



AUGUST 1, 2018



Why Americans Go (and Don't Go) to Religious Services

Many cite practical or personal reasons, rather than lack of belief, for staying home



(Photo by Exkalibur/Getty Images)

In recent years, the percentage of U.S. adults who say they regularly attend religious services has been declining, while the share of Americans who attend only a few times a year, seldom or never has been growing (<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/chapter-2-religious-practices-and-experiences/>). A new Pew Research Center survey finds that the main reason people regularly go to church, synagogue, mosque or another house of worship is an obvious one: to feel closer to God. But the things that keep people away from religious services are more complicated.

Among those who attend no more than a few times a year, about three-in-ten say they do not go to religious services for a simple reason: They are not believers. But a much larger share stay away *not* because of a lack of faith, but for other reasons. This includes many people who say one very important reason they don't regularly attend church is that they **practice their faith in other ways**. Others cite things they dislike about particular congregations or religious services (for example, they **haven't found a church or house of worship they like**, or they **don't like the sermons**). Still others name logistical reasons, like being **in poor health** or not **having the time** to go, as very important reasons for not regularly attending religious services.

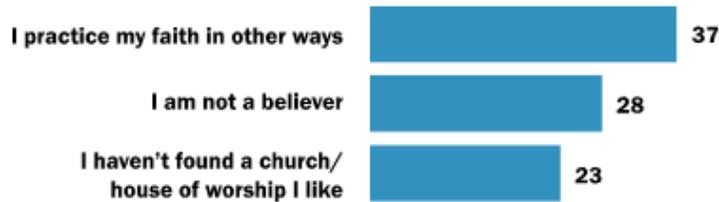
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Top reasons U.S. adults give for choosing to attend or not attend religious services

Among U.S. adults who attend religious services at least once or twice a month, % who say _____ is a "very important" reason they **ATTEND** religious services



Among U.S. adults who attend religious services a few times a year or less often, % who say _____ is a "very important" reason they **DO NOT** attend more often

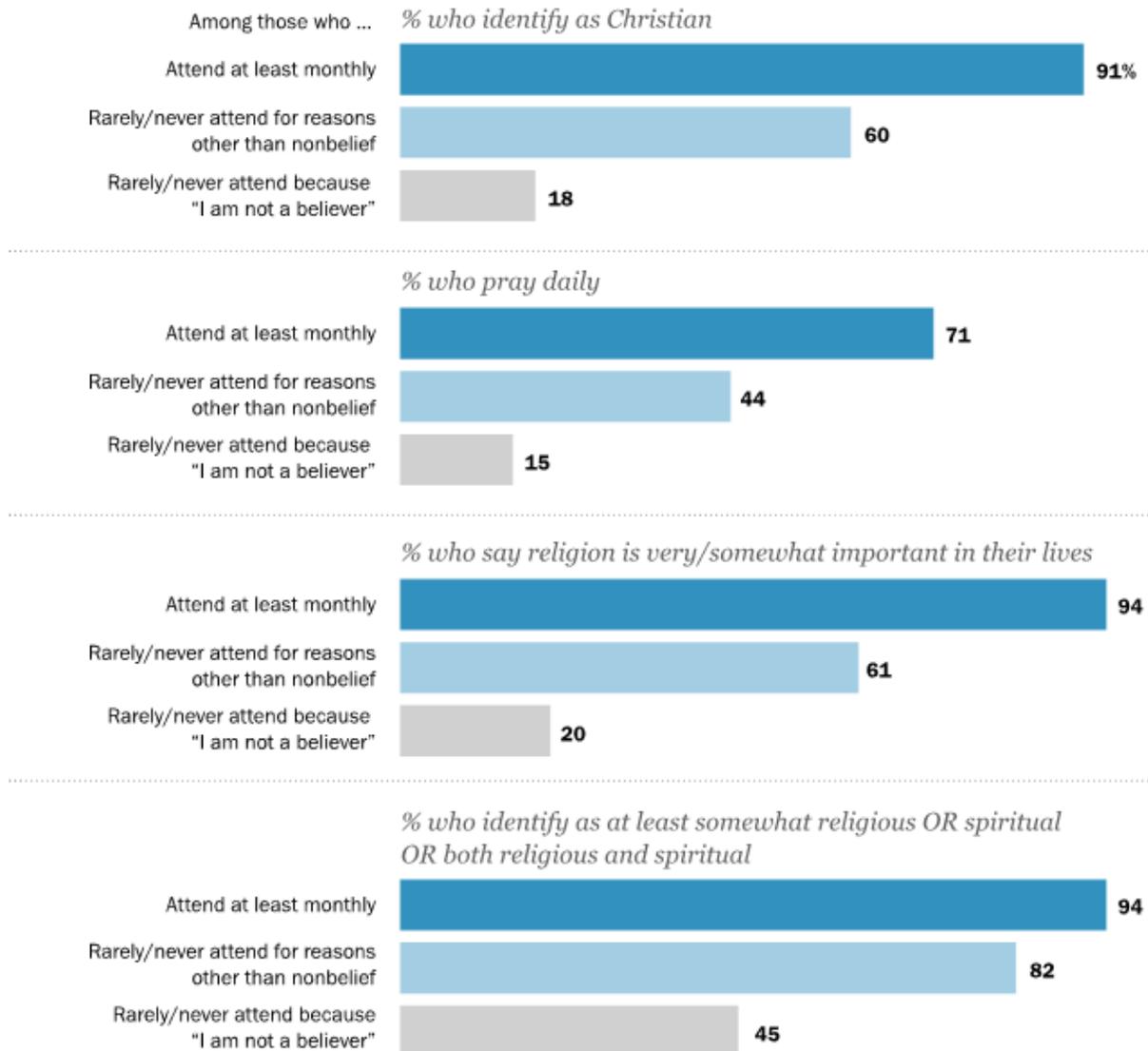


Source: Survey conducted Dec. 4-18, 2017, among U.S. adults.
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By their own description, those who cite reasons *other* than a lack of belief for avoiding church are a fairly religious group. About seven-in-ten identify with a religion (including six-in-ten who are Christian), and most say religion is either "very" or "somewhat" important in their lives. To be sure, they are not as religious as Americans who report going regularly to religious services. But by several standard measures, they are much more religious than those who say, "I am not a believer."

Americans who give reasons other than nonbelief for eschewing religious services are fairly religious



Note: The "Rarely/never attend for reasons other than nonbelief" category includes those who do not say "I am not a believer" is a very important reason they do not attend religious services, but do say other reasons (such as "I practice my faith in other ways," dislike of congregations or religious services, or logistical difficulties) are very important. The "Rarely/never attend because 'I am not a believer'" category includes some respondents who also cite other reasons as very important for not attending. Those who did not cite any of the eight possible reasons in the survey as "very important" for not attending religious services are not shown.

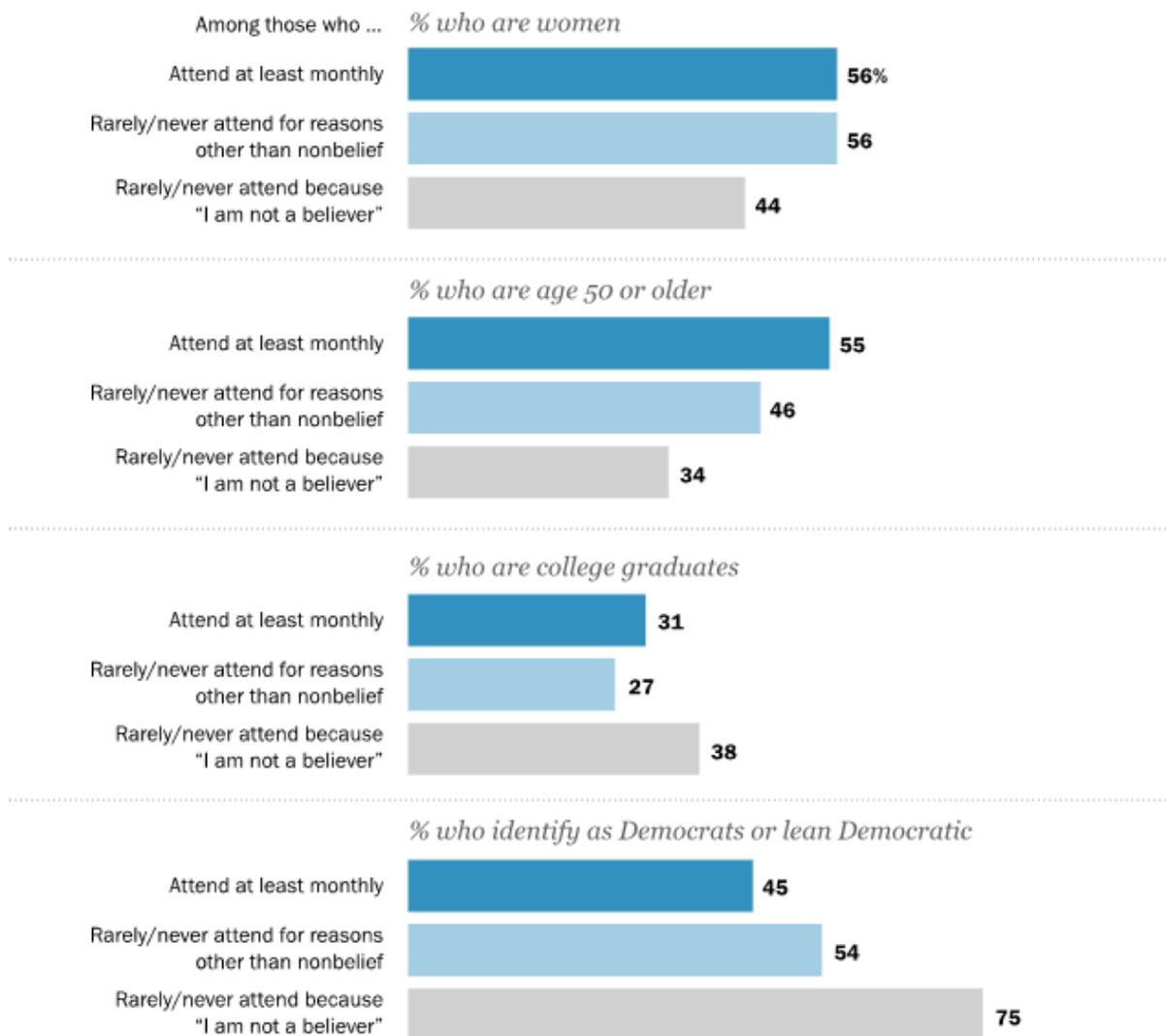
Source: Survey conducted Dec. 4-18, 2017, among U.S. adults.

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Demographically, more than half of those who do not attend church or another house of worship for reasons other than nonbelief are women, and they tend to be older, less highly educated and less Democratic compared with those who do not go because of a lack of faith. Meanwhile, those who refrain from attending religious services because they are nonbelievers are more highly educated and largely male, young and Democratic.

Americans who do not attend religious services due to lack of belief are younger, more highly educated, largely male and Democratic



Note: The "Rarely/never attend for reasons other than nonbelief" category includes those who do not say "I am not a believer" is a very important reason they do not attend religious services, but do say other reasons (such as "I practice my faith in other ways," dislike of congregations or religious services, or logistical difficulties) are very important. The "Rarely/never attend because 'I am not a believer'" category includes some respondents who also cite other reasons as very important for not attending. Those who did not cite any of the eight possible reasons in the survey as "very important" for not attending religious services are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted Dec. 4-18, 2017, among U.S. adults.

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The new survey, conducted online Dec. 4 to 18, 2017, among a nationally representative sample of 4,729 adults on Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel, asked respondents who attend religious services a few times a year or less often (including those who never attend) whether each of eight reasons is "very important, somewhat important, or not important" for why they do not go to religious services more often.¹

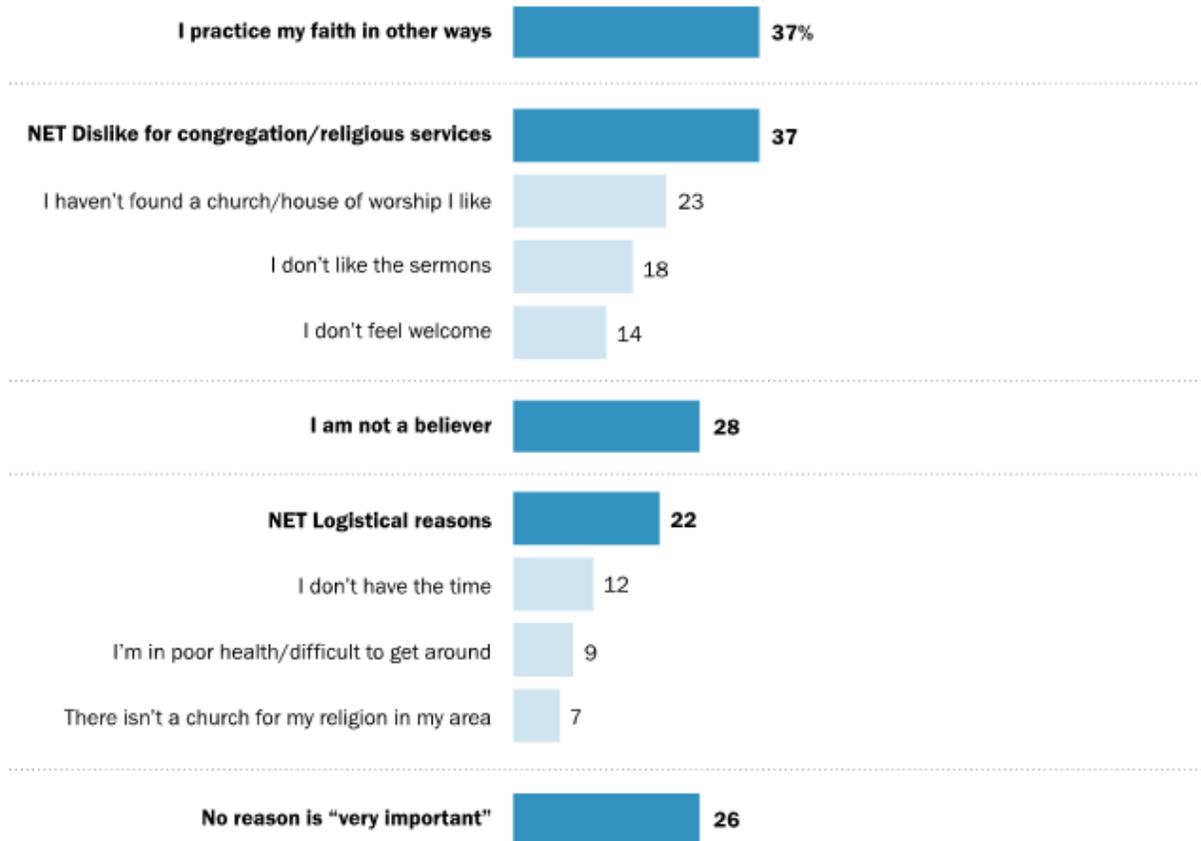
Overall, the single most common answer cited for not attending religious services is "I practice my faith in other ways," which is offered as a very important reason by 37% of people who rarely or never attend religious services. A similar share mention things they dislike about religious services or particular congregations, including one-in-four who say they have not yet found a house of worship they like, one-in-five who say they dislike the sermons, and 14% who say they do not feel welcome at religious services.



About three-in-ten non-attenders say they are not believers, while 22% cite logistical reasons for not going to religious services, such as not having the time or being in poor health. And fully a quarter of those who infrequently attend religious services say none of these factors is a very important reason why.

Among those who rarely attend religious services, nearly four-in-ten say they don't go because they practice their faith in other ways

Among U.S. adults who say they attend religious services a few times a year or less, % who say ____ is a "very important" reason for not attending



Note: Figures do not add to 100% or to subtotals indicated because respondents could say more than one reason is a "very important" reason they do not attend religious services.

Source: Survey conducted Dec. 4-18, 2017, among U.S. adults.
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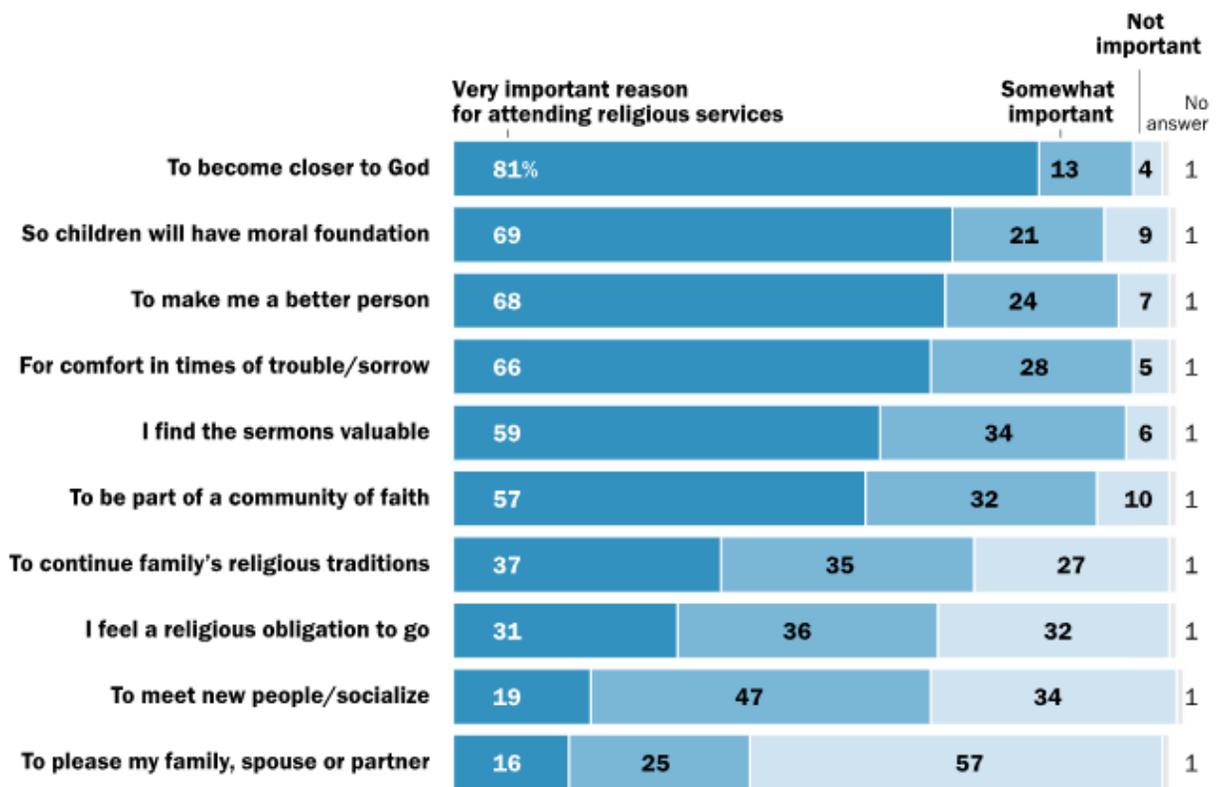
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The survey also asked U.S. adults who say they attend religious services at least once or twice per month about 10 possible reasons they may do so. In response, eight-in-ten regular attenders say becoming "closer to God" is a very important reason they go to religious services.²

Additionally, roughly two-thirds say they attend religious services to give their children a moral foundation, to become better people, and for comfort in times of trouble or sorrow. Smaller majorities say that valuable sermons and being part of "a community of faith" are very important reasons for their regular religious attendance.

Relationship with God, moral foundation for children, self-improvement and comfort in tough times are among key reasons people go to religious services

Reasons for attending religious services among U.S. adults who say they attend at least once or twice a month



Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.
Source: Survey conducted Dec. 4-18, 2017, among U.S. adults.
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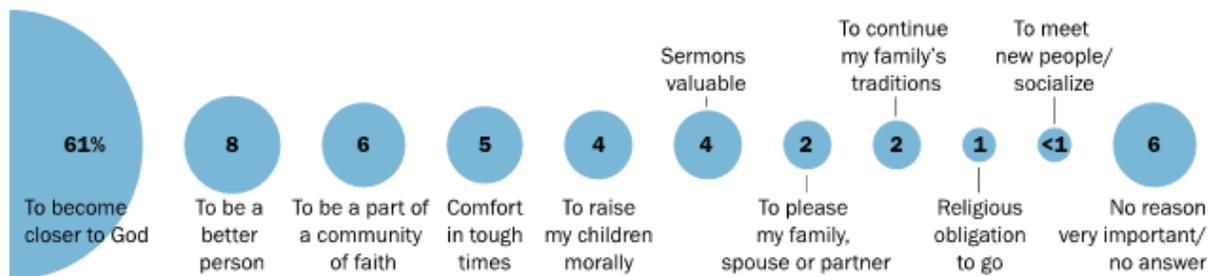
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Far fewer cite their family's religious traditions (37%) or a feeling of religious obligation (31%) as reasons for their steady religious attendance, while even fewer say socializing and meeting new people (19%) or pleasing their spouse or family (16%) are key reasons they attend church regularly.

In a follow-up question, regular worship attenders were asked to choose the *most* important reason they attend religious services.³ Overall, six-in-ten indicate they go to religious services primarily to become closer to God, and no other reason comes close.⁴ For example, just 8% say they go to religious services mainly to become a better person, and about one-in-twenty say they attend religious services primarily to be part of a community of faith, to find comfort in troubling times, to provide their children with a moral foundation, or because they find the sermons valuable.

Six-in-ten attenders go to religious services primarily to get closer to God

Among those who attend religious services at least once or twice a month, % who say _____ is the **most important** reason why



Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding. Each category includes those who named *only* the corresponding item as a "very important" reason for regularly attending religious services, as well as those who named more than one reason as "very important" and then indicated, in a follow-up question, that the corresponding item is the most important reason they attend religious services.

Source: Survey conducted Dec. 4-18, 2017, among U.S. adults.

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Other findings from the new survey include:

- Eight-in-ten regular attenders say they "always" or "often" experience a sense of God's presence when they attend worship services. Nearly three-quarters say they "always" or "often" feel a sense of community with people who share their religion when they attend religious services, and six-in-ten say they feel a sense of connection to a longstanding tradition.
- Catholics who attend Mass regularly are significantly less likely than other Christian churchgoers to say that the sermons they hear are what keeps them coming back. Indeed, among those who attend church regularly, Protestants are roughly twice as likely as Catholics (71% vs. 36%) to say valuable sermons are a very important reason.
- While the survey does not include measures of every conceivable way in which a person might put their religious convictions into practice (e.g., through environmental stewardship, social justice activism, etc.), those who avoid religious services because they "practice their faith in other ways" are *less* involved in a variety of community, charitable and social groups than are those who attend religious services regularly. Among those who cite practicing their faith in other ways as a very important reason for not attending religious services, 50% say they are active in at least one of several types of such groups measured by the survey, compared with 63% among regular attenders. And the people who say they practice their faith in other ways are far less religious, by a variety of traditional measures beyond worship attendance (including frequency of prayer, assessment of religion's importance in one's life, etc.), than those who attend religious services regularly.
- One-in-four respondents who rarely or never attend religious services (26%) give no specific reason why – they do not select any of the eight factors mentioned in the survey as very important reasons for not going to church. This group is considerably *more* religious than those who say they do not attend religious services because of a lack of faith, but somewhat *less* religious than those who cite other reasons (e.g., logistical difficulties or that they "practice their faith in other ways") for not going to church.

More than four-in-ten Christians who do not attend religious services say they practice their faith in other ways

feedback

Among self-identified Christians, the predominant reason that non-churchgoers offer for not attending worship services is that they practice their faith in other ways. Upwards of four-in-ten (44%) say this is a very important reason for not going to church more often. The next most common reason Christians give for not attending services is that they haven't found a church or house of worship they like (28%).

By contrast, the most common reason religiously unaffiliated non-attenders do not attend religious services is a lack of belief (46% say this is a very important reason they do not attend religious services), while one-quarter cite practicing their faith in other ways as a central reason for not going to services.

Among both of these groups of non-attenders (self-identified Christians and religious "nones"), fewer cite not feeling welcome, not having time, being in poor health and not having a nearby house of worship for their religion or denomination as very important reasons for not going to services.

Women, adults ages 50 and older and those who identify as Republicans or lean toward the Republican Party are more likely than other groups of infrequent churchgoers to say they don't attend religious services because they practice their faith in other ways. Meanwhile, men, younger adults, college graduates and Democrats are more likely to cite a lack of belief as a very important reason they do not go to religious services.

The survey does not find much variation by race on these questions, although black respondents who do not attend church regularly are more likely than whites to say they do not go to church because they don't feel welcome and because there is no church for their religion nearby.

Among those who rarely attend church, Christians name a variety of reasons

Among U.S. adults who attend religious services a few times a year or less often, % who say _____ is a "very important" reason they DO NOT attend religious services

	I practice my faith in other ways	NET Dislikes	I haven't found a church/house of worship I like	I don't like the sermons	I don't feel welcome	I am not a believer	NET Logistics	I don't have the time	Poor health/difficulty getting around	There isn't a church/house of worship for my religion in my area
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Total	37	37	23	18	14	28	22	12	9	7
Christian	44	38	28	14	15	11	29	15	13	9
Evangelical Protestant	46	41	33	12	11	11	31	13	13	10
Mainline Protestant	39	42	33	10	17	5	20	12	9	3
Catholic	47	31	19	17	14	12	29	19	16	10
Unaffiliated	26	35	16	20	14	46	14	9	4	3
Men	32	34	19	18	13	32	19	12	7	7
Women	42	40	26	17	16	25	25	12	11	7
Ages 18-29	24	40	25	18	16	32	24	18	6	7
30-49	34	39	21	20	14	32	20	13	6	7
50-64	47	38	24	17	17	21	25	10	12	8
65+	45	28	18	13	8	27	18	5	14	6
White	36	35	22	17	13	29	20	11	8	6
Black	38	39	24	18	22	21	30	17	13	14
Hispanic	40	44	26	19	15	24	26	17	11	8
High school or less	38	40	26	18	18	23	25	10	14	9
Some college	38	41	24	20	15	27	23	14	9	7
College graduate+	34	30	17	16	9	37	16	13	3	3
Republican/lean Rep.	42	38	27	14	12	17	22	12	9	7
Democrat/lean Dem.	34	37	19	20	15	36	22	12	9	7

Note: Figures do not add to 100% or to subtotals indicated because respondents could say more than one reason is a "very important" reason they do not attend religious services. Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic. Hispanics can be of any race.

Source: Survey conducted Dec. 4-18, 2017, among U.S. adults.

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Religious and demographic profiles of types of non-attenders

The survey also makes it possible to flip the lens and analyze the data from the other direction – to ask, for example, who are the people who do not attend church because they simply do not believe in God or religion, and how do they compare with the people who do not attend church because they practice their faith in other ways or because they do not feel welcome?⁵

Most non-attenders who cite a lack of belief as a very important reason for not attending religious services are, simply put, not very religious. But those who cite other reasons as key explanations for not attending church are, overall, more religiously observant.

For instance, two-thirds of people who cite logistical reasons or that they “practice their faith in other ways” as very important factors in keeping them away from religious services identify with a religion (primarily Christianity), as do 56% of those who dislike features of particular congregations or religious services. Roughly half of those who say they practice their



faith in other ways also report praying every day, as do 44% of those who name logistical reasons as key factors in keeping them away from church and 36% of those who dislike elements of services and congregations. By contrast, just 15% of those who do not attend religious services due to a lack of belief say they pray daily.

Many of those who avoid religious services for reasons other than lack of faith are at least somewhat religious

Religious profiles of those who say _____ is a "very important" reason they attend religious services no more than a few times a year

	I practice my faith in other ways	NET Dislikes	I haven't found a church/house of worship I like	I don't like the sermons	I don't feel welcome	I am not a believer	NET Logistics	I don't have the time	Poor health/difficulty getting around	There isn't a church/house of worship for my religion in my area
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Christian	56	47	58	37	48	18	60	58	69	63
Non-Christian faiths	11	8	9	9	7	6	9	10	6	14
Unaffiliated	32	43	33	52	44	74	29	32	22	22
Atheist	1	8	4	13	7	29	2	4	<1	1
Agnostic	6	10	7	16	10	20	6	9	1	6
Nothing in particular	25	25	22	23	27	25	21	19	21	15
Refused	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	<1	3	1
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Pray daily	48	36	47	26	39	15	44	35	58	56
Weekly/monthly	25	23	26	19	23	9	27	25	26	26
Seldom/never	27	41	26	54	39	76	28	40	16	18
Refused	<1	<1	<1	<1	0	<1	<1	<1	0	0
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Say religion is ___ important in their lives										
Very	27	23	29	20	32	14	30	26	48	47
Somewhat	32	26	33	14	23	6	35	32	32	25
Not too/not at all	40	50	36	66	45	80	34	41	18	27
Refused	1	1	2	0	1	0	1	<1	1	1
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Note: The columns are not mutually exclusive; for example, some respondents who say they practice their faith in other ways also say they don't like the sermons. Figures may not add to 100% or to subtotals indicated due to rounding.

Source: Survey conducted Dec. 4-18, 2017, among U.S. adults.

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People who rarely or never attend religious services are younger, on average, than those who attend more regularly. And those who say they do not attend religious services because they don't have time are younger than other non-attenders. About seven-in-ten are under the age of 30, while one-in-five (22%) are between the ages of 50 and 64, and just 7% are over the age of 65. By contrast, those who do not attend religious services because they are in poor health are older than many other groups, with six-in-ten over the age of 50, and they also have less education than most other groups.

Democrats are less likely than Republicans to attend worship services regularly, and among non-attenders, those who say they eschew religious services because they are nonbelievers largely identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party – 75%, vs. 22% who are Republicans. Republicans are more heavily concentrated, though still outnumbered, among those who say they don't attend for other reasons.



Those who don't attend religious services because they do not believe are more highly educated than other groups, predominantly male and Democratic

Demographic profiles of those who say _____ is a "very important" reason they attend religious services no more than a few times a year

	I practice my faith in other ways	NET Dislikes	I haven't found a church/house of worship I like	I don't like the sermons	I don't feel welcome	I am not a believer	NET Logistics	I don't have the time	Poor health/difficulty getting around	There isn't a church/house of worship for my religion in my area
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Men	44	46	42	52	46	56	44	50	37	51
Women	56	54	58	48	54	44	56	50	63	49
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Ages 18-29	16	26	27	24	26	27	26	35	16	23
30-49	31	36	32	38	34	39	31	36	24	32
50-64	33	26	28	25	31	19	30	22	35	31
65+	20	12	13	12	9	15	13	7	25	14
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
H.S. or less	40	42	45	39	49	32	45	33	60	53
Some college	33	34	34	35	32	30	33	37	30	34
College graduate	27	24	22	26	19	38	22	30	10	13
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Republican/lean Rep.	41	37	43	29	31	22	37	36	35	38
Democrat/lean Dem.	55	59	51	67	63	75	60	61	60	57
Other/no lean	4	4	6	4	5	2	3	4	4	5
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Note: The columns are not mutually exclusive; for example, some respondents who say they practice their faith in other ways also say they don't like the sermons. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding. Results for age and education repercentaged to exclude nonresponse. Source: Survey conducted Dec. 4-18, 2017, among U.S. adults.

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Overlap between the reasons given for not attending religious services

feedback

Many non-attenders cite multiple reasons for not going to religious services

% of non-attenders who cite ...	%
0 types of responses as "very important" reasons for not attending	26
1 type of response as "very important"	39
2 types of responses as "very important"	23
3 types of responses as "very important"	9
All 4 types of responses as "very important"	3

Note: Based on U.S. adults who say they attend religious services a few times a year, seldom, or never. The four types of responses are: (1) "I practice my faith in other ways"; (2) "I am not a believer"; (3) Dislikes about religious services, including "I haven't found a church or other house of worship I like," "I don't like the sermons," and "I don't feel welcome"; and (4) Logistical difficulties, including a lack of time, poor health/limited mobility, and the absence of a house of worship for the respondent's religious group near where they live.

Source: Survey conducted Dec. 4-18, 2017, among U.S. adults. "Why Americans Go (and Don't Go) to Religious Services"

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(http://www.pewforum.org/2018/08/01/why-americans-go-to-religious-services/pf-08-01-18_religious-services-00-09/) Respondents were given the option to name more than one very important factor why they do not regularly attend religious services, and many of them did. As a result, there is overlap across the categories; for example, among those who say they do not regularly attend religious services because they practice their faith in other ways, half also say there are things they dislike about congregations or religious services, and three-in-ten say logistical reasons are part of what keeps them from getting to church.

Overall, one-in-three non-attenders cite more than one kind of reason as a factor in their decision to refrain from going to religious services, including 3% who say all four types of reasons contribute to their non-attendance, 9% who cite three types of reasons and 23% who cite two kinds of reasons. An additional 39% name only one very important reason for not attending church, while 26% pick none of these reasons.

Across all religious groups, large majorities cite desire to grow closer to God as key reason for attending religious services

Among those who attend religious services regularly, large majorities across all demographic groups and major Christian traditions say becoming "closer to God" is a very important factor in their decision to attend religious services. Smaller majorities in most Christian traditions name instilling a moral foundation in their children, becoming a better person, seeking comfort in times of trouble, finding value in the sermons, and being part of a community of faith as key reasons they attend religious services. Catholics are the only group of Christians in which fewer than half of regular churchgoers mention an appreciation of sermons as a key factor for why they go to Mass regularly.

In general, women are more likely than men to say that a variety of factors are very important for why they attend religious services regularly. There is one notable exception to this pattern – men are significantly more likely than women to say pleasing a spouse or other family member is a very important reason they go to religious services (22% vs. 12%).

Young adults who attend religious services regularly are more likely than older adults to do so for social reasons: 30% of adults under 30 say meeting new people or socializing is a key factor in why they attend religious services, compared with 19% or fewer among older age groups.

Black Americans who attend church regularly are more likely than their white or Hispanic counterparts to say becoming closer to God, becoming a better person, finding comfort in times of trouble or sorrow, finding the sermons valuable, and feeling a religious obligation are very important reasons for going to church.

Among churchgoers, large majorities across Christian traditions, demographic groups go to religious services to become closer to God

Among U.S. adults who attend religious services at least monthly, % who say _____ is a "very important" reason why

	Personal religious reasons					Family reasons			Community reasons	
	To become closer to God	To make me a better person	For comfort in times of trouble/sorrow	I find the sermons valuable	Feel religious obligation to go	So my children will grow up with a moral foundation	To continue family's religious traditions	To please family/spouse/partner	To be part of community of faith	To meet new people/socialize
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Christian	83	68	67	60	31	71	37	16	58	19
Protestant	87	69	69	71	30	71	35	13	64	19
Evangelical	90	70	69	76	30	75	36	13	67	20
Mainline	77	56	58	54	17	59	32	13	54	15
Historically black	89	85	79	72	42	75	36	15	65	18
Catholic	75	63	60	36	35	69	44	22	46	19
Men	76	62	57	51	30	65	34	22	52	19
Women	85	72	72	66	33	72	40	12	61	19
Ages 18-29	75	65	60	54	32	67	36	24	52	30
30-49	78	67	65	61	29	72	38	20	55	17
50-64	85	70	69	67	32	68	37	16	59	19
65+	85	67	66	52	33	67	37	9	60	15
White	81	63	63	55	29	68	36	12	59	18
Black	89	84	79	74	42	77	36	18	64	22
Hispanic	77	70	64	57	23	67	40	28	45	19
H.S. or less	82	72	70	59	38	73	42	23	60	24
Some college	84	72	69	68	30	70	39	15	54	18
College graduate	78	58	58	50	24	63	29	9	57	14
Republican/lean Rep.	87	68	68	61	32	74	38	13	63	18
Democrat/lean Dem.	77	68	65	58	30	65	36	20	52	19

Note: Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic. Hispanics can be of any race.
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At religious services, eight-in-ten Christians regularly feel a sense of God's presence

Among regular attenders, most experience God's presence, sense of community and connection to tradition while at services

Among U.S. adults who attend religious services at least monthly, % who say they experience _____ "always" or "often but not always" when they attend religious services

	A sense of God's presence %	A sense of community with people who share your religion %	A sense of connection to a longstanding tradition %
Total	80	73	60
Christian	81	73	60
Protestant	83	75	59
Evangelical	86	77	54
Mainline	77	73	66
Historically black	83	71	69
Catholic	78	67	64
Men	76	68	55
Women	84	76	64
Ages 18-29	63	70	58
30-49	83	70	59
50-64	86	76	57
65+	80	74	65
White, non-Hispanic	78	75	59
Black, non-Hispanic	79	68	62
Hispanic	86	72	58
H.S. or less	82	75	63
Some college	85	70	60
College graduate	73	72	57
Republican/lean Republican	83	77	61
Democrat/lean Democratic	77	69	59

Note: Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic. Hispanics can be of any race.

Source: Survey conducted Dec. 4-18, 2017, among U.S. adults.

"Why Americans Go (and Don't Go) to Religious Services"

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(http://www.pewforum.org/2018/08/01/why-americans-go-to-religious-services/pf-08-01-18_religious-services-00-11/) Majorities of U.S. churchgoers say that when they're at religious services, they "always" or "often" feel a sense of God's presence (80%), a sense of community with others (73%) and a sense of connection to a longstanding tradition (60%). Women are more likely than men to say they often or always have these feelings.

Adults under the age of 30 are about as likely as their older counterparts to say they feel a sense of connection to tradition or a sense of community while at religious services. But when it comes to feeling a sense of God's presence at services, younger adults are much less likely than their elders to say they experience this. Roughly six-in-ten adults under 30 (63%) often feel a sense of God's presence at religious services, compared with eight-in-ten or more in older age groups.

1. The questions were asked of all respondents who attend religious services a few times a year or less, including those who self-identify as Christians, those who identify with other religions, and religious “nones” (i.e., those who identify, religiously, as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular”). The questions employed neutral phrasing – they asked about why respondents attend “religious services” a few times a year or less, not why respondents attend “church” a few times a year or less – so as to be applicable to all such groups, not just Christians. However, since most U.S. adults identify as Christians, this report sometimes uses phrases like “church attenders” as shorthand for those who attend religious services regularly. Full question wording is available in the topline. ↩
2. Respondents were able to cite more than one reason as “very important” for why they attend religious services. Overall, 88% of respondents who attend religious services at least once or twice a month indicated that more than one reason is “very important.” ↩
3. The survey did not include a question that asked those who rarely or never attend religious services about the most important reason they refrain from doing so. ↩
4. This includes both those who named only becoming “closer to God” as a “very important” reason for attending religious services, as well as those who named more than one reason as “very important” and then indicated, in the follow-up question, that becoming closer to God is the most important reason they attend religious services. Other categories are calculated the same way. ↩
5. These categories are not mutually exclusive; for example, some respondents who say “I practice my faith in other ways” is a very important reason they do not attend religious services also say “I don’t feel welcome” is a very important reason. ↩



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