

LifeWay Research Uncovers Reasons 18 to 22 Year Olds Drop Out of Church

Written by Staff

NASHVILLE, Tenn.—A new study from LifeWay Research reveals that more than two-thirds of young adults who attend a Protestant church for at least a year in high school will stop attending church regularly for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22.

As young people transition from high school into the workforce or college life, they are faced with many choices – including whether to continue attending church. Although this decision is a source of concern for parents and church leaders, discussion of the reasons young adults choose the direction they do has largely been speculative.

"Lots of alarming numbers have been tossed around regarding church dropouts," said Ed Stetzer, director of LifeWay Research, the research arm of LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention. "We wanted to get at the real situation with clear research – and there is some bad news here, no question. But, there are also some important solutions to be found in the research. When we know why people drop out, we can address how to help better connect them."

To uncover the reasons young people leave church, LifeWay Research conducted a survey in April and May 2007 of more than 1,000 adults ages 18-30. Each indicated that they had attended a Protestant church regularly for at least a year in high school.

Should I stay or should I go?

According to the study, 70 percent of young adults ages 23-30 stopped attending church regularly for at least a year between ages 18-22.

In most cases, the decision to leave was not planned far in advance. Only 20 percent of these "church dropouts" agree that while they were attending church regularly in high school they "planned on taking a break from church once [they] finished high school."

Among those who predetermined to leave church, few told anyone about their desire. One reflected, "I just told my parents I didn't like it," rather than sharing an intention to actually leave. Another said, "I kept my feelings secret for fear of losing my friends."

Why do most young people leave?

Life changes or life situations cause young people to leave the church. In fact, 97 percent of dropouts list one or more specific life-change issues as a reason they left church.

Six of the top 10 reasons church dropouts leave relate to life changes. The most frequent reason for leaving church is, in fact, a self-imposed change, "I simply wanted a break from church" (27 percent).

The paths toward college and the workforce are also strong reasons for young people to leave church: "I moved to college and stopped attending church" (25 percent) and "work responsibilities prevented me from attending" (23 percent).

In addition to moving to college, others simply "moved too far away from the church to continue attending" (22 percent) and, it can be assumed, did not find a closer church.

A previous LifeWay Research study of church switchers confirmed that a residential move is the most frequent reason adults switch churches. "A move beyond your local community breaks the existing ties to a local church," said Scott McConnell, associate director of LifeWay Research. "It requires intentional effort to search for a new church home that may not occur immediately, even for those interested in church."

How young people use their time and the relationships they choose can also lead them away from church. Twenty-two percent "became too busy, though still wanted to attend," and 17 percent "chose to spend more time with friends outside the church."

"In our three studies related to church attendance practices: The Formerly Churched, Church Switchers and now the Teenage Dropout study, one thing is abundantly clear," stated Brad Waggoner, vice president of research and ministry development at LifeWay. "Relationships are often the glue that keep people in church or serves as the attraction to begin attending again following a period of absenteeism. Many people are deeply influenced by friends and loved ones."

Waggoner advised, "Church leaders should passionately and consistently challenge church members to maximize their influence with youth and young adults. Frequent and intentional contact can either prevent or counteract the tendency of some to drop out of church."

Fifty-eight percent of church dropouts selected at least one church or pastor-related reason for leaving church. Most common was, "church members seemed judgmental or hypocritical" (26 percent). Another 20 percent "didn't feel connected to the people in my church."

The final category of reasons, "religious, ethical or political beliefs," contributed to the departure of 52 percent of church dropouts.

Two reasons for leaving reflect this category: "I disagreed with the church's stance on political or social issues" (18 percent) and "I was only going to church to please others" (17 percent).

"Clearly the reasons young people leave are a reflection both of their past experience in church and the new opportunities they have as young adults," McConnell summarized. "To remain in church, a person must have experienced the value of the teaching and relationships at church and see the relevance for the next phase of life."

Why do some young people stay?

Although they only represent 30 percent of those who attended a Protestant church for at least a year in high school, young adults who stay in church through ages 18-22 see the relevance, benefits and purpose of the church now and for their future.

The two most frequent reasons young people stay in church relate to the relevance of church: "Church was a vital part of my relationship with God" (65 percent) and "I wanted the church to help guide my

decisions in everyday life" (58 percent).

Half of those who stayed in church recognize benefits and say, "I felt that church was helping me become a better person" (50 percent).

Forty-two percent remained in church because they were "committed to the purpose and work of the church."

"The vitality and everyday relevance these young people experienced in church is a stark contrast to church dropouts who wanted a break from church and felt unconnected," McConnell said.

Already returning

Many of those who drop out do eventually return. Among church dropouts who are now ages 23-30, 35 percent currently attend church twice a month or more. Another 30 percent attend church more sporadically. Thus, about two-thirds of those who leave do return at some level.

This return to church after being gone for at least a year is primarily the result of encouragement from others. The most common reason for returning is "My parents or family members encouraged me to attend" (39 percent). Twenty-one percent attribute their return to "My friends or acquaintances encouraged me to attend." Combined, 50 percent of those who return were influenced by the encouragement of either family or friends.

Young adults also return to church when they feel the desire personally or sense God calling them back: "I simply felt the desire to return" (34 percent) and "I felt that God was calling me to return to the church" (28 percent).

Women are more likely than men to feel "the desire to return" (41 percent vs. 22 percent) and to feel "God was calling me to return to church" (34 percent vs. 18 percent).

In contrast to the life changes that drove many away from church, life events also bring young adults back to church.

Twenty-four percent return to church because "I had children and felt it was time for them to start attending." This reason is significantly more common for women than men (31 percent vs. 13 percent). Twenty percent "got married and wanted to attend with my spouse."

Turnover among attendees

Attendance patterns among teenagers and young adults reveal that each year many move in and out of consistent church attendance. Young adults were asked to indicate at which ages they attended church at least twice a month beginning with "under 14" through their current age.

Two out of three indicate they attended at the four youngest ages tested: under 14 (70 percent), age 14 (66 percent), age 15 (68 percent), and age 16 (68 percent). However, each year some began attending while others stopped attending twice a month. In fact, only 53 percent indicate they attended at all of these ages. This low level of loyalty through age 16 is a precursor to the declines that follow.

The percent attending twice a month drops sharply at ages 17, 18 and 19, with only 31 percent attending at age 19. Attendance remains low through age 22, and then slowly begins to climb.

"When, by God's grace, young people see the church as essential in their lives and choose to continue attending, their loyalty remains strong," McConnell said. Among young adults ages 23-30 who stayed in church during ages 18-22, only 6 percent do not currently attend church.

Stetzer noted, "There is no easy way to say it, but it must be said. Parents and churches are not passing on a robust Christian faith and an accompanying commitment to the church. We can take some solace in the fact that many do eventually return. But, Christian parents and churches need to ask the hard question, 'What is it about our faith commitment that does not find root in the lives of our children?'"

To listen to a podcast with Stetzer and McConnell discussing the research with leaders who serve in student and collegiate ministry, go to www.lifeway.com/insidelifeway. *Inside LifeWay* is the official news podcast of LifeWay Christian Resources. Read more about what these findings mean for church leaders by going online to www.lifewayresearch.com and www.edstetzer.com

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