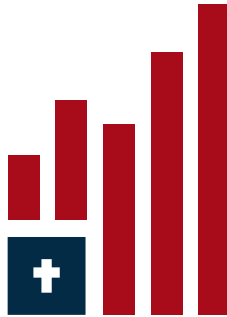


State of the Bible

USA 2024

RESEARCH FROM AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY



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Prepared by

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STATE OF THE BIBLE 2024

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Final edition (December 2024)

ISBN 978-1-58516-737-1 ABS item 125797 (paperback)

ISBN 978-1-58516-579-7 ABS item 125690 (digital)

Printed in the United States of America.

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Note: In the first release of Chapter 7, a syntax error resulted in a small number of missing records being misapplied as “non-Christian,” resulting in a shift of 1 or 2 percent on some findings. The chapter is now updated.

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PREFACE

BY JENNIFER HOLLORAN, DSL

American Bible Society

The annual *State of the Bible* report always takes place within a context. As we think about the last four years in the United States, perhaps it no longer surprises us when we hear that people continue to feel more distant from one another or that the experiences of grief and loss have been part of this past year's story for the majority. We may be more technologically connected than ever before, but somehow those digital interactions leave us more dissatisfied and disconnected. And the accessibility of entertainment and distractions may ease pain for the moment but cannot bring long-term relief.

At American Bible Society, we conduct our *State of the Bible* research because we want to know the hard data about these issues, as well as understand how Americans use the incredible wealth of Scripture available to them to shape and guide their lives. More importantly, we believe that the Bible can transform people and communities through its incredible message of hope and healing. When people choose *not* to use a resource with such power to change their lives

for the better, we want to understand why. Does it not seem relevant to them? Do they have trouble accessing it? Or do they just find it difficult to make it a priority in their increasingly busy lives?

American Bible Society is passionate about Bible advocacy, access, and engagement. We know that having data-driven knowledge about the current state of Scripture engagement and cultural health takes us only partway down the road to achieving our mission. The data allow us to know the current state of being. But by themselves data do not provide the answers to shifting minds and hearts so that people can see the gift of God’s Word already within their reach. We can reflect on the data all day, but it is pointless if it does not lead us collectively toward action.

This is where we must look to the church to respond. In Acts 2, we see an invitation to Scripture engagement in Peter’s very first sermon. This early engagement through instruction became a foundation of the early church as “they spent their time in learning from the apostles” (Acts 2:42). Today, encouraging and promoting Scripture use as a core purpose of the church’s outreach seems an obvious out-working of those early practices. Why then do we find our efforts to increase corporate Scripture engagement so stagnant, even among the Christ-following population?

One of the greatest barriers to effective Scripture engagement—inside and outside the church—is our lack of unity. Not uniformity in traditions or approach, but our unity in our love for the gospel and our belief that the message of Jesus transforms lives. James C. Wilhoit, in *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered*, puts it well: “Protecting, maintaining, and treasuring our unity is both a means

and a fruit of formation. And our desire for unity flows out of our marveling at the gospel.” Perhaps we need more time together contemplating the truth and beauty of the gospel, giving us less time to focus on the aspects of life that might divide us if we elevate them above the importance of the gospel.

More than ever, we need a united church to come together around changing the trajectory of Scripture engagement in the United States. Across the scope of Christianity in the U.S., we have churches and organizations using creative methods to help people experience the power of God’s Word applied to their lives. We need to keep reaching across traditional barriers to learn from one another so that these practices can be expanded, contextualized, and innovated further upon as we think about the future of Scripture engagement in our country.

The level of Scripture engagement in the United States remains lower than it could be with the right attention. It is no time for the church to become complacent. We should see this moment of declining Scripture engagement as the time to grow in our ability to work together as the body of Christ. It’s not just the health of the church that depends on it. It’s millions of individual lives that will otherwise miss out on the transforming power of Christ. ■



JENNIFER HOLLORAN, DSL

Jennifer Holloran serves as President and CEO at American Bible Society, sharing decades of experience in the global movement to expand Bible access and engagement. Prior to joining ABS, she served Wycliffe Bible Translators USA for more than 22 years, most recently as Chief Operating Officer. She holds a doctorate in strategic leadership from Regent University as well as a Master of Business Administration with a specialization in human resources from the University of Central Florida. Jennifer and her husband, Tim, live in Philadelphia, PA, with their daughters, Katherine and Penelope.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE GOSPEL

BY JOHN FARQUHAR PLAKE, PH.D.

American Bible Society

This year marks the fourteenth consecutive year for American Bible Society's *State of the Bible: USA* study. Over that period (2011–2024), our research team has chronicled the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic; has shown how Scripture Engagement is strongly associated with overall well-being; and has discussed the impact of the Bible on behaviors including generosity, neighborliness, and evangelism, among other important topics.

OPPORTUNITY IN THE MOVABLE MIDDLE

After 35,000 interviews with typical Americans, we have learned about the **Movable Middle**, a group of 65 million American adults who are open to the message of the Bible, curious to know more about what it says, and interested in learning more about Jesus

Christ. I often think of the Movable Middle as “Bible test drivers” because they are willing to give the Bible a chance. Consequently, they represent a tremendous opportunity for the church precisely because they’re leaning in.

The Movable Middle has five basic characteristics that we have enumerated in previous editions of our *State of the Bible* research:

1. **They are interested in the Bible on their own terms.** In other words, they have questions, and they’re open to considering the Bible’s wisdom for their lives.
2. **They struggle with the language and culture of the Bible.** Their cultural and historical distance from the Ancient Near East makes it challenging for them to understand the Bible’s wisdom and apply it to a modern context.
3. **They prefer modern-language translations of the Bible** because these are more accessible to them.
4. **They need a guide and welcome the church to help them** find what they’re looking for in Scripture and apply it to their situation.
5. **They want to emulate a heritage of faith.** Often, they are related to or acquainted with someone they see as a “Bible person” in a way that they admire. They long to become more like that Bible person, but they don’t know where to start.

While these five characteristics of the Movable Middle might be sufficient to spark your creativity, many of our readers still wonder where to find and how to serve this audience. So let’s dig a bit deeper into where you can find the Movable Middle. Here are a few facts . . .

The Movable Middle is . . .

50% Male & 50% Female (though only 4 in 10 Scripture Engaged Americans are men).

More likely to be Gen Z or Boomers. Millennials are more likely to be Bible Disengaged, while Gen X is more likely to be Scripture Engaged.

More likely to be Black or Hispanic.

More likely to be living in the South.

Self-identified as Christian, usually a Non-Practicing Christian from the Evangelical, Mainline Protestant, or Historically Black Protestant traditions.

Churched and unchurched. While a whopping 42 percent (27.2M) of the Movable Middle are currently unchurched, that leaves **more than half who have a church connection**. Many say they've attended a church service (in person or online) in the past week (31%), month (16%), or the past six months (11%).

The Movable Middle is everywhere, representing one in four American adults, and we have an opportunity to help them take their next step with God through deeper engagement with the Bible. We have identified several key opportunities to minister to those people who are more likely than average to be in the Movable Middle. As researchers, we would say that these groups “over-index” for being open to the gospel message. In short, *people are more open to God’s Word when facing disruptions, whether positive or negative*. Here are just a few:

1. **People dealing with anxiety and other emotional needs.** Approximately 45 million American adults have an anxiety disorder, and we estimate that nearly 12 million of them are also in the Movable Middle.
2. **People struggling with uncontrolled anger.** Approximately 1 in 12 American adults struggles with anger that can harm their relationships with spouses, children, co-workers, and even strangers. Many turn to God for help with their temper, and the Bible can provide wisdom and strength in their distress.
3. **People dealing with loss and grief.** When one person dies, a much larger family and community typically faces grief and loss. Each year over 450,000 American adults die, and many of them leave family and friends who are grieving without hope. The gospel speaks to their pain.
4. **People building romantic relationships.** Each year nearly 2 million adults in America get married. Based on an analysis of data from Bible reading plans on the popular YouVersion Bible app, we’ve learned that many of them are in the

Movable Middle and turn to the Bible for wisdom to help their relationships thrive.

5. **People graduating and starting something new.** Between high school and college graduations, each year nearly 8 million young adults celebrate a milestone and look to a promising but uncertain future. At times of transition, many look to God for blessing and to God's Word for wisdom.
6. **People facing major decisions.** Though we don't have precise numbers, we know that people in the Movable Middle face key decisions all the time. "Do I take this job offer or look for something else?" "How can I become a better parent?" "Am I on the right path?" God's Word offers time-tested wisdom for decision-making.

Perhaps in a bygone era it was possible simply to hand a Bible to a person facing disruptions like these. But it has always been more effective to help people hear from God through his Word (the Bible), his Spirit (in prayer), and his people (in Christian community). The Bible plays a critical role in helping people hear God's voice and enjoy the benefits of life in relationship with him.

The challenge facing all of us in the church is to be the guides that these Bible test drivers are seeking. We must work to understand the needs of each person and carefully present them with the hope that is found in God's Word.

STATE OF THE BIBLE: USA 2024

Throughout 2024, the *State of the Bible* research team reported on the findings from our January 2024 national survey. Each month from April through December we released a new chapter focusing on key aspects of America's relationship with the Bible, faith, and the church. These are the stories you will find in this final edition of the 2024 report.

2024

APR

The Bible in America Today. Our first chapter tracks key metrics about Scripture engagement, Bible use, perceptions of the Bible, and overall spiritual vitality in America. We'll also examine the social impact of the Bible and motivations for Bible use today.

2024

MAY

Faith and Technology. This chapter offers you a new look at how Americans think about the advent of generative artificial intelligence (AI), specifically as it touches the church and the Bible. Additionally, we'll take a close look at how church attendance patterns and Bible reading practices are changing in the post-COVID world.

2024

JUN

Human Flourishing. In partnership with Human Flourishing investigators at Harvard University and Baylor University, we continue our ongoing investigation of how the Bible, faith, and the church are connected to holistic well-being.

2024

JUL

Love in Action. The influence of the Bible extends beyond what people think about God or where they choose to worship. It also guides readers' interactions with others. In this chapter we look at how the Bible informs neighboring in America.

2024

AUG

How Do You Feel About Church? In recent years, researchers have documented major shifts in Americans' church attendance and attitudes toward the church as an institution in society. We examine positive and negative perceptions of the church.

2024

SEP

Gen Z—Hope and Challenge. America is facing a rise in emotional distress, including anxiety, depression, and suicidality, especially among young adults. We prepared our readers for the back-to-school season by profiling Generation Z and discussing how appropriate Bible engagement can restore hope for those who are struggling. We also cover people's responses to hardship, including disappointment with God and social and cultural pressures on faith and Bible engagement.

2024

OCT

Nones and Nominals. The ranks of the religiously unaffiliated—the “Nones”—have grown quickly in recent years. We look at who makes up this group and how they are doing compared with everyone else. We also provide a profile of a larger group of “nominals,” those who *identify* with a religious tradition but do not *participate* in its formal gatherings.

2024

NOV

Loneliness. As the holidays approach, many people feel a profound sense of loneliness. The chapter released in November looks at loneliness in America and how the Bible and the church invite people to belong in God's family.

2024

DEC

Giving. December is the season of giving in America. We round out the report by digging deeper on the Bible's influence on generosity. We also provide a year-in-review summary of our most important stories for 2024 (page 192) and a look ahead to our research agenda for 2025.

Finally, throughout this year's report, you'll notice that we're including **extended content** that links outside the ebook and print editions. The new coverage begins in Chapter 2. We've interviewed experts on subjects like the Bible and artificial intelligence, loneliness, best practices for healthy churches, and more. We hope you'll engage with *State of the Bible* through our traditional report, blogs, and video interviews. You will find all the latest at stateofthebible.org. There's much more to come!



CONCLUSION

As you read our 2024 report, I invite you to prayerfully consider how this research presents opportunities for the gospel in America. What is God challenging you, your church, or your organization to do in response to the needs of our nation? If we meet the opportunities that are presented by the Movable Middle, we can see a new

generation connected to God through his Word. We can see a steady erosion of Bible engagement reversed with God's help.

Fundamentally, the *State of the Bible: USA* research project is more than an objective description of America's spiritual state. It is an invitation and a challenge for all of us who care about the Bible to ensure that it is understandable and meaningful to our neighbors. ■



JOHN FARQUHAR PLAKE, PH.D.

Dr. John Plake is a researcher with a pastor's heart. He bridges the worlds of social science, business intelligence, and spiritual formation, helping Christian leaders understand how people grow in Christ.

Dr. Plake serves as Chief Innovation Officer at American Bible Society and is the editor-in-chief of the *State of the Bible* series. Over 34 years of full-time ministry, John has served as a pastor, missionary, professor, and researcher.

He is an ordained minister with a Ph.D. in intercultural studies. He lives with his family in Wilmington, Delaware.

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THE BIBLE IN AMERICA TODAY

According to a recent poll by YouGov, well over half of adult Americans (56%) say 2023 was a “bad” or “terrible” year for the country. About two in five (41%) call it “one of the worst years in American history.” You might already be weighing all the international, political, and social issues that might cause so many people to say that.

As bad as that sounds, however, a much smaller portion (27%) had a “bad” or “terrible” year *personally*. A substantial majority (71%) considered *their* year at least “OK,” with one in nine (11%) saying it was “great.”¹

This is always the challenge faced by pollsters: getting both the big story and the small story. With *State of the Bible*, we follow the big trends—how many millions are reading the Bible, going to church,

¹ Ballard, J. (2023, December 21). What Americans thought of 2023, both for the country and for themselves. *YouGov*. <https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/48237-what-americans-thought-of-2023-expect-from-2024-poll>



More Christians are thriving in their spiritual growth.

or donating—but also the personal implications. Is the Bible changing people’s lives? Are they meeting God there?

Our survey is conducted each January, so responses generally reflect the reality of the previous year. And the big headlines from the 2024 poll are not good, though not terrible. People are interacting with the Bible a bit less than the previous year. While about the same number of people meet our criteria to be Scripture Engaged, there’s migration from the Movable Middle category to the Bible Disengaged. Even the scores on the Spiritual Vitality Gauge are slightly down.

But people are still interacting with Scripture and discovering its hope, comfort, and power. More Christians are thriving in their spiritual growth. More young adults report being transformed by the Bible’s message. We find joys as well as challenges in the data.

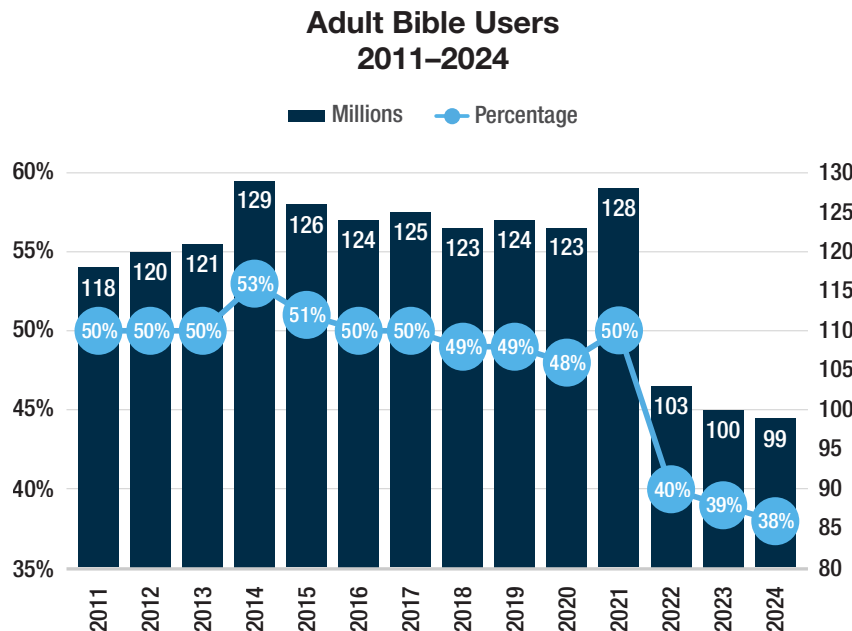
BIBLE USE

Bible Use—whether daily, weekly, or three to four times a year—is slightly down from last year.

We designate those who interact with Scripture at least three or four times a year (apart from services at church) as Bible Users. “Using” the Bible might seem like strange terminology, but people connect with the Bible in different ways these days. Some listen to Bible recordings or Scripture songs, while others do online searches or use app-based devotionals. There are also formats for those with

impairments of sight or hearing. We ask about *using* the Bible so we don't miss any of those interactions.

A few years ago, half of Americans were Bible Users (50%) and three in ten “never” used the Bible (29%). We reported a rather drastic shift in our 2022 survey—Bible Use tumbling by ten points (down to 40%) with non-users increasing by that same amount (up to 40%). Surveys in these last two years have seen minor variations in those numbers, with Bible Use inching downward.

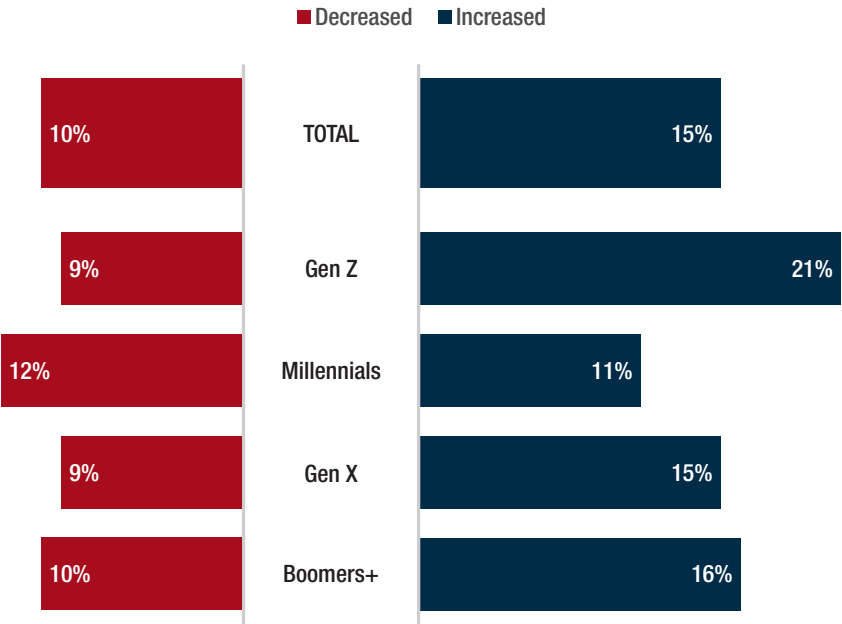


Perhaps you hoped that the drop in Bible Use reported in 2022 was a temporary blip, possibly a result of the pandemic, and that we would soon bounce back. Two years later, we see that a course correction has not yet occurred.

Still, when people are asked whether their Bible use has increased or decreased in the past year, they are substantially more likely to say it has *increased*. The vast majority report no change, but self-reported increasers (15%) outnumber decreaseers (10%). This happens every year, even when the overall Bible Use numbers go down. (Even in our 2022 survey, when Bible Use dropped precipitously, 13% said they read it more, and 10% less.) This probably indicates that people *want to think* they’ve been reading the Bible more, whether or not they really have been.

Increase/Decrease in Bible Reading²

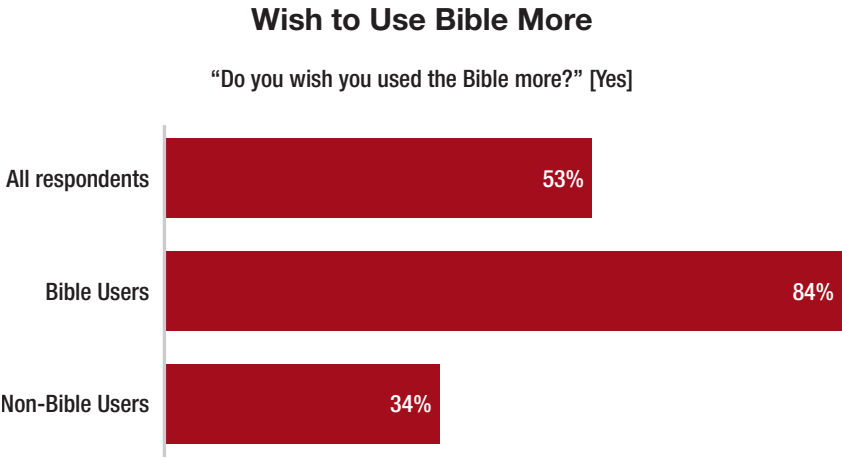
Compared to last year, my personal use of the Bible has



² On some questions, like this one, the Elders (age 79+) have such a small sample size that the statistics are unreliable. In these cases, we are grouping them with the Boomer generation.

It’s notable that more than a fifth of Gen Z adults (21%) say they’ve increased their Bible use, more than twice the number of those claiming a decrease (9%). On the other hand, Millennials were the only age group in which more said they had decreased (12%) than increased (11%).

Some people turn against the Bible. They don’t read it, and they don’t feel bad about not reading it; they have no desire for it, and some even resent the place it has in public life. But that’s not what we see in these responses. The self-reporting of increased Bible reading, even if it is overly optimistic, suggests that the Bible still has a positive place in many people’s minds. We also see this in another survey question: “Do you wish you used the Bible more?”



More than half of American adults (53%) say yes, they do wish they read the Bible more. Even among those who don’t qualify as Bible Users, people who don’t interact with the Bible even three times a year, more than a third of them *wish they did*.

Our findings about people's wish to read the Bible more hint that all is not lost. In a majority of Americans there is still the desire for the Bible.

This provides some helpful context to the general story of decline in the standing of America's faith. Author Aaron M. Renn, for instance, examines the status of American Christianity in recent decades and suggests that we've lived through a "positive world" (1964–1994) and a "neutral world" (1994–2014), and have now entered a "negative world," in which the dominant culture opposes the church.³ *State of the Bible* data confirm a recent decline in Bible use, Scripture engagement, and church attendance. But our findings about people's wish to read the Bible more hint that all is not lost. In a majority of Americans there is still the desire for the Bible.

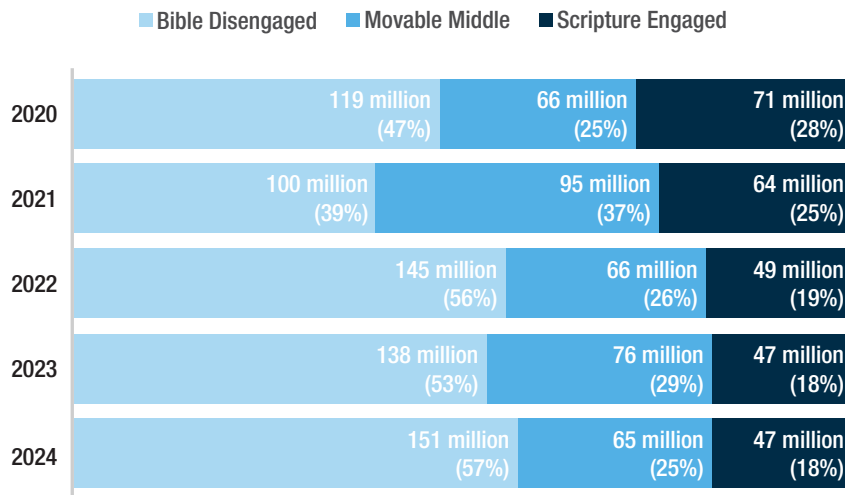
SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

The number of American adults who are Scripture Engaged has held steady in the past year at about 47 million (18%), but there is movement in the Movable Middle. This in-between group lost four percentage points in the last year (29% to 25%). This represents more than 10 million people who dropped into the lowest category, the Bible Disengaged.

Last year it seemed the Movable Middle was surging, perhaps moving toward greater engagement, but the 2024 statistics go back the other way. The percentage of Bible Disengaged is now at its highest point ever.

³ Renn, A. M. (2022, February 1). The three worlds of evangelicalism. *First Things*. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2022/02/the-three-worlds-of-evangelicalism>

U.S. Scripture Engagement, 2020–2024



The Scripture Engagement formula weighs responses to fifteen questions in three areas: *Frequency* of Bible reading; *Impact* on one’s relationship with God and others; and *Centrality* of the Bible in decision-making. The drop in the past year comes from the Impact questions. These include matters of generosity, loving behavior, and one’s sense of connection with God. There was a major drop in these scores among the Bible Disengaged, suggesting that the Impact responses knocked many from the Movable Middle into the bottom category.

Frequency of Bible reading, as we’ve seen, has decreased only slightly. Centrality of the Bible in decision-making has remained steady—so apparently people are using the Bible as a guidebook for life at about the same level as they did last year. Yet, for millions of people, the Bible is not leading to a greater connection with God or more loving behavior toward others, at least as much as it did a year ago.

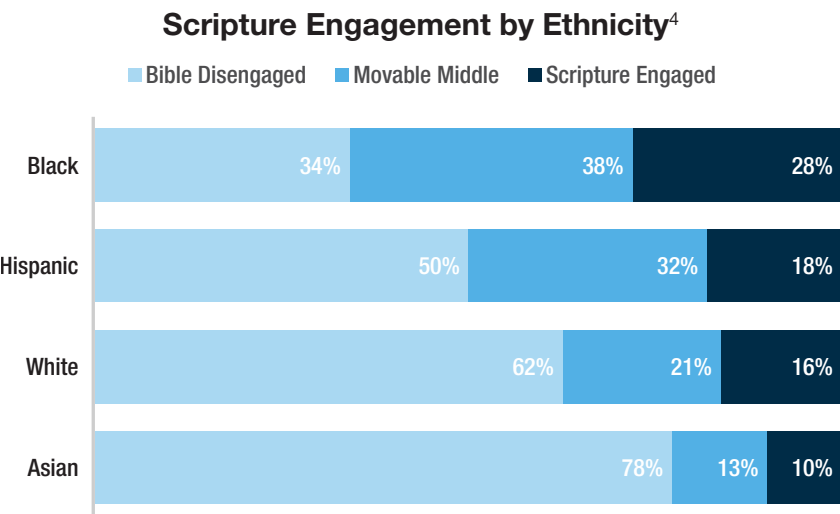
Taking a deeper dive into the **demographics** of Scripture Engagement, we find . . .

. . . Black Americans leading again in Scripture Engagement

. . . Evangelicals most likely to be Scripture Engaged

. . . the South as the strongest region by far for Scripture Engagement

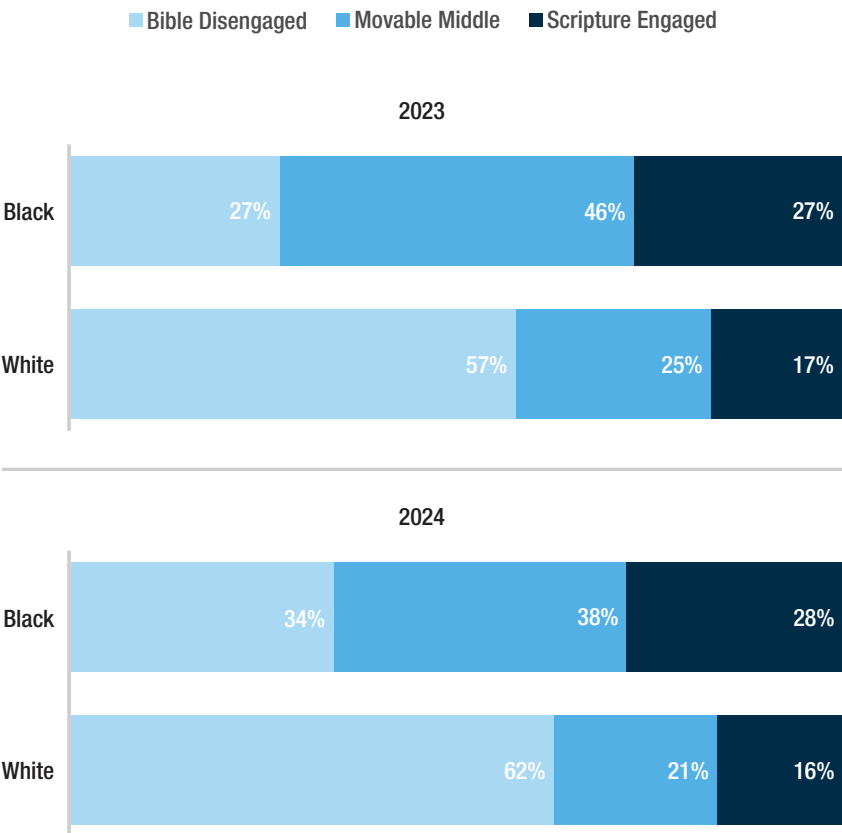
. . . Boomers as the generation most likely to be Scripture Engaged



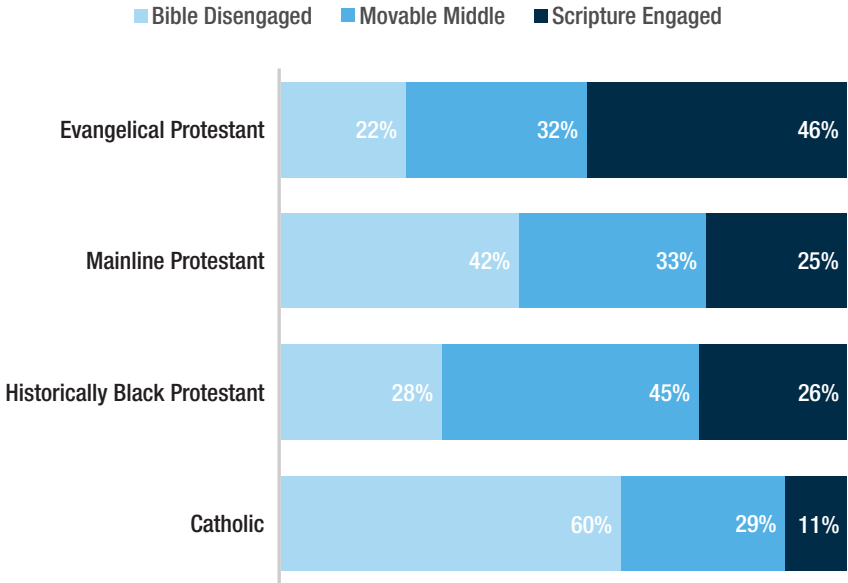
⁴ The Black, White, and Asian categories include only non-Hispanics. The Asian category includes Pacific Islanders. Other groups are included in the survey, but the sample sizes are too small to be reported here.

More than a quarter of Black Americans (28%) are Scripture Engaged, far outpacing any other ethnic group. They also have a much larger percentage in the Movable Middle (38%). This population also had a slight uptick in Scripture Engagement from last year (from 27%), while White Americans had a slight downturn. Both those groups had a substantial slide from the Movable Middle to the Bible Disengaged.

**Black and White Americans' Scripture Engagement,
2023–24**



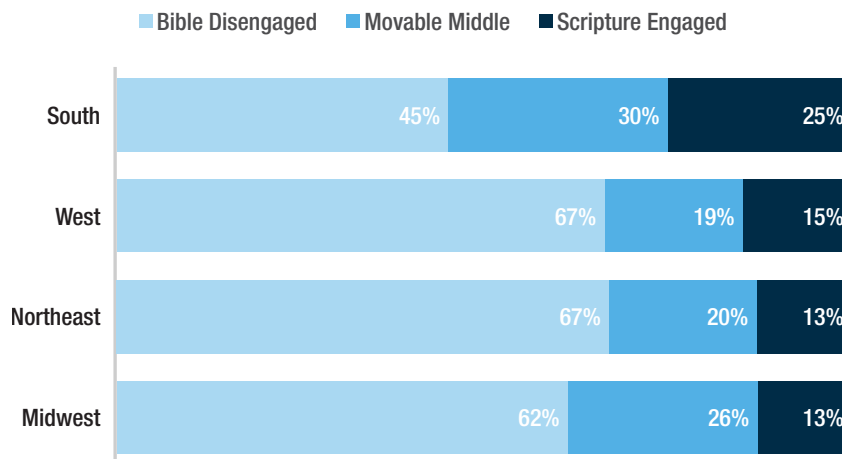
Scripture Engagement by Religious Identity



Just under half of Evangelicals (46%) are Scripture Engaged, leading other religious groups by far. Among Mainline Protestants and those in Historically Black denominations, about a quarter are Scripture Engaged. Comparing with last year’s statistics, we see a familiar pattern—migration from the Movable Middle to the Bible Disengaged—*except for the Mainline Protestants*. This group had a major increase in Scripture Engagement (19% to 25%) and a decrease in Bible Disengagement (44% to 42%).

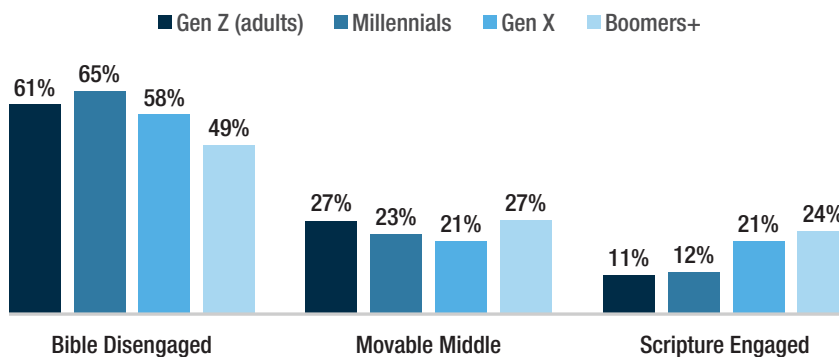
One-quarter of those in the South are Scripture Engaged (25%), nearly doubling the percentage of those in the Northeast or Midwest (13%). In the Northeast and West, two-thirds (67%) are Bible Disengaged.

Scripture Engagement by Region



About a quarter of Boomers (now including those we previously had in the “Elder” category) are Scripture Engaged (24%), leading the way among generations. Nearly two-thirds of Millennials (65%) are Bible Disengaged. Generation Z adults, 18–27 years old, are the least Scripture Engaged (11%), but have many in the Movable Middle (27%).

Scripture Engagement by Generation

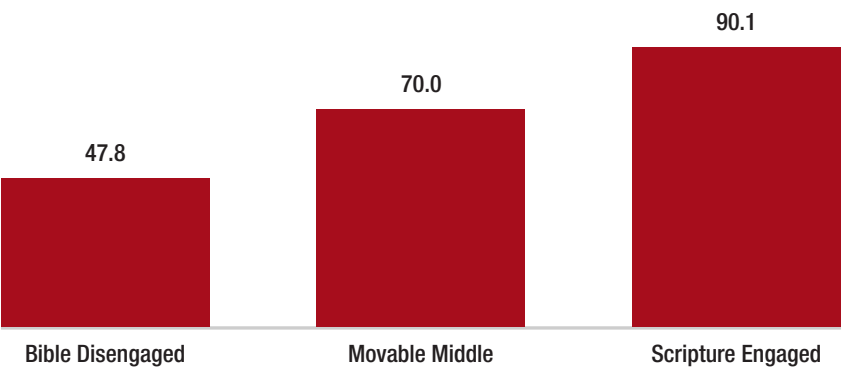


SPIRITUAL VITALITY

Jesus said, “A healthy tree bears good fruit” (Matthew 7:17), and he told his closest followers, “My Father’s glory is shown by your bearing much fruit; and in this way you become my disciples” (John 15:8). Church leaders have often wondered how to know if they’re succeeding. How can we measure the “fruit” in the lives of people being transformed by the Spirit, whose work is often unseen?

The Spiritual Vitality Gauge (svg) is an attempt to do that with nine simple questions about people’s beliefs, spiritual practices, and faith in action. The resulting score (0 to 100) offers a sense of how a Christian is growing spiritually.⁵

SVG Scores by Scripture Engagement



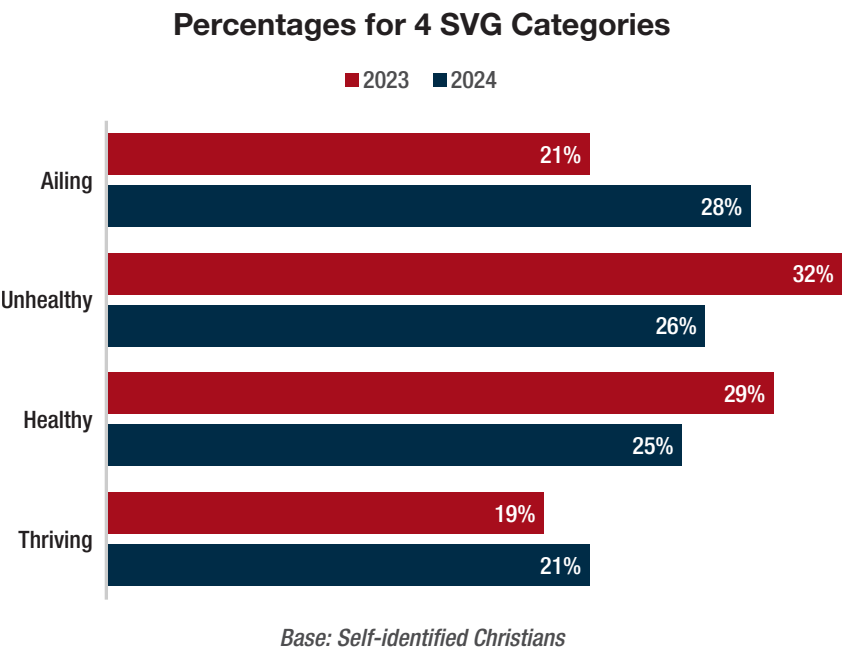
We at American Bible Society are happy to use the svg in *State of the Bible* because we see vital spiritual growth as the proper result of Scripture Engagement. (James 1:22 challenges us to be doers of the Word and not just hearers.) So, with permission from the svg

⁵ The Spiritual Vitality Gauge is used by permission of Renovo. All rights reserved. renovo.services

creators, we have included these nine questions, asking them only of self-identified Christians.

It’s not surprising that the survey shows a strong correlation between Scripture Engagement and Spiritual Vitality. The Bible has a powerful effect in people’s spiritual lives.

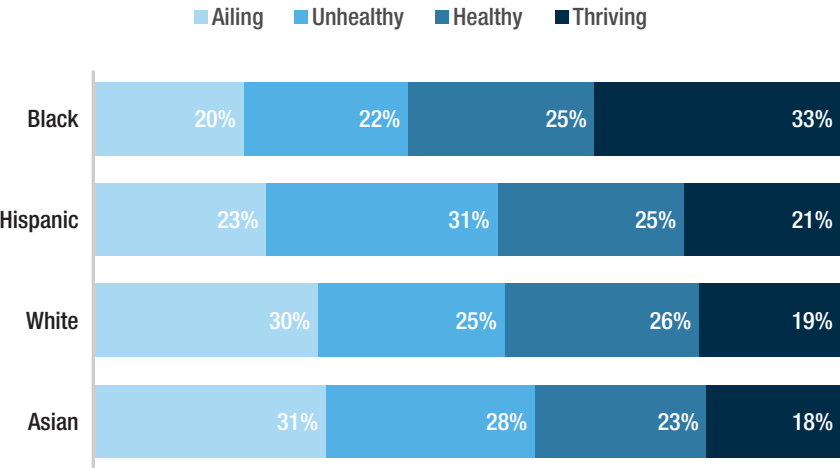
Based on the svg scores, respondents are put in four groups: Ailing, Unhealthy, Healthy, and Thriving. As we compare year-to-year scores, we see some intriguing differences.



Spiritually speaking, you might say the rich have gotten richer and the poor poorer. The percentage of Christians who are “Thriving” in their svg scores has gone up by about a tenth (19% to 21%). This

suggests that more than 3 million American Christians took whatever the previous year threw at them and emerged spiritually stronger. But the percentage of “Ailing” Christians has had an even greater jump (21% to 28%), suggesting that even more millions who call themselves Christians slipped backward in their spiritual health.

Spiritual Vitality Category by Race/Ethnicity



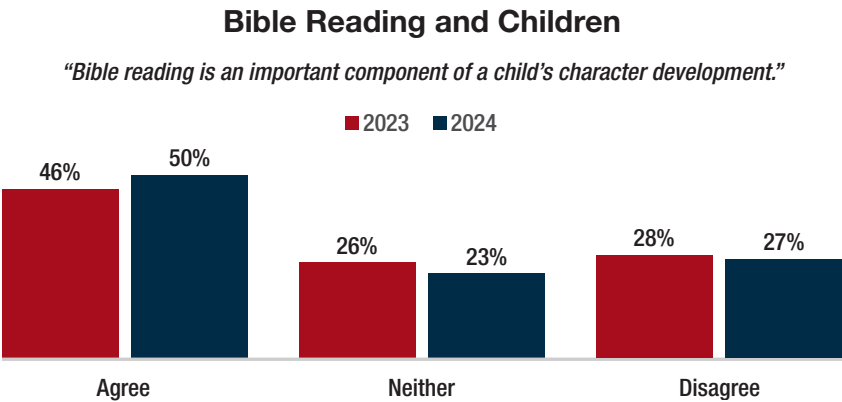
One third of Black Christians in the U.S. are spiritually thriving, according to the svg. This is a much greater portion than we see in any other ethnic group. Among every other group, more than half of self-identified Christians rate as “Unhealthy” or “Ailing.” At the very least, this suggests that Christians (and church leaders) in other groups should study *how* Black Christians are growing in their faith and learn from them.

IMPORTANCE OF THE BIBLE

SOCIAL IMPACT

For years we have asked baseline questions about the impact of the Bible on society. Generally, we find only subtle variations in those responses from year to year. For instance, in the past year there was no change in *“If the people of our country were to not read the Bible, do you think our country would be worse off, better off, or about the same?”* One in seven Americans (14%) rather consistently say the country would be better off, but four in nine (44%) say a Bible-less America would be worse.

Yet one question showed a significant change this year. Half of Americans now agree that Bible reading is an important component of a child’s character development (50%, up from 46%). School issues were in the news in 2023, with parents, teachers, administrators, and school boards debating the best ways to educate children. This may have sparked some to pay more attention to the effect of Scripture in character development.

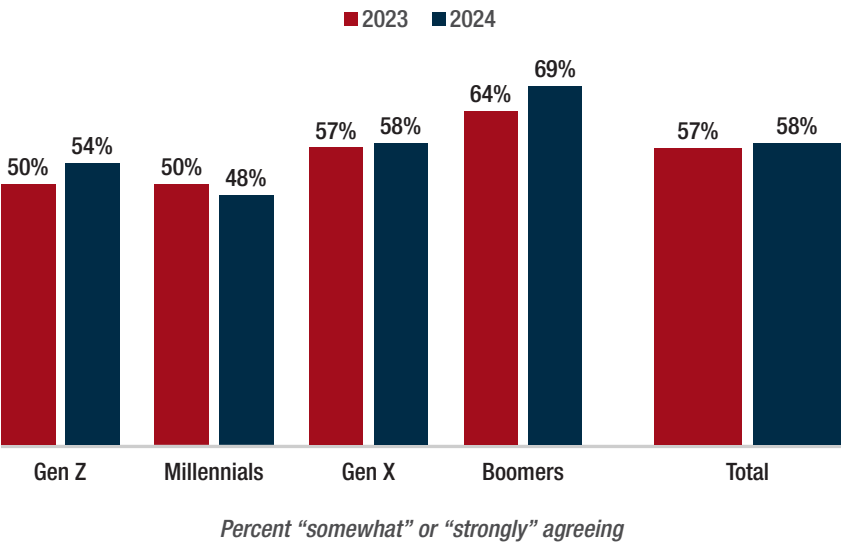


TRANSFORMATION

Slightly more people than last year say the message of the Bible has transformed their lives (58%, up from 57%). Especially notable is the increase among Gen Z adults (a 4% rise to 54%). It would be great to imagine nearly 2 million 18–27-year-olds newly transformed by the Bible’s message in the past year, but we suspect there’s another reason for this uptick. We don’t include Gen Z-ers in our survey until they’re adults, at age 18. So these numbers may show an influx of 18-year-olds who have been transformed at some point in their youth and are being counted for the first time. Still, it’s good news, offering some hope for this generation going forward.

Life Transformation by Generation⁶

“The message of the Bible has transformed my life.”



⁶ Elders had a substantial decrease, but the small sample size makes it unreliable.

MOTIVATION

Why do people read the Bible? Our survey offers a number of good reasons. “It brings me closer to God” is consistently the leading response. But when we cross-tabulate these answers with the SVG, we find some curious differences.

Motivations for Bible Reading by SVG Categories

<i>I use the Bible because:</i>	<i>All Bible Users</i>	<i>Ailing</i>	<i>Unhealthy</i>	<i>Healthy</i>	<i>Thriving</i>
It brings me closer to God	42%	18%	31%	46%	52%
It helps me discern God’s will for my life	18%	5%	16%	20%	21%
I need wisdom for making life decisions	13%	15%	10%	12%	14%
I need comfort	10%	22%	17%	7%	5%
It tells me about the nature of God	9%	11%	12%	10%	5%
It shows me how to treat others	4%	13%	8%	2%	1%
I know I’m supposed to	3%	11%	5%	3%	1%

Base: Bible Users and (for SVG categories) self-identified Christians

Healthier Christians (“Thriving” and “Healthy”) are far more likely to give that top answer, coming to Scripture because “It brings me closer to God.” The *unhealthiest* Christians are the most likely to come to the Bible for comfort or wisdom in decision-making.

We don’t need to judge good and bad reasons for interacting with Scripture, but we might be seeing a developmental process here. Early in Christian development, many do read the Bible because they’re “supposed to.” Maybe they move on to moral guidelines

(“how to treat others”) or basic theology (“nature of God”). Comfort is always available in Scripture, and at certain points in one’s spiritual journey, it might be the main attraction. But as people grow spiritually, they are more likely to seek wisdom, discernment, and eventually communion with God.

This provides some direction for those who teach the Bible and seek to draw people into a deeper involvement with it. Remember their level. For a spiritually “ailing” Christian in crisis, a message of comfort will most likely be more compelling than guidance in discerning God’s will for their life. That’s what these numbers suggest. ■

THE BIBLE HAS A LOT OF INFLUENCE ON ...

How I **interact**
with people

159 MILLION
AMERICANS AGREE



How I **treat** people who are
of a different race than I am

146 MILLION
AMERICANS AGREE



My **support** for refugees and people
displaced by wars and conflicts

130 MILLION
AMERICANS AGREE





FAITH AND TECHNOLOGY

The pastoral staff at a mid-size New Jersey church gathered to plan their upcoming preaching schedule, including a series based on their worship songs—what Scripture and theology lay behind those lyrics? One pastor had turned to ChatGPT for help, supplying the words to several of the congregation’s favorite songs and asking for an analysis. The whole team was amazed at the result.

The ChatGPT large language model had yielded a very helpful report, summarizing the themes of the songs, identifying biblical allusions, and offering some basic theology. Yet someone noticed an interesting detail: the AI generator wrote like an outsider. It said, “Christians believe . . .”—not “we believe.”

The AI phenomenon has captivated human attention over the last year and a half. Viewed one way, it is only the latest step in the decades-long development of computerization, but OpenAI ventured into new territory when it introduced ChatGPT to the public

in November, 2022. Computers weren't just sorting and storing information anymore. They were *creating*.¹

“Almost overnight, people began using ChatGPT to write song lyrics, draft emails, summarize documents, and craft speeches at weddings,” Bloomberg News reported a year after the new technology debuted. “Some even turned it into their personal therapist. Where previous chatbots were often an annoyance, ChatGPT, with its simple user interface and rapid-fire colorful responses, was a source of genuine awe and amusement.”²

This development has prompted vigorous debate throughout society, and notably among church leaders. Is AI a grand new tool that will help us minister more effectively, or is it the fulfillment of our most terrifying sci-fi scenarios?

State of the Bible 2024 will not answer those questions, though we will report on how the public feels about all this—and how their interaction with the Bible affects their optimism or pessimism about AI. In this chapter, we'll also be examining online church attendance. With COVID subsiding, are people getting back to in-person involvement?

But let's get back to that AI-generated report on song lyrics. That computer model had a thorough knowledge of the Bible's content, but it lacked the ability to engage spiritually with Scripture. We know

1 In a helpful blog on the subject (<https://careynieuwhof.com/the-ultimate-guide-to-a-i-pastors-and-the-church/>), Carey Nieuwhof and Kenny Jahng share a ChatGPT-generated definition: Generative AI “refers to a type of artificial intelligence that has the ability to create original content or outputs, such as images, text, music, or even videos. Unlike other types of A.I. that are designed to complete specific tasks, generative A.I. is programmed to learn and create on its own, using algorithms and neural networks to generate new and unique outputs based on patterns and data it has learned from existing content.”

2 Nix, J. (2023, December 10). The year ChatGPT changed almost everything. Bloomberg News, in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

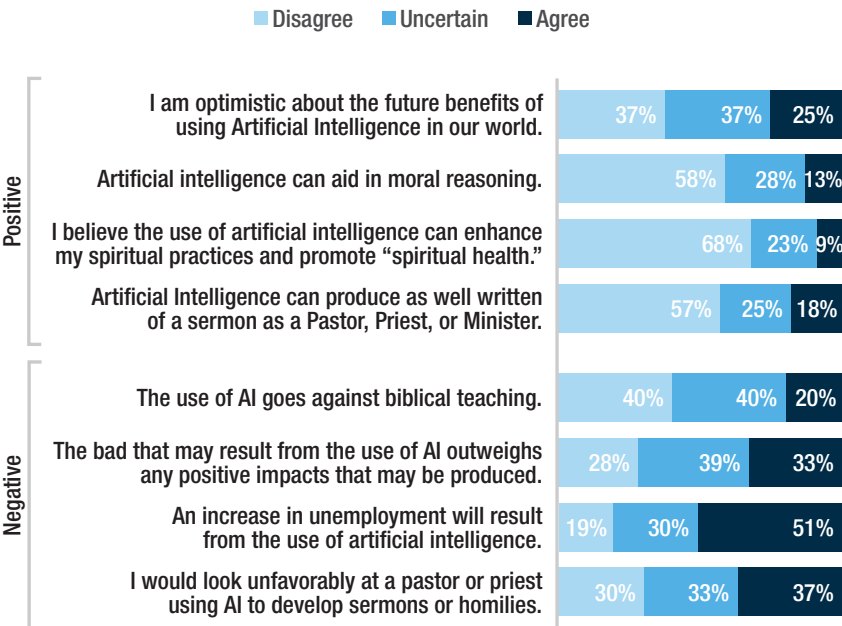
the difference, right? Full engagement with the Bible is not a matter of information stored in one’s memory, but a vital relationship with the God of the Bible.

With that in mind, in this chapter we also explore *how* people connect with the Bible. Are certain methods more effective in not only conveying knowledge, but transforming lives?

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

This year’s *State of the Bible* survey included eight statements for people to agree or disagree with. Four of them were rather positive about AI and its effects. The other four were negative.

Attitudes about Artificial Intelligence



The greatest levels of disagreement came on positive statements about AI's spiritual and moral value (68% and 58%, respectively). Note that these weren't only Christians saying that AI could not "promote spiritual health" or "aid in moral reasoning." This was the general public. Those two statements also garnered the lowest levels of agreement (9% and 13%).

As you might expect in such a new field, the levels of uncertainty are quite high across the board. Respondents indicated the greatest uncertainty about whether AI "goes against biblical teaching" (40%). This may reflect people's general lack of confidence in their biblical knowledge (only about a third of the public say they're "moderately" or "highly" knowledgeable about the Bible), but it might also indicate the ambiguity of this new technology. AI cancer diagnosis would likely be considered biblically aligned; AI theology, not so much. And despite the high level of uncertainty on this question, an equal portion (40%) disagreed with the statement about AI going against the Bible. Only one in five (20%) agreed that AI is unbiblical.

More than half agreed with the negative statement that AI would bring about "an increase in unemployment" (51%)—by far, the highest level of agreement. And yet, when asked to weigh the good and bad effects of AI, only one in three said the bad would outweigh the good, while nearly as many (28%) said the opposite.

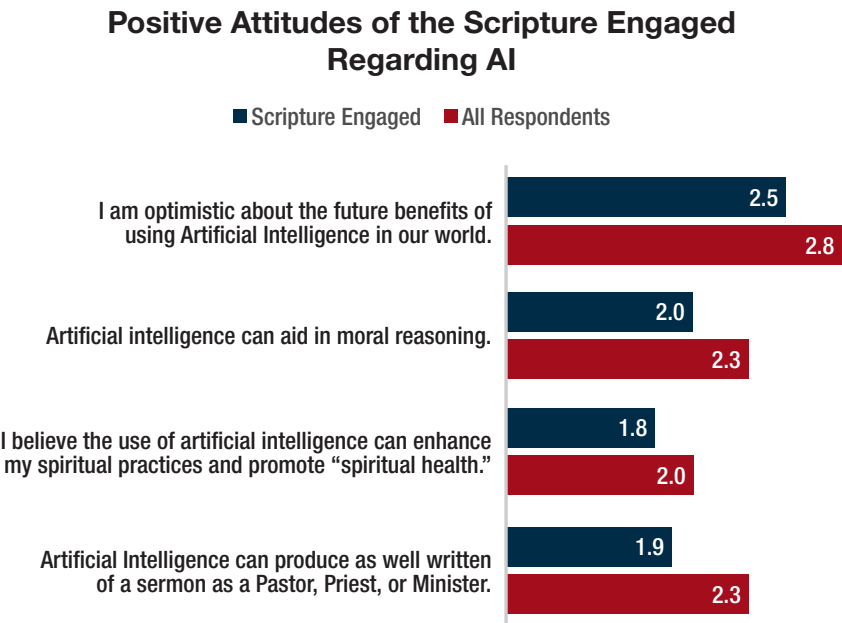
Overall, the responses tilt negative, with a great deal of uncertainty. People aren't sure what a future world with AI will be like, but right now they have more fears than hopes.

HOW FAITH AFFECTS THOSE FEELINGS

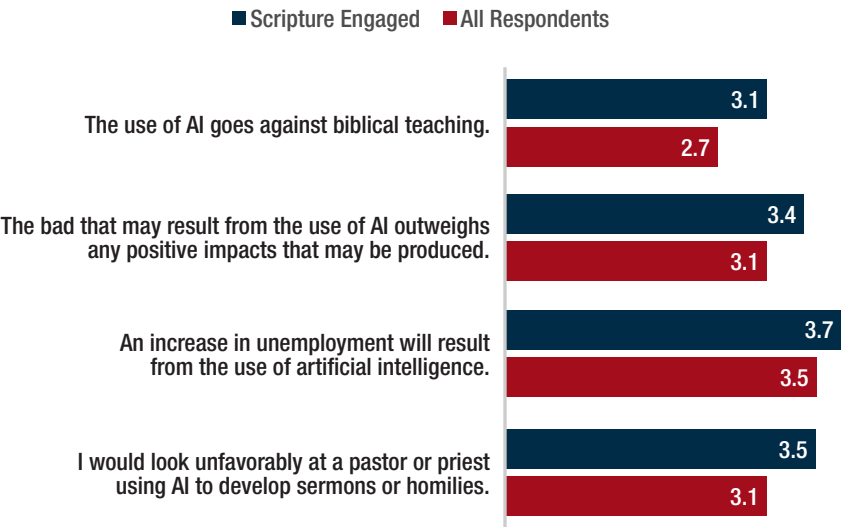
How does Scripture engagement affect people’s attitudes toward AI? What about church attendance? When people are more committed to their faith, does that make them less fearful about the technological future? Or are they more concerned about the growing power of soulless machines and the priorities of the people programming them?

In general, we see slightly more concern.

For these comparisons, we crunch the responses to each statement into an Agreement Score, awarding 1 point for “Strongly Disagree,” 2 for “Slightly Disagree, on up to 5 for “Strongly Agree.” The midpoint is 3.



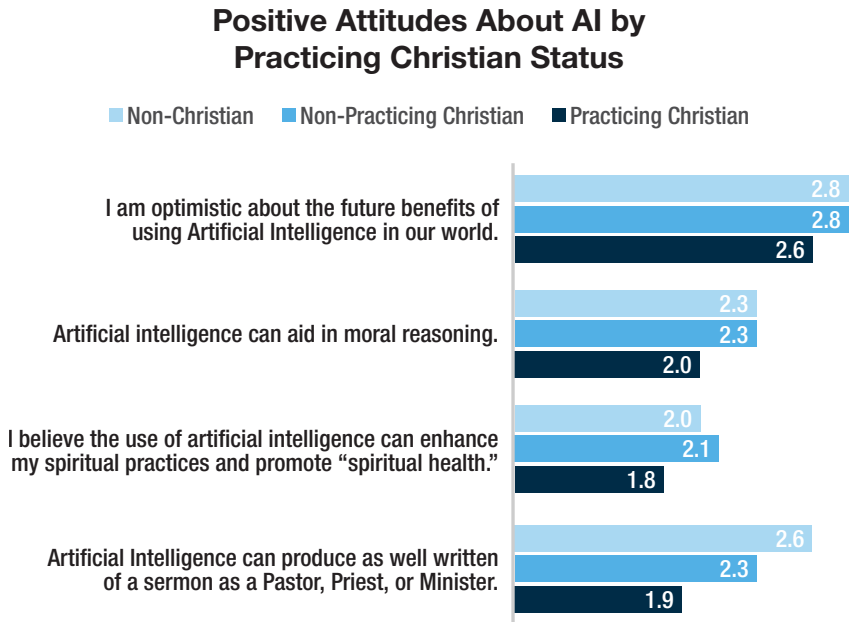
Negative Attitudes of the Scripture Engaged Regarding AI



Evaluating the different Bible engagement segments, we see the Movable Middle and the Bible Disengaged tracking closely with the overall scores, but the Scripture Engaged are significantly different, showing less optimism about AI and more pessimism.

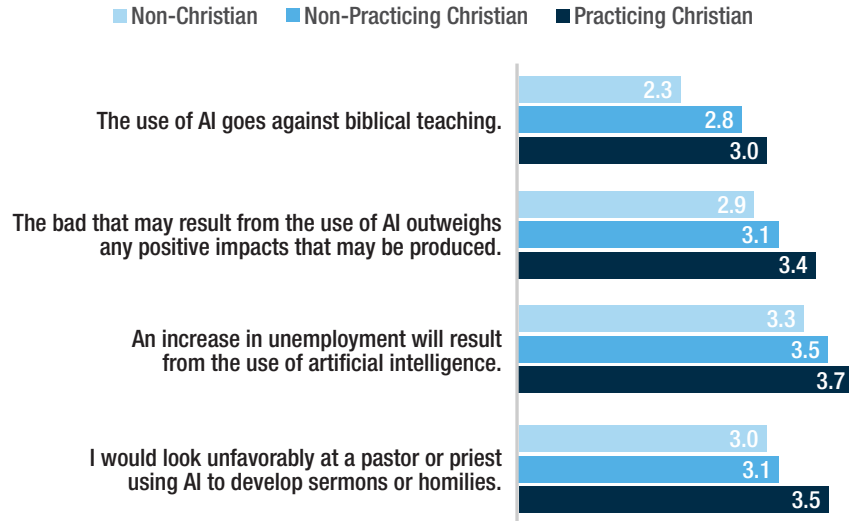
There are two significant diversions among the other engagement groups. Unsurprisingly, the Bible Disengaged don’t know or don’t care whether “*The use of AI goes against biblical teaching*” (2.4, as opposed to the 3.1 of the Scripture Engaged). And the Movable Middle were more likely to entertain the notion that AI might “*enhance my spiritual practices and promote ‘spiritual health’*” (2.3, well above the 1.8 of the Scripture Engaged). Might this indicate a desire for a greater connection with God and Scripture—if only they had the right tool to help them?

Practicing Christians mirror the Scripture Engaged in their responses to these statements, and they show a marked difference from Non-Christians. That middle group, the Non-Practicing Christians, lines up almost exactly with the total average scores.



Non-Christians only rise above the midpoint of 3 on the question of unemployment. On all the other statements, either positive or negative, they tend toward slight disagreement or uncertainty. By comparison, Practicing Christians are less positive and more negative on every statement. But their score on the question of biblical teaching is still right at the midpoint. (The Scripture Engaged are only a tick higher.) This suggests uncertainty. Perhaps we're all still figuring out what Scripture has to say about this modern development.

Negative Attitudes About AI by Practicing Christian Status



Pastors may find it heartening that those who actually attend church are far less likely to assume that AI can write better sermons. But note that they might “look unfavorably” at you if they learned that you used it.

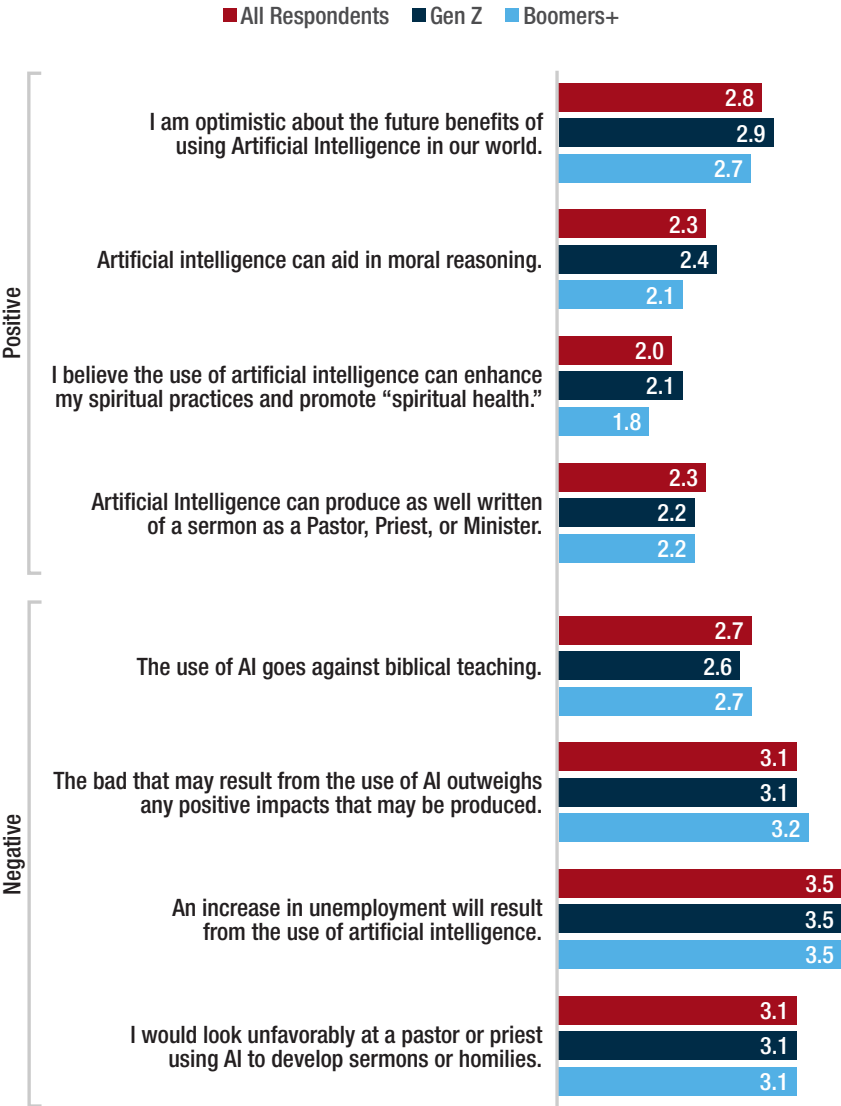
THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF AI

Over the past several years of this report, we’ve seen that Millennials and Gen Z are far more comfortable with technology than older generations. They are, after all, “digital natives,” growing up in a world of computers, cell phones, Amazon, and Wikipedia. So you might expect them to feel more positively and less negatively about AI.

That’s not the case. In fact, the generations score nearly the same on these eight statements, in most cases diverging from the total by no

more than one decimal point, if that. The exceptions come from the Boomer+ generation, which is slightly more apt (by 0.2) to disagree with AI’s ability to aid in moral reasoning or spiritual health.

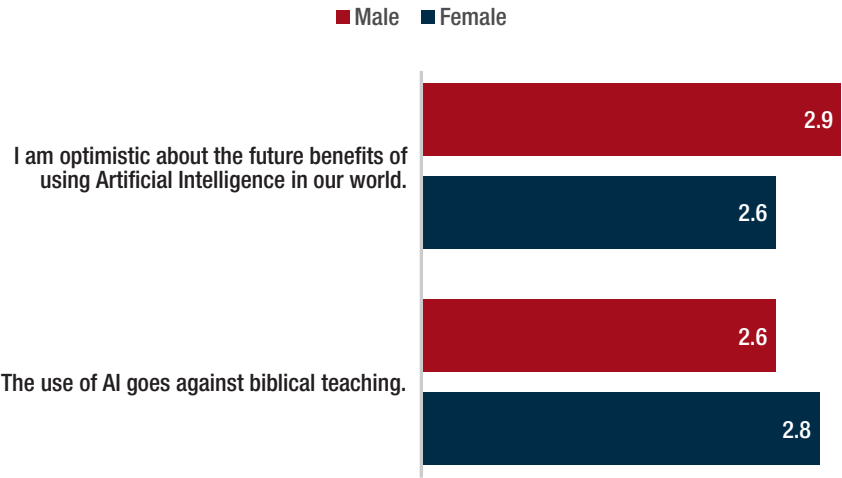
AI Attitudes by Selected Generations



So, why don't we see more support for AI among the younger generations? Authenticity appears to be highly valued in that group, and so the intrinsic artificiality of AI might be difficult for many to accept. Also, their greater comfort level with technology may be offset by fears of how this latest tech will affect their livelihood. One recent workplace-based study found about half of employees already using generative AI at work and even more wanting to increase its use, but a significant number of Gen Z workers (43%) feared that they lacked the AI skills to keep their jobs.³

Women are less optimistic about AI, and men are a bit less likely to think AI goes against biblical teaching, but otherwise there's little gender difference on the eight statements. Notice also that both these scores are under the midpoint of 3, so we can't say men are more optimistic about AI, just uncertain.

Gender and Selected AI Statements



³ Survey finds gen z most worried about AI's workplace impact. (2024, April 15). *PSHRA*. <https://pshra.org/survey-finds-gen-z-most-worried-about-ais-workplace-impact/>

Among other findings . . .

- People with college degrees are more positive and less negative about AI than others, with one exception: they're less likely to believe in AI's ability to enhance spiritual health.
- Those in households earning more than \$100,000 a year are less likely to say that the bad effects of AI outweigh the good.
- Those who live in the South are more likely to say AI goes against biblical teaching.
- Those who live in small towns or rural areas are less likely to say they're optimistic about AI.
- Political Independents are much more likely to agree with the negative statements about AI. Democrats and Republicans are remarkably alike on their responses to the eight statements.

There is much more thinking to be done about AI and its possible connection to Christian faith. We like the overview offered by Carey Nieuwhof and Kenny Jahng: “[T]he question for church leaders becomes not whether the church will embrace AI, but *how* the church will embrace AI. History would tell us that ignoring technological revolutions probably isn’t the wisest choice and AI is no exception. Leaders who ignore the future have a hard time doing ministry in the future. But embracing AI fully without thinking through the theological, ethical, and existential questions of AI poses difficulties too.”⁴

4 Nieuwhof, C., & Jahng, K. (2023, December 20). The Ultimate Guide to AI, Pastors, and the Church. *CareyNieuwhof.com*. <https://careynieuwhof.com/the-ultimate-guide-to-a-i-pastors-and-the-church/>

In April our team attended the Global Missional AI Summit in Orlando, FL, and interviewed several experts on ministry and AI technology.

Click below for a short video where several leading figures in missional tech explore the ministry possibilities of AI.

“We ask ourselves . . . Does this enhance spiritual growth in the people we’re trying to reach? Does this facilitate authentic spiritual regeneration?”

DEL CHRISTMAN

Vice President, Research & Development, Autonodyne LLC



**GLOBAL MISSIONAL
AI SUMMIT 2024**

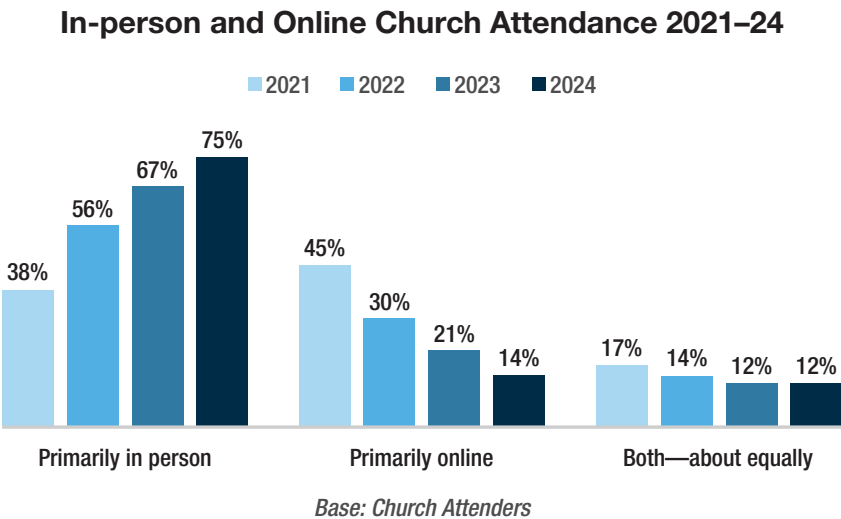
ONLINE CHURCH

We now move to the technology involved in making church services available to those who can't, or won't, attend in person. This was a necessity a few years ago when churches were shuttered because of the pandemic. In 2020, Lifeway reported that 97 percent of U.S. churches were putting their services online—67 percent live-streaming and others making videos available for later viewing.⁵ Some churches discovered an exciting new outreach in this process, a way to connect with curious people who weren't quite ready for the

⁵ McConnell, S. (2021, June 9). How can your church track online worship participation? *Lifeway Research*. https://research.lifeway.com/2021/06/10/online_participation/

full church experience. This was also a gift to shut-ins, introverts, and those whose pandemic fears lingered.

Many assumed that online church viewing would temporarily supplant in-person attendance, but once the COVID threat dissipated, people would return to the live services. According to our newest data, that seems to be true. In-person attendance is bouncing back.



Remember that this survey is conducted in January, so each year’s report covers behavior from the previous year. The 2021 information reflects church attendance from 2020, the first year of the pandemic, when many churches closed for a while. We see here a steady return to in-person attendance since then.

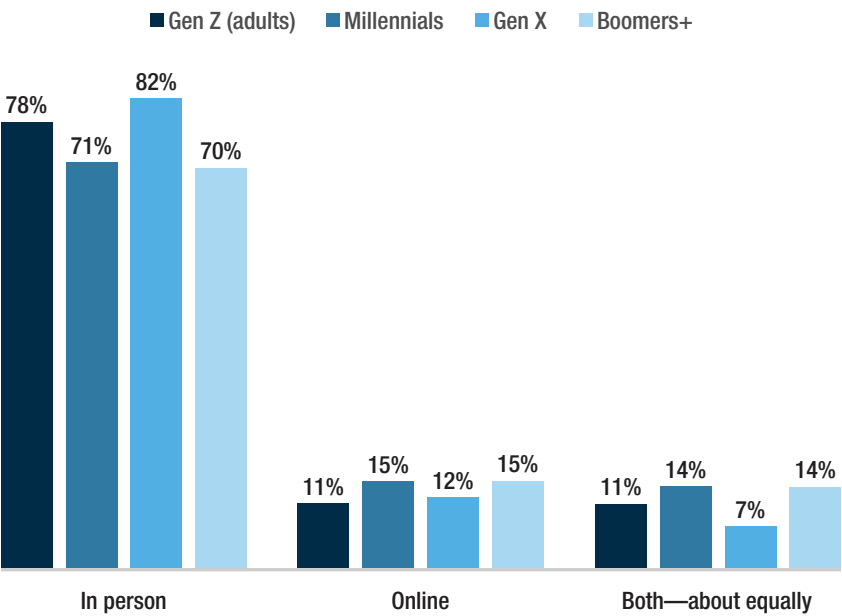
Combining the “primarily online” attenders with those who split their churchgoing between the two formats, we find about a quarter of church attenders using the online option half the time or more.

GENERATIONS

Millennials and those in the Boomer+ generation are most likely to attend online. We might imagine that health needs of the older group often make online attendance a more attractive option. Perhaps some Millennials are dealing with child care needs.

Gen X is the generation most likely to attend in person, followed by Gen Z adults (who, in many cases, are the children of Gen X parents). When we differentiate between young Gen Z adults (18–22 years old) and older Gen Z (23–27), we find the younger ones more likely to attend primarily in person (82% to 74%), with only one in twenty (5%) of that younger set attending primarily online.

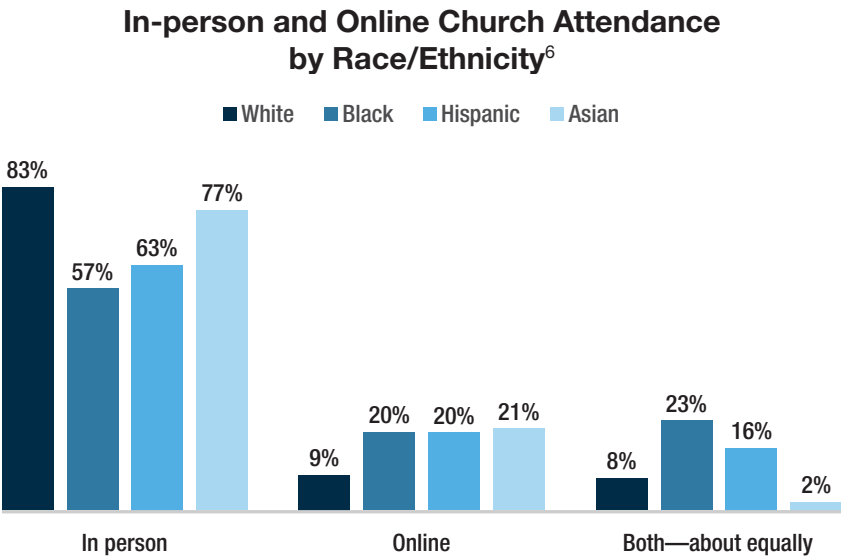
**In-person and Online Church Attendance
by Generation**



Base: Church Attenders

RACE/ETHNICITY

We also find a stark difference between white church attenders and those of other ethnic groups, with whites preferring in-person attendance in greater numbers. Those in the other groups are more likely to say they attend in-person and online “about equally.”



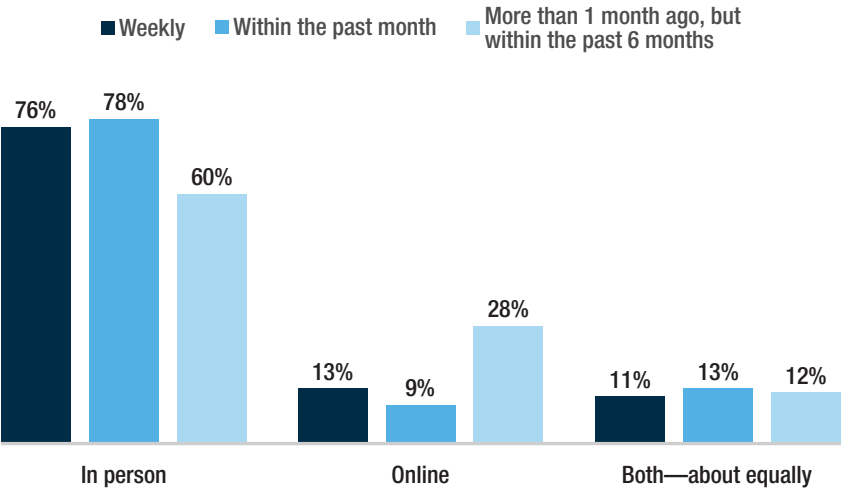
FREQUENCY OF ATTENDANCE

Of those who attend services weekly—in person or online—more than three quarters (76%) come to church in person. That percentage is a bit higher (78%) for those who’ve attended in the past month (but not weekly). It drops to three in five (60%) for those who haven’t attended in 1–6 months. That less-frequent group is far more likely to attend online (28%) than those who attend more often. This is not surprising—it makes sense that those less committed to frequent

⁶ White, Black, and Asian categories do not include Hispanics. Asians include Pacific Islanders.

attendance would be more apt to choose an easier way to attend, where they don't have to dress up or travel. But it suggests that providing streaming church services holds a door open for sporadic attenders: "We'd love to have you here in person, but if you can't get here, you can still connect virtually."

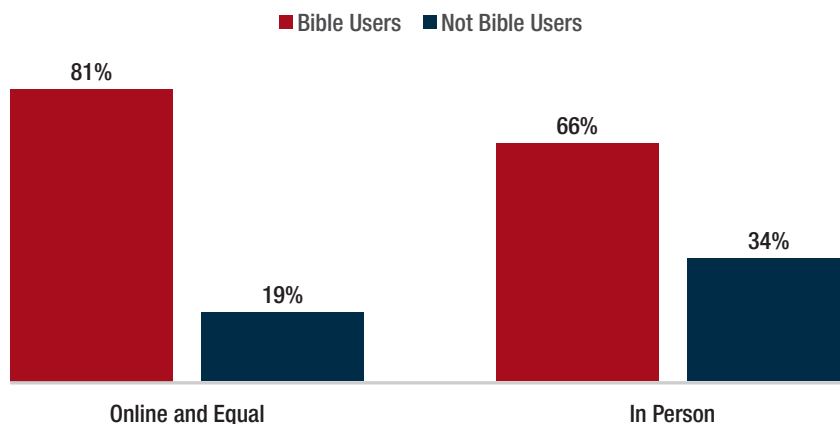
**In-person and online attendance
by frequency of attendance**



BIBLE USE AND SPIRITUAL VITALITY

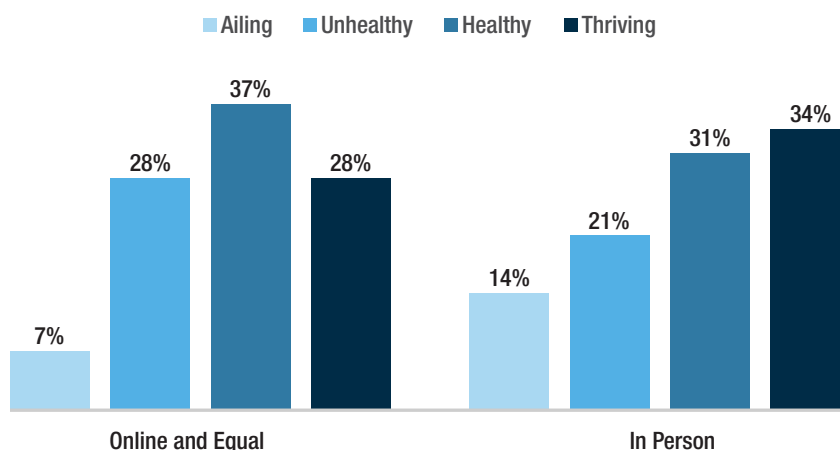
Many assume that those who attend church online, since they're less committed to in-person attendance, are also less committed to the Bible or to their spiritual growth. Our data disprove that assumption. Online attenders—including those who attend church online and in person "about equally"—are significantly *more* likely to read the Bible on their own. More than four in five of them (81%) are Bible Users, compared to about two-thirds of the "primarily in-person" attenders.

In-person and Online Church Attendance by Bible Use



The difference becomes more complex when we examine their status on the Spiritual Vitality Gauge (svg). In-person attenders are more likely to be at the edges of this chart, the *most* spiritually vital and the *least*. The online attenders are better represented in the center, the Healthy and Unhealthy categories.

In-person and Online Church Attendance by Spiritual Vitality



This may give us a contour of these two categories. In-person attenders include many of a church's most dynamic members, people who want to be fully present with God and the worshipping community. But there are also many people who attend church in person but have little spiritual vitality (or Bible reading) outside of that service. Their attendance *is* their spiritual commitment. On the other hand, those who make a point of tuning in online may enjoy a certain degree of spiritual health, even though they're missing out on the spiritual benefits of physical participation in corporate worship.

THE ONLINE DEBATE

If you do a web search for “stop streaming church services,” you’ll enter an energetic discussion that has raged since the pandemic started to ease. Good reasons are put forth for and against online worship. Christian writer Tish Harrison Warren supported online services in 2020, but changed her mind, writing in 2022, “Online church, while it was necessary for a season, diminishes worship and us as people. We seek to worship wholly—with heart, soul, mind, and strength—and embodiment is an irreducible part of that wholeness.”⁷

Our data suggest that some churches are discontinuing their online options and that many churchgoers have returned to in-person attendance. We love the fact that more people are experiencing that “embodiment” once again, the wholeness of live worship. But let’s not ignore Jesus’s emphasis on searching the “highways and byways” for stragglers. Let’s not ignore the Movable Middle or the

⁷ Warren, T. (2022, January 30). Why Churches Should Drop Their Online Services. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/30/opinion/church-online-services-covid.html>

Non-Practicing Christians. Perhaps this data can help churches reach out to those who are curious but not committed, who might not darken the door of a church building, but might click on a link.

MODES OF BIBLE USE

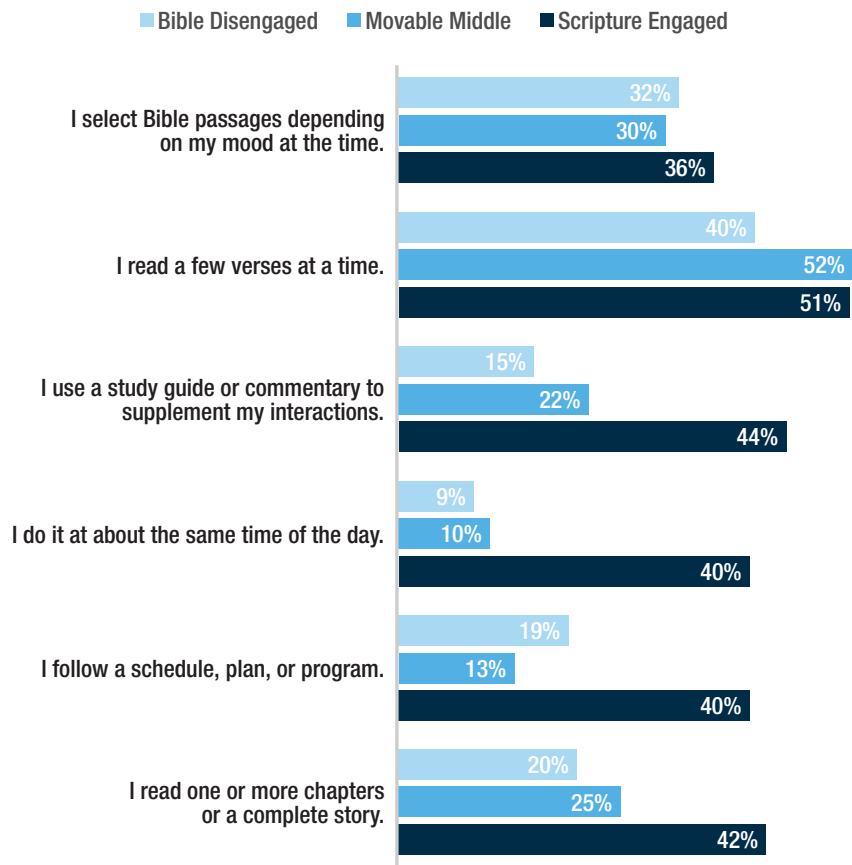
Just as people attend church in different ways, they interact with the Bible in different ways. In the last few years, we've asked people about their Bible reading habits. Do they read a few verses at a time or a full chapter or story? Do they follow a schedule, plan, or program, or do they choose Bible passages based on their mood at the time? Do they read Scripture about the same time each day? Do they use a study guide or commentary?

We're happy to see any method of interacting with the Bible, but as we examined these questions, we noticed that two of the methods were fairly easy, things a casual Bible reader might practice: reading a few verses at a time and choosing Bible passages according to one's mood. The four other methods were more challenging, ways that a more disciplined Bible reader might employ.

Sure enough, as we cross-tabulated these methods with the Spiritual Vitality Gauge (svG) last year, this distinction was confirmed. "Thriving" Christians used all of the methods—casual or disciplined. But "Ailing" and "Unhealthy" believers specialized in the "casual" methods.

In this year's report, we cross-tabulate the methods with Scripture engagement and we find a similar story.

Bible Use Disciplines and Scripture Engagement

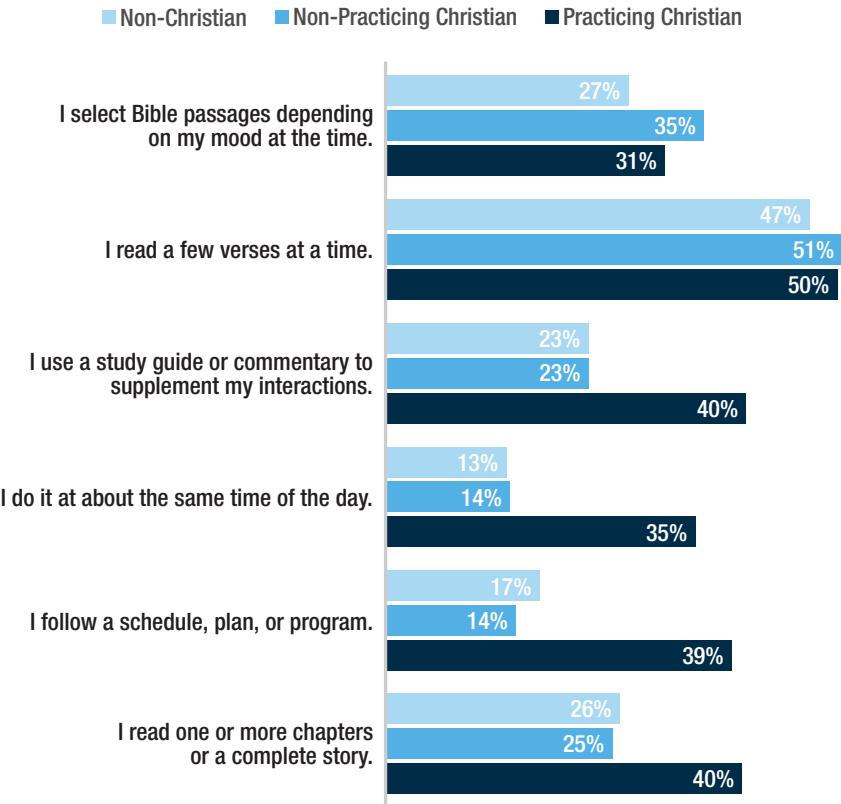


Scripture Engaged people come to the Bible in all six of these ways, though mood-based reading is their least popular method. They far exceed the Movable Middle and the Bible Disengaged in the four practices we call Disciplined. Yet the Movable Middle pulls slightly ahead of the Engaged (52% to 51%) in the Casual “few verses at a time” approach. Even the Bible Disengaged indicate that they use those two Casual methods when they interact with Scripture. (It should be noted that only Bible Users were asked about these

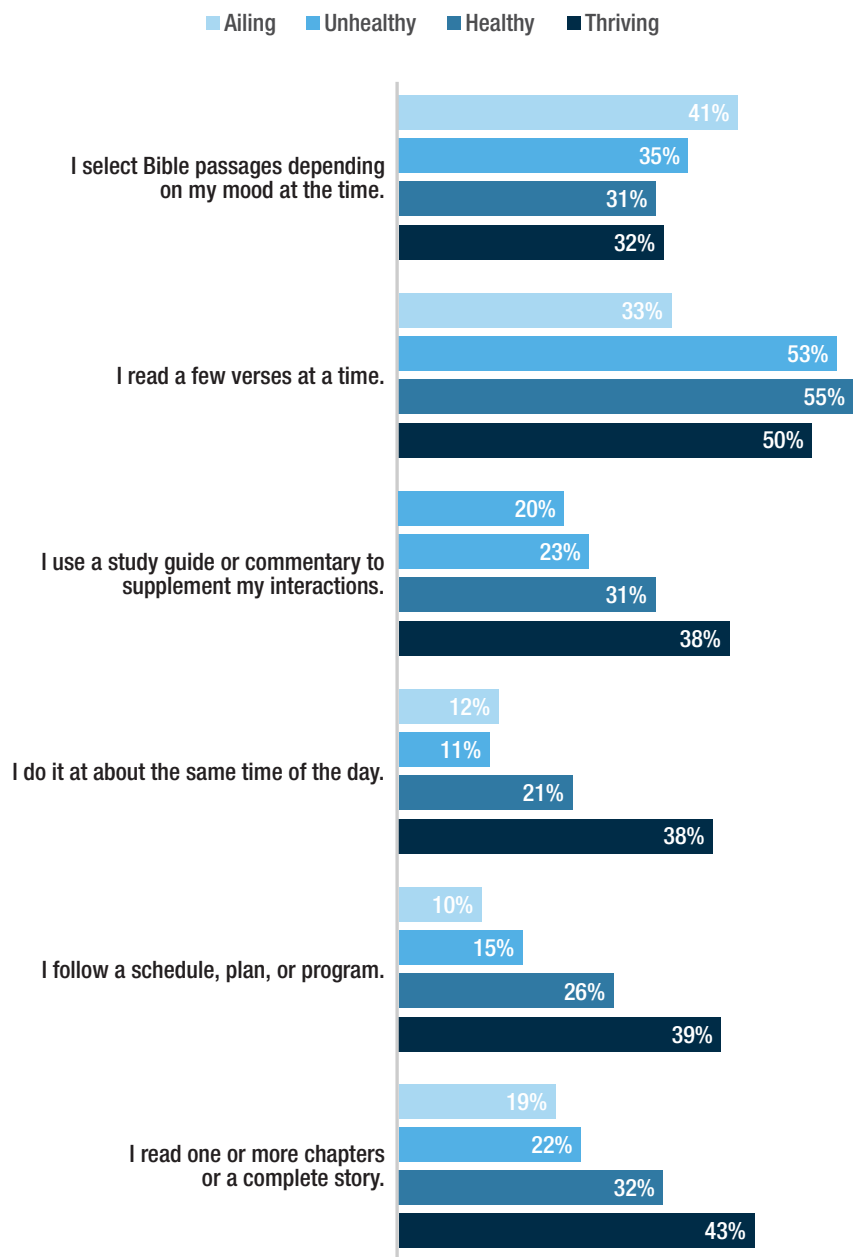
methods, so here the Bible Disengaged category excludes those who don't read the Bible at all.)

A look at Practicing Christian status reveals a similar dynamic: the two Casual approaches are used by substantial portions of all groups, but Practicing Christians far outpace the others in the four Disciplined methods. The fact that Non-Christians surpass Non-Practicing Christians on a few of those methods probably indicates responses by those of other faiths (such as Judaism) that honor the Bible but don't consider themselves Christians.

Bible Use Disciplines and Practicing Christian Status



Bible Use Disciplines and SVG



Once again, the cross-tabulation with the Spiritual Vitality Gauge tells the same story, except here we have an additional grade level. While “Healthy” Christians report using the Disciplined methods far more than “Unhealthy” Christians, they consistently fall short of their “Thriving” comrades. While it’s always hard to determine cause and effect, this clearly links Spiritual Vitality with Disciplined Bible reading methods. So if you’re looking to grow spiritually, perhaps it would help to get a Bible study app that will prompt you each day, or to start reading full chapters rather than select verses.

CONCLUSION

Much of this chapter involves modality. *How* do people attend church? And *how* do people read the Bible? Furthermore, *how* will the amazing but alarming AI tools influence our lives, our faith, and our ministry?

Christian discernment often involves judging better and worse ways of doing things. Didn’t Paul pray that the Philippians would “be able to discern what is best” (Philippians 1:10 NIV)? And a host of Christian communicators stand ready to guide us from good to great.

But perhaps we can learn to encourage *all* ways of reading Scripture, casual and disciplined, continually digging deeper and recognizing the voice of God. Perhaps we can promote *all* ways of gathering for worship, online as well as in-person, sharing the wholeness of Christ’s body by meeting together in every fashion available to us. Perhaps we can learn to use *all* the tools at our disposal, technological and creative and deeply personal, to share Christ’s love with our neighbors and draw them in to ever-deeper experiences of faith. ■



25 MILLION

Americans attend church online*



27 MILLION

Americans follow a schedule, study plan, or program when they interact with the Bible



146 MILLION

Americans think pastors can write better sermons than AI**

*This includes those who say they attend church “primarily online” or both online and in person “about equally.”

**56% of American adults disagreed that AI can “produce as well-written a sermon as a pastor, priest, or minister.”



HUMAN FLOURISHING

“E lmo is just checking in. How is everybody doing?” That simple message popped up on social media in late January. Though it came from a tiny *Sesame Street* character, it prompted a gigantic response. More than 200 million people viewed the post, and tens of thousands have answered.

Some replies seemed casual and happy, but for many this was a chance to complain. NPR reported, “People aired litanies of personal and relationship problems and more general angst. They spoke about being tired, broke and unsure how to improve things, and feeling disconnected from others.”¹

¹ Chappell, B. (2024, January 31). Elmo takes a turn as a therapist after asking, “how is everybody doing?” *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2024/01/31/1228145269/elmo-therapist-asking-how-is-everybody-doing>

Pundits called it “trauma dumping.” Stephen Colbert ran a fake ad for “Trauma Me Elmo.” One respondent said her rent had been raised—could she move in with Elmo on Sesame Street?

The fuzzy red character, who generally communicates like a three-year-old, carried on the conversation with some maturity. Shortly after the initial storm of responses, a follow-up message appeared: “Wow! Elmo is glad he asked! Elmo learned that it is important to ask a friend how they are doing. Elmo will check in again soon, friends! Elmo loves you.”

Christina Vittas, Sesame Street’s social media manager (and the human behind Elmo’s account), found it hard to keep up with all the replies, but took the opportunity to recommend resources for emotional wellbeing. She was glad that Elmo’s tweet “opened up conversations about the serious mental health crisis in our country.”² Many of the responses also referred to economic and relational difficulties. And, it should be said, many people told Elmo they were doing just fine.

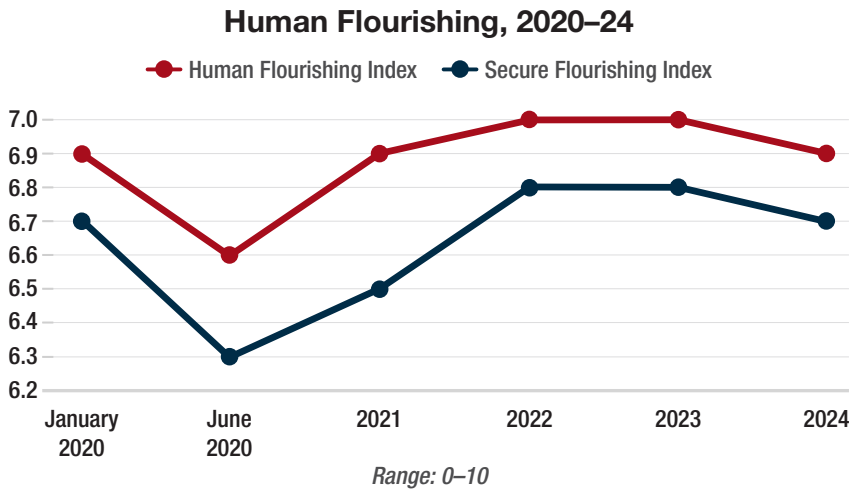
For the last few years, the *State of the Bible* survey has included a bank of “how’s everybody doing?” questions. Developed by researchers from Harvard University, the Human Flourishing Index covers five specific areas of life (with a sixth area, on finances, contributing to the Secure Flourishing Index). These scores give us insight into the well-being of our nation from year to year, as well as the effects of church, faith, and Scripture.³

2 Saad, N. (2024, February 1). Therapy Elmo? Social Media manager weighs in on Elmo’s inadvertent mental health check. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/tv/story/2024-02-01/elmo-therapy-social-media-manager-viral-tweet-christina-vittas>

3 See “Human Flourishing Index” in the Definitions section starting on page 203.

FLOURISHING IN RECENT YEARS

In a year-to-year comparison, Americans dropped one decimal point in their overall Human Flourishing score (from 7.0 to 6.9) in 2024. Two of the domains (Happiness & Life Satisfaction and Mental & Physical Health) showed the same one-decimal decline, while two others had the same score as last year. Of the five Human Flourishing Domains, only Close Social Relationships saw an increase this year, up one decimal point.

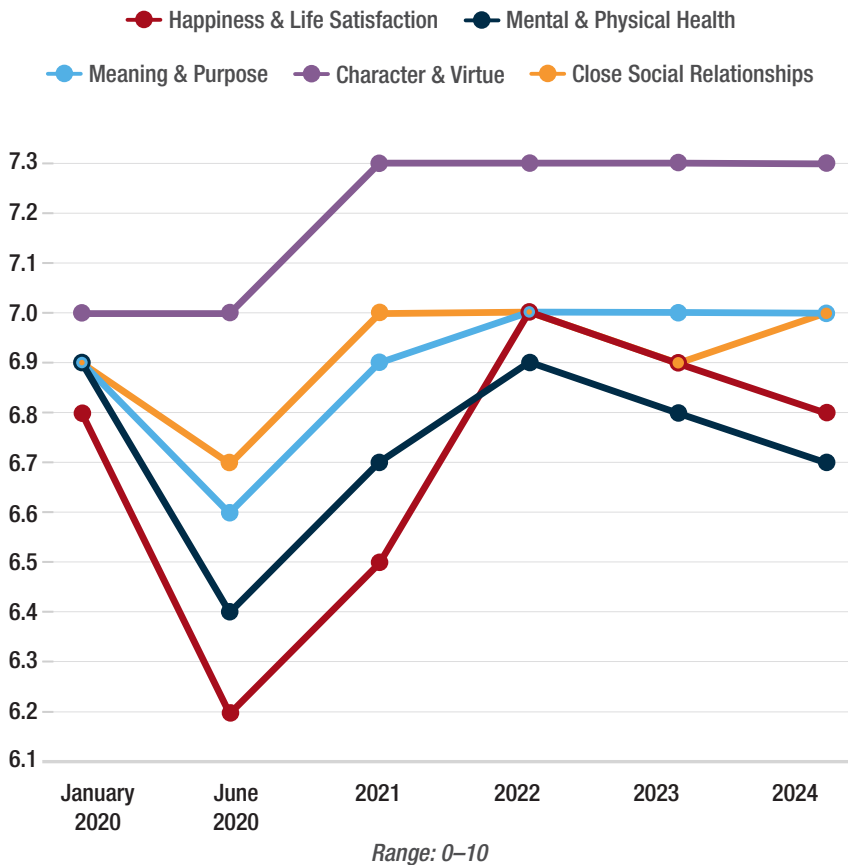


From a research standpoint, we were fortunate to begin using the Human Flourishing Index in the January 2020 survey, just before America experienced pandemic-related shutdowns. We added a mid-year survey in 2020 and have continued to track flourishing every January since. The results tell a vivid story of a population dealing with a major health crisis and bouncing back.

As you might expect, all domains took a tumble in our June 2020 survey, conducted in the thick of the pandemic—except for

Character & Virtue. That domain actually rose by several decimal points in 2021 and has stayed at that level. The biblical principle that “suffering produces perseverance and perseverance, character” (Romans 5:3–4) might be affirmed by these scores.

Human Flourishing Domains, 2020–24

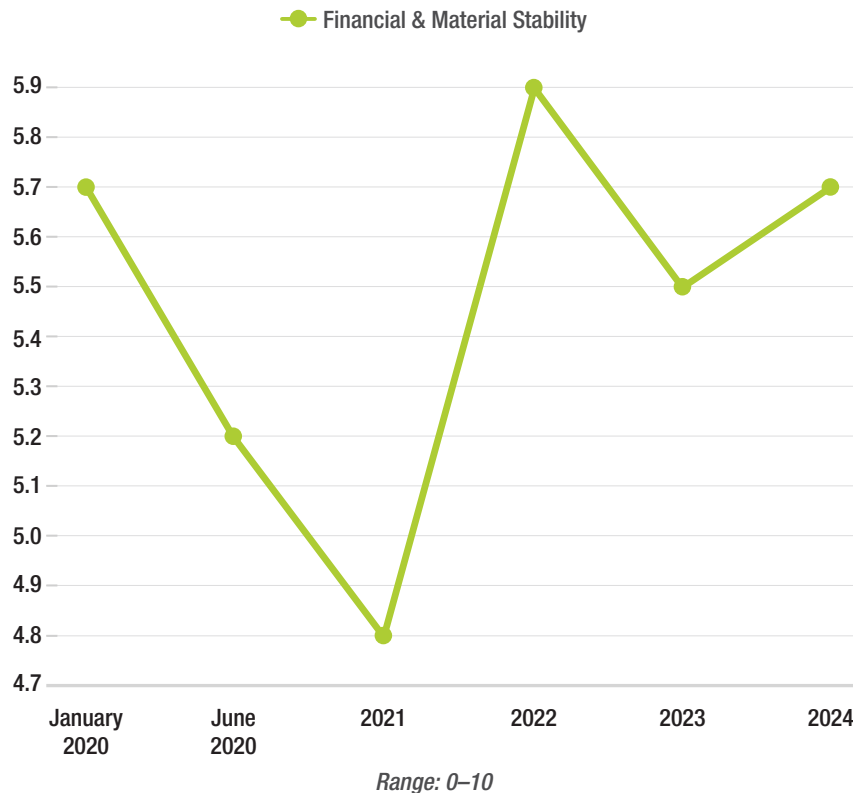


It took a bit longer for the other domains, but eventually they returned to pre-pandemic levels or a tick higher—with the exception of Mental & Physical Health, which has decreased slightly in

each of the last two years. This is now the lowest of the five Human Flourishing domains, indicating this is a growing area of concern for the nation.

It’s also worth noting that the Financial & Material Stability domain is more erratic than others. In the first year of the pandemic—and the economic upheaval that went along with it—people’s confidence in this area dropped sharply, but then it rose *above* pre-pandemic levels by January 2022. The last two years have seen another drop and another rise, most likely due to more recent economic factors.

Financial & Material Stability, 2020–24

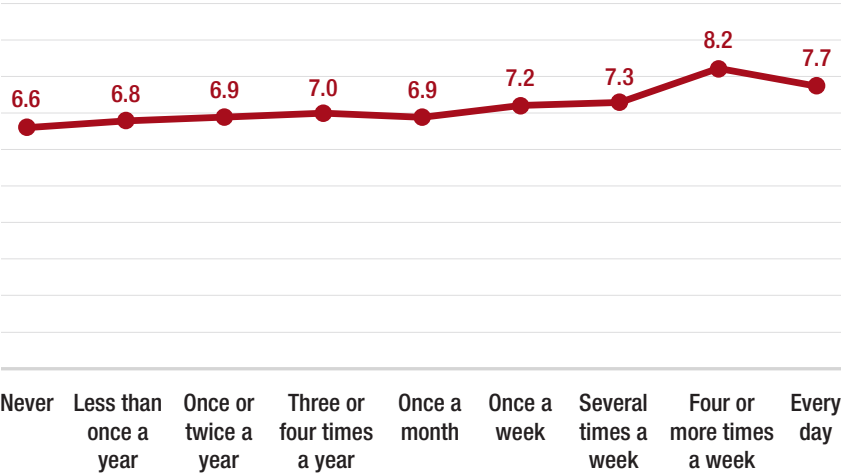


THE BIBLE AND FLOURISHING

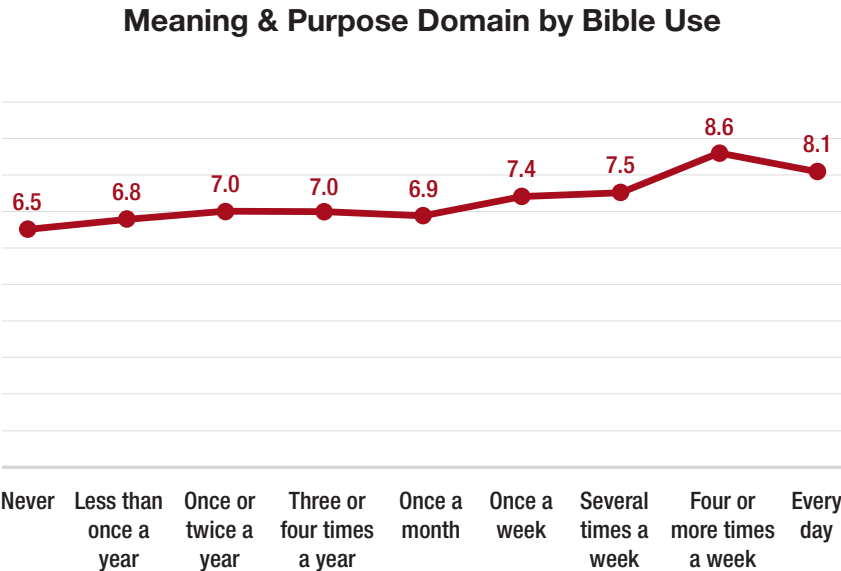
The Bible helps people flourish. In general, the more often people interact with the Bible, the higher their Human Flourishing scores. Those who “never” use the Bible score 6.6 on the index, well below the overall mean of 6.9. Those who come to Scripture only once a week exceed the national average, scoring 7.2. The flourishing scores are even higher for those who use the Bible more than once a week.

In the past two decades, some Bible-promoting agencies have mentioned “The Power of Four”—reading Scripture four times a week or more—as a key marker. The data here support that concept. Flourishing scores are *much* higher at that level. Curiously, the “four times a week” users even flourish more than those who use the Bible every day. (This might suggest that the group of daily Bible users includes some who read the Bible more as a daily chore than for deeper engagement with God.)

Human Flourishing by Bible Use



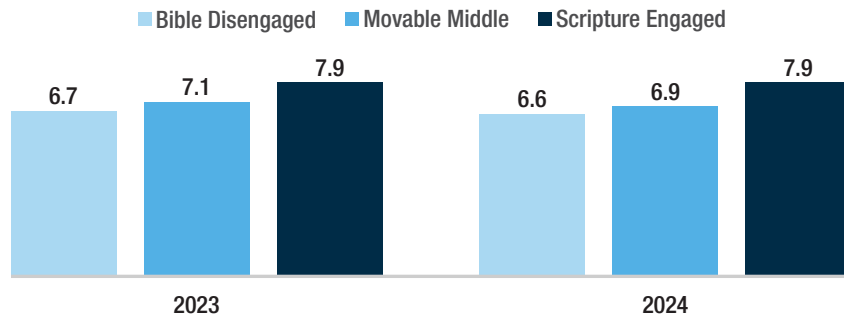
What is it about regular Bible use that impacts human flourishing? We might identify several connections, since Scripture often speaks to matters of character, relationships, and joy. But one domain jumps out statistically: Meaning & Purpose.



The contour is similar to what we see with the full Human Flourishing Index, but the differences are more pronounced. The “four times a week” group rises to 8.6, two full points higher than the “never” users.

Frequency of Bible use is one factor we use in determining someone’s level of Scripture engagement for this survey. We also consider the impact of Scripture on relationships with God and others and its centrality in decision-making. So how do the Scripture Engaged, Movable Middle, and Bible Disengaged score on the Human Flourishing Index?

Human Flourishing by Scripture Engagement



Scripture engagement is clearly associated with greater Human Flourishing, with the Scripture Engaged exceeding the Movable Middle by a full point. The two lower groups reflect the slight down-trend we've seen in the overall numbers from 2023 to 2024, but the Scripture Engaged have held steady.

HOPE AGENCY

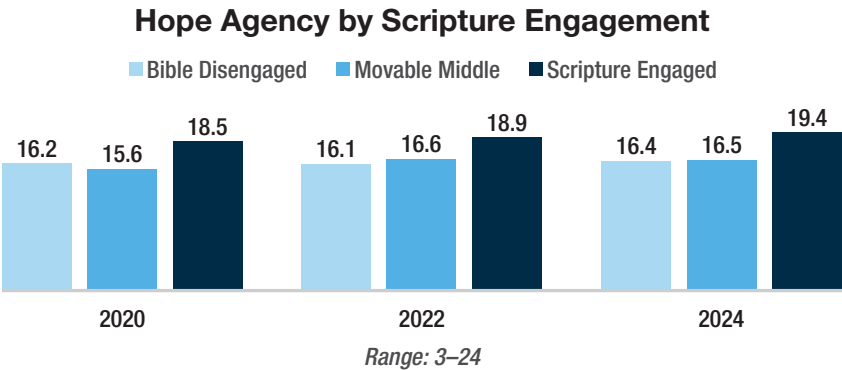
How would you define hope? We know it when we feel it, but it can be hard to put into words. In the past few decades, researchers have explored different ways to test for hope. Even in biblical studies, scholars work hard to distinguish hope from, say, faith or joy.

In recent years, the *State of the Bible* survey has taken different approaches. Last year, we considered Persevering Hope, a positive outlook in life even when beset by difficulty. We're returning this year to Hope Agency,⁴ the sense a person has when they're moving forward on a path that leads in a good direction. We present three simple statements about plans, goals, and how people are

⁴ The Hope Scale was developed by C. R. Snyder of the University of Kansas. See Snyder, C. R. (1994). *The psychology of hope: You can get there from here*. Simon & Schuster.

“navigating” life. Respondents indicate their level of agreement or disagreement on an 8-point scale. This results in a Hope Agency score of 3 to 24.

People who are Scripture Engaged score significantly higher in Hope Agency than others. This has been true in previous years as well. The 2020 results are pre-pandemic, and the 2022 numbers might be considered post-pandemic, as people were putting their lives back on track. Other than a dip to 17.8 in 2021, the Scripture Engaged hope score has steadily grown and is now at its highest level ever.



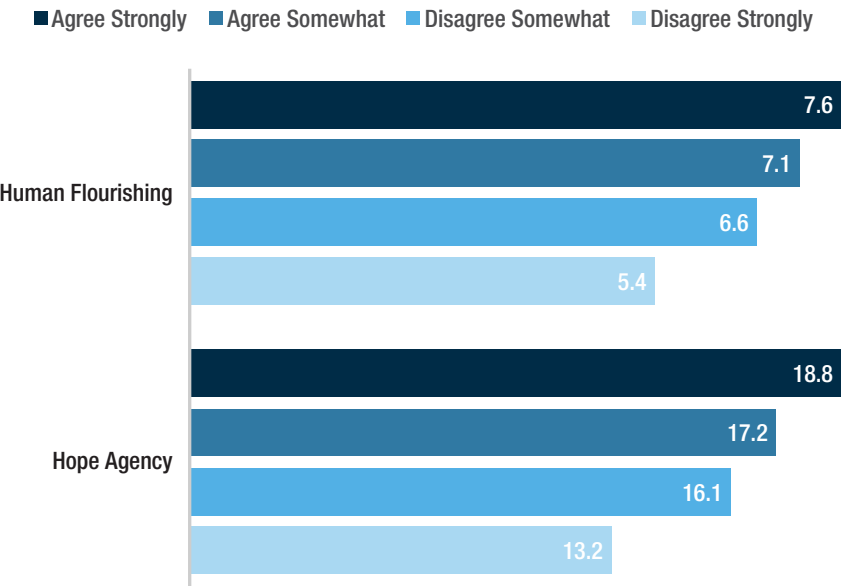
It’s especially striking that there’s little difference between the Movable Middle and the Bible Disengaged. By definition, those in the Movable Middle have some interaction with the Bible, but are not fully experiencing its impact or centrality. Could it be that, by not investing themselves fully in a relationship with the God of Scripture, they’re missing out on the hope that God offers? Or could this have more to do with “agency”? The hope statements in the survey have to do with action, progress, moving forward. Might the Scripture Engaged be more motivated to work with God in a process of spiritual growth?

FORGIVENESS

“I am able to sincerely forgive whatever someone else has done to me, regardless of whether they ever ask for forgiveness or not.” How would you respond to that statement? Would you agree or disagree? While forgiveness is a crucial part of spiritual development—Jesus made it part of the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:12–15)—it can be very hard to do.

What can our data tell us about those who do forgive? Are they happier, healthier, and more hopeful than those who nurse grudges? In a word, yes. People who agreed most strongly with that forgiveness statement scored significantly higher than others in Human Flourishing and Hope Agency. People who disagreed scored lower.

Flourishing and Hope by Ability to Forgive



Ranges: Human Flourishing 0–10, Hope Agency 3–24

Remember all that Human Flourishing involves: Happiness, Health, Purpose, Character, Relationships. The ability to forgive is associated with each of these domains. Those who “agree strongly” that they can forgive others are a full two points higher on the overall flourishing score (7.6 to 5.4) than those who “disagree strongly.”

We find a similar pattern when we turn to Hope Agency, with a huge disparity between the scores of those who strongly agree or disagree with the forgiveness statement. Apparently, the ability to forgive is a key component of moving forward with one’s life in a positive way.

This is an important insight, and not only for Christians. People are held back in their own personal progress when they can’t forgive others. They may think they’re getting back at those who hurt them, but they’re only depriving themselves of a forward-moving hope.

People are held back in their own personal progress when they can’t forgive others.

STRESS

The *State of the Bible* survey asks about ten different responses to stress. Do people have trouble sleeping or concentrating? Do they feel shaky or fearful or numb, unable to enjoy things they used to enjoy? All of these are clinical symptoms of stress, and the degree to which people report these symptoms yields a stress score of 0 to 40.

We don’t ask about causes of stress, though we imagine there are many in the modern world. And we don’t ask how people cope, but we do examine the statistical effect of Christian faith, spiritual growth, and engagement with the Bible.

Stress Level by Scripture Engagement



Range: 0–40

Scripture Engaged people report much less stress than others. It's not even close (more than 30% lower than the other groups). Intriguingly, those in the Movable Middle report slightly more stress than the Bible Disengaged.

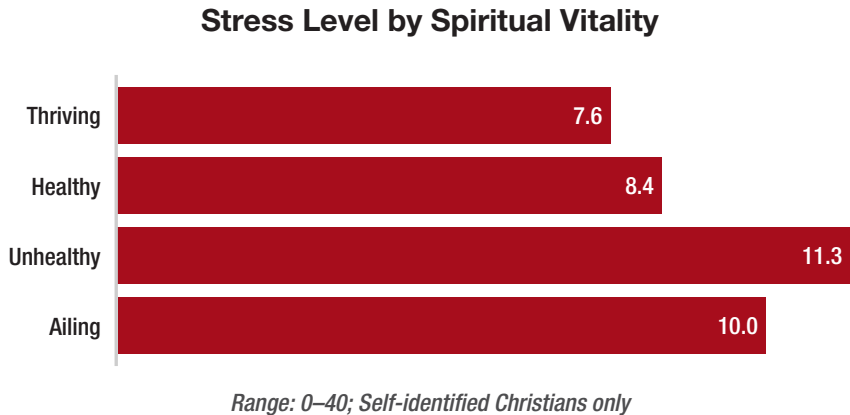
Stress Level by Practicing Christian Status



Range: 0–40

Practicing Christians report less than three-quarters of the stress of others. Non-Christians and Non-Practicing Christians have equal stress scores, suggesting that merely identifying as a Christian has little effect on one's stress. Practicing Christians, who attend church

and consider faith important in their lives, report significantly less stress.

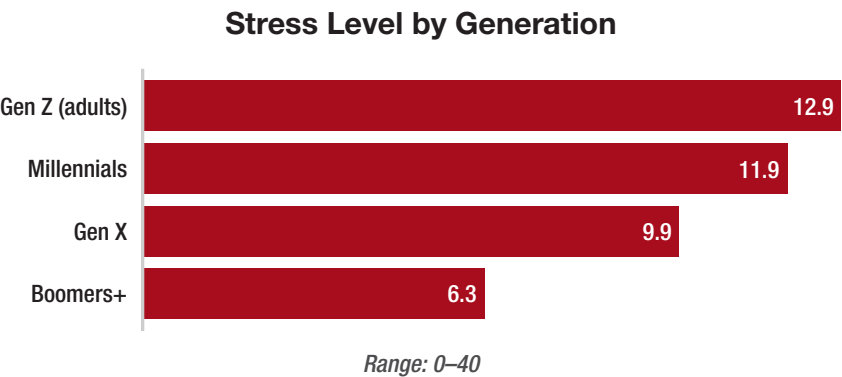


“Thriving” Christians (on the Spiritual Vitality Gauge) report the lowest stress level at 7.6, comparable to Practicing Christians and the Scripture Engaged. “Healthy” Christians are not far behind at 8.4, which is still a full point below the overall population. Clearly, a strong relationship with God—involving beliefs, attitudes, and practices—makes a difference in how people experience and cope with stress.

Surprisingly, however, “Unhealthy” Christians report considerably more stress than the “Ailing.” We saw a similar effect with the Movable Middle more stressed than the Bible Disengaged. And Non-Practicing Christians were in a dead heat with Non-Christians. Is there something about this halfway position that *adds* stress to people’s lives? Do the people in these middle categories experience more spiritual wrestling or religious expectations or uncertainties or complex relationships? Something is keeping them up at night, even more than those who dismiss the Bible and Christianity altogether.

GENERATIONS

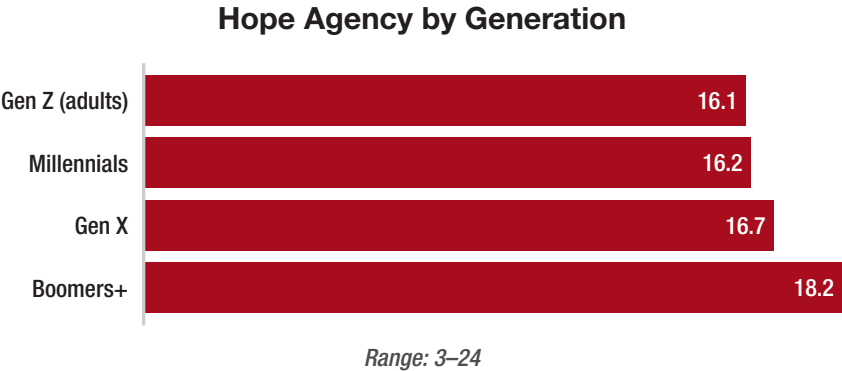
Speaking of stress, adults in Generation Z (age 18–27) have the highest level of stress of any age group in our survey. Millennials aren’t far behind. The Boomers+ generation has the lowest level of stress by far.⁵ No doubt this relates largely to the life situations of people in these age groups, but it might also be affected by the fact that the older generations include more who are Scripture Engaged, Practicing Christian, and Thriving.



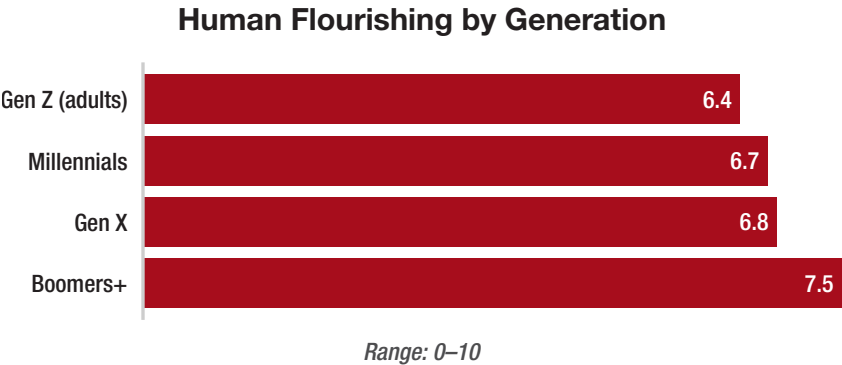
Gen Z adults also report the lowest level of Hope Agency, with Millennials only slightly better. Again, Boomers+ have the best score. Remember that this score is based on questions about moving forward with plans and goals and navigating successfully through life. You might think that the youngest generation would have a greater sense of movement and a brighter sense of the future unscrolling before them. Then again, this is a generation that saw its plans come to a screeching halt in the time of COVID and who now face

⁵ As a reminder, though Generation Z includes teenagers, we only survey adults. Also, to avoid unreliable sample sizes, we have now merged the Elder generation with the Boomers, calling this new group Boomers+.

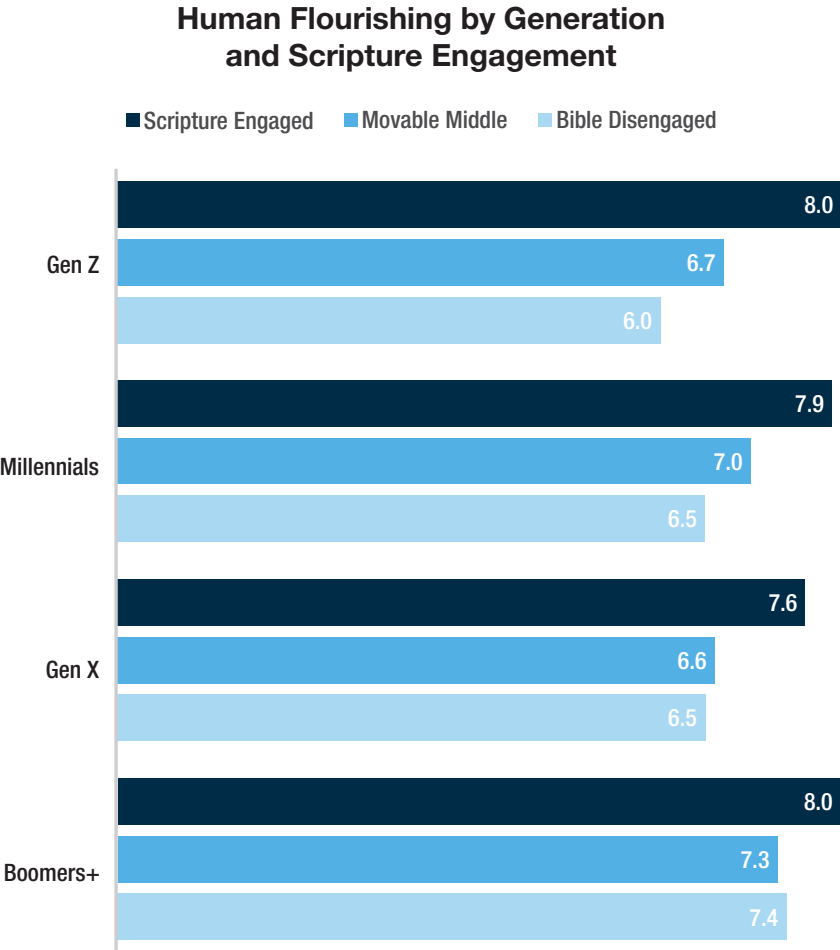
an uncertain job market, sharply rising living costs, and possibly crippling college debt. There is much more to be studied and said about the hope or hopelessness of Gen Z and Millennials. Perhaps the data here can sound an alarm that will lead to greater awareness and new ministry.



Returning to Human Flourishing, Gen Z adults have the lowest score once again, with Boomers+ the highest. Of the six domains that enter into the Secure Flourishing Index, Gen Z scores especially low in the Meaning & Purpose category. Millennials have the lowest score in Financial & Material Stability—which is more about feelings of financial security than of actual wealth.



When we look deeper into the generational data, cross-tabulating it with Scripture engagement, we find some good news about Gen Z. When these young adults are Scripture Engaged, they flourish as much as their elders, and even more.



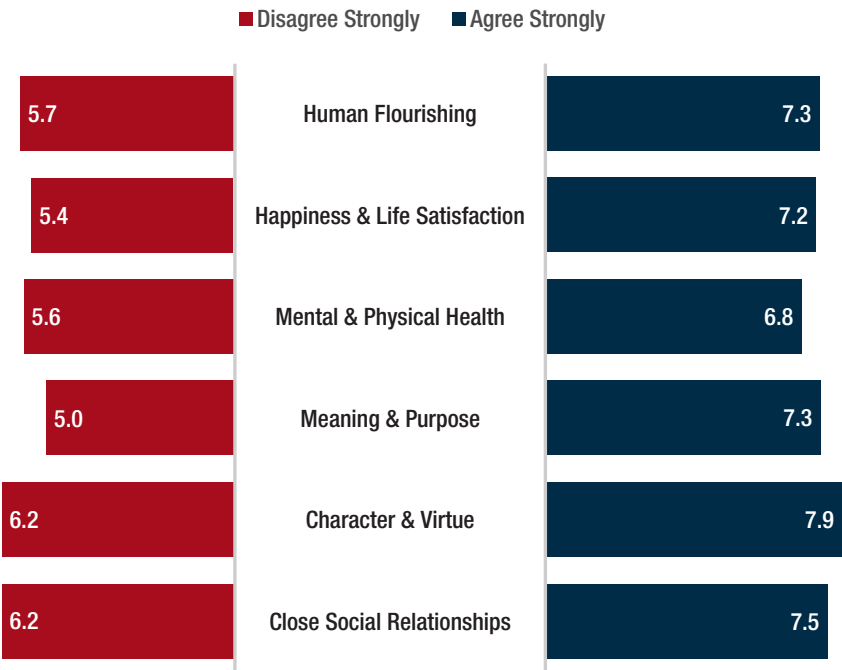
We need to acknowledge that many in Gen Z are Bible Disengaged, and they have the lowest Flourishing numbers on the board (6.0). But that subset of *Scripture Engaged* Gen Z-ers has the highest

number (8.0). This suggests they are living with purpose, character, and happiness.

One question in our survey asks people if they agree that “The message of the Bible has transformed my life.” More than half of Gen Z adults (55%) say yes to experiencing a transformed life, with almost one in four (24%) agreeing “strongly.” The graphic below shows how this group’s response to this question affects their Flourishing scores.

Flourishing Index and Domains by Bible Transformation

“The message of the Bible has transformed my life.”



Base: Gen Z adults

Whatever challenges those young adults are facing, and surely there are many, a meaningful connection with God in the Bible is transforming many of them, helping them to live well.

CONCLUSION

Psalm 1 describes the “blessed” life of those who let God lead them. “They find happiness in the Teaching of the LORD, and they think about it day and night. They are like trees growing beside a stream, trees that produce fruit in season and always have leaves. Those people succeed in everything they do.” (Psalm 1:2–3 CEV)

It’s easy to see both Scripture engagement and Human Flourishing in those verses.

The numbers we’ve examined in this chapter tell the same story. *People tend to flourish in life when they’re regularly and meaningfully interacting with the Bible.* It’s not a magic incantation or secret ritual, but a vital relationship in which we hear from God and allow him to change us.

The Lord doesn’t promise to eradicate our problems; quite the opposite. “In this world you will have trouble,” Jesus said (John 16:33 NIV), but he also promised we could weather life’s storms if we build our lives on the firm rock of his teachings (Matthew 7:24–27). So we still encounter stressors, but we don’t get quite so stressed out.

And we flourish—not with power and wealth, but with character and purpose and deep satisfaction, blooming like a tree, shining like a light on a hilltop. ■

SCRIPTURE ENGAGED PEOPLE SCORE . . .

A woman with dark hair, wearing a white turtleneck and a beige cardigan, is watering a large green plant with a light green watering can. She is smiling and looking down at the plant. The background shows a bright, modern interior with large windows and other plants.

18%

higher than the
Bible Disengaged
in **Human Flourishing**

A hiker with a backpack is walking away on a dirt path through a lush green forest. The path is surrounded by tall grass and trees, with sunlight filtering through the canopy. The hiker is wearing a backpack and shorts, and the scene is peaceful and scenic.

18%

higher than the
Bible Disengaged
in **Hope Agency**

An elderly couple is sitting on a couch. The man, with a white beard and wearing a blue shirt, is holding a tablet and showing it to the woman. The woman, with grey hair, is smiling and looking at the tablet. They are in a bright, modern living room with large windows and indoor plants.

36%

lower than the
Movable Middle
in **Stress**



LOVE IN ACTION

“**L**ove your neighbor as yourself,” said Jesus, quoting a command from Leviticus. Later he taught that love would be a defining characteristic of his followers. Throughout the rest of the New Testament, those followers echoed the theme. Love needed to be more than just a lofty ideal, but an everyday way of life. “Children, you show love for others by truly helping them, and not merely by talking about it,” wrote the apostle John. Love in action was at the core of the developing Christian community.¹

But Christians aren’t the only people who love their neighbors. Any community grows stronger as people help one another, protect the rights of others, and serve as volunteers for the greater good. America was “conceived in liberty,” as Lincoln said, but its founders knew that the collective practice of freedom entailed certain obligations

¹ Scriptures cited: Matthew 22:39 (from Leviticus 19:18); John 13:35; 1 John 3:18 (CEV).

As the American Founders recognized, neighborly actions and attitudes are essential for the success of a free community.

to our fellow citizens, which might be summarized in the biblical challenge to love others.

Late in life, former president Thomas Jefferson—not known as a conventional Christian—gave this advice: “Adore God. Reverence and cherish your parents. Love your neighbor as yourself, and your country more than yourself. Be just. Be true.”²

As the American Founders recognized, neighborly actions and attitudes are essential for the success of a free community. So, in this survey of all Americans, we gladly ask about a collection of principles we call “pro-social behavior.”

In short, what do Americans think about how to treat others?

TRENDS

The last three *State of the Bible* surveys have asked about the same pro-social issues, and we haven’t seen much year-to-year change, except on a few topics that have been in the news lately: immigration, race relations, and the environment. The political climate certainly affects the responses here. Our survey presents the issues in a few words, without further definition. Respondents will, of course, add their own context—for instance, whether the immigration is legal or illegal. With that in mind, we find significant movement on these issues in recent years, especially among Practicing Christians.

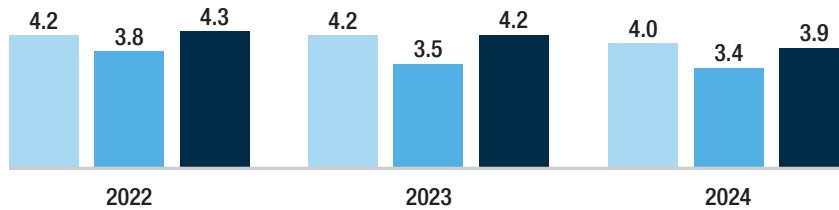
² Thomas Jefferson, letter to Thomas Jefferson Smith, February 21, 1825.

Selected Pro-Social Questions by Practicing Christian Status, 2022–24³

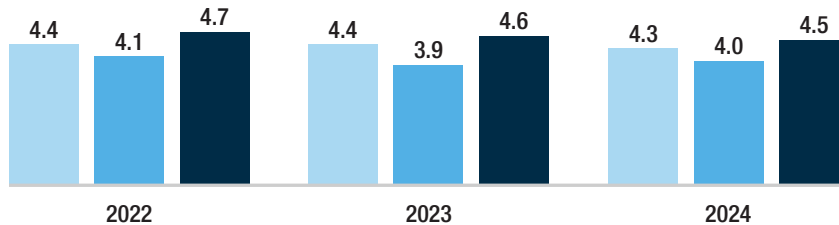
■ Non-Christians ■ Non-Practicing Christians ■ Practicing Christians

“It is important for me to . . .”

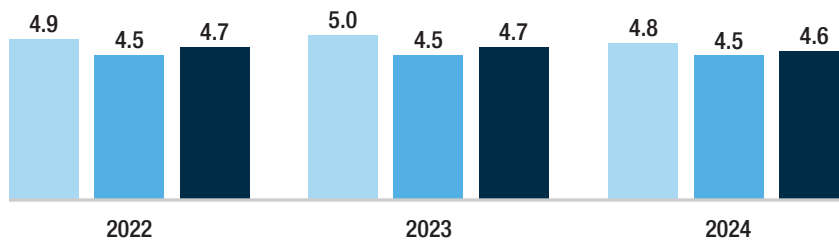
Welcome immigrants into my community



Befriend people of other races



Care for the environment



³ Responses have a range of 1 to 6—Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Somewhat Agree, Agree, Strongly Agree, Very Strongly Agree. These scores represent the mean response for each subgroup.

All groups are less apt to consider it important to **welcome immigrants** than they've been in previous years, but the decline is greatest among Practicing Christians. Non-Christians now place more importance on this than Practicing Christians do.

Among all three groups, we see a slight decline since 2022 in the importance of **befriending people of other races**. The 2020 death of George Floyd, along with other incidents before and after that, turned the attention of many Americans to racial issues. In the next year or two, we saw big companies committing to diversity and communities tearing down statues. But our trendline suggests a drop-off of attention in the last two years.

There's also a very slight decline in the importance placed on **care for the environment**. Non-Christians consider that more important than Christians do.

'GOOD NEIGHBORS'

"It is important for me to be a good neighbor."

We turn from contentious issues of our age to a topical softball. Only one in forty (2.5%) disagree with the value of being a good neighbor. There might be some quibbling over what "neighbor" means—the folks next door, or the people in my church, or everyone? Still the mean score overall is 4.8 (out of 6), indicating strong agreement in general. Nearly six in ten agree "strongly" or "very strongly." Yet a look through the demographics provides some interesting comparisons.



“It is important for me to be a good neighbor.”

Boomers+ have the highest mean score (5.0), **Millennials** lowest (4.6).

Nearly three in four of the **Scripture Engaged** (74%) agree strongly or very strongly and *none* of them indicate any level of disagreement.

Women are more likely than **men** to agree strongly or very strongly (61% to 56%).

Only half of the **Movable Middle** agree strongly or very strongly.

The lowest percentage of strong agreement (54%) comes from those living **in rural communities**, the highest from those **in or near large cities** (city, 64%; suburb, 62%). Might that reflect the fact that, in sparsely populated communities, people are (by definition) farther from their geographical neighbors?

Perhaps because of that population density factor, the **Northeast** has the highest percentage (62%) of those agreeing strongly or very strongly.

Homeowners (62%) indicate high levels of agreement more than **renters** (53%).

‘PRO-SOCIAL BEHAVIORS’

We’re grouping together five personal and specific statements as “pro-social behaviors” (excluding the general “good neighbor” statement and the impersonal “environment” statement). In these five specific ways of “loving your neighbor,” what did people consider important?

- *Welcome immigrants into my community*
- *Befriend people of other races*
- *Befriend people of other religions*
- *Care for those who are in prison*
- *Advocate for those who are oppressed by society*

Importance of Pro-Social Behaviors, Overall

Pro-Social Behaviors	Score	% strongly or very strongly agreeing	% disagreeing
Welcome immigrants	3.7	30%	22%
Befriend those of other races	4.2	42%	12%
Befriend those of other religions	4.1	39%	13%
Care for those in prison	3.4	23%	30%
Advocate for the oppressed	4.1	38%	11%

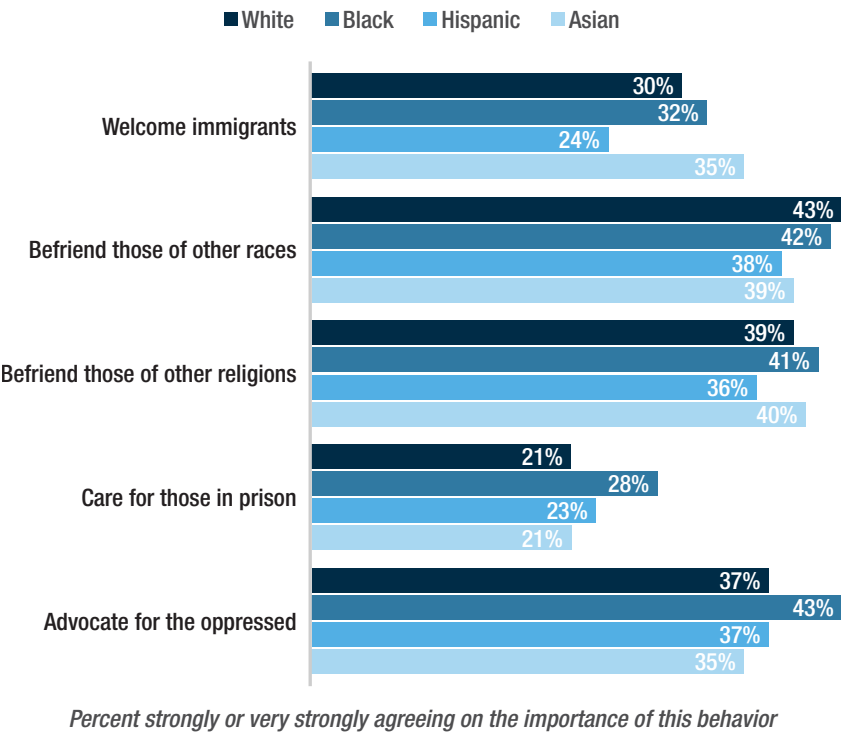
About two in five respondents indicate strong levels of agreement on the importance of befriending those of other races and religions and advocating for the oppressed (42%, 39%, 38%). Only about one in eight disagree on those points (11–13%). There was far less agreement on the welcoming of immigrants (30%) or care for prisoners (23%).

Women are more likely than men to agree on the importance of all five of these pro-social behaviors.

RACE/ETHNICITY

Black Americans as a group are slightly more likely than white respondents to agree strongly on most of these behaviors, with a substantial difference on the issues of caring for those in prison and advocating for the oppressed. Hispanics show the least agreement of any ethnic group on welcoming immigrants, Asians the most.

Importance of Pro-Social Behaviors by Race/Ethnicity⁴



⁴ White, Black, and Asian categories do not include Hispanics. Asians include Pacific Islanders.

SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

The Bible Disengaged are more likely than the Scripture Engaged to agree strongly on the importance of welcoming immigrants, and they come close on the issue of forging friendships across religious lines. But the Scripture Engaged group leads the way, by far, in the *lack of disagreement* with any of these five matters. It seems that even if they have questions about the details of *how* these pro-social behaviors get done in our nation today, they still understand that the Bible encourages these behaviors in some way.

Compared to the Movable Middle, the Bible Disengaged show more strong agreement on all these questions, but also more disagreement. (As we’ve noted in previous chapters, the middle group tends to be noncommittal.)

Importance of Pro-Social Behaviors
by Scripture Engagement

Percent agreeing strongly or very strongly / and *disagreeing at any level*

Pro-Social Behaviors	Bible Disengaged	Movable Middle	Scripture Engaged
Welcome immigrants	34% / 25%	17% / 21%	33% / 13%
Befriend those of other races	33% / 13%	31% / 13%	55% / 7%
Befriend those of other religions	41% / 15%	31% / 12%	46% / 8%
Care for those in prison	19% / 40%	18% / 22%	40% / 9%
Advocate for the oppressed	37% / 13%	29% / 11%	53% / 5%

FORGIVENESS

Elsewhere in the survey we ask for levels of agreement on another statement: *“I am able to sincerely forgive whatever someone else has done to me, regardless of whether they ever ask for forgiveness or not.”*

On that statement, respondents have four options—agreeing somewhat or strongly and disagreeing somewhat or strongly. We suspected that the more people forgive others, the more they’ll support pro-social behaviors of all sorts.

It turns out we’re right.

On every one of these five pro-social behaviors (plus “caring for the environment” and “being a good neighbor”), the more people forgive, the more important they consider all those actions.

Here we’ve calculated the mean score for all five pro-social behaviors (combined) and tracked it with the four responses to the forgiveness question. The correlation is striking.

Prosocial Score by Ability to Forgive

“I am able to sincerely forgive whatever someone else has done to me, regardless of whether they ever ask for forgiveness or not.”



Forgiven people forgive others. The New Testament repeatedly makes that point. “Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13). By receiving God’s forgiveness, we step into a grace-based moral economy that “keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Corinthians 13:5).

But these survey findings take us further. God’s forgiveness opens our hearts to others, but it also opens our hands. We become more eager to help others, to serve them, to work for their benefit, whether or not it benefits us. “Freely you have received, freely give,” Jesus said to a group of followers as he sent them out to bless others (Matthew 10:8). Surely he says the same thing to us.

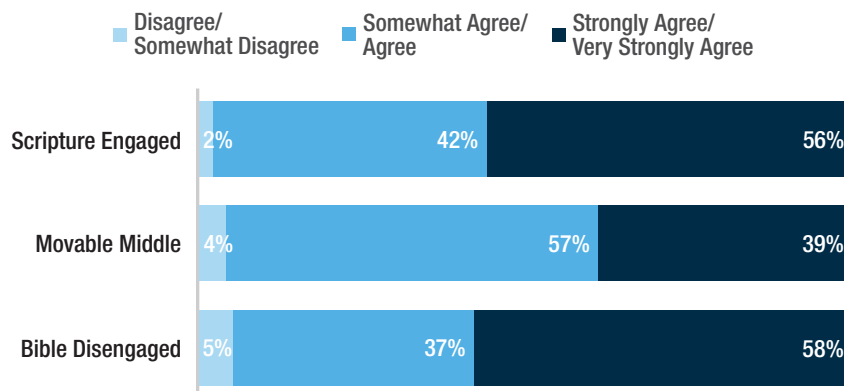
ENVIRONMENT

Who agrees that it’s important to care for the environment?

- Women (54%) tend to agree strongly or very strongly with our statement. Men (51%) are a few points behind.
- White respondents have the greatest percentage agreeing strongly or very strongly (55%)—but not by much (Asians 54%, Hispanics 50%). Black respondents have the lowest percentage at that level of agreement (44%). But across all groups, fewer than one in twenty disagree.
- Residents of large cities (60%) have the highest percentage strongly/very strongly agreeing, people in rural areas the lowest (48%). This surprising difference might suggest that many are responding to a political idea of “caring for the environment” rather than their actual relationship with the earth.

- The Bible Disengaged have the highest percentage of those in strong/very strong agreement (58%), though the Scripture Engaged are close behind (56%). As we've seen before, the Movable Middle doesn't seem to care as much (39%).

Importance of Care for Environment by Scripture Engagement



From its first chapter, the Bible asserts the value of the world God created, emphasizing the responsibility of humans to care for it (Genesis 1:26–30). Yet the Bible Disengaged are more likely to agree strongly on the importance of environmental care. Why?

We get a fuller treatment of the data by breaking down the six possible responses into three groups. Nearly everyone in the survey “agrees” that it’s important to care for the environment. Among the Scripture Engaged, less than 1 in 40 disagree (2.3%). The difference comes in how strongly they agree.

While the Bible speaks clearly about human stewardship of the earth, it also speaks just as clearly about other themes: people’s relationship

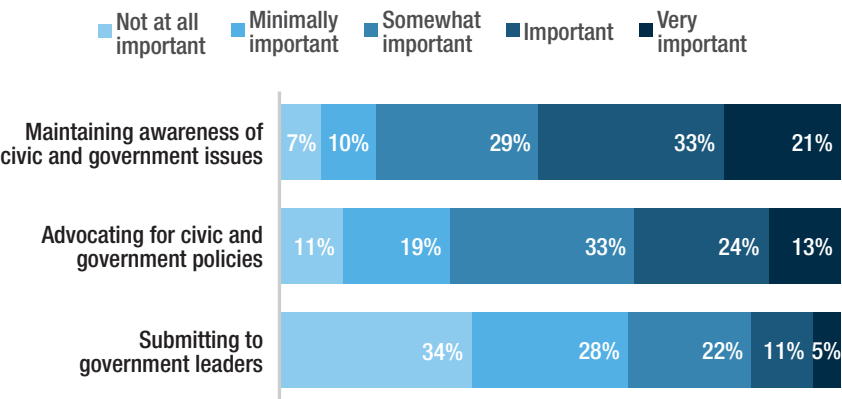
with God, justice, care for the poor, to name a few. Other cultural, social, and political factors may be keeping the Scripture Engaged from being so focused on this one issue, but the data show that 98 percent of them *do* consider it at least somewhat important to care about the environment.

CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

A separate group of questions focuses on people’s involvement with the government: awareness of civic issues, advocacy for civic policies, and submitting to government leaders.

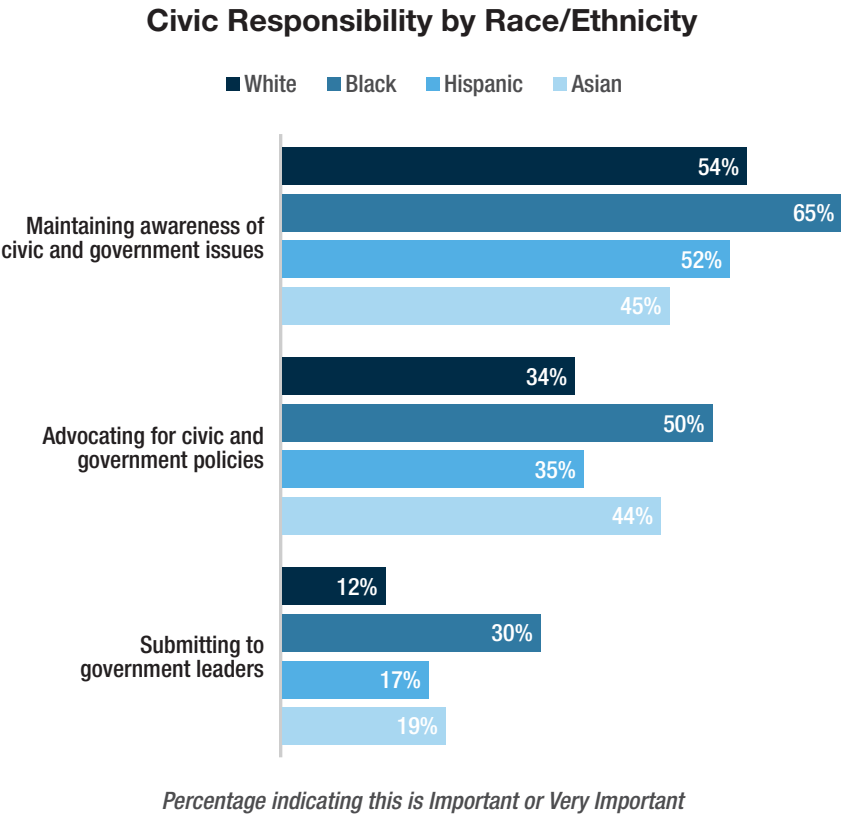
Civic Responsibility, Overall

How important are the following practices in your life?



Among all Americans, more than half (54%) consider it important or very important to maintain civic awareness, but when it comes to advocating for particular policies, the sense of importance declines. There also seems to be significant pushback on the notion of submitting to government leaders, with more than a third (34%) calling it “not important” and less than 1 in 20 calling it “very important.”

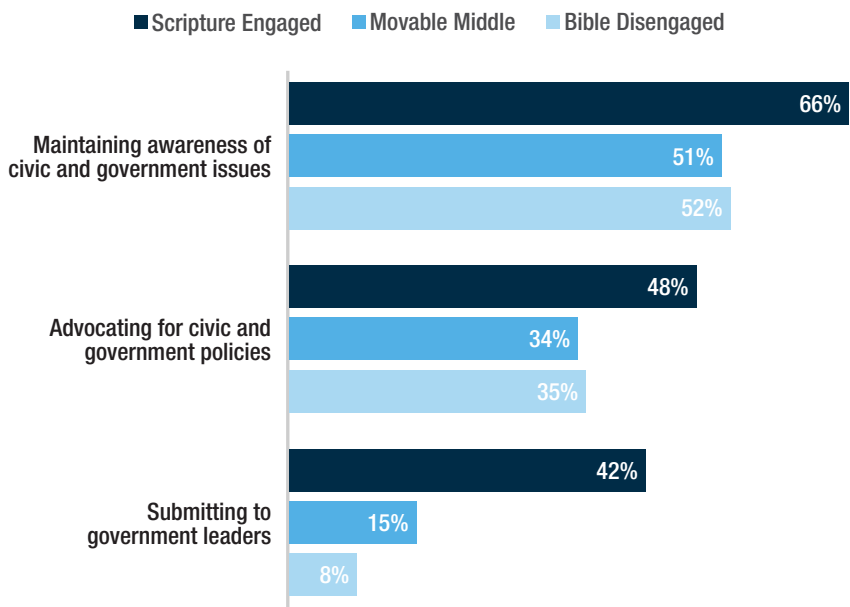
The **racial/ethnic** breakdown is significant, especially as we recognize major differences in the history of different groups and their interaction with government.



Awareness and advocacy have been major strategies in black Americans’ struggle for civil rights, so it’s no surprise that this group is most likely to consider those important. White Americans are least likely to consider it important to advocate for certain policies. And about one in eight (12%) white respondents consider it important or very important to submit to government leaders, by far the lowest level of any ethnic group in the survey.

Does **Scripture Engagement** affect a person’s interaction with government? Yes, greatly.

Civic Responsibility by Scripture Engagement



Percentage indicating this is Important or Very Important

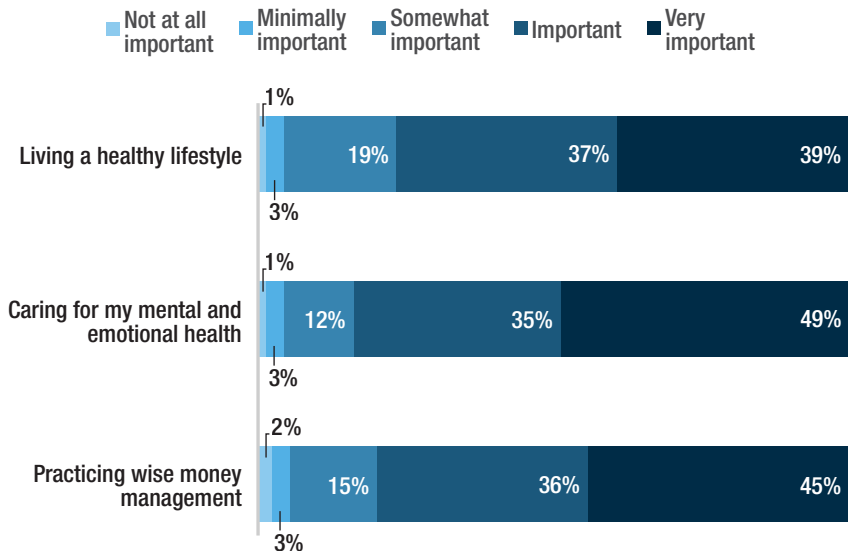
On every point—awareness, advocacy, and submission—the Scripture Engaged are far more apt to tout the importance of civic responsibility. We see little difference between the Movable Middle and the Bible Disengaged on awareness and advocacy, but the Scripture Engaged clearly place a higher value on these aspects of citizenship. Perhaps inspired by biblical passages like Romans 13 (“Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities . . .”), three of seven among the Scripture Engaged (42%) consider it important to submit to government leaders, immensely more than the Movable Middle (15%) or Bible Disengaged (8%).

SELF-CARE

Three questions in this survey address ways people manage their own lives: living a healthy lifestyle, caring for mental and emotional health, and practicing wise money management.

Self-Care, Overall

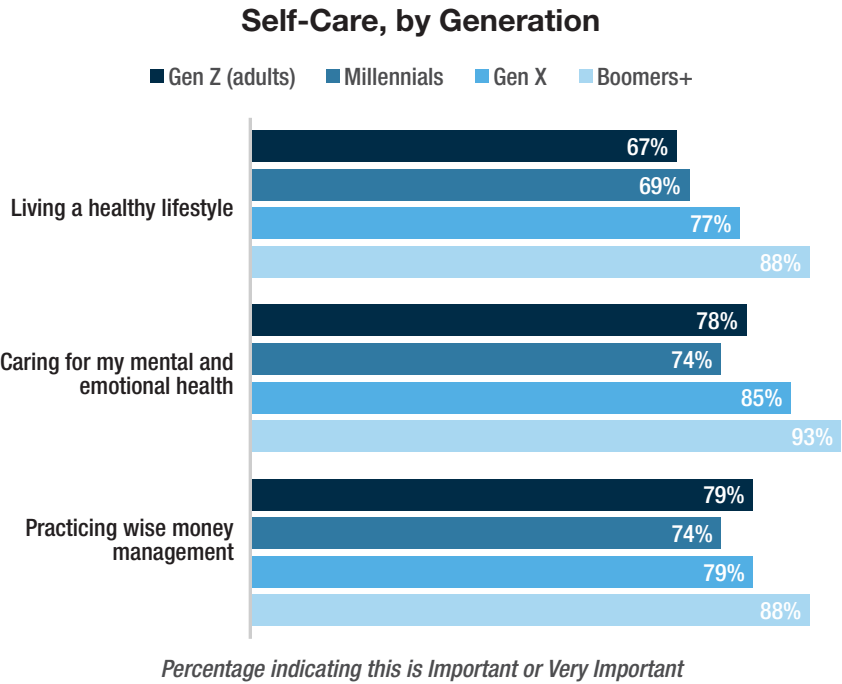
How important are the following practices in your life?



All three areas are considered important or very important by at least three of four respondents (76%, 83%, and 81%). This is at least twice the level we just saw on “advocating for civic policies.” On each of the self-care statements fewer than one in twenty say it’s “minimally” or “not at all” important.

Women are more likely than men to indicate the highest levels of importance on these matters. (Men give slightly more importance to the three civic responsibility issues.)

Among the **generations**, we might expect to see a stairstep effect, with the perceived importance of self-care issues increasing with age. But Gen Z adults challenge that expectation and place strong importance on mental/emotional health and money management (79%), outpacing Millennials (74%). We wonder if the tumultuous events of recent years—pandemic, natural disasters, economic challenges, institutional change—have caused greater concern about their own health and wealth.

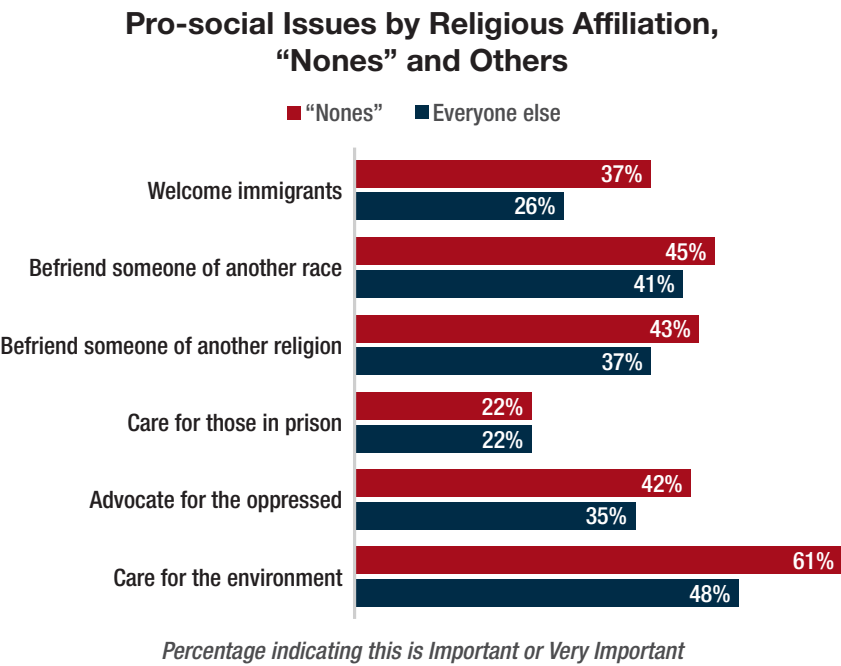


‘NONES’

About three in ten Americans could be classified as “Nones.” They don’t identify with any particular religion or denomination. Much has been written about this group as it has grown numerically in

recent decades.⁵ Some are church dropouts, while others have never connected with a church. They are overwhelmingly Bible Disengaged (89%).

But here’s a surprise. In our survey of pro-social behaviors, the “Nones” outscore everyone else in the importance they ascribe to these actions. They are substantially more likely to agree strongly or very strongly that it’s important to welcome immigrants or advocate for the oppressed or befriend people of other races or religions. Only on the issue of caring for those in prison (apparently a tough challenge for all) do they draw even with everyone else.



5 See the recent report from Pew Research: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/>. Also see Burge, R. C. (2021). *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going*. Fortress.

When it comes to caring for the environment, the difference is even greater. Three in five of the “Nones” (61%) agree strongly or very strongly that this is important, while less than half (48%) of all other Americans would say that.

Could this be a clue as to why they aren’t connected with a church?

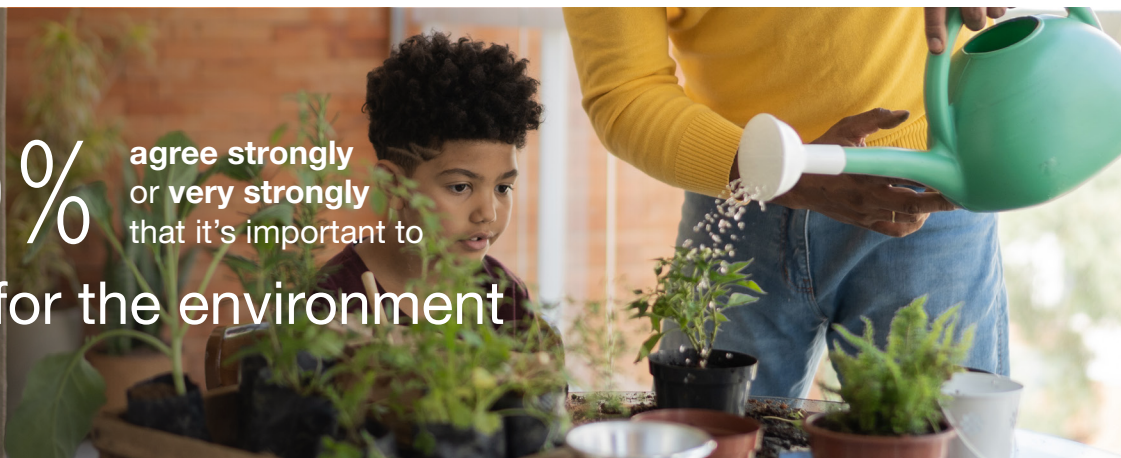
Surely there are many reasons why 80 million American adults aren’t religiously affiliated. Maybe this is one. Some church leaders might assume that the “Nones” don’t care for anyone but themselves, but here we find that they care *more* than others about this handful of social issues. Could churches use this as a point of love-driven, Christ-following reconnection? ■

AMONG THOSE WHO SAY THEY'VE ATTENDED CHURCH WITHIN THE LAST MONTH . . .

50%

agree strongly
or very strongly
that it's important to

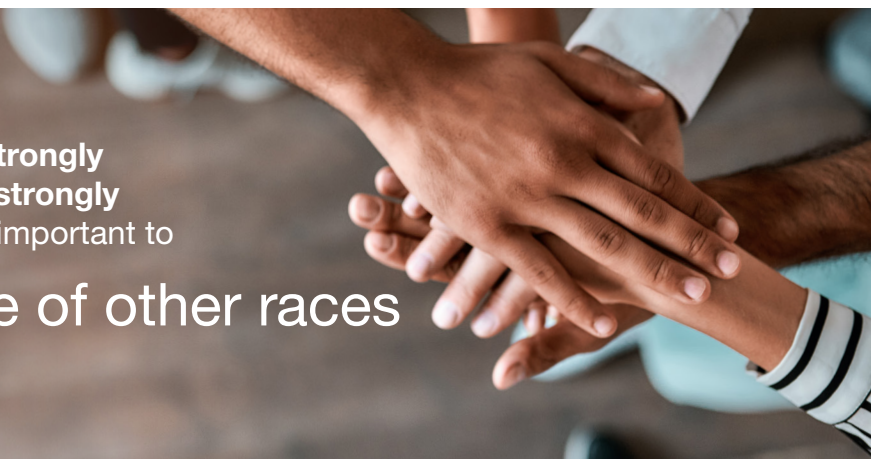
Care for the environment



44%

agree strongly
or very strongly
that it's important to

Befriend people of other races



27%

agree strongly
or very strongly
that it's important to

Care for those in prison





HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT CHURCH?

Perhaps you’ve heard people say, “We should be more like the New Testament church.” After reading 1 Corinthians, you could reply, “Maybe we already are.”

Christians in Corinth were divided into factions, taking fellow believers to court, creating chaos in their fellowship dinners and worship services, arguing about who had the best spiritual gifts, and covering up a sex scandal. Despite all that, the apostle Paul envisions a situation where an unbeliever wanders into a service, hears people speaking the truth of God, and says, “God is really among you!”¹

¹ Find the problems in 1 Corinthians 3:3–4; 6:1–7; 11:20–21; 14:29–33; 12:15–27; 5:1–2. “God is really among you!” is from 14:24–25 CEV.

What are the factors that draw people to a church, and what experiences might drive them away?

In similar ways today, American churches are pulled together and torn apart. What are the factors that draw people to a church, and what experiences might drive them away? That's the dual focus of this chapter.

CHURCH POSITIVES

Believing, belonging, becoming—various leaders might arrange that process in different ways, but many would agree that these are key elements of church involvement. Our findings concur.

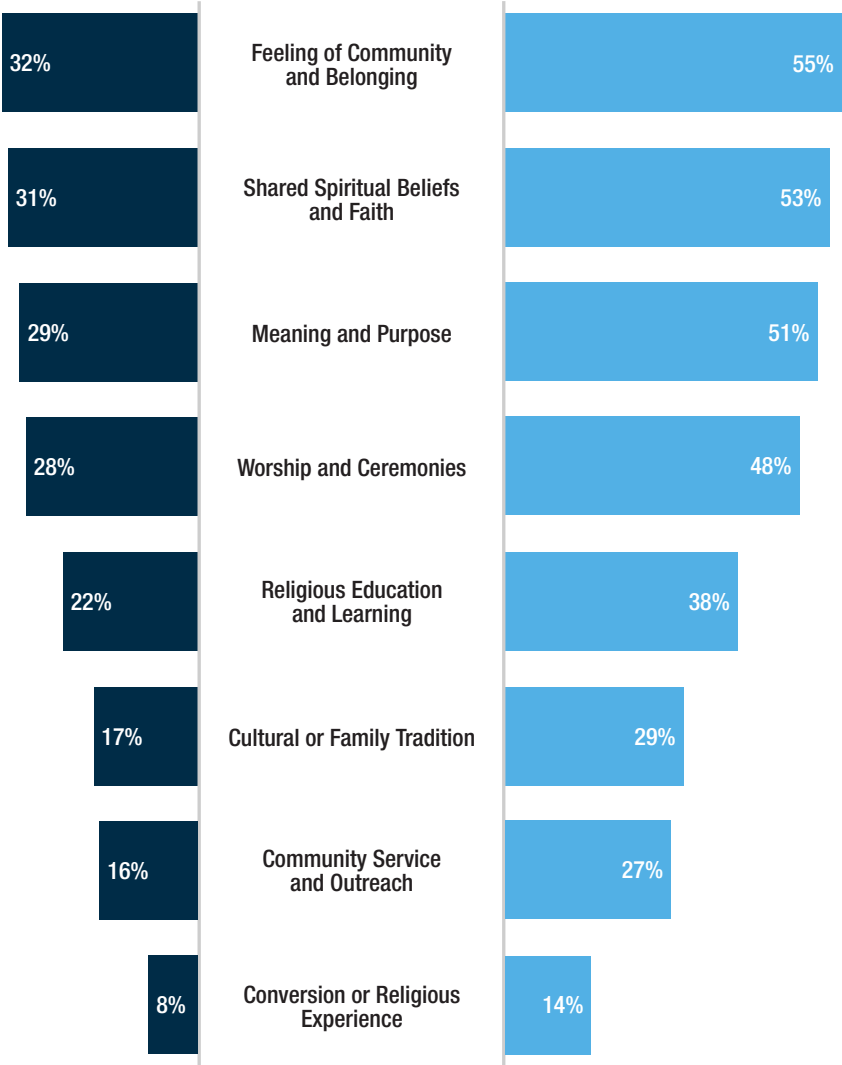
People were invited to choose as many items as they liked from a list of nine “positive experiences” that increased their participation in a church, temple, or faith community. To be clear, the question was asked of everyone in the survey, not just Christians, and so some might be thinking of Jewish, Muslim, or other religious gatherings. Three out of seven (42%) begged out of the question, saying they did not participate in any such community. This figure is substantially more than the unaffiliated, the “Nones” (26%), suggesting that there's another group of people (we might call them “Nominals”) who *identify* with a certain religious tradition but do not *participate* in it.

The top three positive experiences were each chosen by more than half of the others, those who indicate they *do* participate in a faith community: Feeling of Community and Belonging (55%), Shared Spiritual Beliefs and Faith (53%), and Meaning and Purpose (51%). *Belonging, believing, and through it all, becoming.* “Worship and Ceremonies” (48%) came in a close fourth.

Experiences that Increase Church Participation

Which of the following positive experiences increase your level of participation in a church, temple, or faith community?

■ Percentage of all ■ Percentage of church participants

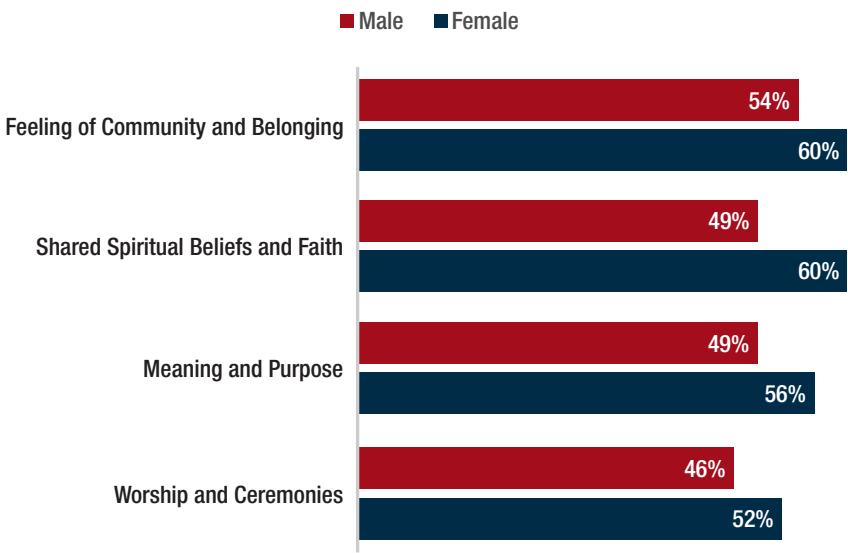


DEMOGRAPHICS

Gender

Women report more positive experiences than men do. Among those participating in faith communities, the greatest differences are seen in “Shared Spiritual Beliefs” (60% for women, to 49% for men) and “Religious Education and Learning” (43% to 35%). That is, women are more likely to say these positive experiences have increased their participation in their faith community.

Selected Church Positives by Gender

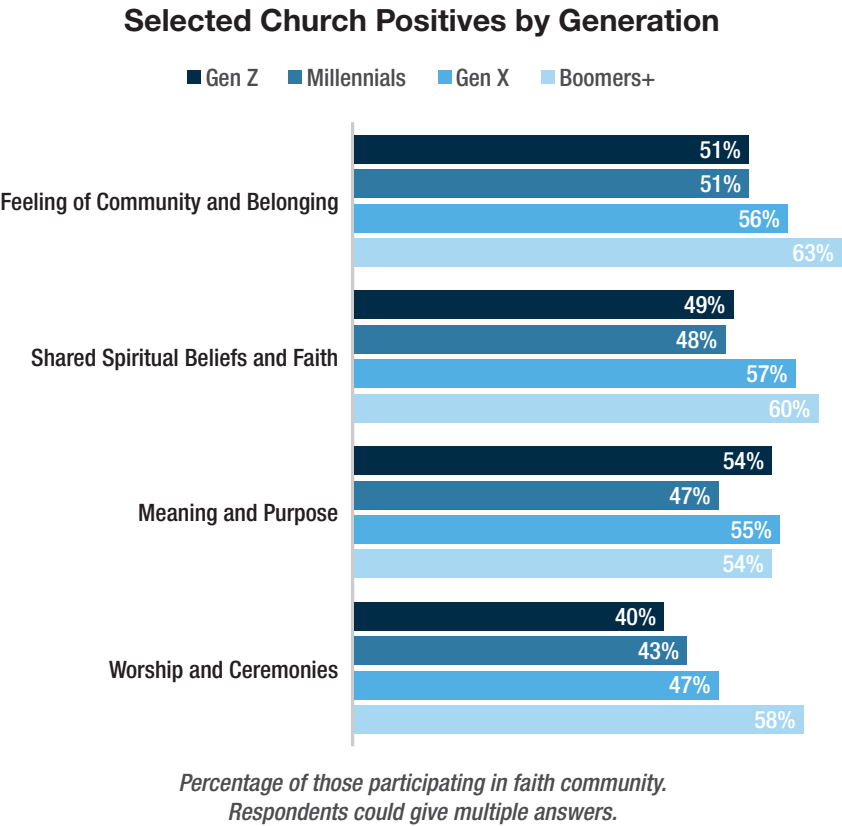


*Percentage of those participating in faith community.
Respondents could give multiple answers.*

Generations

Generational differences are not major, but **Boomers** report more positive experiences than the younger generations. Among those

involved in a faith community, Generation Z is just about as likely as Generation X or Boomers to be drawn by Meaning and Purpose (all at 54–55% of the participating group), while Millennials trail behind (47%). Gen Z is least likely to be drawn by “Worship and Ceremonies.”

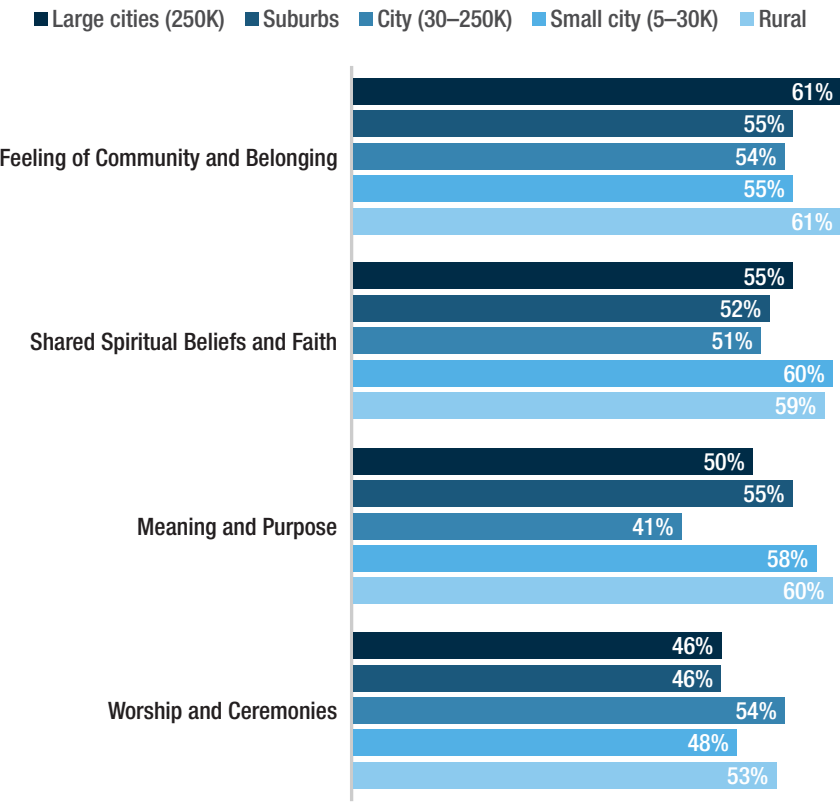


Community Type

Similarly, there were only a few notable differences among those living in various **types of communities**. Inhabitants of rural areas and large cities equally value the feeling of community and belonging

(61%). Oddly, those who live in medium-size cities experience a sense of “meaning and purpose” in their faith communities at a substantially lower rate than others (41%). Perhaps most surprising was the *lack* of difference in the opt-out statement: “I do not participate in a church, temple, or faith community.” While we’re used to seeing substantial differences between community types on many spiritual questions, all were within one percent (44–45%) in saying they “do not participate.”

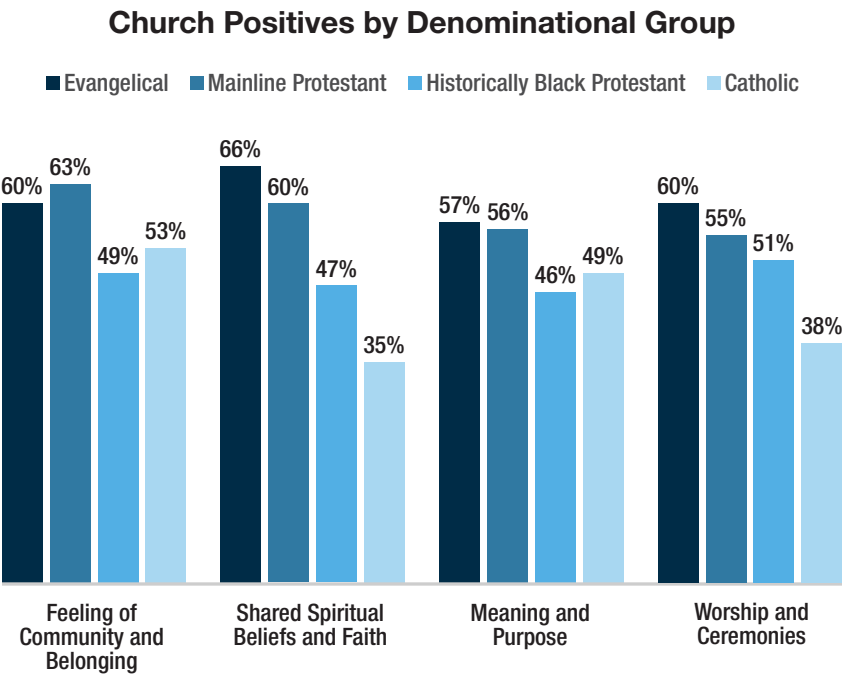
Selected Church Positives by Community Type



*Percentage of those participating in faith community.
Respondents could give multiple answers.*

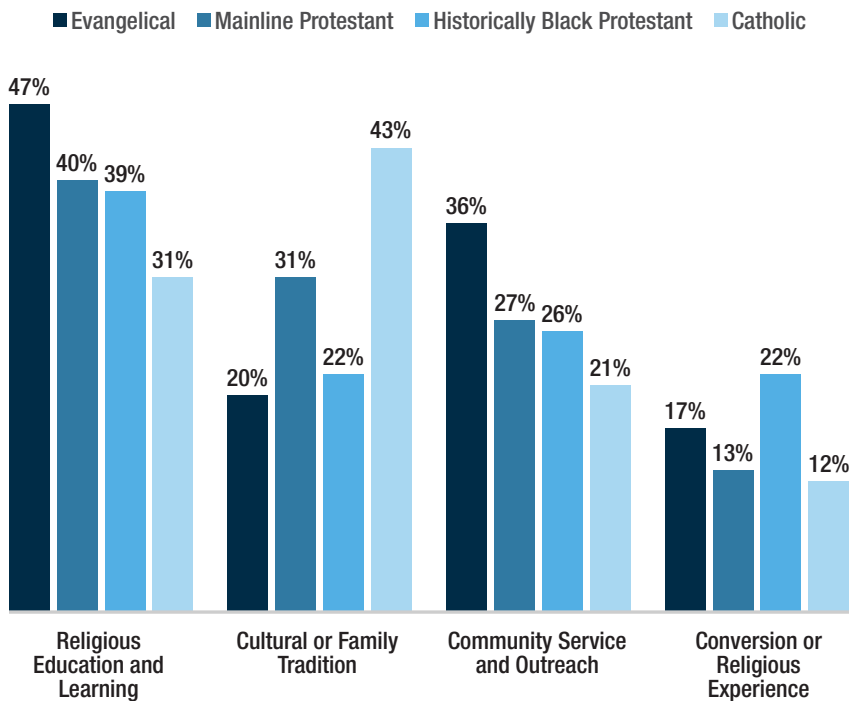
Denominational Group

Many church experts have observed that different Christian denominations possess different strengths, styles, and values. Our numbers show that the groups aren't wildly divergent, but there are a few interesting distinctions. **Evangelicals** are far more likely than other groups to report positive experiences, with about two of three church participants identifying Shared Beliefs (66%) as a positive factor that increased their participation. Participants in **Mainline Protestant** churches are most likely to identify Feeling of Community and Belonging (63%) as a positive, while active **Catholics** are more likely than other groups to be drawn by Cultural or Family Tradition (43%).



*Percentage of those participating in faith community.
Respondents could give multiple answers.*

Church Positives by Denominational Group (continued)



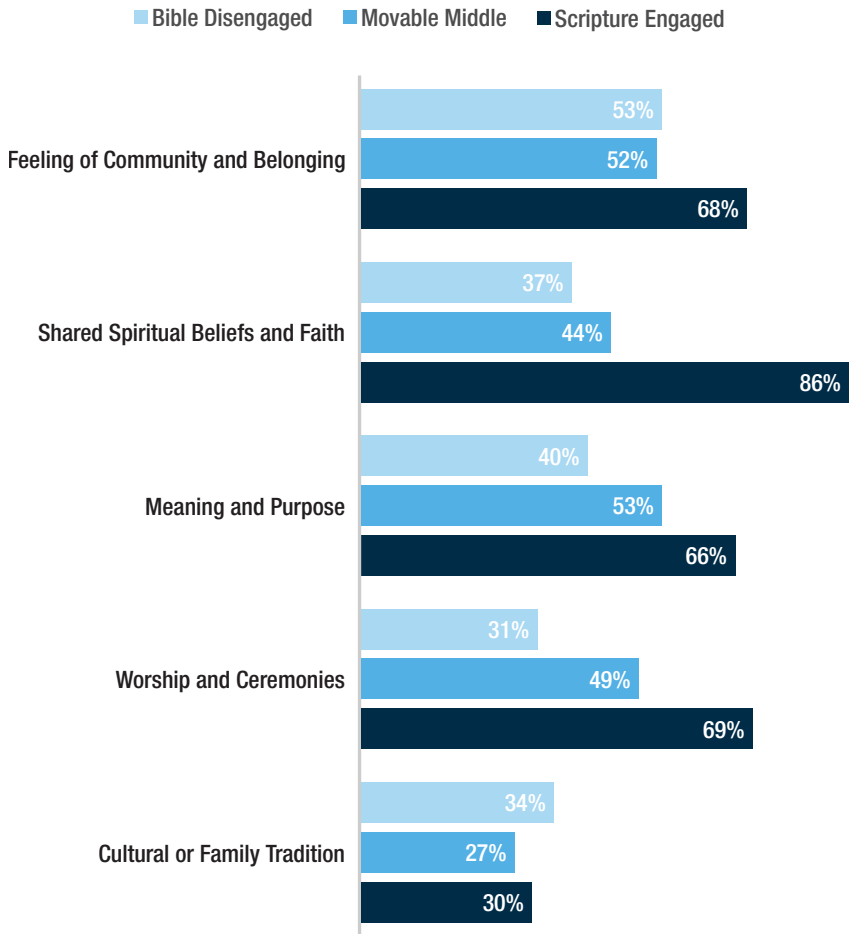
*Percentage of those participating in faith community.
Respondents could give multiple answers.*

SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

The **Scripture Engaged** far exceed the Movable Middle and the Bible Disengaged on the top four positive responses, especially on Shared Spiritual Beliefs, mentioned by six out of seven Scripture Engaged churchgoers (86%). As we examine the numbers for the Bible Disengaged, we must note that more than two-thirds (68%) opted out of this question, saying they do not participate in a faith community. Among those who do participate, we find a substantial level of appreciation for a church’s “feeling of community” (53%) and its

sense of “meaning and purpose” (40%). About a third of the Bible Disengaged who participate in a faith community say they’re drawn by “cultural or family tradition” (34%, the highest level of the three Bible engagement groups).

**Selected Church Positives
by Scripture Engagement**



*Percentage of those participating in faith community.
Respondents could give multiple answers.*

CHURCH ATTENDANCE: FREQUENCY AND MODALITY

After the disruptions of the pandemic, now nearly three-quarters of church attenders primarily attend in person (75%), with only one in seven (14%) attending online and the rest (11%) splitting their attendance between the two modes. Still, we have wondered whether the online and in-person groups would appreciate different things about the experience. To some extent, they do—but there are no real surprises here.

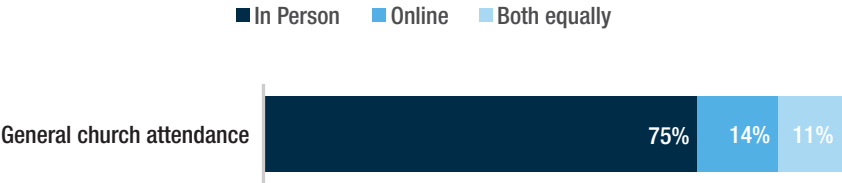
There are four “you gotta be there” items on our list of positive experiences. It might be possible to approximate these experiences in a virtual setting, but generally they require physical presence.

- Feeling of Community and Belonging
- Worship and Ceremonies
- Community Service and Outreach
- Cultural or Family Tradition



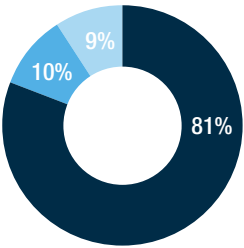
Those who identify these as positive church experiences are more likely than others to attend in person. (Overall church attendance is 75% in person, but 80% of those who value these factors attend in person. While attendance overall is 14% online, among this group, it's only 10%.)

Church Positives and Modality of Attendance

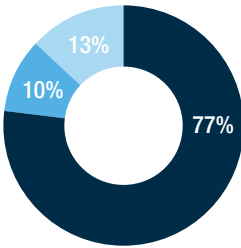


Those who value . . .

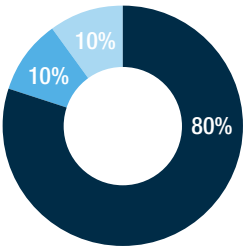
Feeling of Community and Belonging



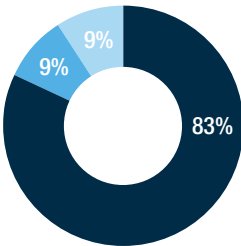
Worship and Ceremonies



Community Service and Outreach



Cultural or Family Tradition



As for frequency of attendance, you might expect more enthusiasm from those who attend every week—and that’s what we find. Weekly attenders are more likely to report positive experiences, and they identify the same items we’ve already been highlighting: Shared Beliefs, Feeling of Community, Worship, and Purpose. The level of these responses drops off incrementally with monthly attenders, and again with those whose attendance is even less frequent. It’s surprising, though, that a third of those who haven’t been to church for six months (34%) still value the church’s “feeling of community and belonging.” An even greater portion (38%) refer to the “meaning and purpose” they find at the church they haven’t attended for half a year.

CHURCH NEGATIVES

We imagine that church leaders might examine the positive factors above as they ask, “What are people looking for in a church?” But we also know that different factors drive some people away from church or make them less eager to get involved. So our survey also asked about negative experiences “encountered in a church, temple, or faith community” that have led to “decreased participation.”

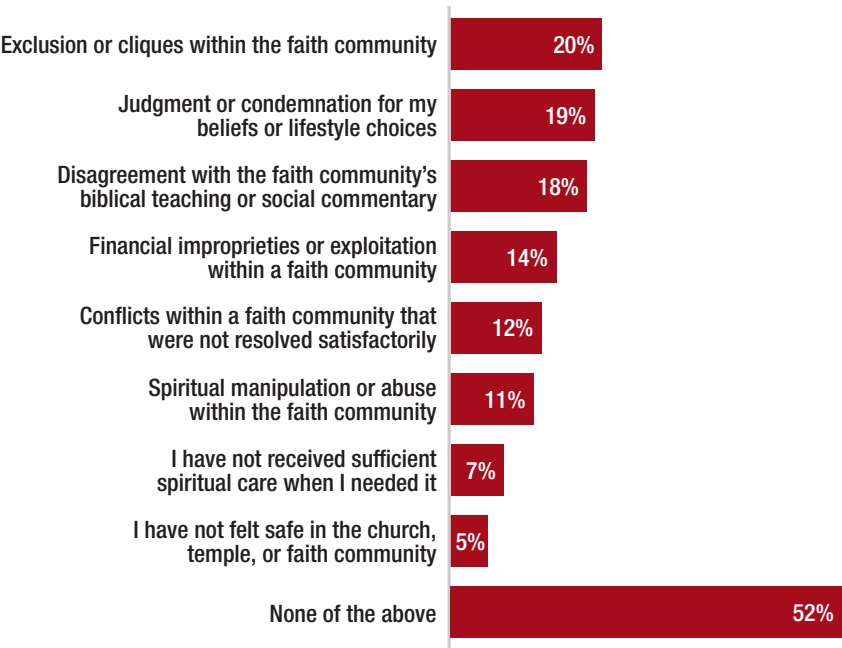
The question was asked of everyone, whether they indicated any church background or not. Again, people were allowed to choose as many answers as they wanted. Nearly half (48%) chose at least one response.

We weren’t looking for theoretical ideas about “the problem with the church these days.” We asked about actual experiences they had encountered. Most of the options were selected by between one-tenth and one-fifth of all respondents. While some might feel

reassured that “only” about a fifth of the population mentioned cliques or judgment, this represents about 50 million Americans who say they participate less in a faith community for these reasons.

Experiences That Decrease Church Participation

“Which of the following negative experiences have you encountered in a church, temple, or faith community that decreased your level of participation?”



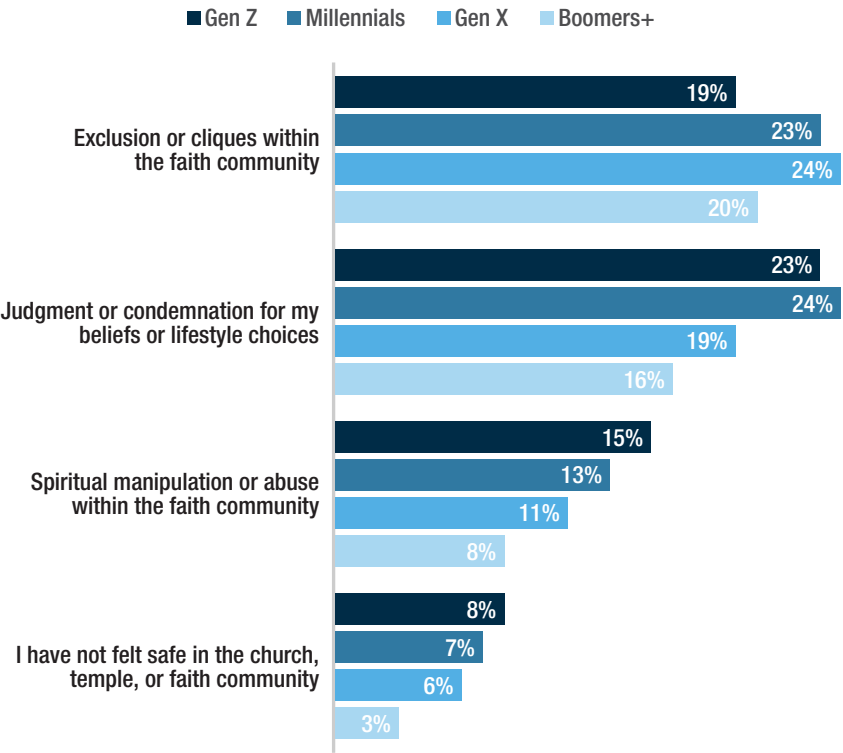
DEMOGRAPHICS

Generations

Gen Z and Millennials are more likely than older groups to report “judgment or condemnation” for their “belief or lifestyle.” Nearly one in four (23% and 24%) of these younger generations identify this

as a participation-decreasing factor (compared to 19% and 16% of the two older generations). The younger groups are also more likely to mention “spiritual manipulation” and lack of safety. Gen X is the group most likely to be bothered by “exclusion or cliques.”

Selected Church Negatives by Generation

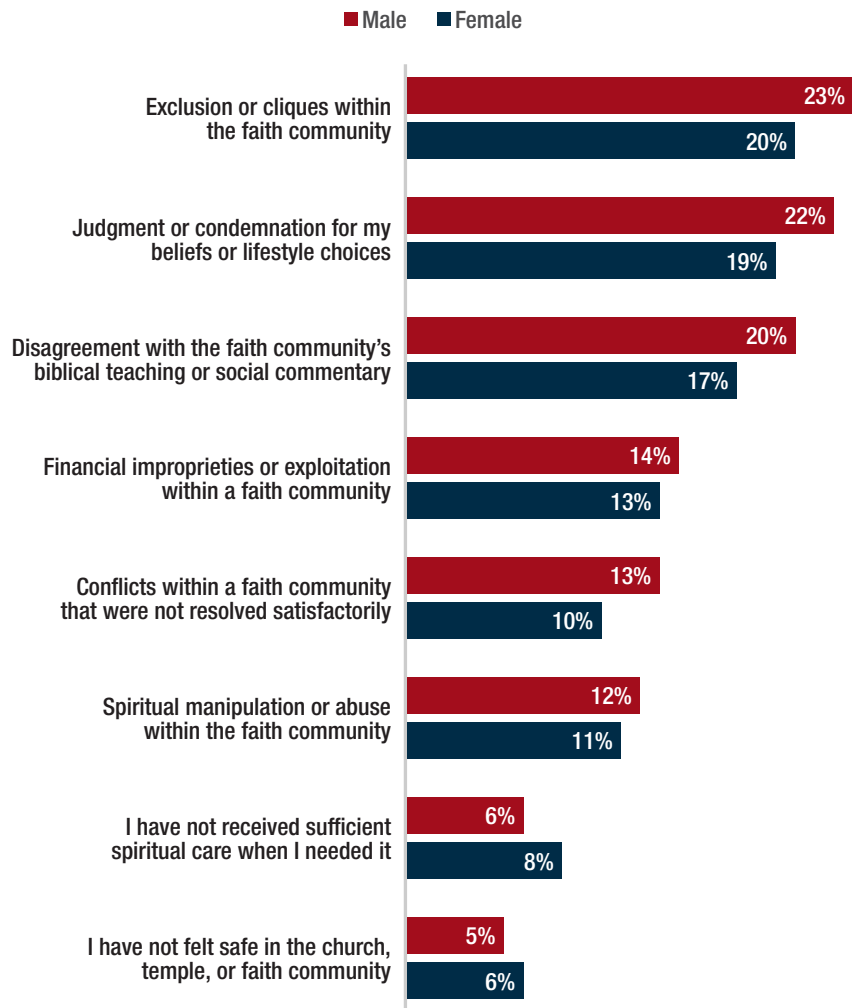


More could be said about different levels of sensitivity to these issues among the generations. Are young people more alert to matters of judgment, manipulation, and safety, or are they actually experiencing these things more than older folks? In either case, a certain number of them are telling us that these experiences have decreased their participation in their faith community.

Gender

Men have more complaints than women do (in contrast to women’s lead in the positive categories). Only in two of these negative issues do women surpass men. They’re more likely to say, “I have not felt safe,” and “I have not received sufficient spiritual care when I needed it.”

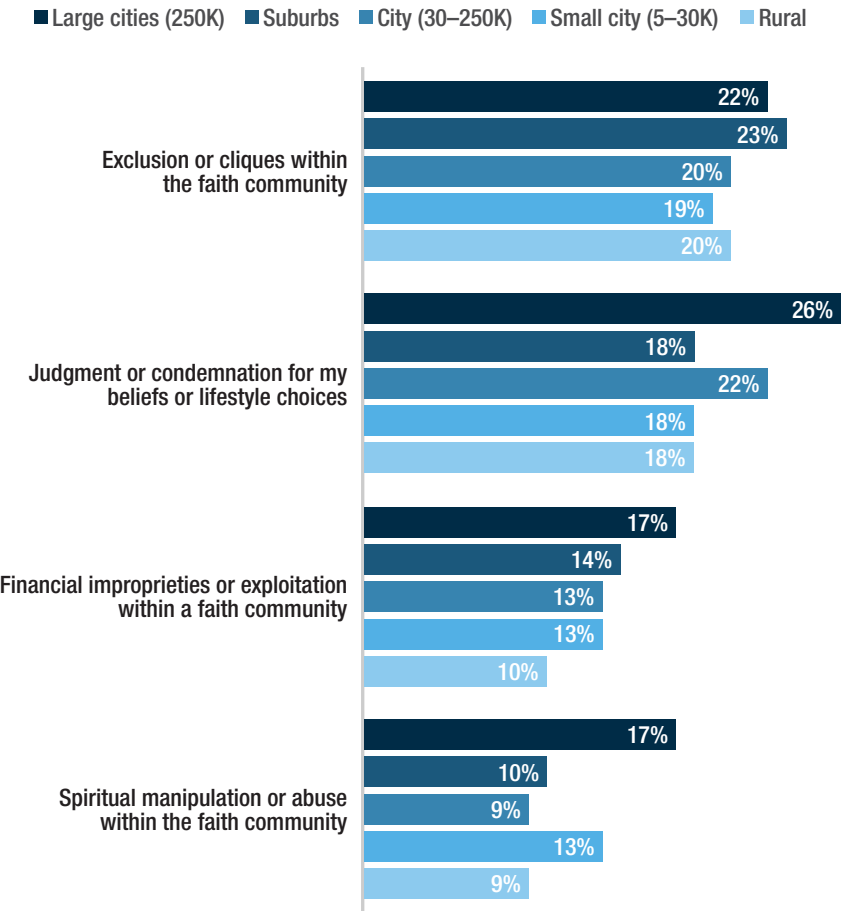
Church Negatives by Gender



Community Type

Those who live in large cities have more complaints, especially about judgment, financial improprieties, and spiritual manipulation. Suburbanites seem most sensitive about cliques. Those in rural areas have the fewest complaints (60% have none at all, compared with 52% of the overall population).

**Selected Church Negatives
by Community Type**



Denominational Group

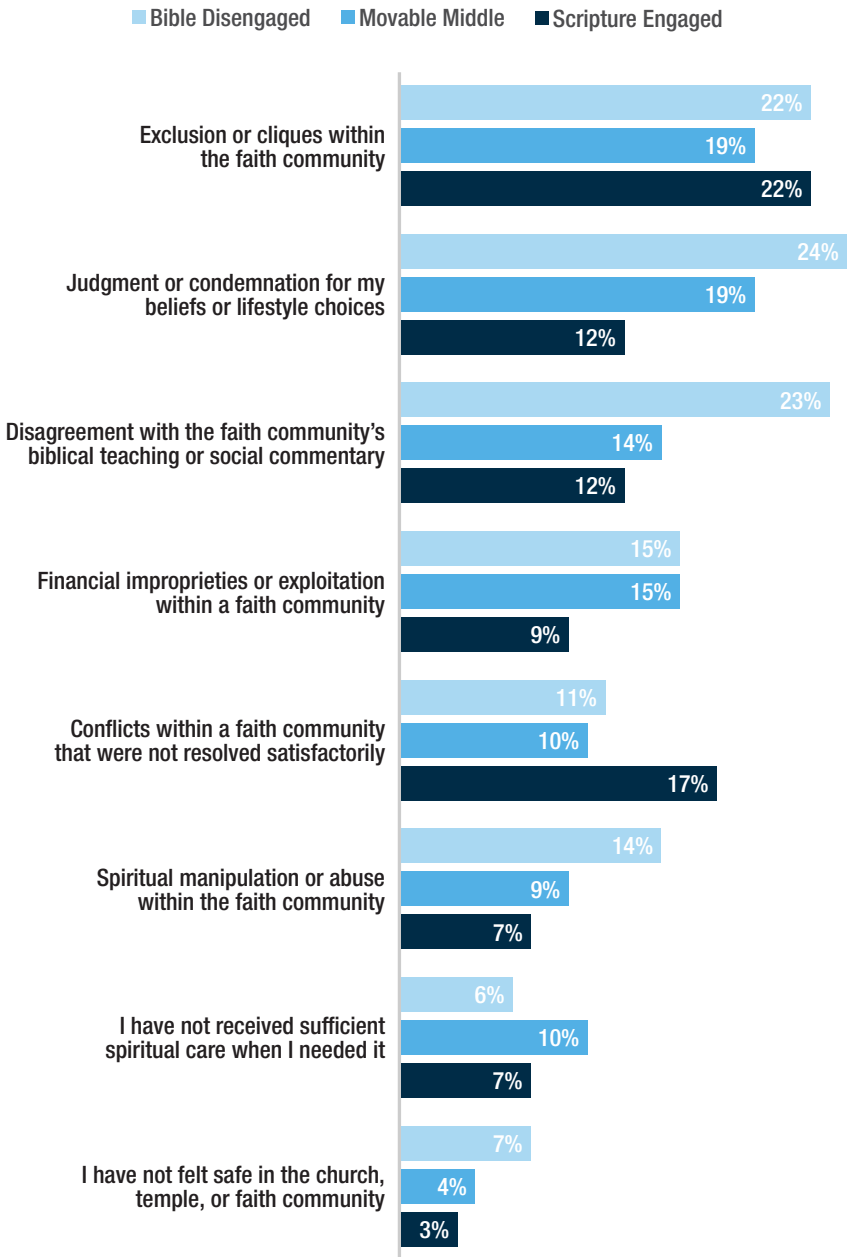
Differences among different denominational groups are not great, suggesting that churches of all stripes encounter the same sorts of problems. One significant exception is seen with “Conflicts within a faith community that were not resolved satisfactorily,” identified by about one in seven Evangelicals (15%) and Mainline Protestants (14%), but far fewer in Historically Black denominations (8%) or the Catholic Church (6%).

SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

The Scripture Engaged have fewer problems with the church, except in two areas: *cliques* and *unresolved conflicts*. The most-mentioned problem by everyone in the survey, “exclusion and cliques” gets complaints from the Engaged and Disengaged alike (both at 22%). With “conflicts . . . that were not resolved satisfactorily,” the Scripture Engaged (17%) far exceed the complaint level of the Movable Middle (10%) and the Bible Disengaged (11%).

This conflict resolution issue merits a closer look. Remember that the question asks about issues that *have been encountered* and have “*decreased your level of participation*” in the faith community. Here we see the people most committed to Scripture, who are probably the church’s most active, most helpful members, yet one-sixth of them report some diminishment of their involvement—perhaps they leave a church or at least withdraw from some activities. And why? Because some conflict was not resolved in a satisfactory way.

Church Negatives by Scripture Engagement



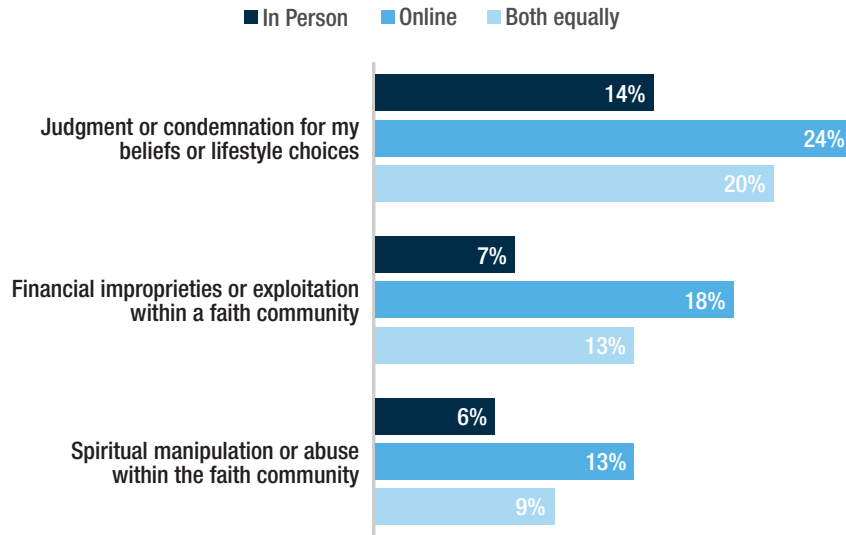
On another front, the Movable Middle is more likely to say they don't receive the spiritual care they need (10%, compared to 6% for the Scripture Engaged). This provides an interesting new detail in the profile of the Movable Middle that we (and perhaps you) are assembling. By definition, they are not reading the Bible or applying its teachings as much as the Scripture Engaged do, and that might reflect some lack of desire or discipline. But here we should observe that a tenth of them say they want spiritual care that they haven't received, and this has affected their relationship with their faith community. It might be that many of these people expect pastors to be mind-readers, knowing what people want even if they don't ask for help. Still, we see here a spark of desire that might reveal a ministry opportunity.

As we look at the Bible Disengaged, it's no surprise that they would express more disagreement with a church's biblical teaching (23%, compared to 12% for the Scripture Engaged). They're also far more likely to say they've experienced judgment or condemnation for their beliefs or lifestyle choices (24%), and that this has limited, or perhaps prevented, their church involvement.

ONLINE AND IN PERSON

On half of these "church negatives," those who attend church primarily online resemble in-person attenders. Yet in three areas, their negative experiences far exceed those of the in-person group: judgment (24% to 14%), financial improprieties (18% to 7%), and spiritual manipulation (13% to 6%). Might this suggest that online services are a haven for those who don't fully trust the church?

Selected Church Negatives and Mode of Attendance



VOLUNTEERS

As we close this chapter, we move from the outsiders to the insiders, the volunteers who keep the church going. Those who say they have “volunteered in my place of worship” are more likely than other church participants to highlight positive factors about the church. The top response, “Feeling of Community and Belonging” is mentioned by two-thirds of volunteers (68%, compared to 55% of all churchgoers). Is this because those volunteers are actively engaged in creating and maintaining that community, or do they volunteer because they care so much about community?

Volunteers are also far more likely to value “Community Service and Outreach” (40%, compared to 27% of all churchgoers).

Volunteers generally have fewer complaints about the church than non-volunteers, except for “Exclusion or cliques within the faith community” (mentioned by 24% of volunteers, compared to 21% of non-volunteers). Remember that these complaints are based on personal experience, which suggests all kinds of backstories. Were these insiders once excluded outsiders? Or does their concern about cliques drive them to get involved and welcome everyone?

Volunteers are also far more troubled than non-volunteers about unresolved conflicts in the church (20% to 10%). As insiders, are they more aware of conflicts? Do they notice it more when team members slip away because of some unresolved issue?

And, as a word to the wise pastor, 10 percent of volunteers (compared to 7% of non-volunteers) said, “I have not received sufficient spiritual care when I needed it.”

The church is not just an organization; it’s an organism. The New Testament compares it to a human body. As such, it suffers pains and strains and sprains, but it can also pull all its systems together to do great things. We salute its volunteers, we strive to equip its leaders, and we cheer on those who participate week after week, in person or online. We also pray for hope, help, and healing for the outsiders. ■

CHURCH VOLUNTEERS

64%

value* the **Worship and Ceremonies** of the church
(compared to 21% of non-volunteers)



40%

value* the church's **Community Service and Outreach**
(compared to 11% of non-volunteers)



20%

have experienced **unresolved conflicts**
(compared to 10% of non-volunteers)



*as a positive experience that increased their participation



GEN Z—HOPE AND CHALLENGE

“Gen Z is the first generation to have gone through puberty hunched over smartphones and tablets, having fewer face-to-face conversations and shoulder-to-shoulder adventures with their friends. As childhood was rewired . . . adolescents became more anxious, depressed, and fragile. In this new phone-based childhood . . . children are, in a sense, deprived of childhood.”

Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*¹

Over the years, we’ve reported on differences among the generational groups, not only with regard to Bible use and churchgoing, but also their emotional and mental state. Our survey includes questions about people’s perceived well-being,

¹ Haidt, J. (2024). *The Anxious Generation: How the great rewiring of childhood is causing an epidemic of mental illness* (p. 65). Penguin.

along with related factors such as stress, anxiety, trauma, and hope (see Chapter 3 on Human Flourishing). Overall, we see a slight drop from last year's numbers, specifically in the areas of Mental & Physical Health and Happiness & Life Satisfaction.

As we analyze the generational differences, the data present us with a clear challenge. Gen Z adults (ages 18–27) have more fears, greater anxiety, lower self-esteem, and less affirmation from peers than any older generation.

But we also see something else. Those members of Gen Z who are Scripture Engaged—who interact regularly with the Bible and apply it to their lives—do better. In fact, on several measures of emotional health, they score just as high as any other age group.

This cohort of Scripture Engaged young adults is not large. As we've reported elsewhere (see page 11), Gen Z ranks lowest among the generations in Scripture Engagement at 11 percent. But those who *are* connecting with the Bible are reaping its benefits.

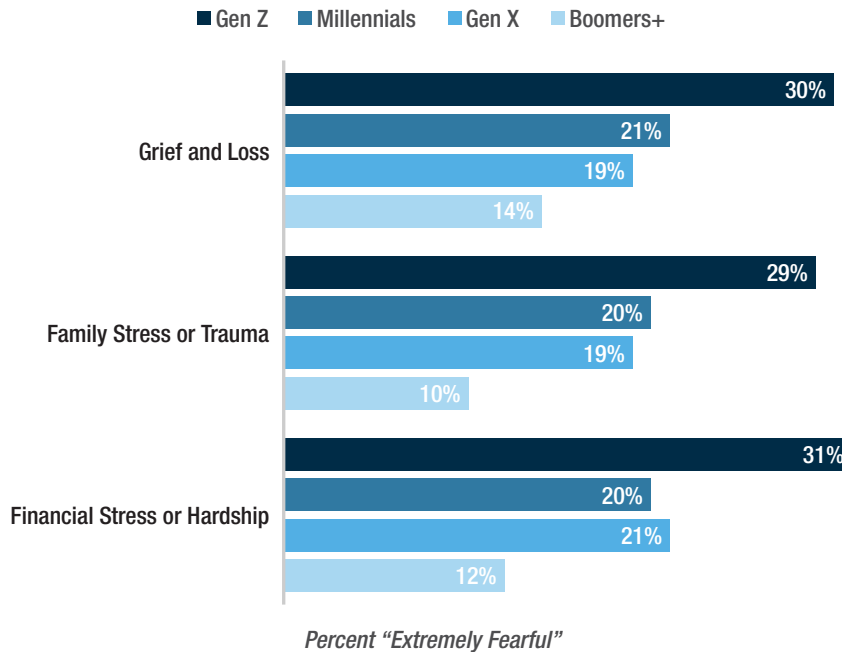
Those members of Gen Z who are Scripture Engaged—who interact regularly with the Bible and apply it to their lives—do better.

FEARS OF THE GENERATIONS

Gen Z is significantly more fearful overall, specifically in the areas of

- Grief and Loss
- Family Stress or Trauma
- Financial Stress or Hardship

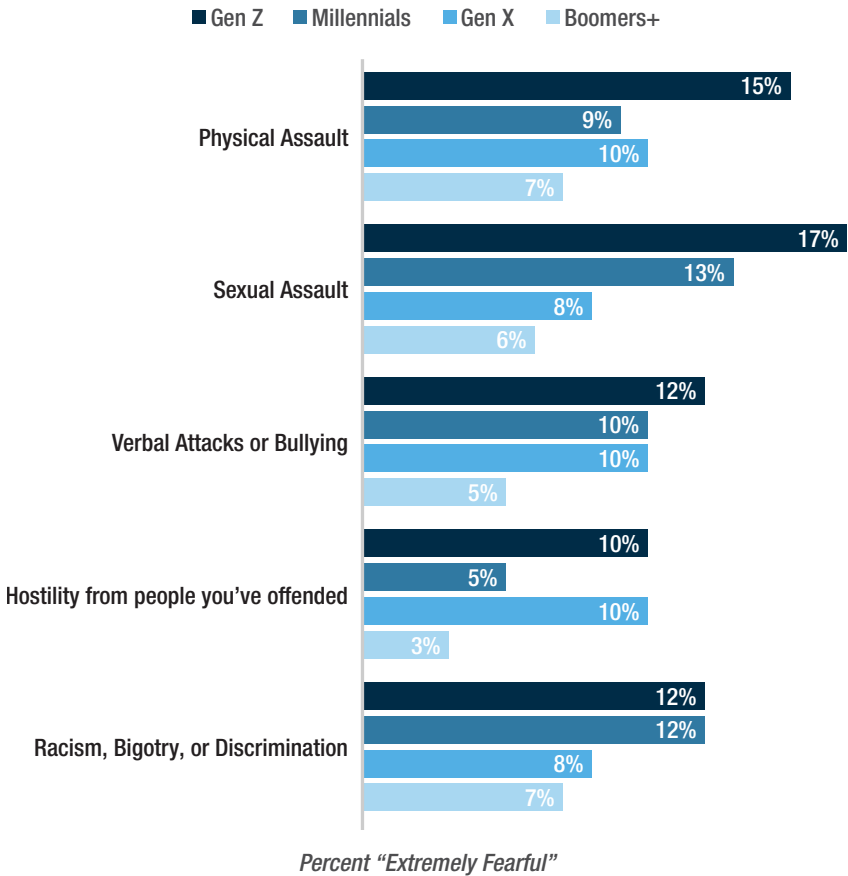
Selected Fears by Generation



These are not hypothetical fears. From other survey questions we know that more than half of respondents across the generations have been exposed to trauma. Just under half of every generation has experienced grief or loss in the past year. It is probable that those in older generations have weathered similar crises before, and so their fear is no longer “extreme.” Still the level of fear reported by the youngest generation is substantial (about 3 in 10 are extremely fearful regarding each of these matters, with another 45 percent “moderately” fearful), and higher than that of any other generation.

It’s worth noting that Financial Stress or Hardship is the most common fear of the highest-earning generation in our survey, Gen X (21 percent, with another 52 percent moderately fearful).

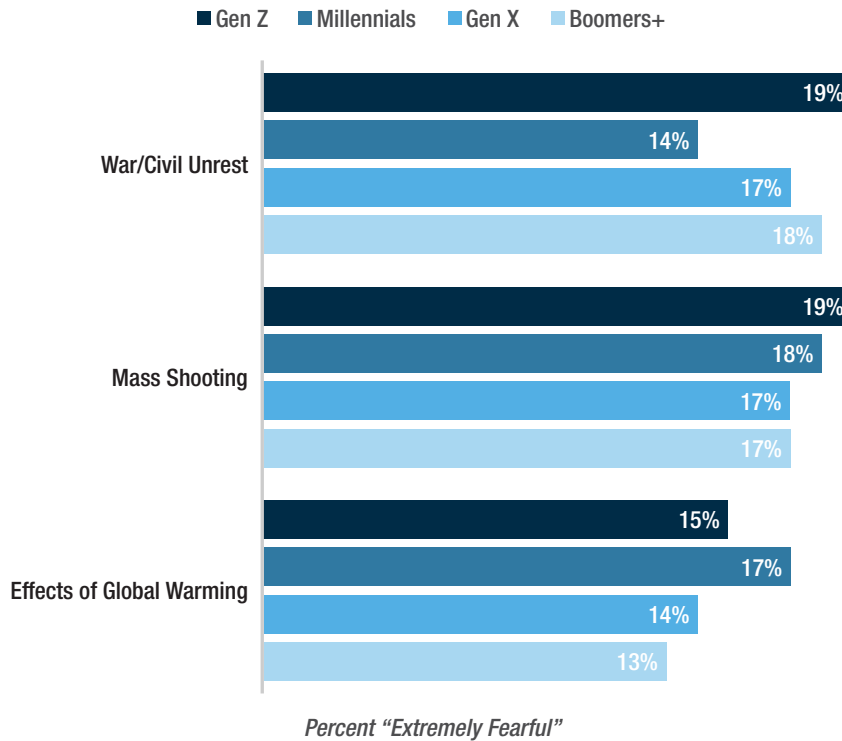
Selected Fears by Generation (continued)



In these matters of personal safety and relationships, Gen Z continues to report the highest levels of extreme fear, though the levels are lower and the differences narrower.

Unsurprisingly, women far exceed men in the fear of sexual assault (50 percent of women are moderately or extremely fearful, compared to 19 percent of men). Women are more fearful than men on all eleven fear issues, but the difference is greatest on this question.

Selected Fears by Generation (continued)



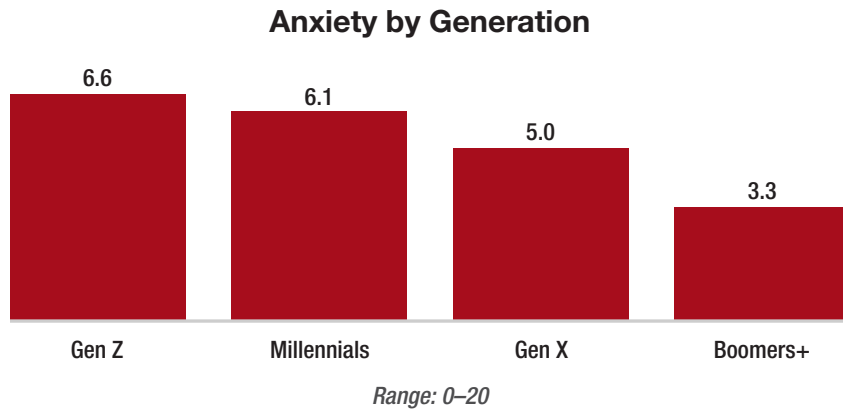
The survey also included a few items that might have been culled from the headlines. By narrow margins, Gen Z is more likely to be extremely fearful of War or Civil Unrest or a Mass Shooting. Millennials surpass them in fearing the Effects of Global Warming.

Regarding the fear of War and Civil Unrest, 3 out of 4 in the Boomer+ generation (60 years old and up) report that they are Moderately or Extremely Fearful—this is their greatest object of fear in this survey. Many in this generation have personal memories of Vietnam and the turbulence of the Sixties, which may provide context for current fears.

ANXIETY

Anxiety is highest among Generation Z. It decreases with each older generation.

The anxiety score comes from responses to five questions about clinical symptoms of anxiety. As we've just seen, the fear questions focus on *objects* of fear, but the anxiety scores are *symptom-based*, as people report feeling sleepless or restless or having trouble concentrating. The total symptom report gives us a basis for comparison. With possible scores of 0 to 20, the oldest generation scores very low (3.3), just half the level of Gen Z (6.6).

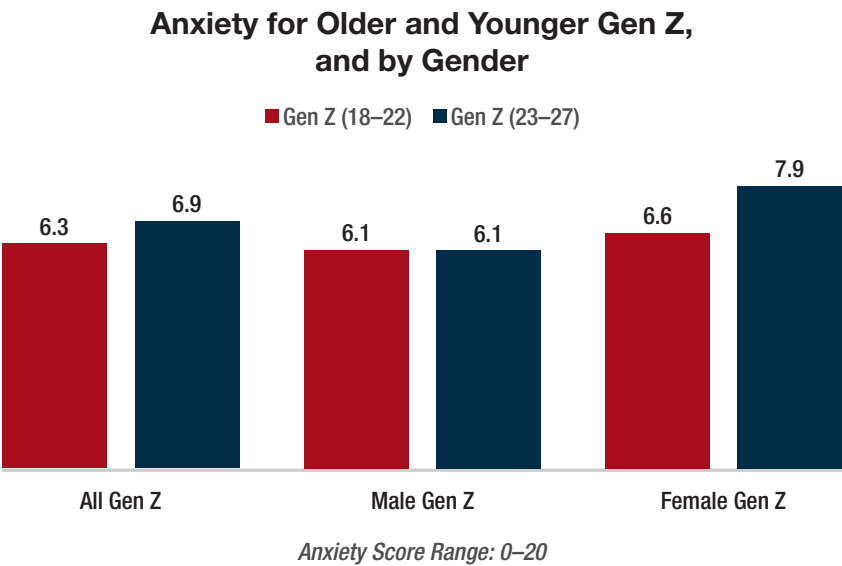


Separating older Gen Z (23–27 years old) from younger (18–22), we find that older group with considerably more anxiety (6.9 to 6.3). We might surmise that many in the younger group are still living with their parents or at college, so the pressures of living and working on their own have not yet surfaced.

Further, we see that this entire difference comes from Gen Z women. Among younger Gen Z, females have substantially more anxiety

than males (6.6 to 6.1), but among older Gen Z, the difference is extraordinary (7.9 to 6.1).

The sample size is rather small,² which creates a larger margin of error, so we want to be careful about drawing conclusions. Yet the data suggest an especially high level of anxiety in that subgroup. Is there a way for Christians to provide comfort and support for women of this age in the community or within the church family?

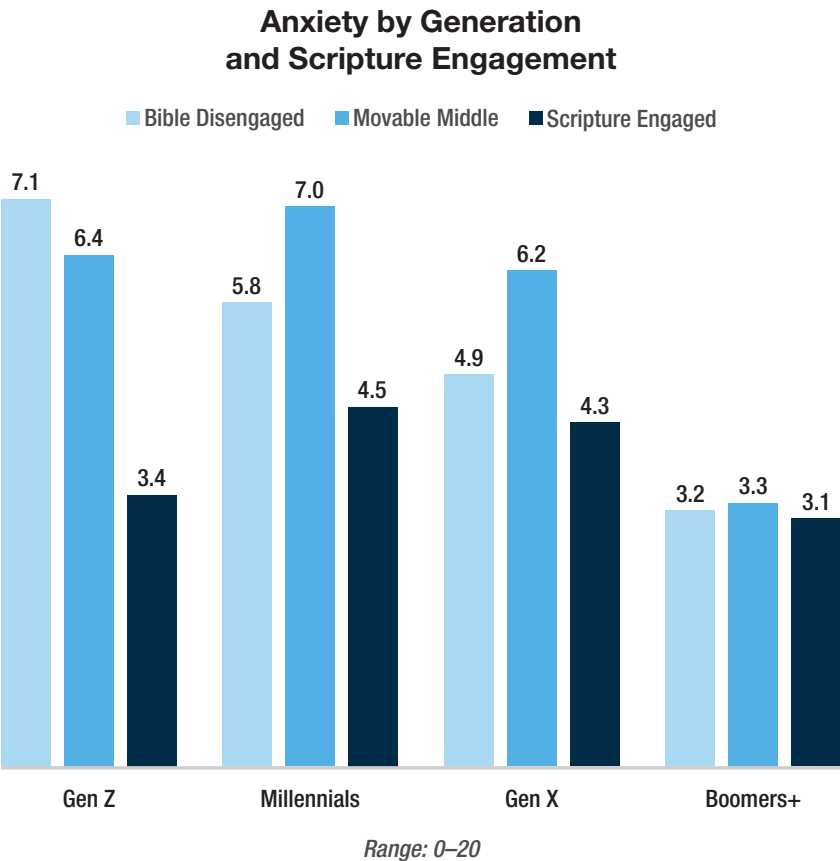


ANXIETY AND THE BIBLE

The Bible says, “God cares for you, so turn all your worries over to him” (1 Peter 5:7); “Don’t worry about anything, but pray about everything” (Philippians 4:6); and “Don’t worry about tomorrow” (Matthew 6:34). From these and another dozen references, we see

² Of the approximately 2,500 people surveyed, 79 were in this subcategory of women 23–27 years old.

the Bible promoting trust and prayer as powerful responses to anxiety. So, do people who engage with Scripture report less anxiety? Yes, and the difference is stunning.



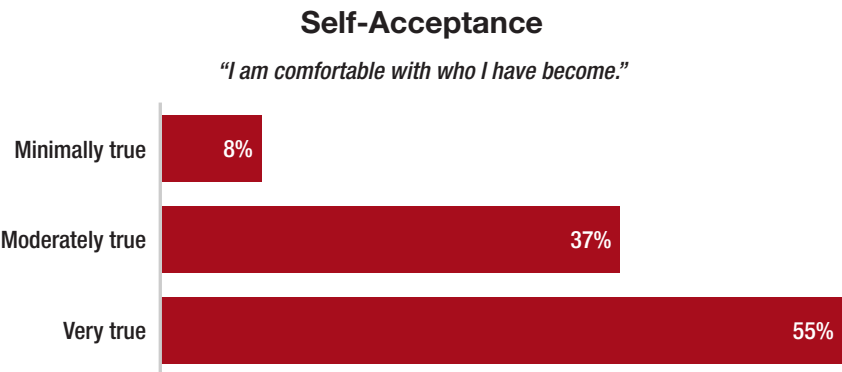
Throughout all generations, but especially among Generation Z, Scripture Engagement is associated with lower anxiety levels. Within Gen Z the anxiety score of the Scripture Engaged (3.4) is less than half that of the Bible Disengaged (7.1), and it’s close to the score of the Boomers. We could say that Scripture Engagement “undoes” the generational effect.

SELF-ACCEPTANCE

“I am comfortable with who I have become.” On a scale of 0 to 10, how much do you agree with that statement?

This is a new question on this year’s survey, and the responses give us a reading on one of the basic components of emotional health—what we’re calling self-acceptance.

Overall, people are quite comfortable with themselves. The midpoint of responses was 7.3 on a scale of 0 to 10. We’ve compressed those answers into three categories: Minimally (0–3), Moderately (4–7) and Very (8–10).

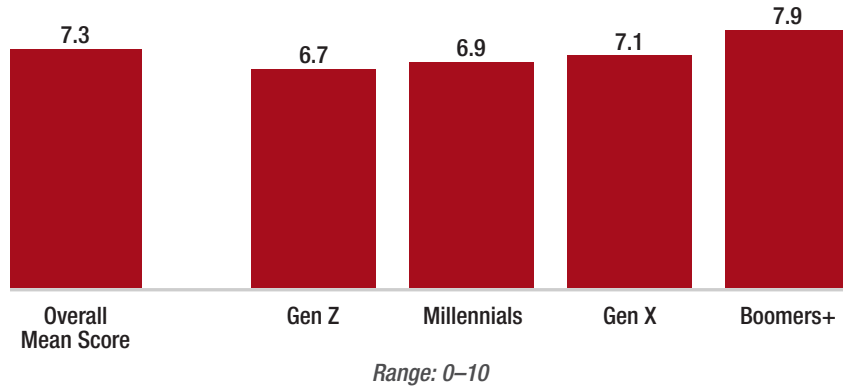


GENERATIONAL

Older people indicate more comfort with “who they have become.” Thus Gen Z has the lowest scores here. Since young people are still early in the process of becoming whoever they will be, this is not surprising. And remember that this is self-reporting on a scale of 0 to 10. Someone who gives a 6 in response might think they’re a bit above average—but they’re actually bringing down the mean score.

Self-Acceptance by Generation (mean score)

"I am comfortable with who I have become."



AFFIRMATION FROM PEERS

"I feel affirmed by my peers." On that same scale of 0 to 10, how much do you agree with that statement?

This other new question might be considered a companion to the first. Peer affirmation adds to self-acceptance to foster emotional health. And once again, the responses were rather high, averaging 6.7, though not as high as the self-acceptance question.

Affirmation from Peers

"I feel affirmed by my peers."

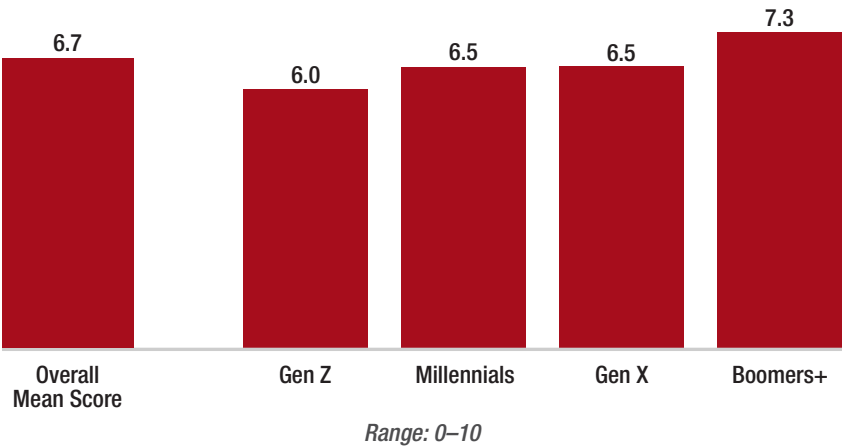


GENERATIONAL

With each older generation there are higher scores on peer affirmation. This might result from the fact that, as we age, we increasingly get to choose our peers. Notice the high ratings from the Boomer+ generation. The lower score from the youngest generation may reflect high expectations, bullying, cliques, and the often-difficult dynamics of social media. But on a scale of 0–10, those who gave a score of 6 probably saw it as above average.

Affirmation from Peers by Generation (mean score)

"I feel affirmed by my peers."

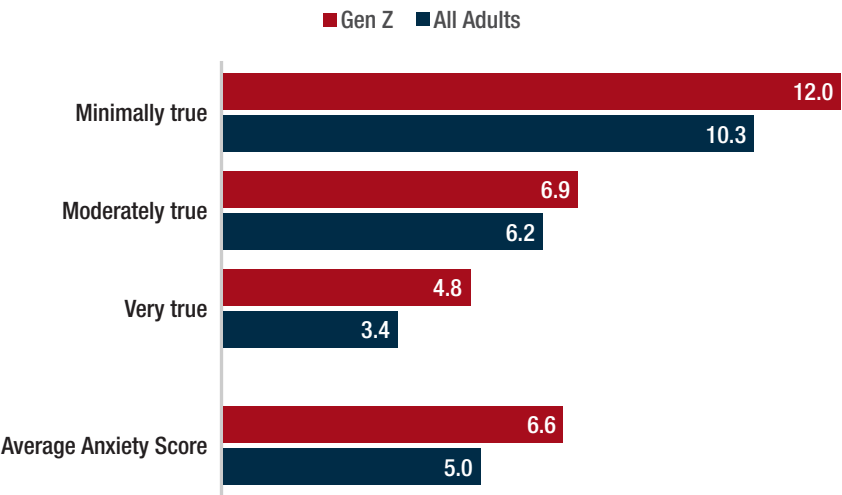


ANXIETY BY SELF-ACCEPTANCE AND PEER AFFIRMATION

People who report the highest levels of self-acceptance and peer affirmation have the lowest anxiety levels—that is, they report the fewest symptoms of anxiety. While this is not surprising, the statistical connection is striking, especially with Gen Z, and especially with self-acceptance.

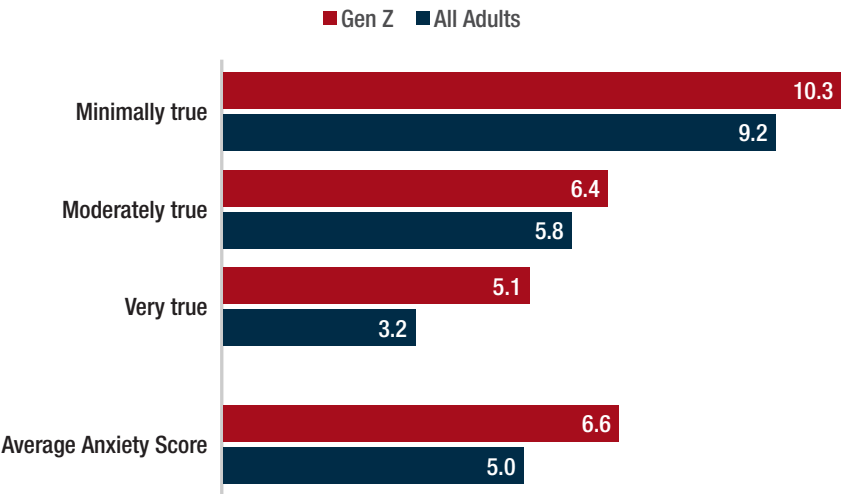
Anxiety Scores by Generation and Self-Acceptance

"I am comfortable with who I have become."



Anxiety Scores by Generation and Peer Affirmation

"I feel affirmed by my peers."



TRAUMA

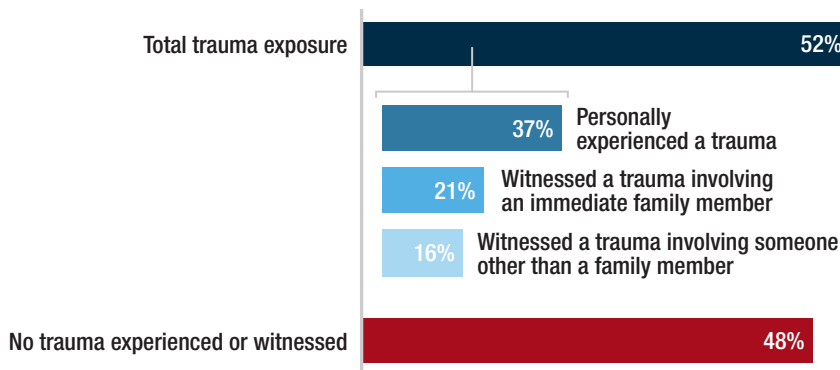
“Have you ever experienced or witnessed physical, psychological, or emotional trauma?”

The qualifiers of “physical, psychological, or emotional” help to frame the seriousness and scope of these injuries. This isn’t just having a bad day. Trauma has been defined as “a wound of the heart and mind that causes deep suffering.”³

With a “yes” response, the surveyor narrows the situation further: *Did you personally experience this, or did you witness a trauma involving a family member or someone else?*

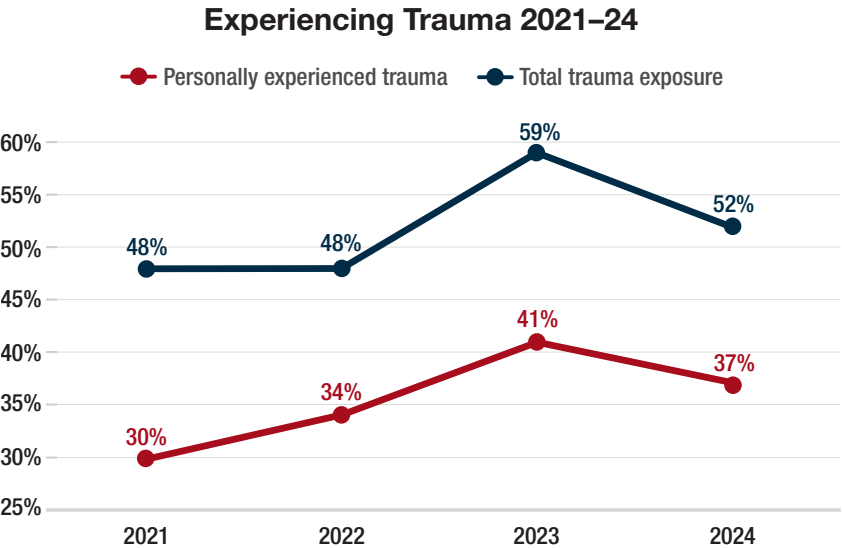
About three in eight (37%) Americans say they have personally experienced a trauma. About one in five (21%) have witnessed trauma involving a family member, one in six (16%) involving someone else. A little less than half (48%) of the population has not experienced or witnessed trauma.

Experiencing or Witnessing Trauma



3 Trauma Healing Institute. <https://www.traumahealingbasics.org/recognizing-trauma>

We’ve been asking this question for several years now, and there’s more vacillation than we would expect—especially because we ask if people have “ever” encountered trauma, not just in the previous year. Our 2023 survey, conducted early that year, hit a high point, with more than two in five (41%) saying they had experienced trauma personally, and the same number saying they had never experienced or witnessed trauma. Those numbers have come down a bit this year, though they’re still substantially higher than those from 2021.



We have no clear explanation for the increase in 2023, unless it’s a case of people processing the events of the 2020–21 pandemic. Perhaps, in the thick of it (2021–22), they didn’t yet define it as trauma and only later looked at the physical, psychological, emotional, and even social toll it took. From that perspective (2023), many might conclude they had been through a traumatic experience. A year later (2024), they might be less inclined to call it that, as their memories of the experience faded or they became distracted by new challenges.

TRAUMA AND GENERATIONS

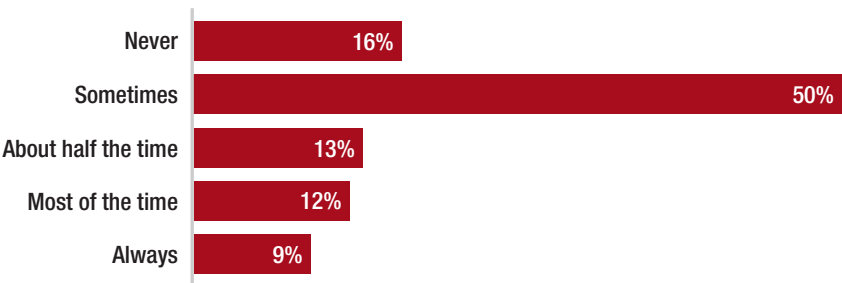
Gen X is the group most likely to have encountered trauma, by experiencing or witnessing it (58%). The Boomer+ generation is least likely to report exposure to trauma (46%), but this may be a matter of definitions. The concept of trauma was not in common use until rather late in the Boomers' lives.

AFTERMATH OF TRAUMA

Of all those who experienced or witnessed trauma, five of six (84%) are still affected by it at least "sometimes." More than one in five (21%) say they're affected by it "most of the time" or "always."

Frequency of Effects of Trauma

"How often does the trauma you experienced or witnessed affect you today?"



Base: Those who have experienced or witnessed trauma

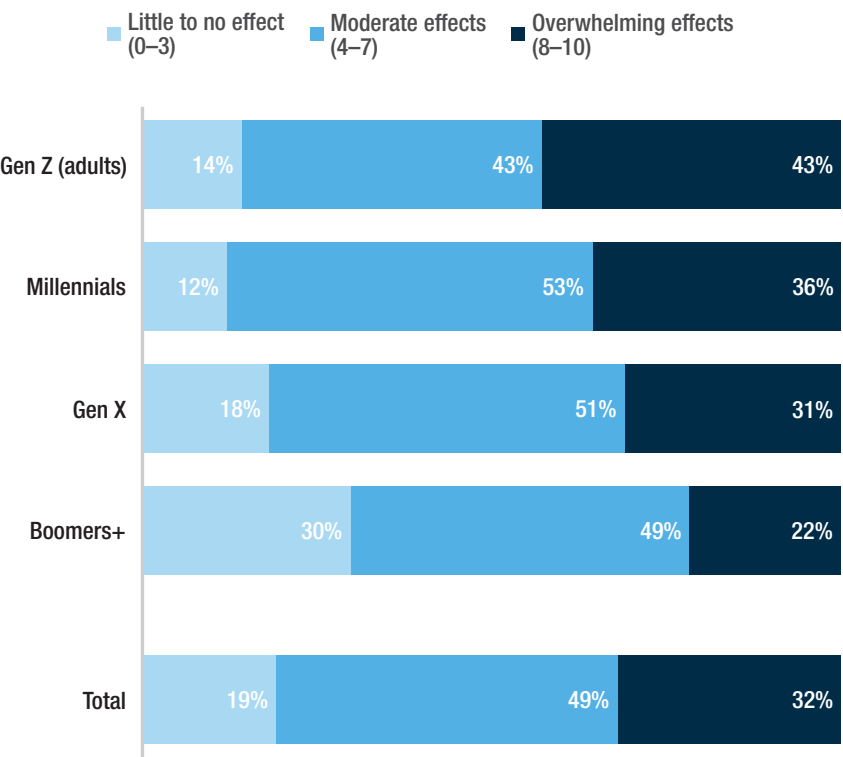
Pause a moment to digest those numbers. About 44 percent of the general public say they're sometimes still affected by trauma they experienced or witnessed at some point in their lives.⁴ That factors out to more than 100 million Americans. And more than a tenth

⁴ With 52% of Americans exposed to trauma and 84% of them still affected by it, that's 44% of the population, or 100 million+.

(11%) of the people you pass on the street are “always” or “most of the time” dealing with those after-effects.

The after-effects of trauma include psychological and physiological symptoms such as flashbacks, nightmares, numbness, dread, sleeplessness, and panic attacks. “It takes tremendous energy to keep functioning while carrying the memory of terror, and the shame of utter weakness and vulnerability,” says trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk in his book *The Body Keeps the Score*.⁵

Effects of Trauma Exposure by Generation



5 Van der Kolk, B. A. (2015). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma* (p. 2). Penguin Books.

When asked to rate the severity of the trauma effects they are experiencing on a scale of 0–10, nearly a third (32%) of those exposed to trauma said 8 or above. Gen Z (43%) was the most likely to give that high a rating. Considering, then, that slightly more than half of Gen Z has been exposed to trauma and nearly half (43%) of that group rate its continuing effects at a severity level of 8 out of 10, or higher, the data suggest that more than one-fifth (23%) of Gen Z adults in America are living with trauma effects of that magnitude.

SEEKING HELP

We’ve examined a number of emotional issues—fear, anxiety, self-acceptance, peer relationships, and trauma. What do people do when they need help with these or other personal problems?

Around a quarter of Americans (24%) would turn to a faith community or church. The most sought-after resource is a “counseling center or mental health professional” (57%).⁶ About a third (34%) would talk with “a trusted family member.”

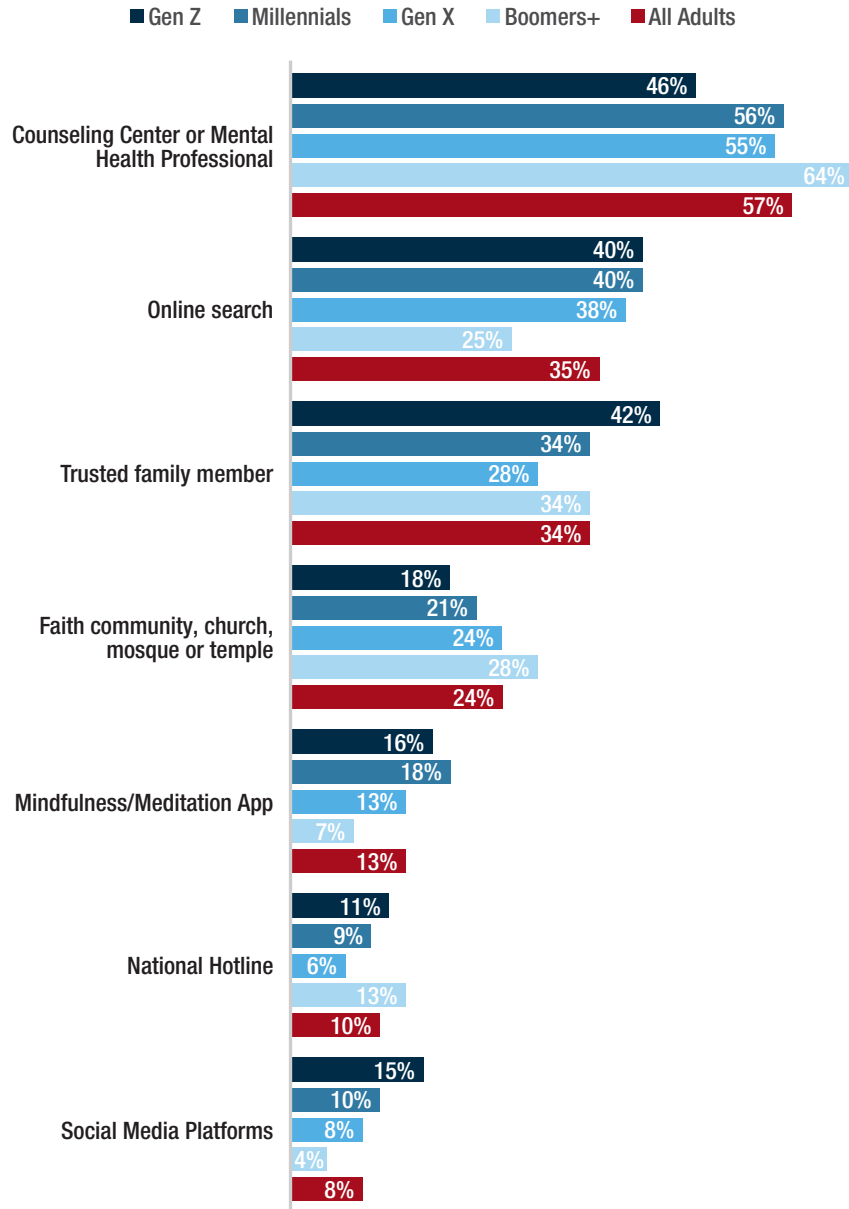
But in this internet age, we also see “online search” as the second most popular option (35%). Others turn to apps and social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, or TikTok.

Gen Z is the least likely age group to seek help from a church or faith community, and the least likely to see a professional counselor, but the most likely to talk with a trusted family member. As you might expect, they’re also the most likely to seek help on social media.

⁶ We recognize that some churches provide counseling services with mental health professionals, but this was not specified in the question.

Mental Health Resources by Generation

"If seeking mental health resources, where would you look to find them?"





Reconnect: Simple Practices for When Life Feels Overwhelming

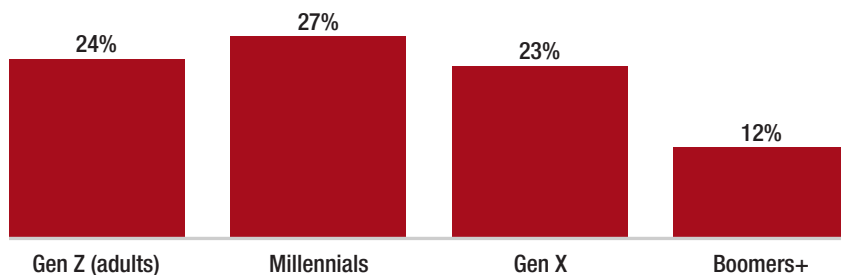
Navigating stress and overwhelming emotions can be tough. Download this free resource for youth and parents from the Trauma Healing Institute and learn five simple practices that anyone can use to help recognize their emotions and calm their body in times of stress.

DOWNLOAD NOW

traumahealinginstitute.org/reconnect

Beyond the hypothetical (where *would* you look), are people *actually seeking* help from mental health professionals? Among the three youngest adult generations, about a quarter of them say they've met with a professional counselor in the past year "to discuss my mental health concerns." For the Boomer+ generation, the number is about half that.

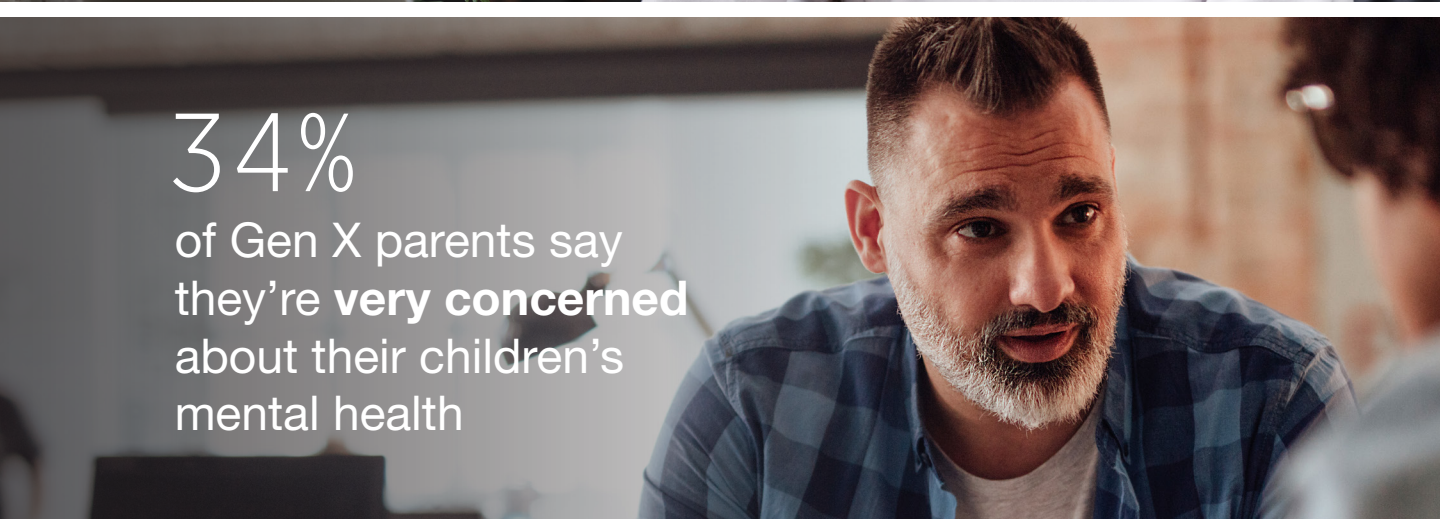
Seeing a Counselor, by Generation





19%

of Gen Z adults report
poor mental health
(compared to only 7%
of everyone older)



34%

of Gen X parents say
they're **very concerned**
about their children's
mental health



31%

of 23–27-year-olds have met with a
professional counselor to discuss
mental health concerns, but only
16% of those 18–22 have

SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING

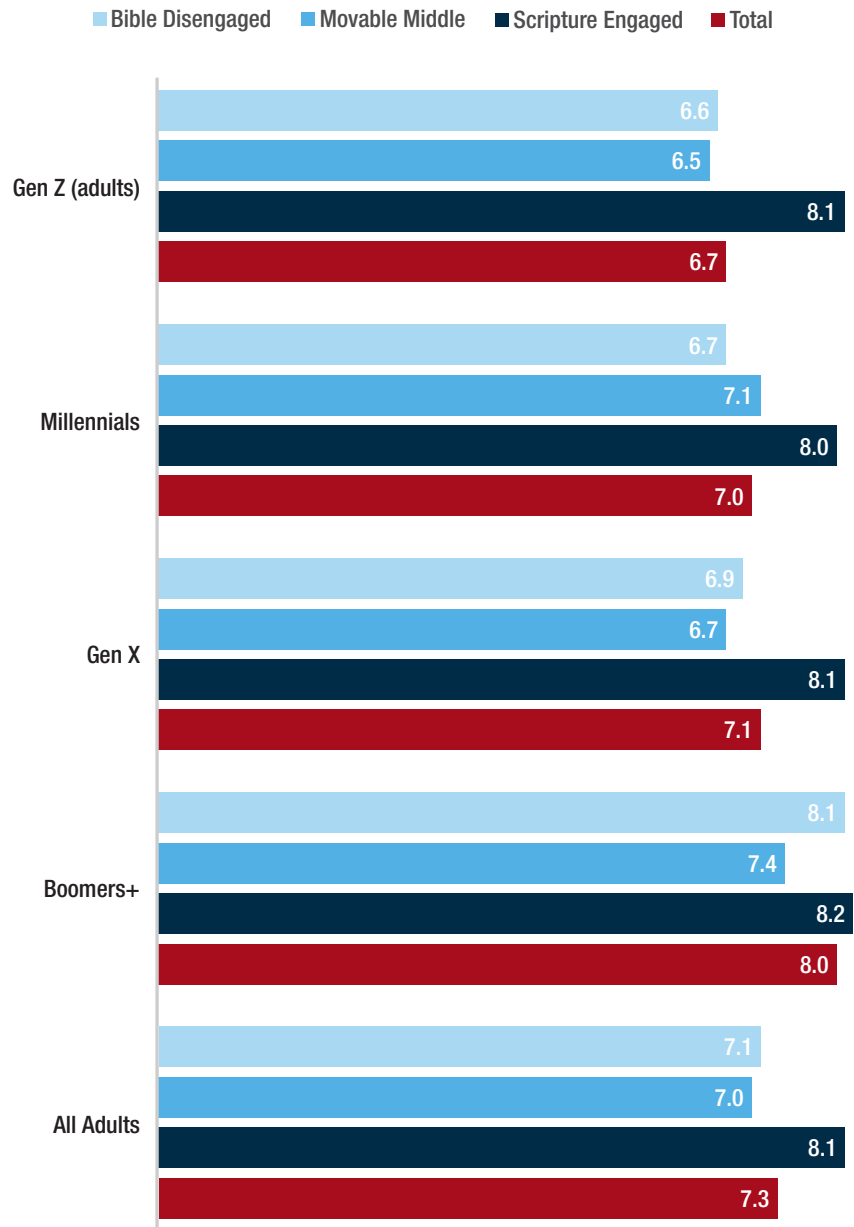
One healing factor that might be overlooked is Scripture Engagement. We affirm the value of wise counsel from mental health professionals, pastors, and trusted friends, but our statistics consistently show that Scripture Engagement makes a huge difference.

Take those two new questions regarding self-acceptance and peer affirmation. Scripture Engaged people score much higher on both of those questions than the Movable Middle or the Bible Disengaged. We find a similar difference with Practicing Christians over Non-Practicing Christians and Non-Christians. Not only do Bible-engaged churchgoers have regular affirmations from God about who they are becoming, but they also have a community of faith supporting them.

And after presenting many concerns about the current situation of the youngest adults in our society, we want to offer hope as well. Pages 58–59 of this report offered a generational analysis of Human Flourishing, Hope Agency, and Stress, with the conclusion that our youngest adults are in trouble. But the chart on page 60 shows what a difference Scripture Engagement makes. Young adults who engage with Scripture flourish just as much as older folks. The Bible, meaningfully applied to their lives, makes up for many of the negative issues that affect Gen Z more than older generations.

We see that same dynamic again with self-acceptance. And doesn't it make sense that those of any generation who continually interact with God through Scripture would receive a regular message of God's love for them and their value to him?

Self-Acceptance by Generation
and Scripture Engagement



The Bible is not a “quick fix” to the emotional problems people face. There’s nothing especially quick about it. But we commune with God in Scripture. We build a relationship in which we find support and purpose, identity and guidance. We still feel the pain of loss, the after-effects of trauma, and uncertainty about the future. And as we engage with Scripture, we find hope in our connection with a God who loves to help and heal. ■



ENGAGING THE EMERGING GENERATION

watch now!

Dr. Tanita Tualla Maddox, a Gen Z expert and the National Director of Generational Impact for Young Life, shares her insights and experience working with the emerging generation. Watch the interview [here](#).



NONES AND NOMINALS

“[It] is unquestionably valuable . . . for both people of faith and those who claim no religious affiliation to understand the contours of this ever-growing bloc of American society. While each of the nones arrived at the same place through their own journey, it’s helpful to understand what they hold in common—socially, politically, and demographically.”

Ryan P. Burge, *The Nones*¹

Jesus told a story about a farmer who sowed seed on different types of terrain, with different outcomes (Matthew 13:3–8). The seed, he explained later, was “the message of the kingdom,” which yields growth and bounty in some hearers but encounters great difficulty in others (Matthew 13:18–23).

¹ Burge, R. P. (2021). *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going* (p. 67). Fortress.

A modern business leader might see that parable as an early example of market research. Any successful company knows its potential customers and what makes them buy or holds them back.

The church is not a business. It's not selling a product to customers. But it is, in biblical terms, "sowing" the "message of the kingdom" to a broad population. It might make sense for Christian leaders to consider what "soils" that seed is landing on. What are the groups of people in and around our ministries? What can we do to prepare them, or draw them closer?

In this chapter of *State of the Bible*, we explore three groups that have partial interaction with churches or none at all: The Nones, the Nominals, and the Casuals.

THE NONES

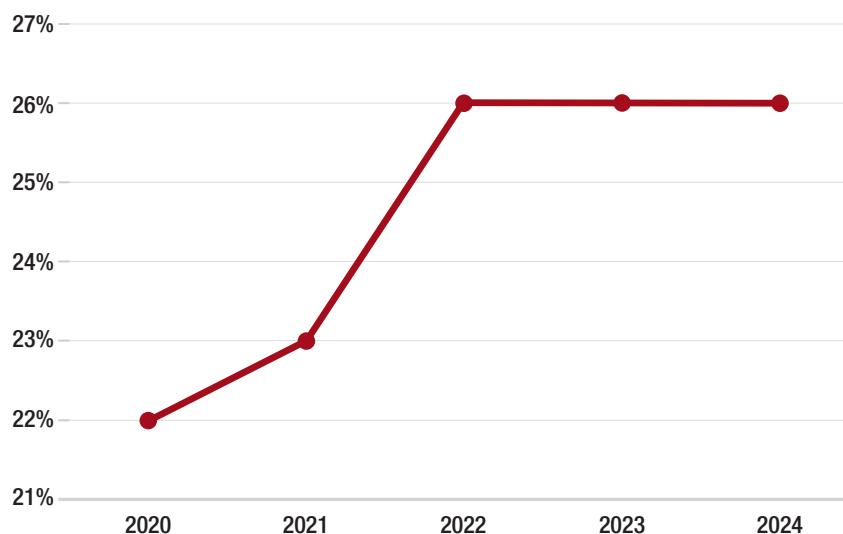
Considerable attention has been paid lately to the Nones, the religiously unaffiliated. When surveyors ask them if they're Protestant or Catholic or Jewish or Muslim, they respond, "None of the above." Some of them are atheist or agnostic, but not all. This doesn't mean they have no religious beliefs or background—merely that they claim no connection to a particular church or religion. Nearly all researchers would agree that more than a quarter of American adults now qualify as Nones, and that number has grown rapidly through the last half-century.

In his groundbreaking book, *The Nones*, social scientist and pastor Ryan P. Burge traces public data from the General Social Survey dating back to 1972. At that point only **5 percent** of American adults

considered themselves religiously unaffiliated. There was only minor growth in that group until the early 1990s, when we saw a rapid shift to nearly **12 percent** by 1996. Then there was steady growth of about half a percent per year, with a slight, brief downturn coinciding with the 9/11 attacks in 2001. The total crossed the **20 percent** mark about a decade ago, and it kept growing for several more years.

In recent years, *State of the Bible* surveys have found concurring data. We saw a sharp increase in the 2022 figures (from **23% to 26%**), but the number has held steady (at 26%) in the two polls since then.

The Nones, 2020–24



Have we reached a saturation point? It's probably too soon to tell. Predictions would be pointless, but other researchers are also seeing what we see—for the moment, at least, a stabilizing of what has been a rapid rise.

Social scientists acknowledge that a “social desirability bias” might be responsible for some of the rapid growth of this group over the last half-century. That is, in 1972, some nonreligious people considered it respectable to be religious, so they claimed a connection they didn’t really have. Now there’s no such stigma attached to *not* being religious. Yet that bias could account for only a small portion of the fivefold increase we’ve seen.

WHO ARE THE NONES?

The religiously unaffiliated are less likely to be currently **married** (43%, compared to 51% of all Americans) and more likely to be “**never married**” (42%, compared to 32%). This suggests that “unaffiliated” may be as important to that definition as “religiously.” That is, it might not be just religion that these people are avoiding. Burge points out that, in the 1970s, nearly three-quarters of American adults were married. The decline of marriage to present levels has paralleled the rise of the Nones.

Considerably more than half of Nones are **men** (54%, compared to 49.5% of all Americans). For some time now, it has been theorized that religion (or at least modern religion) caters more to feminine energies than masculine. Whether that’s true or not, most observers would not be surprised that the unaffiliated population has substantially more men.

Younger Americans are more likely to be Nones than older Americans. One third of Gen Z (33%) and even more of Millennials (37%) report no church affiliation, but less than a quarter of Gen X (24%) and only one in six Boomers (16%).

Large and medium-sized **cities** (at least 30,000 population) have greater concentrations of Nones (32%), much more than suburbs (23%) and rural areas (21%). Remember that we're not only talking about Christian churches here, but any religious affiliation. Cities are often culturally diverse, with a broad array of religious services available. But nearly a third of city-dwellers claim no religious affiliation.

Nones are more common in the **West** than in the South (34% of Westerners are religiously unaffiliated, but only 20% of Southerners). They are slightly more likely to have at least a **Bachelor's degree** (42% of Nones do, as compared to 39% of the general public). And more than a third (35%) of Nones are in households with income of **more than \$100,000 a year**. This exceeds all Christian denominational groups, except Catholics.

HOW ARE THEY DOING?

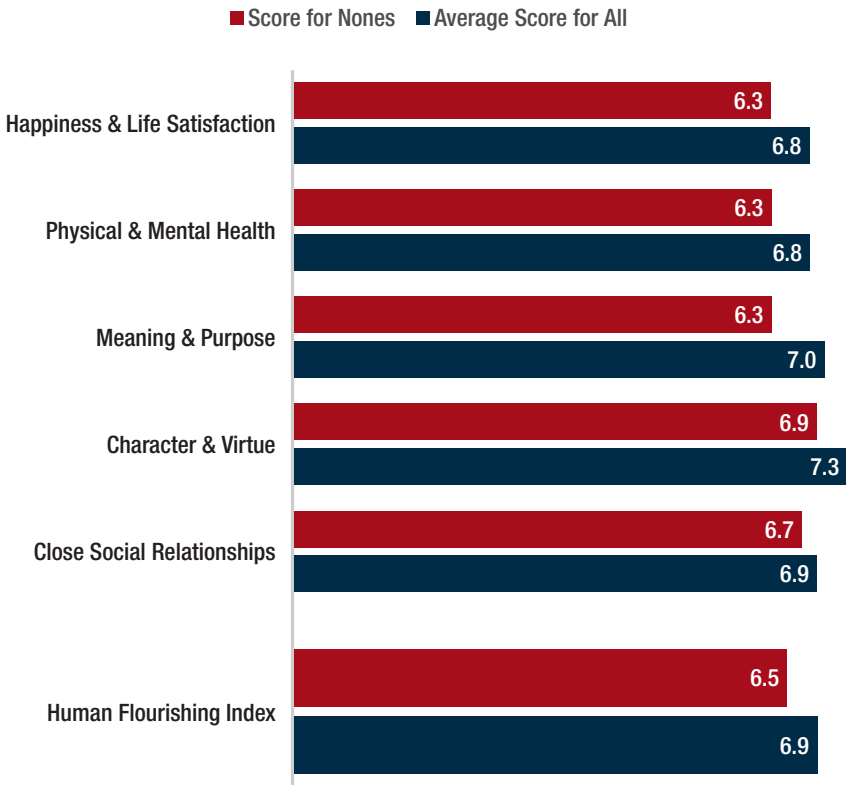
As seen in Chapter 3, the *State of the Bible* survey includes data on several life-and-health issues. Some of these combine to form the Human Flourishing Index.² We also create scores that measure hope and stress. By these measures of flourishing, hope, and stress, how are the Nones doing, compared to everyone else?

Better educated and better paid than the average American, young, male, unfettered by marriage, possibly living in a western city, they ought to be thriving, right?

They aren't.

² VanderWeele, T. J. (2017). On the promotion of human flourishing. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114(31), 8148–8156.

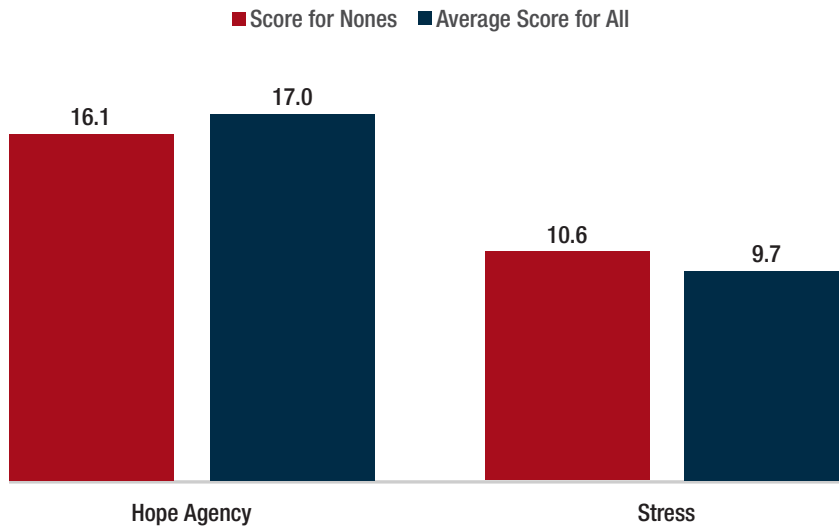
The 5 Elements of Human Flourishing, Nones and Average



In each of the five factors that make up the Human Flourishing Index (see Chapter 3), the Nones score significantly lower than average. The difference is greatest in the Meaning & Purpose category. On Close Social Relationships, the unaffiliated come close to the average, but still fall short.

In other measures of well-being, we find a similar outcome. Nones self-report lower levels of hope and higher levels of stress.

Hope and Stress, Nones and Average



THE FAITH OF THE NONES

By definition, the Nones are those without any particular religious affiliation. That reflects their lack of identification with a religious group, but it doesn't necessarily define their personal beliefs. They may believe in God, think about Jesus, and even read the Bible, while still not connecting with any one religious group.

So, are these people just freelance believers, practicing their personal Christianity without landing in any faith community? Few of them would fit that description.

- Nearly two-thirds of the Nones (64%) say they're **not curious** about the Bible or Jesus. (By comparison, of those affiliated with *non-Christian* religions, only 40% said no.)

- Only 1 in 15 Nones (7%) is a **Bible User**, reading at least 3–4 times a year.
- Only 1 in 30 of them agree that “**the Bible is totally accurate** in all of the principles it presents” (3% for Nones, compared to 38% of the general public).
- Only 1 in 12 say their **religious faith is very important** in their life today (8% for Nones, compared to 50% of the general public).
- One-tenth of the Nones say they’ve made a **personal commitment to Jesus Christ** that is still important in their life today (10%, compared to 54% of the general population).
- Nearly 2 in 5 say, “The Bible was written to **control or manipulate** people” (40%).

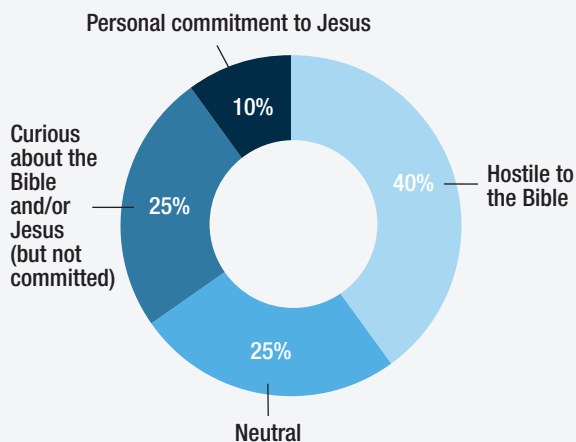
Nearly 70 million Americans could be classified as Nones. It appears that about a tenth of them are committed to Jesus but not to a particular church or denomination. Another quarter may be “curious” about Jesus or the Bible, but not committed. On the other end of the spectrum, two-fifths of them might be considered hostile to the Bible. That leaves another quarter of the Nones we can only consider neutral, just not interested.

This is a vast mission field that starts at our doorstep. Yet clearly the Nones are not all alike. Some appear antagonistic to biblical faith, while others seem apathetic. And what about those who say they’re curious? Are there ways that churches could fan those sparks of curiosity into flame, moving people from mere interest to investigation to interaction? And what about the Nones who say they’ve already made a commitment to Christ? How can churches help them take the next steps on their faith journey?

The Nones at a Glance



It's understandable to assume that all Nones are vehemently opposed to Christianity, Jesus, and the Bible. Some are, but others are curious, perhaps receptive. Some even say they've made a personal commitment to Jesus that's still important in their life today. By gathering responses to different questions in our survey, we've made our best guess at the makeup of this group. **These are approximate figures, but they may provide a helpful overview.**



TWO NEW GROUPS

For years now, we have used the term **Practicing Christians** to describe a particular group, setting them apart from Non-Practicing Christians and Non-Christians. This designation pulls together three data points. People must (a) say they're Christian; (b) attend church at least once a month; and (c) "strongly agree" that their faith is very important to them. If someone claims Christianity but not *both* of the other points—attendance and faith importance—they are Non-Practicing Christians.

Note that there's an external action (attendance) and an internal commitment (importance of faith). Non-Practicing Christians could fall short on one or the other or both. So we decided to break this down further. People who say they're Christians but do not attend church at least once a month—these we are now defining as **Nominals**.

If they do attend church but don't consider faith very important to them, we define them as **Casuals**.

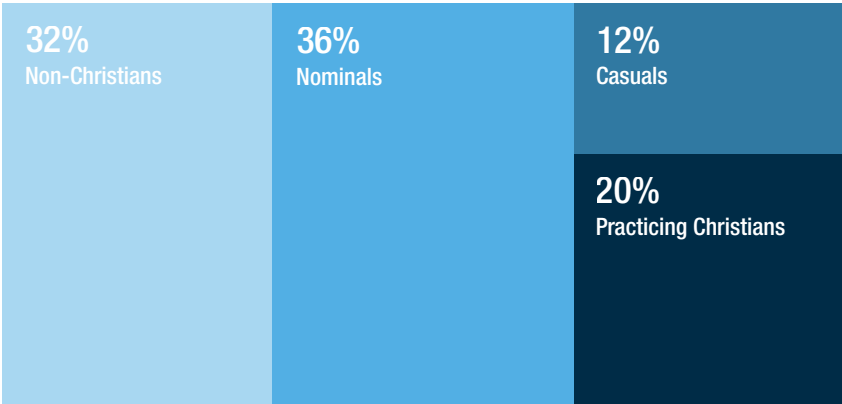
The **Non-Christian** category has two main segments: the Nones, who are unaffiliated with any religion; and those who are affiliated with a non-Christian religion, such as Judaism or Islam. While there are significant differences between these two subgroups, for this section we combine them in the Non-Christian category.

With Practicing Christians on one side and Non-Christians on the other, we now have four distinct groups of people that churches could be reaching in different ways. Church leaders, you surely enjoy the involvement of Practicing Christians; you probably have

the Nominals on your email list, but rarely in your building; and you have the Casuals in your building each week (but not in your Bible studies).

Faith Participation Segments

Percent of American Population



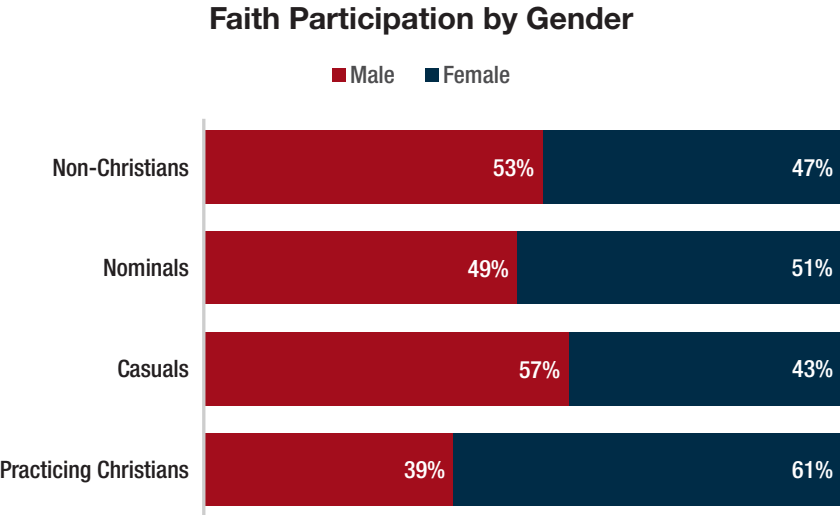
DEMOGRAPHICS OF NOMINALS AND CASUALS

In most key measures, the Nominals mirror the American public at large. In gender, marital status, and generations, the Nominal group shares the contour of the U.S. population. But in the other categories of faith participation, we see some significant differences.

Gender

Practicing Christians are far more likely to be female (61%). Casuals—those who attend church but don’t consider faith “very important” in their lives—are mostly male (57%). Earlier we reported that Nones included significantly more men (54%) than women. Here’s a case where the Non-Christian category (53% male) is slightly

different from the Nones: the inclusion of those who affiliate with non-Christian religions adds some balance to the stats of the unaffiliated.



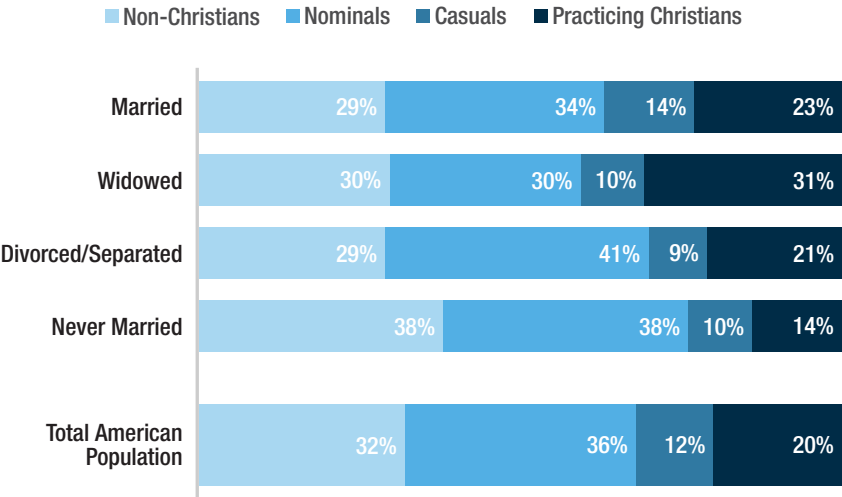
Marital Status

Between them, the “married” (51%) and “never married” (32%) groups make up more than four-fifths of the total population. The differences in their faith participation are stark. Married people are far more likely to be Practicing Christians (23% to 14%). The never married are far more likely to be Non-Christians (38% to 29%). Married people are more likely than others to be Casuals—suggesting that many may attend church with a spouse though they themselves don’t give their faith high priority.

The high percentage of Practicing Christians among the widowed probably connects with our generational data. Widows and widowers tend to be in the oldest generation. Among the divorced or

separated, two-fifths are Nominals—calling themselves Christians but seldom attending church. Marital breakups can have a damaging effect on people’s faith, but there’s a social effect as well. It’s often difficult to attend church after a divorce or separation, especially if you used to attend with your spouse.

Faith Participation by Marital Status



Generation, Income, Race, and Region

Compared to the Boomer+ generation, **Millennials** are half as likely to be Practicing Christians (13% to 26%) and half-again more likely to be Non-Christians (39% to 24%).

The income group with the greatest portion of Practicing Christians is in households with annual income of **\$60,000 to \$100,000** (23%, where only 20% of all Americans are Practicing Christians). That group also has the highest percentage of Casuals (16%, compared to 12% overall).

One in four **Black Americans** (26%) is a Practicing Christian, exceeding the portions of Hispanic (21%) and White Americans (20%). **Hispanic Americans** have the highest percentage (41%) of Nominal Christians.

The **Northeast** U.S. has the lowest percentage of Practicing Christians (14%, compared to 25% in the South). **The West** has the highest percentage of Non-Christians (40%, compared to 25% in the South). The portion of Nominals is similar in all regions except the West (32%). This may suggest less cultural pressure to claim Christianity, along with a greater affiliation with non-Christian religions.

NOMINALS, CASUALS, AND RELIGION

Do Nominals and Casuals affiliate more with certain brands of Christianity? What sort of relationship do they have with the Bible? Can Nominals or Casuals still lead healthy, or even “thriving,” spiritual lives?

The answers to these questions are clear and strong.

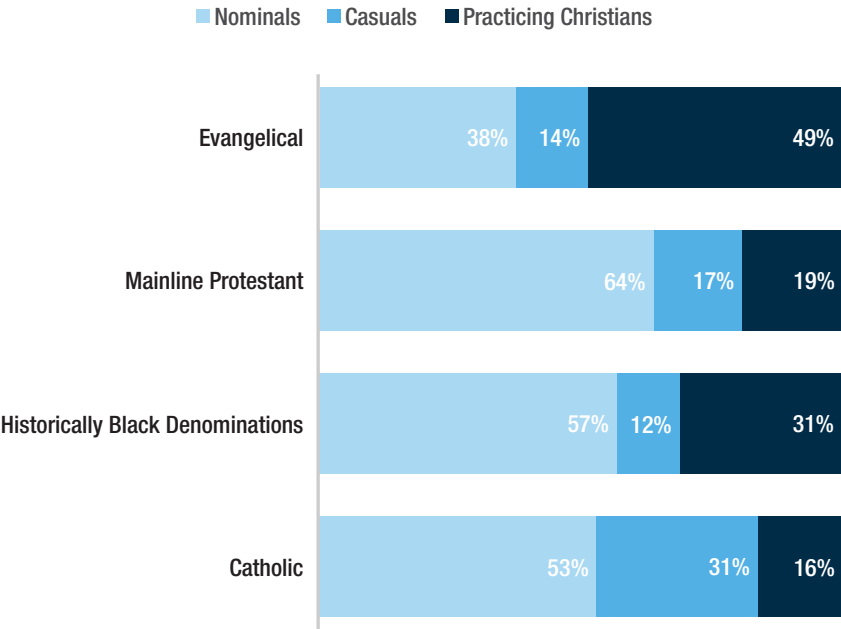
Denominational groups

Nearly half of Evangelicals (49%) are Practicing Christians, and no other denominational group comes close. Catholics (16%) and Mainline Protestants (19%) have much smaller percentages of Practicing Christians.

When it comes to Casuals—those who attend but don’t consider faith “very important”—nearly a third of Catholics (31%) fit that description, the largest portion of any denominational group.

In each group except Evangelicals, more than half are Nominals—affiliating with the church but not attending even once a month. Mainline Protestants have the greatest portion of Nominals (64%).

Faith Participation by Denominational Group



Scripture Engagement

You would expect Practicing Christians to be Scripture Engaged, and two-thirds of them are (67%, with another 27% in the Movable Middle, and a scant 6% Bible Disengaged). Indeed, part of the “practice” of the Christian is interacting with the Bible and applying it, independently and with other believers.

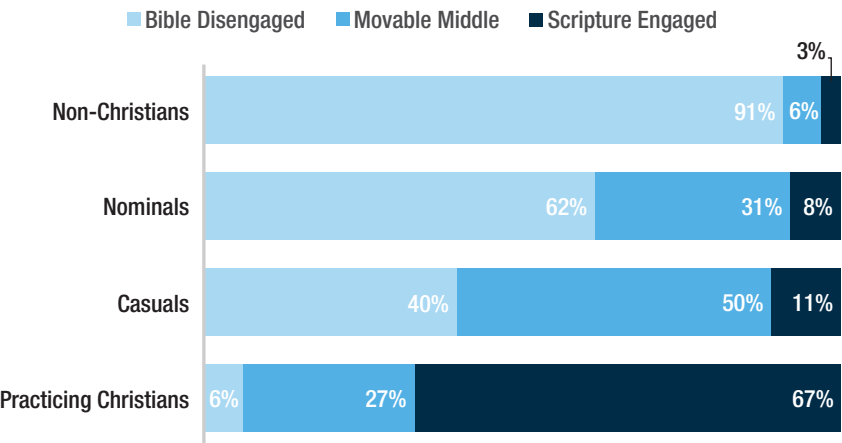
The Movable Middle has always intrigued us. They are “movable” because, statistically, they seem to slide into the Scripture Engaged

While it's possible to interact with the Bible on your own, without church involvement, it's rare.

category or back among the Bible Disengaged. They have some interaction with the Bible and some application of it, but they don't seem fully sold on it. This parallels our new "casual" category. By definition, the Casuals attend church at least monthly, but they don't give top priority to their faith. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus mentions how, with some hearers, "the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful" (Matthew 13:22 NIV). Perhaps that's the story of the Casuals, distracted by everything else in their lives and devaluing their faith. Our data show that half (50%) of the Casuals are also in the "casual" middle regarding the Bible.

Those who call themselves Christians but seldom attend church—the Nominals—are mostly Bible Disengaged (62%). Not even a third of them wander into the Movable Middle (31%). One lesson we learn here is that, while it's possible to interact with the Bible on your own, without church involvement, it's rare.

Faith Participation by Scripture Engagement

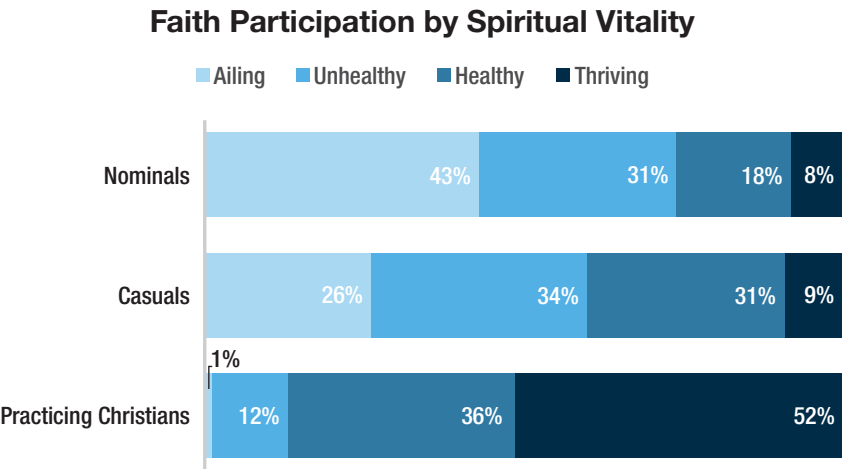


Spiritual Vitality

How do the Nominals and Casuals fare on the Spiritual Vitality Gauge (svg)?³ Are they Thriving, Healthy, Unhealthy, or Ailing?

Once again, we have validation of the value of church attendance and prioritizing one’s faith. More than half (52%) of Practicing Christians are Thriving, according to the svg. Only 13 percent are in the two unhealthy categories.

Even more significant is the dearth of Casual (9%) and Nominal (8%) Christians among the spiritually Thriving. Six of ten Casuals and nearly three-quarters of Nominals are in the Unhealthy and Ailing categories. From the data we see that it’s hard to thrive as a Christian when you’re not even attending church monthly (like the Nominals), or when your faith is not “very important” in your life (like the Casuals).



3 See page 12.

DO NOMINALS AND CASUALS FLOURISH?

In the last few pages, we've been looking at various expressions of spiritual life—church attendance, Bible engagement, and other beliefs and practices. The connections between them are validating, but not surprising.

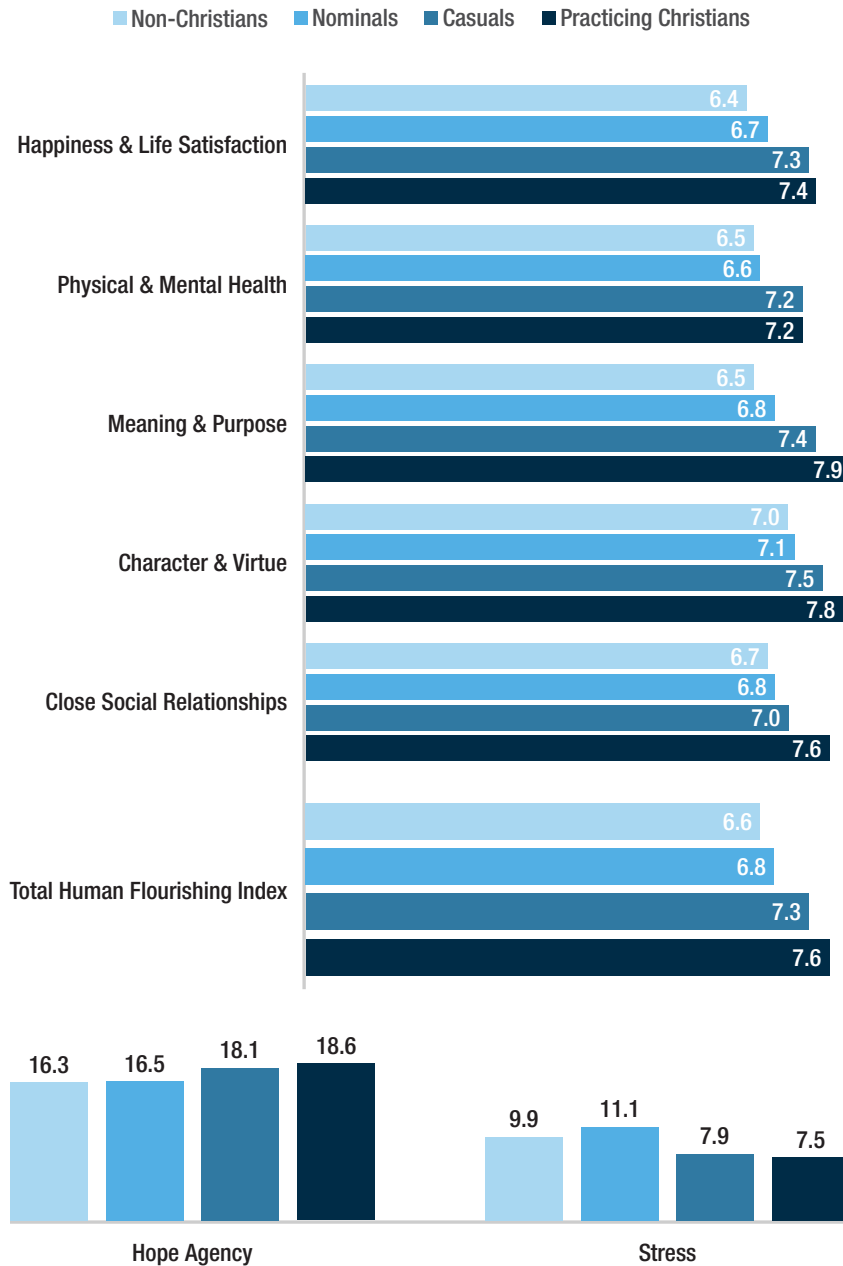
Now we turn to statistics that are more psychological than spiritual. How do Nominals and Casuals measure up in matters of “human flourishing”? When Christians are more committed, do they lead more satisfying lives?

The data show clearly that Practicing Christians score higher in Human Flourishing than Casuals and Nominals (and Nones). They also have the best scores in every individual component of Human Flourishing, as well as the metrics related to hope and stress.

We see the same pattern throughout the data: Practicing Christians are followed by Casuals, then Nominals, then Non-Christians, including the Nones.

Do Nominal and Casual Christians flourish? Somewhat. More than Non-Christians, but not as much as Practicing Christians. The second-place scores of the Casuals suggest that gathering with the church helps people flourish, even if they don't consider their faith “very important.”

Human Flourishing Scores by Faith Participation



As we've said, if you're a church or ministry leader, you have these people in your orbit—throughout your neighborhood, on your email list, in your church. Practicing Christians are the core of your operation, faithful and faith-filled. The Casuals show up, rather regularly, but it's as if a switch has not yet been thrown. The current isn't flowing. Faith in Christ is one of many aspects of life they deal with. It's not a priority. The same might be said for the Nominals you seldom see. Christmas and Easter and weddings and funerals, that's it—oh, and some send their kids to your vbs. Of course there are the Nones, the outsiders, those along the “highways and byways” of your community. You see them around town. Your church people work with them, go to school with them, play pickleball with them. Some might oppose your faith, but others might be curious.

Maybe these findings can spark some thinking about how these groups differ and how you might employ unique strategies to invite those of each group to God's banquet. ■



watch now!

ALL ABOUT THE NONES

To better understand the Nones, we interviewed **Dr. Ryan P. Burge**, an associate professor of political science at Eastern Illinois University, pastor, statistician, and author of *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going*. Watch the interview now!

CURIOUS?

Percent curious about the Bible and/or Jesus

95%
of Casuals



89%
of Nominals



35%
of Nones





LONELINESS

In 2023 the U.S. Surgeon General issued *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*, an advisory on the effects of loneliness on individuals and society. “The lack of social connection poses a significant risk for individual health and longevity,” the report warns, adding that it “can increase the risk for premature death as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.” Loneliness and lack of social connection are associated with greater risks of heart disease and stroke, of anxiety, depression, and dementia, and greater susceptibility to viruses.

The report goes on to quantify the economic cost. “Loneliness and isolation are associated with lower academic achievement and worse performance at work. In the U.S., stress-related absenteeism attributed to loneliness costs employers an estimated \$154 billion annually.” For older adults, social isolation costs an estimated \$6.7 billion a year in excess Medicare spending.¹

¹ Murthy, V. (2023). *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* (pp. 7–10). Office of the Surgeon General. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

How would you define loneliness? Generally we know it when we feel it, but it's hard to put into words. One article called it “a distressing emotional state of one's lack of intimate and close relationships to a partner, family, or friends.”² We like the relative simplicity of a definition from Susan Mettes, author of *The Loneliness Epidemic*: “Loneliness is when we're disappointed in our relationships.”³

State of the Bible has long included measures of people's well-being—flourishing and hope as well as stress and anxiety. This year we have adapted five questions from the UCLA Loneliness Scale,⁴ asking how often people feel lonely in different ways. For instance, the first question is simply, “How often do you feel alone?” The last one is, “How often do you feel that people are around you but not with you?” People give responses from 1 (never) to 4 (often), resulting in an overall score of 5 to 20. The average for all respondents is 11.9.

Why do we make this effort to measure people's emotional state? Because God cares about whole people—not just their eternal destination, but their lives now, their feelings, relationships, and well-being. In our surveys, we've seen many ways that Americans benefit from Bible engagement, and we suspect that it might also help them feel less lonely. So we're testing a hypothesis. If the nation is indeed experiencing an “epidemic of loneliness,” what happens when people form a meaningful relationship with the God they meet in Scripture?

2 Ong, A. D., Uchino, B. N., & Wethington, E. (2016). Loneliness and health in older adults: A minireview and synthesis. *Gerontology*, 62(4), 443–449. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000441651>

3 See the video interview with Susan Mettes linked on page 175.

4 See the definitions section, page 205. Wongpakaran, N., Wongpakaran, T., Pinyopornpanish, M., Simcharoen, S., Suradom, C., Varnado, P., & Kuntawong, P. (2020). Development and validation of a 6-item Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (RULS-6) using Rasch analysis. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 25(2), 233–256. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjhp.12404>; Russell DW. (1996). UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3): Reliability, validity, and factor structure. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 66(1), 20–40. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa6601_2

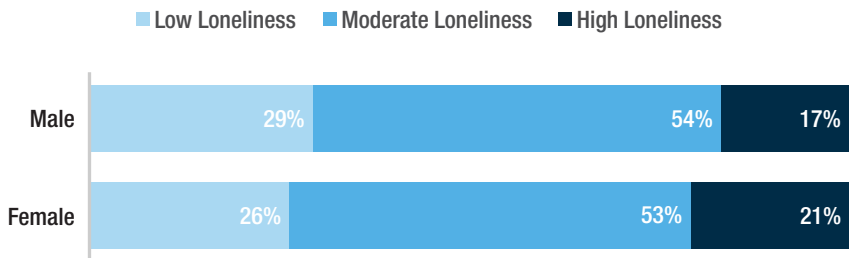
PROFILES IN LONELINESS

Does loneliness afflict some more than others? Are certain groups of people at higher risk? We examine some basic demographics before moving on to more spiritual issues.

GENDER AND GENERATION

Women report more loneliness than men. With an average score of 12.1 on the Loneliness Scale, women clearly exceed the 11.7 score of men, though the difference is not huge. Looked at a different way, about one in five women (21%) have scores that indicate a high degree of loneliness, where only one in six men (17%) are at that level.

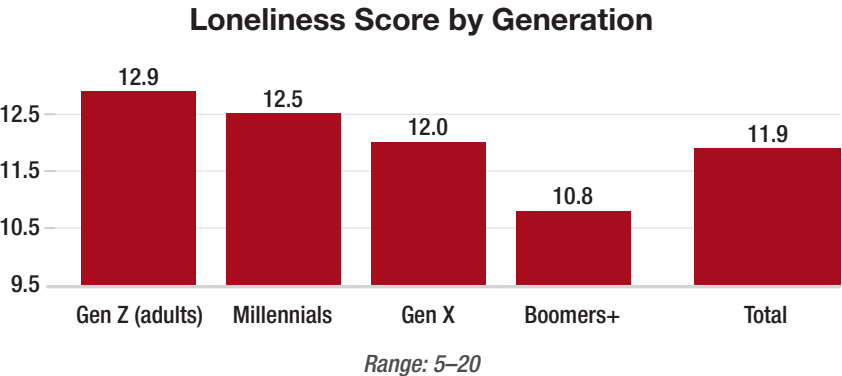
Loneliness Levels by Gender



You might be surprised by this. Many assume that women are naturally more social and that men tend to be loners. Women build deeper friendships, it is said, and men have shallow connections based on sports. And yet, on this survey, women are more likely to say nobody really knows them well, or that they feel left out or alone.

The generational breakdown provides the same stairsteps we’ve seen on other questions. Here Generation Z scores highest in loneliness (12.9), with Millennials a step lower (12.5) and Gen X another step

lower (12.0). Then we see a huge step down to the level of the Boomers+ group (10.8), which now includes all who are 60 and older.



This might also seem counterintuitive to some readers. Isn't Gen Z the connected generation? Haven't they grown up with the technological ability to interact with pretty much anyone on the planet any time they want? Don't they always seem to have their eyes on their phones?

As Jonathan Haidt explains it, "Social media . . . increases the *quantity* of social connections and thereby reduces their quality . . . When everything moved onto smartphones in the early 2010s, both girls and boys experienced a gigantic increase in the *number* of their social ties and in the *time* required to service those ties. . . . This explosive growth necessarily caused a decline in the number and depth of close friendships . . ." He cites data from the University of Michigan showing a precipitous decline since 2009 in the percentage of teens saying they had a few close friends "to hang around with" and a sharp increase in the percentage saying, "A lot of times I feel lonely."⁵

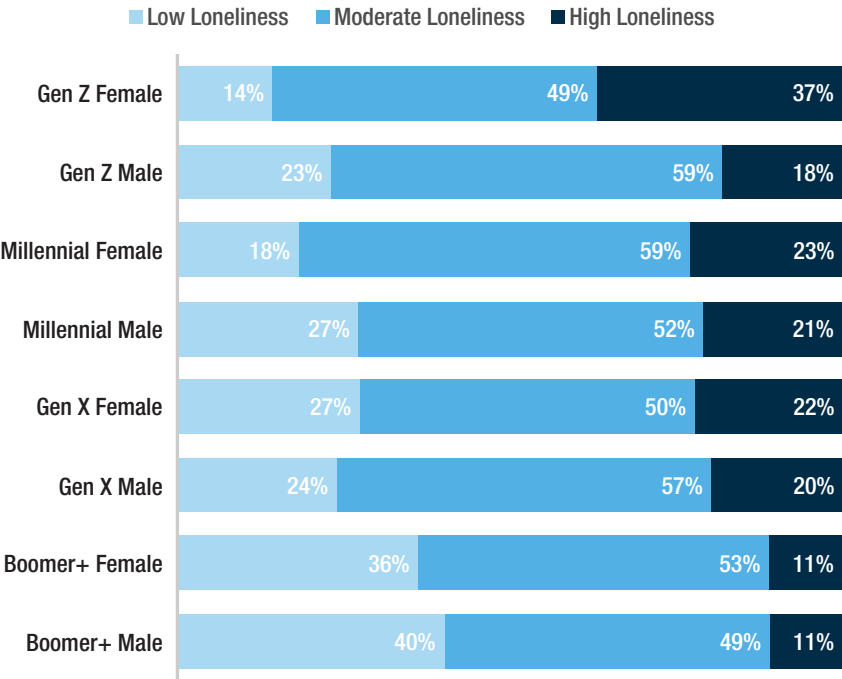
⁵ Haidt, J. (2024). *The Anxious Generation* (p. 168–69). Penguin. Haidt credits the data to Monitoring the Future, a project of Michigan's Institute for Social Research.

Haidt identifies the years 2010–2015 as “the Great Rewiring,” with improvements in smartphones changing youth culture. Whether or not he’s right, we note that our group of Gen Z adults, now 18–27 years old, would have been 4 to 18 years old in that period, directly in the crosshairs of the cultural shifts he’s writing about.

So if we see relatively high loneliness in Generation Z and also among females, will it be especially concentrated in Gen Z women? It is.

Looking at those in the “high” loneliness category, we find that four-point difference (21% female to 17% male) flattening in every generation, *except in Gen Z*. There the females (37%) are *twice as likely* as the males (18%) to report a “high” degree of loneliness.

Loneliness Levels by Generation and Gender



Well over a third of Gen Z women indicate that they are highly lonely.

This information sets an agenda for anyone connected to Christian ministry, indeed for any Christian who cares about young adults. Well over a third of Gen Z women indicate that they are highly lonely. They say no one understands them, that people are “around” them but not “with” them. Our God frequently says, “I am with you.” He knows us better than we know ourselves, and still loves us. Psalm 68:6 has a wonderful phrase that applies here: “You find families for those who are lonely” (CEV). Perhaps God can use us to do that, becoming “families” for lonely people around us.

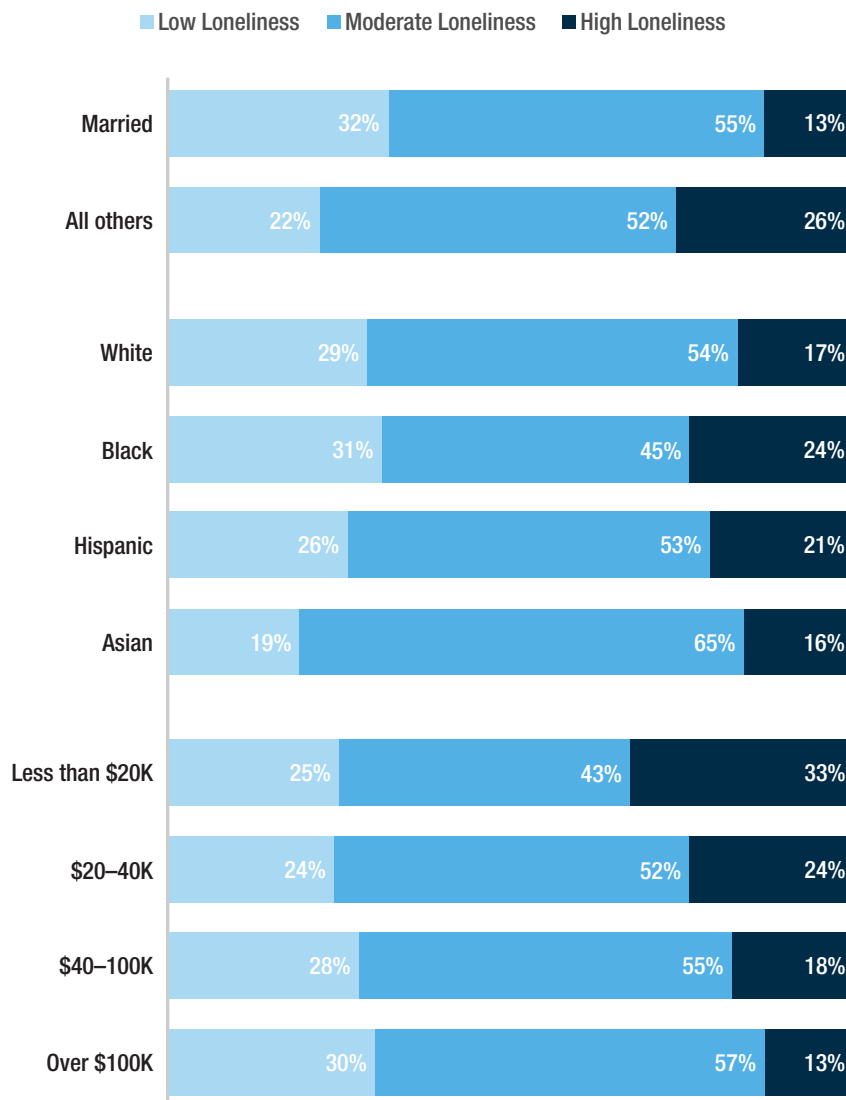
MARITAL STATUS, RACE, INCOME

Those who are married are about half as likely as others to report a high level of loneliness (13%). Differences are minimal among the divorced, separated, widowed, and never married. Collectively, about a quarter of them (26%) report a high level of loneliness.

Among the four main racial/ethnic groups, Black Americans have the greatest percentage reporting high loneliness (24%), but also the greatest percentage with low loneliness (21%).

Regarding income levels, we’d love to say that, as the song goes, “Money can’t buy me love,” but the numbers show that those with higher household income are less likely to report high loneliness. There isn’t much difference between those making \$45,000 and those making \$95,000 annually, but the change is substantial under \$40K and over \$100K.

Loneliness Levels by Marital Status,⁶ Race/Ethnicity,⁷ and Household Income



⁶ “All others” in the Marital Status category includes Never Married, Divorced, Separated, and Widowed.

⁷ In our reporting of Racial/Ethnic categories, Whites and Blacks do not include Hispanics; Pacific Islanders are included in the Asian category.

LONELINESS, THE BIBLE, AND CHURCH

Active Christians combat loneliness in two important ways. First, when they engage with Scripture, they interact with a God who loves them “with an everlasting love” (Jeremiah 31:3). “You are familiar with all my ways,” the Psalmist prays (Psalm 139:3). For the Scripture Engaged person, Bible reading is not a homework assignment, but more like a date night that develops a valuable relationship.

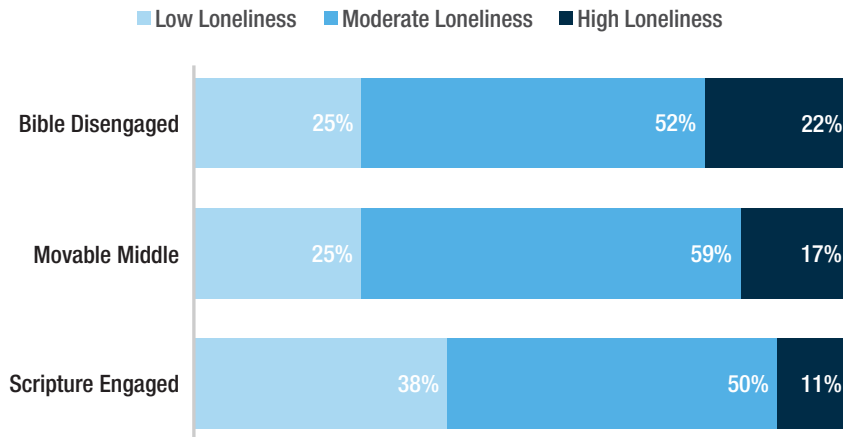
The Bible also leads to meaningful connection with other people. Scripture engagement is statistically associated with church attendance. Churches are far from perfect—and they always have been—but they still provide opportunities for people to connect intentionally and deeply, building relationships that go beyond “How ya doin’?”

SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

Scripture Engaged people are half as likely to report high loneliness (11%) as the Bible Disengaged (22%). Those in the Movable Middle are, as you might guess, in the middle (17%).

As we have indicated throughout this report, the Scripture Engagement metric is designed to go beyond the frequency of Bible reading. It also considers the Bible’s centrality in decision-making and impact on relationships with God and other people. It’s no surprise then that people who read about love and humility and forgiveness—and *live out these principles in their lives*—would build strong friendships and thus report fewer feelings of loneliness. Still, it’s nice to see statistical confirmation.

Loneliness Levels and Scripture Engagement



A few pages ago, we included a generational breakdown of our findings on loneliness. *Breakdown* might be an apt word, since each new generation exhibits more loneliness than the one before. Gen Z adults had an average loneliness score of 12.9, compared to 10.8 for the Boomer+ group.

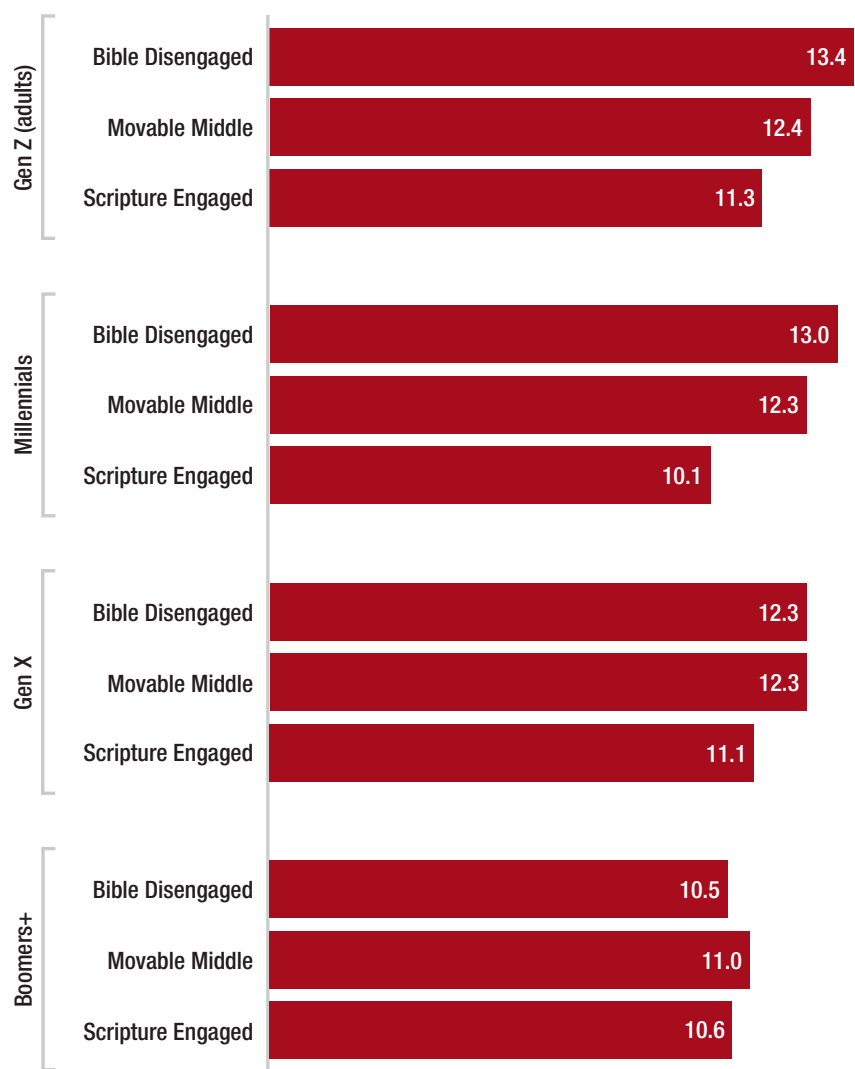
But what happens when we add Scripture engagement to the analysis? Does meaningful interaction with the Bible ease the generational challenges in this area as it does in other categories?

Yes, and the effect is remarkable.

Not only do Scripture Engaged Gen Z-ers report less loneliness than their peers in the Movable Middle or among the Bible Disengaged, they have lower loneliness scores than most of those in the next two generations. We find the lowest loneliness scores of any subgroup among the Scripture Engaged Millennials.

Scripture engagement makes a big difference in every generation except for the oldest, where people average low loneliness scores whether they're Scripture Engaged or not.

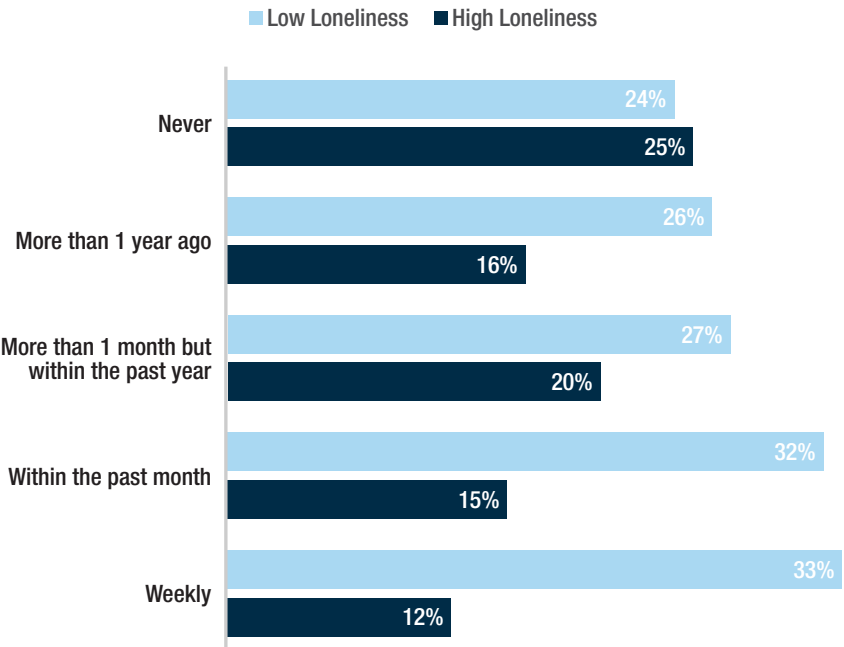
Loneliness Scores by Generation and Scripture Engagement



CHURCH CONNECTION

One third of those who attend church weekly report low levels of loneliness (33%). Only about one in eight report high levels of loneliness (12%). For those who have attended not weekly, but “within the past month,” the numbers are similar (32% and 15%). We might assume that church-based relationships—reinforced every week, or even once a month—do a great deal to fend off loneliness.

Loneliness Levels by Church Attendance



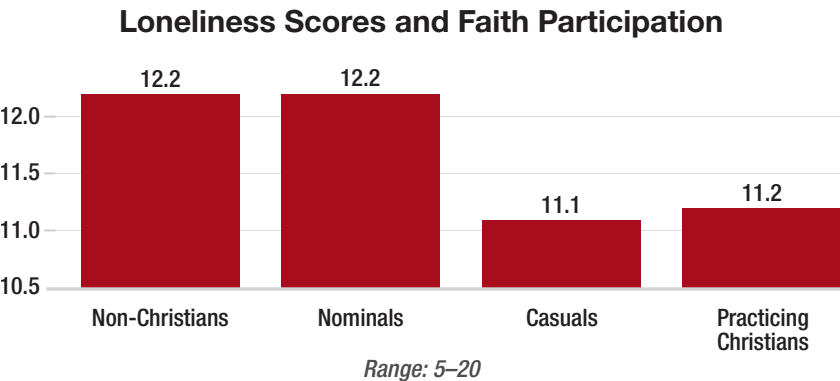
In the last chapter, we introduced a new category of how people interact with religion, the church, and personal faith. The Casuals now take their place among Nones, Nominals, and Practicing Christians. We wondered whether there was any difference in the loneliness levels of these groups.

By our definition, **Practicing Christians** identify as Christians, attend church at least monthly, and “strongly agree” that their faith is “very important” in their lives. These people average a fairly low Loneliness Score of 11.2 (remember that 11.9 is the overall mean).

Casual Christians attend church at least monthly, but fall short on that faith question. Their Loneliness Score is even lower at 11.1—not terribly surprising if their main reason for attending church is social more than spiritual.

Nominal Christians do not attend church even monthly. As we saw in the previous graph, loneliness increases when church attendance is less than monthly. Here, they show an average score of 12.2.

Non-Christians, obviously, do not identify as Christians. Some belong to non-Christian religions and attend those services, but this category also includes the Nones. Together, this group of Non-Christians averages a Loneliness Score of 12.2.

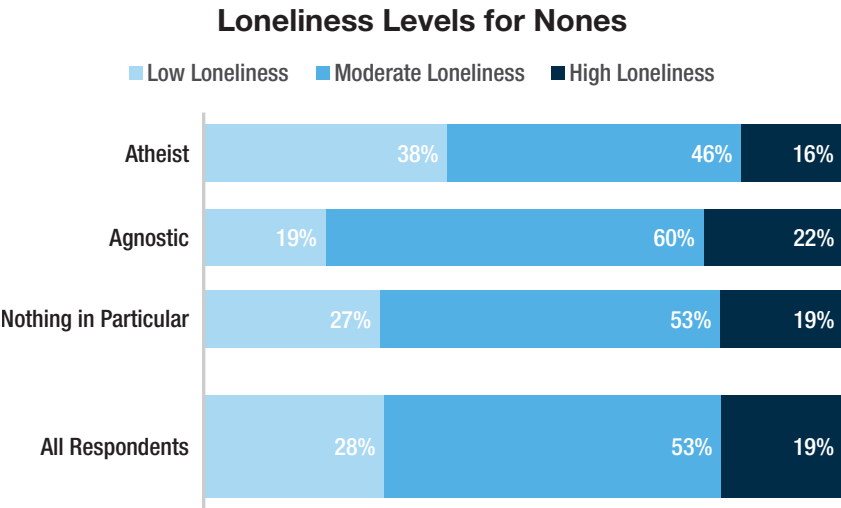


Note that there is no meaningful difference between Nominals and Non-Christians. Casual Christians and Practicing Christians are

also nearly identical on this measure. From these findings, it would appear that church attendance, rather than claiming to be a Christian, is a key factor in reducing loneliness.

With regard to religious identification, the category of the Nones (covered in depth in Chapter 7) can be sliced into subgroups of Atheists, Agnostics, and Nothing in Particular. Is there any difference in loneliness among them? Yes. Atheists struggle least with loneliness, Agnostics most.

Defining these groups in the simplest terms, Atheists have decided there is no God; Agnostics haven't decided yet. Perhaps there is a confidence in the atheists' certainty. Perhaps they develop friendships with those who reinforce their belief. On the other hand, perhaps agnostics are caught in between—expressing doubt among people of faith and the possibility of faith among those committed to disbelief. If that's the case, they might respond strongly to our survey question about feeling that “people are around you but not with you.”



FORGIVENESS, TRAUMA, AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH

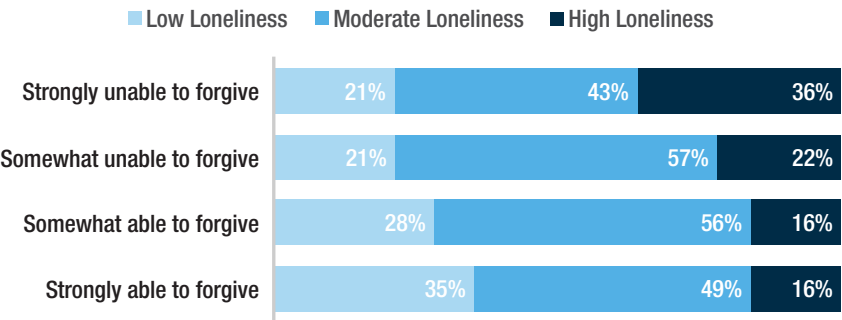
Any marriage counselor will tell you that the ability to forgive is an essential skill. It’s crucial in all relationships—with families, friends, churches, companies, and teams. Those who can’t forgive shut themselves off from mature relationships. Those who learn to forgive establish deep connections that last. At least that’s the theory. Does the research bear it out?

Our survey asks a tough question, calling for agreement or disagreement on this point: *I am able to sincerely forgive whatever someone else has done to me, regardless of whether they ever ask for forgiveness or not.* Half of all respondents agreed “somewhat.” Another fifth agreed “strongly,” leaving three-tenths on the disagreeing side (including 8% disagreeing “strongly”).

That small, strongly unforgiving group reported, far and away, the highest level of loneliness. Those who strongly affirmed their ability to forgive had the largest group reporting a low level of loneliness. The theory holds. Forgiving people are less lonely.

Loneliness Levels by Ability to Forgive

“I am able to sincerely forgive whatever someone else has done to me, regardless of whether they ever ask for forgiveness or not.”



Those who have personally experienced trauma report significantly more loneliness than those who haven't. As we previously reported (page 119ff.), 37 percent of Americans have personally experienced trauma. This group reports an average Loneliness Score of 13.2, compared to 11.2 for everyone else. Trauma has a number of lingering effects on the emotional health of those who have gone through it. These factors may affect their ability to form or fully enjoy deep friendships. One of the loneliness questions on our survey is: *How often do you feel that no one really knows you well?* It's understandable that a trauma sufferer would assume that no one fully understands what they've experienced.

But here's where the power of forgiveness becomes more than just a theory. For trauma sufferers who "agree strongly" that they are able



Forgiveness: Things to know and do when you want to forgive and heal

Forgiveness can be hard and confusing, especially when we are still in pain. This pamphlet from the Trauma Healing Institute takes a look at forgiveness as both a decision and an ongoing process, and shares some practical actions that can help those who want to forgive and heal.

DOWNLOAD NOW

traumahealinginstitute.org/forgiveness

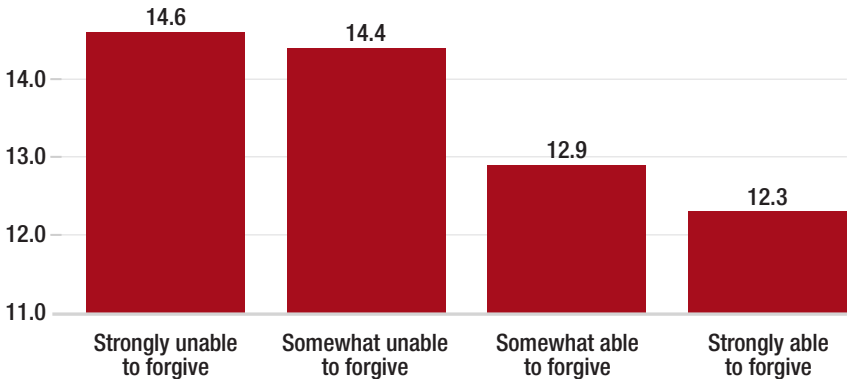
to forgive, the Loneliness Score comes down to 12.3 (not too far from the 11.9 overall average). For those who “agree somewhat” about forgiveness, the score comes down a bit, to 12.9. Forgiveness does not erase their problems, but it seems to ease them. On the other hand, for trauma sufferers who say they can’t forgive, the Loneliness Score soars to well above 14.

Loneliness Scores, by Forgiveness and Trauma

“I am able to sincerely forgive whatever someone else has done to me, regardless of whether they ever ask for forgiveness or not.”

Average Loneliness Score for all respondents: 11.9

Average Loneliness Score for all who have experienced trauma: 13.2



Base: Those who have experienced trauma personally

We can’t be sure about causation. Does an inability to forgive cause greater loneliness? Or do lonely people find it harder to forgive? Maybe both. Yet our statistics show a clear correlation between lower levels of loneliness and the ability to forgive. We see this connection especially among those who have suffered trauma.

This is why trauma healing ministries intentionally lead people on a journey toward forgiveness. Such ministries also employ small-group

discussion, promoting a sense of community in which people can forge friendships with others who understand their challenges.

We often report on statistical differences between Christians and non-Christians, but we're also interested in the development of a person's commitment to Christ. Last year we used a collection of eight statements describing this progression—from “not a Christian” to “starting to explore” to “Christ is the most important relationship in my life”—and we did some demographic analysis (*State of the Bible 2023*, page 31ff.).⁸

We return to this group of questions this year to explore whether there are certain points on a person's spiritual journey where they are most lonely.

It makes sense that we see the lowest levels of loneliness when the person says, “I have an intimate relationship with Christ.” But notice that the highest levels of loneliness appear when people are “starting to explore,” when they “have not yet made a decision.” These people are even lonelier than those who are “not interested.”

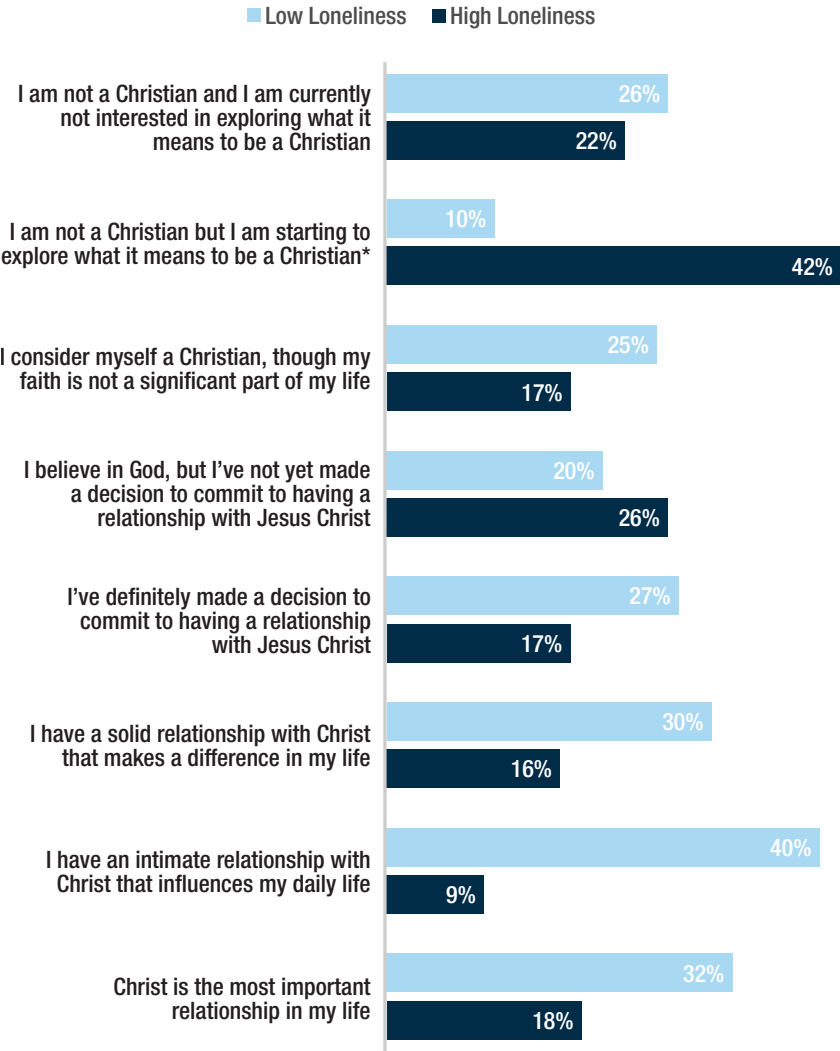
For many, starting out on a journey toward faith *increases* their loneliness. They may be exposing themselves to ridicule, questioning the beliefs of friends or family, starting a new way of life. All of this might tear them from their social fabric.

Churches often respond to seekers and questioners with good teaching, solid arguments for the Christian faith, or instilling basic habits

⁸ The eight responses on this question are © 2023 Originate Constructs. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

of discipleship. This is all good. Yet, based on this nugget of data, we shouldn't neglect their basic need for *friendship*, something they might especially need in this time of searching.

Loneliness Levels by Commitment to Christ



*The sample size on the second statement is quite low.

LONELINESS SCORES

Range: 5–20, with higher scores indicating more loneliness

Attending
church primarily
in person:

11.2



Attending
church primarily
online:

11.1



Attending church
both **in person**
and online,
about equally:

11.7



Never
attending
church:

12.5





THE MILITARY AND THEIR FAMILIES

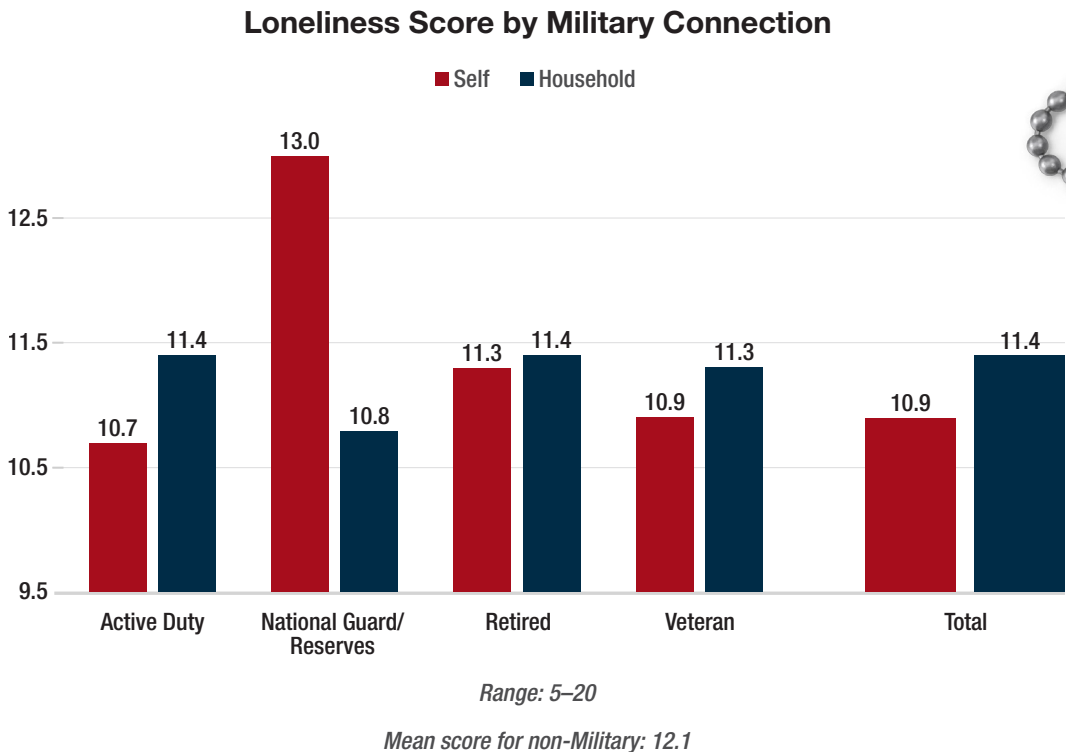
For two centuries now, American Bible Society has provided Bible content to meet the needs of the U.S. military and their families. In support of this ministry, the *State of the Bible* survey includes a question about military service. Respondents can indicate whether they are on active duty (1%), in the National Guard or Reserves (1%), retired (2%) or veterans (7%)—or in a household with anyone in those categories.

The entire group of those who are serving or have served, and those who live with them, comprises more than a quarter of Americans (28%). We wanted to know how they're doing, in terms of loneliness (the theme of this chapter), but also stress, anxiety, and of course Bible engagement.

LONELINESS

People in military households report less loneliness than everyone else. While the average score on our version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale is 11.9 overall, it's two ticks higher (12.1) for those not connected with the military. Those with military service themselves score significantly lower in loneliness (10.9) with those in their households not far behind (11.4).

While the sample sizes are small, we find the lowest loneliness score (10.7) among those currently on active duty and relatively high loneliness (13.0) among those in the National Guard or Reserves. Perhaps some find more camaraderie in regular service with others, but less when the interaction is more sporadic.

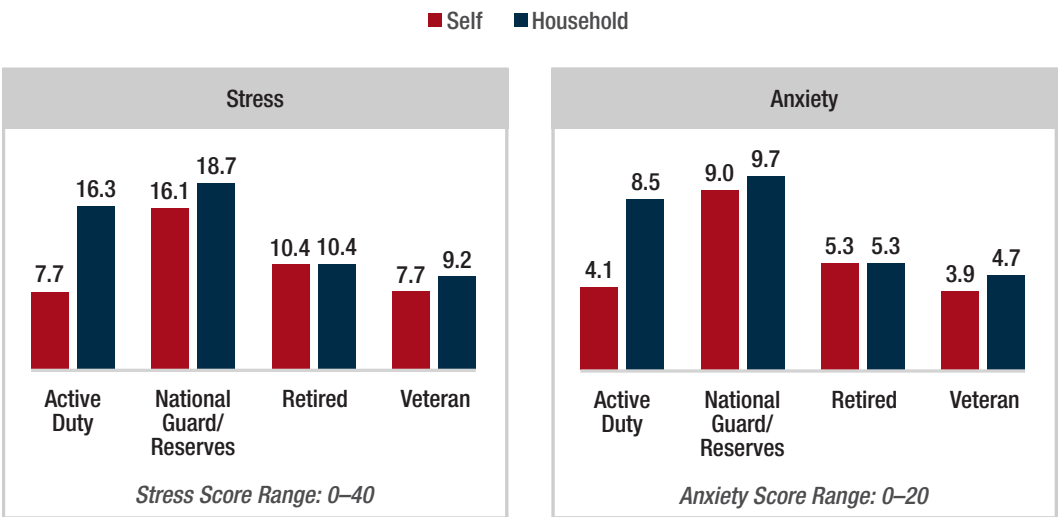


STRESS/ANXIETY

At every level except retirement, military households feel greater stress and anxiety than the servicepeople themselves. With those on active duty, the difference is greatest. For those serving, the stress and anxiety levels are very low, but their families more than make up for that.

Those serving in the National Guard or Reserves have the highest levels of stress and anxiety, along with their families.

Stress/Anxiety among the Military and their Households

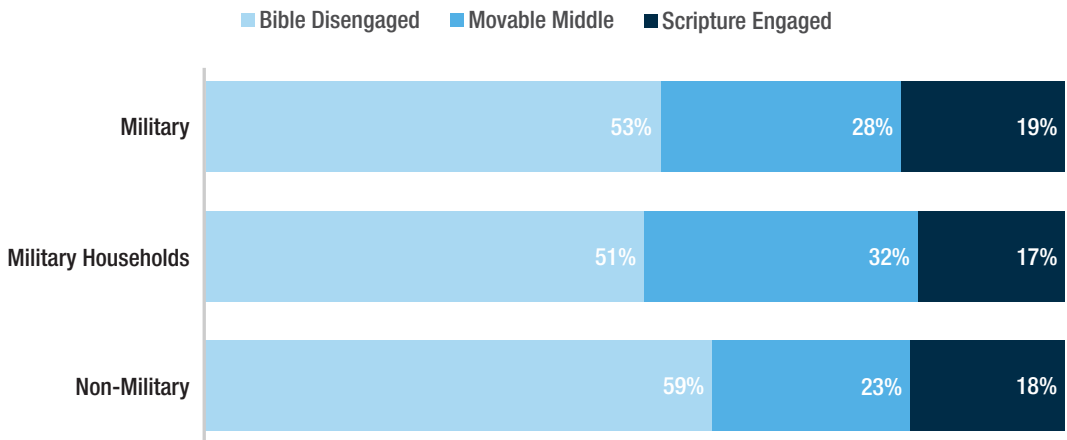


SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

Military members themselves (19%) are slightly more Scripture Engaged than the non-military public (18%). Their families are slightly less Scripture Engaged (17%), though they have far more in the Movable Middle (32%, compared with 23% non-military).

Scripture Engagement involves a desire to hear God’s voice in the Bible and an openness to its teachings, but also the self-discipline involved in developing a habit of regular Bible reading. So it makes sense that those who develop military discipline would also practice a spiritual discipline of Scripture reading. ■

Scripture Engagement among the Military and their Households



watch now!

THE LONELINESS EPIDEMIC

We interviewed **Susan Mettes**, author of *The Loneliness Epidemic*, to dig deeper on loneliness in the United States—and how the Bible and churches can make a difference. Mettes is also a military spouse and shares her personal experience with what can sometimes be a lonely lifestyle.



GIVING

“Half the world is on the wrong scent in the pursuit of happiness. They think it consists in having and getting, and in being served by others. It consists in giving and serving others.”¹

Scottish scholar-evangelist Henry Drummond preached that in the late 1800s, but it’s true in any century. Jesus calls us to love others, and that often takes the form of generosity, giving freely and creatively of our time, effort, and money.

This chapter focuses on financial giving to charity, including churches. How much do Americans donate? How does the giving of Scripture Engaged people compare with that of others? And what organizations, causes, or ministries receive those donations? Conducted in early 2024, our survey asks about people’s giving in 2023.

¹ Drummond, H. (1874). The greatest thing in the world. In *The World’s Great Sermons*, Vol 10. (1908). https://biblehub.com/library/various/the_worlds_great_sermons_volume_10/

PHILANTHROPY IN GENERAL

According to *Giving USA 2024*, total charitable giving in America went up 1.9 percent last year in terms of dollars donated, but this failed to keep up with the inflation rate of 4.1 percent.

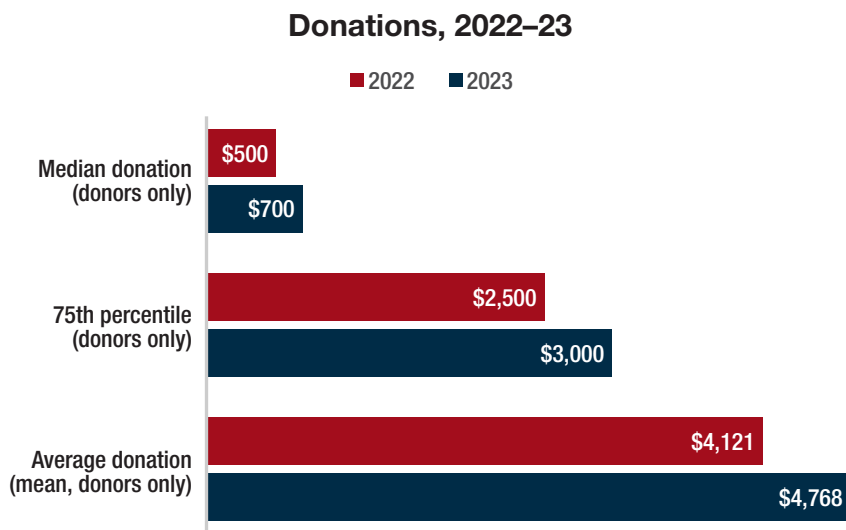
Individual households account for about two-thirds of the total amount donated, with the rest coming from foundations, corporations, and bequests.²

Our survey confirms that charitable contributions in 2023 were somewhat larger (in dollar amounts) than the previous year, but we also find that **fewer people were contributing** (68% of the public in 2022, dropping to 59%). This might stem from the mixed economic realities of 2023—more jobs and higher wages allowing some to give more, but high inflation creating tight household budgets and keeping others from giving at all.

Donors, 2022–23



² *Giving USA 2024: The Annual Report on Philanthropy for the Year 2023*. (2024, June 25). Lilly Family School of Philanthropy. Reported in https://philanthropy.indianapolis.iu.edu/news-events/news/_news/2024/giving-usa-us-charitable-giving-totaled-557.16-billion-in-2023.html



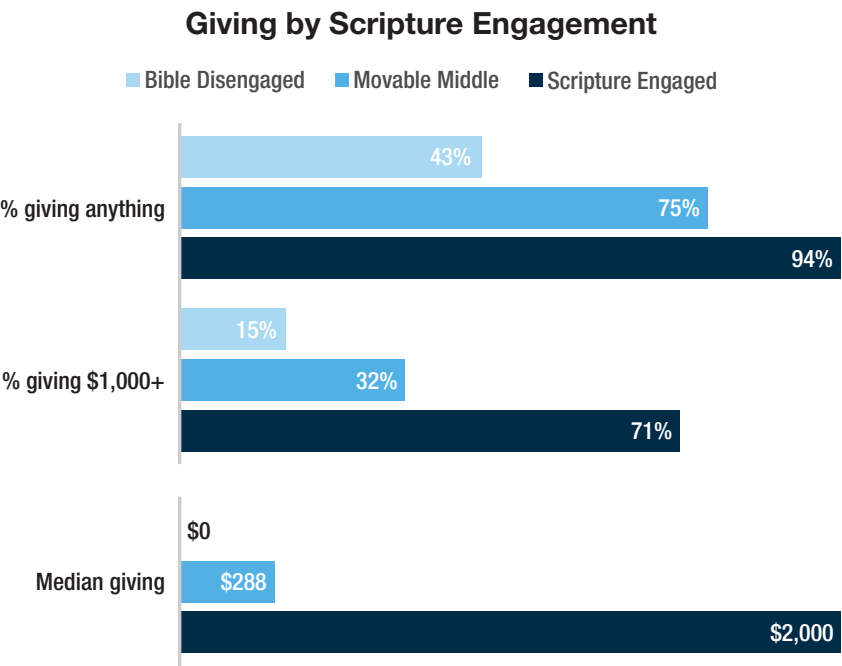
The *State of the Bible* survey relies on people to self-report the amount their household donated to charity. We understand they are estimating, which explains the round numbers. The *median* identifies the giver in the statistical middle. Among those who made any donations in 2023, exactly half say they gave \$700 or less, and half say \$700 or more.

The *75th percentile* is a variation on the median. One-quarter of givers say they donated \$3,000 or more, while three-quarters say \$3,000 or less. And, since some in that top quarter are giving tens of thousands, the mean donation rises to more than \$4,000, far higher than the median. By both measures, 2023 saw an increase in the amount given over the previous year.

Jesus called us to love others, and that often takes the form of generosity, giving freely and creatively of our time, effort, and money.

FAITH AND GIVING

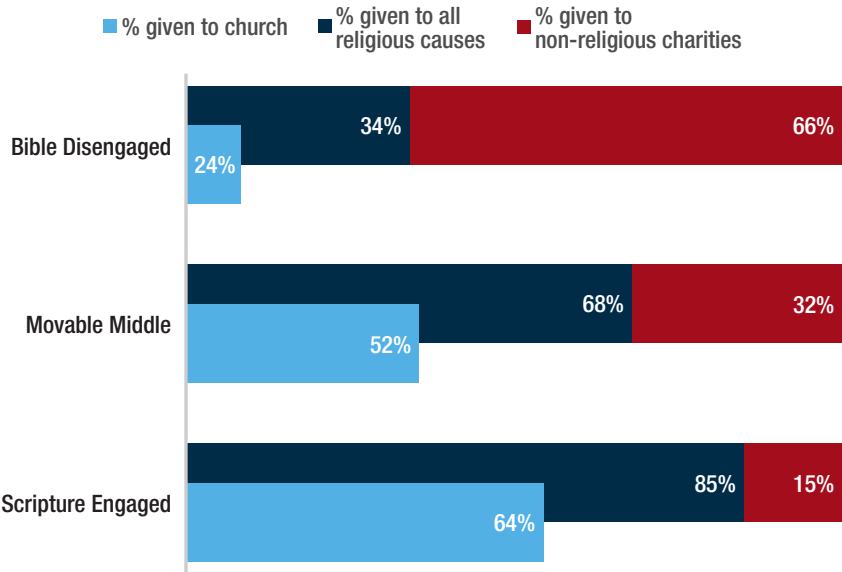
Scripture Engaged people are more likely to donate to charity, and they give more. One factor might be the self-discipline involved in both regular Bible reading and steady financial support of church or charity. And for many it goes far beyond obligation: they find in Scripture a passionate spirit of giving. Their interaction with our generous God yields greater generosity in their lives.



Charitable giving still occurs among those who engage less with Scripture, or not at all. In the Movable Middle, three quarters give *something* to church or charity, and nearly a third give at least \$1,000. But nearly all of the Scripture Engaged (94%) are donors, and seven in ten (71%) say they gave at least \$1,000 in the past year (about one in six say they gave at least \$10,000).

Median giving among the Scripture Engaged is seven times higher than that of the Movable Middle. The zero-dollar median for the Bible Disengaged doesn't mean no one gave; it just confirms that more than half (57%) gave nothing, and so the person in the middle of that pack is one of those zero-dollar givers.

Recipients of Giving, by Scripture Engagement

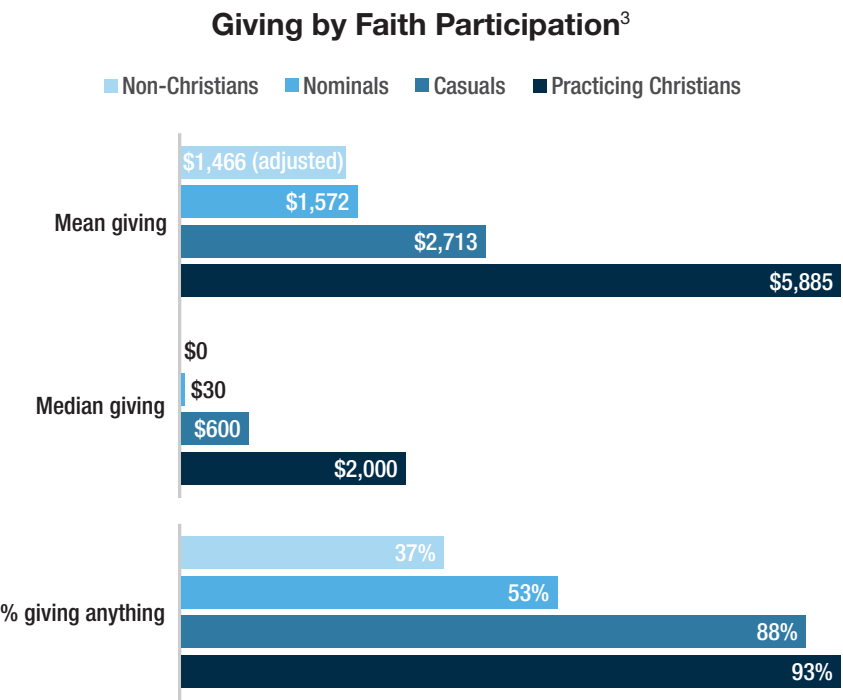


The Scripture Engaged focus most of their giving on their church (64%) or other religious causes (an additional 21%). And while those in the Movable Middle give considerably less, those who do give send more than half of their donations to their church (52%), and more the two-thirds (68%) to all religious causes (including their church giving). The Bible Disengaged, who give even less, send two-thirds of their contributions (66%) to non-religious charities. Still, nearly a quarter of them (24%) are connected enough to a church to donate to it.

PRACTICING, CASUAL, NOMINAL

In Chapter 7, we examined the qualities of three distinct subgroups of people identifying as Christians—Practicing, “Casuals,” and “Nominals.” For years now, we have applied the term “Practicing” to those who attend church at least once a month and “strongly agree” that their Christian faith is very important to them. “Nominals” don’t attend church monthly. “Casuals” have the attendance but not the importance.

How do these groups compare in their levels of giving to church or charity?

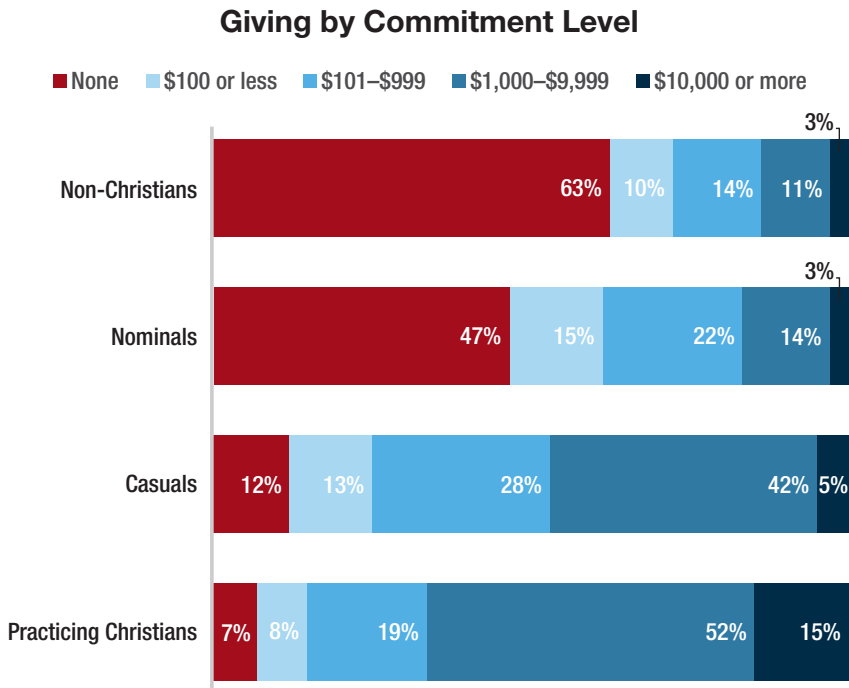


³ Mean numbers for the Non-Christian group were substantially skewed by one respondent who reported an extremely large donation. For comparison, we removed that one response from these statistics.

Practicing Christians more than double the average (mean) giving of Casuals and nearly quadruple that of Nominals. The differences in median giving are even greater. Just as we saw with the Scripture Engaged, nearly all Practicing Christians (93%) donate *something*.

Casuals are also highly likely (88%) to donate something to church or charity. It seems their commitment to church attendance is accompanied by a certain commitment to share their resources (and Casuals tend to have higher incomes). Nominals give far less, on average, and just over half of them (53%) give anything at all.

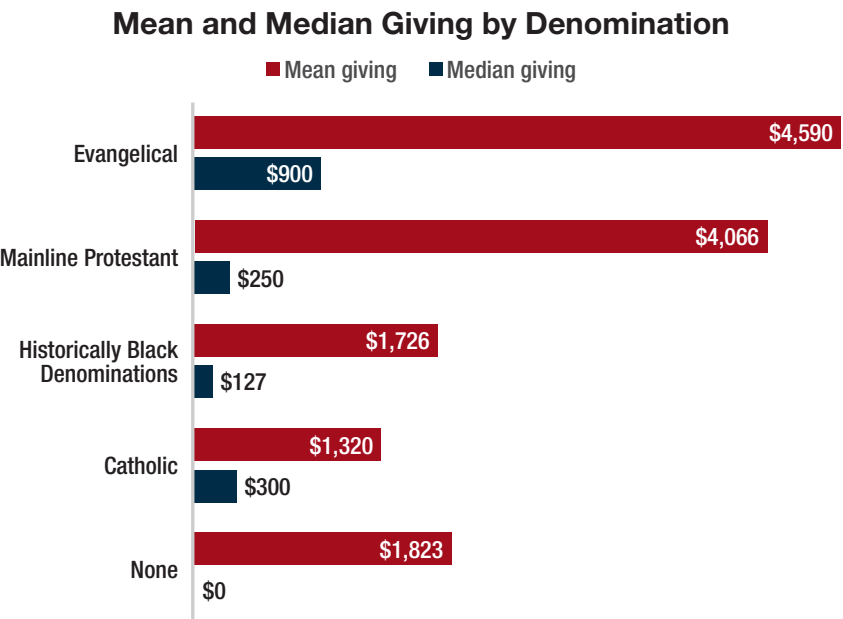
We recognize that many non-Christians donate to their religious communities, and many of them support non-religious charities. But, as a group, they donate the least.



DENOMINATIONS

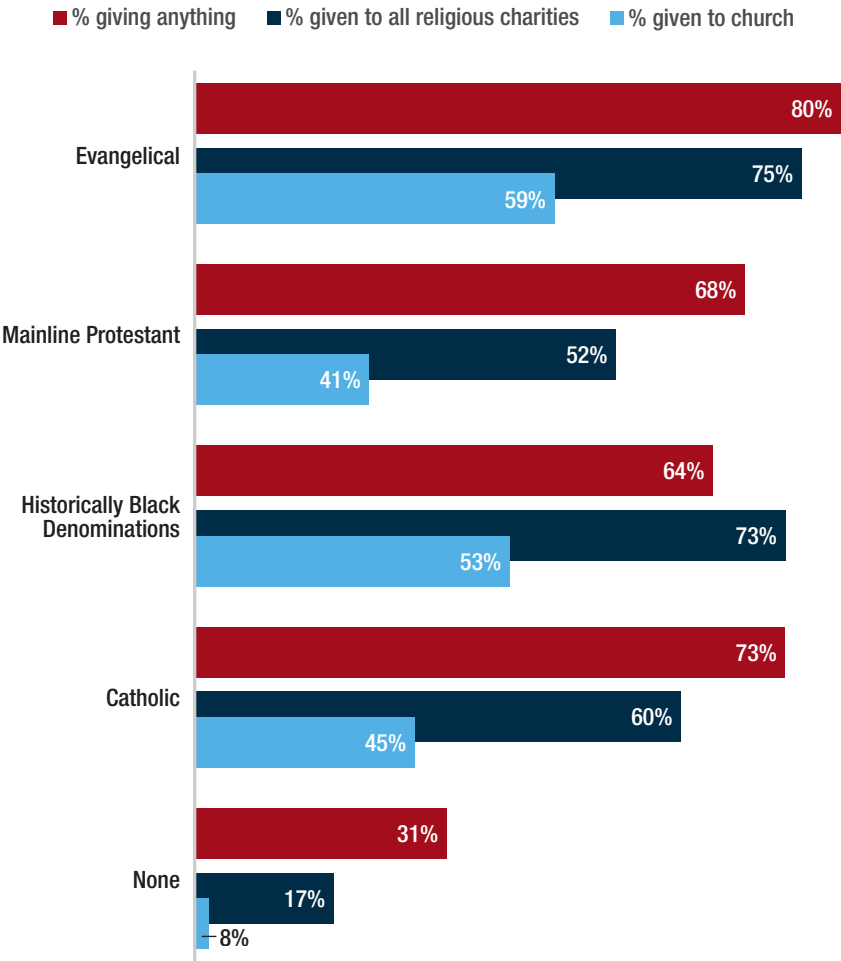
We now turn to the giving practices of those who identify with churches of various denominations. Every church group has a share of Casuals and Nominals, which are likely to bring down the levels of giving for that group. Also note that, rather than reporting on dozens of specific denominations, we've gathered them into a handful of denominational groups. How do these groups compare?

Evangelicals lead the way in average amount donated, percentage of people donating, and percentage given to their church or any religious charity. Only one-fifth of them (20%) do not give at all. And while most of their donations support religious causes (75%, with 59% going to their church), that leaves a quarter of their contributions to support non-religious charities. Two out of five evangelicals (40%) give all their charitable contributions to their church.



Mainline Protestants are most likely to support non-religious charities, with nearly half of their donations (48%) going there. Twenty percent of mainline Protestants give nothing to their church. Those in Historically Black Protestant churches give more than half (53%) of their donations to their church, as part of the nearly three-quarters they give to all religious causes.

Percentage of Giving by Denomination



PROPORTIONS

Jesus taught his disciples—and us—an important lesson one day as he watched wealthy people putting money in the collection box at the Temple. When a poor widow contributed two copper coins, Jesus said she “put in more than all the others. Everyone else gave what they didn’t need. But she is very poor and gave everything she had” (Luke 21:1–4 CEV).

Nonprofits naturally look first to the top-line dollars donated, but God looks at the heart. And giving *proportions* may be a better window there. Those blessed with great wealth often give from their surplus. It takes a deeper commitment to give sacrificially.

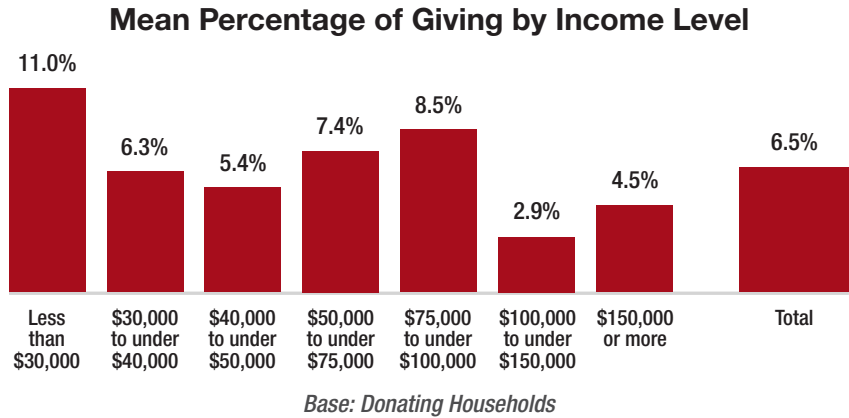
Our survey shows that donors at the lowest income levels give the greatest percentage of their income to church or charity.⁴ Giving exceeds 10 percent of income only at income levels under \$20,000 a year. As income increases to \$30k, \$40k, and \$50k, the percentage of giving decreases, dropping to little more than 5 percent.

But then, in that “middle income” region of \$50k to \$100k, the percentages rise, only to plummet to the lowest proportion of all (2.9%) in the \$100k–\$150k income range.

Keep in mind that this is all about the income and giving of *households*, not individuals. Remember also that this includes all charitable giving, not just Christians giving to Christian causes. And these are percentages of *donating* households. At the lowest income

⁴ While these figures reflect a proportion of income, they do not take accumulated wealth into account. Many older folks receive fixed incomes while living on (and giving from) their savings and retirement accounts.

levels, more than 60 percent of households do not donate anything at all. That’s reversed among the highest-earning households, where about 60 percent donate *something*. The stark differences we see here would flatten a bit if we included all the non-giving households, but the pattern would still stand. *Lower-earning households contribute at higher proportions.*



The chart shows us two “troughs” in the proportion of giving—just under \$50,000 and just under \$150,000. Every household has different priorities, of course, but we can imagine that people at these income levels might be striving to live a middle-class life or an upper-class life and stretching to afford the elements of that aspiration. As they see it, they would have no “disposable income” beyond those necessities, and so their ability to give to church or charity is limited.

Yet we must not neglect the spiritual aspect of giving. It’s certainly not a matter of disposable income. We think of Paul extolling the generosity of the Macedonian churches: “Although they were going through hard times and were very poor, they were glad to give generously. They gave as much as they could afford and even more, simply

WHO DONATES TO CHURCH OR CHARITY?

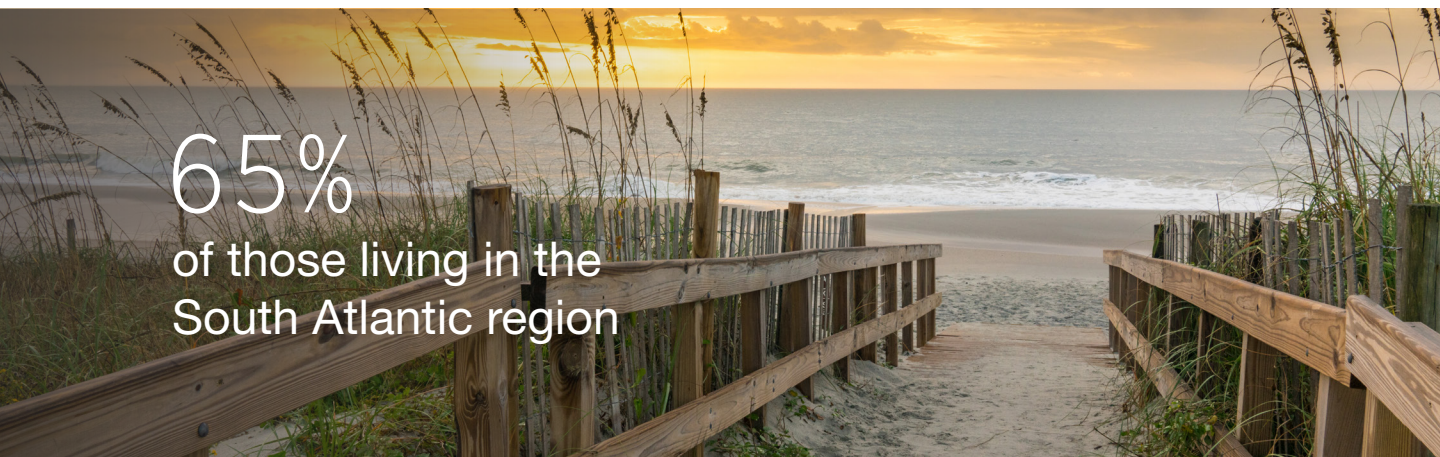
76%

of Boomers+
(age 60 and up)



65%

of those living in the
South Atlantic region



64%

of those living
in suburbs

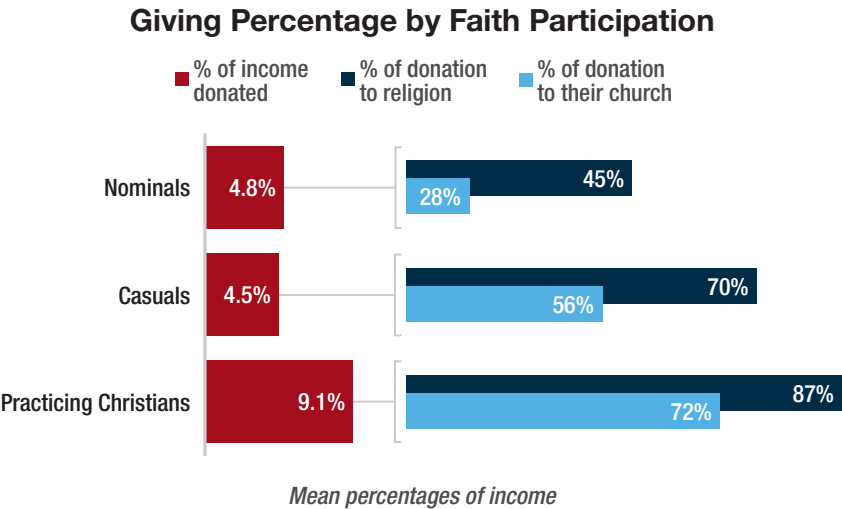


greatest proportion of givers among generations, regions, community types

because they wanted to. They even asked and begged us to let them have the joy of giving their money for God’s people. And they did more than we had hoped. They gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us, just as God wanted them to do” (2 Corinthians 8:2–5 CEV).

So, in terms of proportions, do Practicing Christians—who attend church and consider their faith very important—also practice generosity more than others? Yes. Practicing Christians contribute more than 9 percent of their income. Casuals and Nominals give at about half that level.

With their commitment to church attendance, it’s no surprise that Practicing Christians direct 87 percent of their donations to religious causes in general (including 72% to their church). While Casuals donate a lower percentage of their income than Nominals do, they are far more likely to support religious causes (70%) and specifically their church (56%).

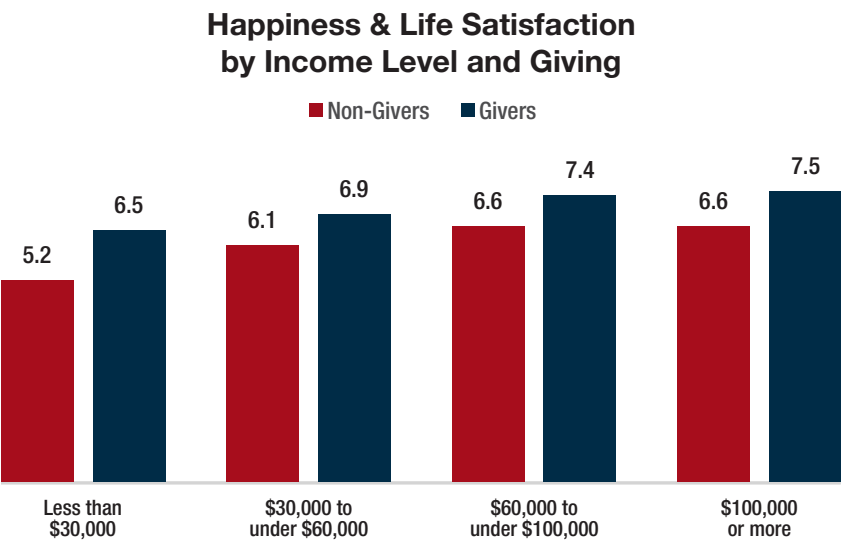


HAPPINESS AND SATISFACTION

“A generous person will prosper,” the Bible says; “whoever refreshes others will be refreshed” (Proverbs 11:25 NIV). We have statistics to bear that out.

In chapter 3, we used the Human Flourishing Index with its composite of self-reported scores in six different domains of life. Here we zero in on one of those domains: Happiness & Life Satisfaction, in which people scored 6.8 overall, on a 0 to 10 scale with 10 being best. People who made no donations to church or charity scored only 6.1. Givers, on the other hand, scored more than a full point higher, nearly 7.2. And at every level of giving, those who gave more had higher satisfaction scores.

Could that just reflect the wealth they had to begin with? Are richer people more satisfied with their lives? Maybe, but there’s more to that story.



We broke down the scores by four income quadrants and, as you might expect, the Happiness & Life Satisfaction score increases with greater household income. Yet in each quadrant, we see givers far outpacing non-givers. The lowest satisfaction score (5.2) comes among non-givers in the poorest households, making less than \$30,000 a year. But givers at that same income level have a satisfaction score of 6.5, rivaling non-givers making up to \$100,000.

You might say the joy of giving is better than getting a \$50,000 raise.

We really don't want to quantify it like that, because the joy of giving is worth infinitely more than any dollar amount. Still, the numbers are compelling.

One of the problems with surveys is that they quickly become all about numbers, rather than the people behind the numbers, rather than the hearts of those people, rather than the Spirit of God transforming and motivating those people. Ultimately, this chapter is not about money. It's about the miracle of generosity in people's hearts.

In closing, we offer another number. Among Bible Users—a group that includes anyone who connects with Scripture on their own at least three or four times a year—eight out of nine (88%) agree that interacting with the Bible makes them “more generous with their time, energy, and financial resources.”

In the Bible, we meet the God who loves us, and we learn to love others. We meet a God of grace and generosity, who shares those traits with us. That is why we at American Bible Society continue to promote, facilitate, and track Bible engagement and its powerful effects. ■

LOOKING BACK AND FORWARD

SUMMARY HIGHLIGHTS FROM 2024

CHAPTER 1: BIBLE USE IN AMERICA

In the last ten years the proportion of adult Bible Users in the United States has decreased from 53 percent to 38 percent. Since the pandemic the number of Scripture Engaged adults has decreased from 71 million to 47 million.

CHAPTER 2: FAITH AND TECHNOLOGY

Uncertainty among adults regarding Artificial Intelligence is high. Scripture Engaged adults are less likely to be optimistic than others about AI and its effects. They are more likely to agree with negative statements about AI and less likely to expect positive outcomes.

CHAPTER 3: HUMAN FLOURISHING

In general, older adults report higher levels of flourishing than younger adults—except for those who are younger and Scripture Engaged. Forgiveness is a key component for increased levels of Human Flourishing and Hope.

CHAPTER 4: LOVE IN ACTION

Most people agree on the importance of being a good neighbor—74 percent strongly or very strongly agree with this. The people receiving the least neighborly attention are those in prison.

CHAPTER 5: HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT CHURCH?

The church qualities that are most attractive to people are connected with relationships:

- Feelings of Community and Belonging (55%)
- Shared Spiritual Beliefs and Faith (53%)
- Meaning and Purpose (51%)

CHAPTER 6: GEN Z—HOPE & CHALLENGE

Gen Z is the generation most challenged in Scripture Engagement, Human Flourishing, Hope, and Stress. But the challenges appear to dissipate among those in Gen Z who are Scripture Engaged.

CHAPTER 7: NONES & NOMINALS

Nones—people who do not identify with any faith group—are not homogeneous. While many (40%) are hostile to the Bible, 25 percent are curious about the Bible and/or Jesus. Another 25 percent do not care either way. Ten percent of Nones report having made a commitment to Jesus that was meaningful in their lives.

CHAPTER 8: LONELINESS

Gen Z women have the greatest challenges with issues related to loneliness, with 36 percent in the High Loneliness group compared to 11 percent of Boomer+ men and women. A critical component for those with high loneliness is their stated inability to forgive. The lowest levels of loneliness are reported by people who have a strong commitment to Christ.

CHAPTER 9: GENEROSITY

In each income category, those who demonstrate generosity score higher in happiness and life satisfaction. As faith commitment increases, levels and proportions of generosity also increase sharply, from Non-Christians with a median giving level of \$0 and 37 percent giving something, to Practicing Christians with a median giving level of \$2,000, and 93 percent giving.

UPCOMING IN 2025

This year the *State of the Bible* research team identified some hopeful new trends in our data around Bible use in America. As we prepare for our January 2025 survey, we will continue tracking our traditional metrics. We will also ask new topical questions to provide church and ministry leaders with resources to help an unsettled nation connect (or reconnect) with the Bible.

In 2025, look for more in-depth interviews with people offering wisdom to connect research with ministry and Bible engagement. We'll bring fresh updates each month from April through December. Here are some of the stories we plan to release throughout the year.

2025

APR

The Bible in America Today. Our first chapter will track our core metrics about perceptions of the Bible, Scripture Engagement, and Bible use frequency and methods. We will build on our years of data on these topics to provide insight into key Bible trends. This chapter will also cover spiritual vitality in America.

2025

MAY

The Bible Around the World. The 2025 survey will feature a sampling of items used in a similar global study about the Bible. This chapter will compare responses from the U.S. with findings from the global study.

2025

JUN

Human Flourishing. In partnership with Human Flourishing investigators at Harvard University, we will continue our ongoing investigation of how the Bible, faith, and the church are connected to holistic well-being.

2025

JUL

Faith and Trust. In July, we'll be introducing a new theme, the degree of trust Americans have, both toward people in general and for key institutions in our society. How does Scripture engagement affect the way people express trust?

2025

AUG

Engagement with the Church. Church attendance and perceptions of the church as a social institution continue to shift. We'll stay on top of the data for Americans' formal and informal affiliations this month.

2025

SEP

Gen Z—In Search of Identity. In September, we'll extend our research on Gen Z by exploring the search for identity among young adults, asking specifically how being an active Bible user affects their understanding of who they are and their sense of purpose and direction.

2025

OCT

The Afterlife. Bible engagement is connected with increased hope. Some of that hope is for the life we anticipate after our time on Earth is finished. In October we will look at Americans' hope for the future and how this hope might support those who are struggling in the present.

2025

NOV

Loving God and Neighbor. We now have four years of data on the relationship between Scripture Engagement and loving our neighbors. This year we move beyond people's intentions and share what we are learning about the connections we have with friends and neighbors.

2025

DEC

Love in Action. The influence of the Bible extends beyond what people think about God or where they choose to worship. It also guides readers' interactions with others. In this chapter we look at how the Bible informs neighboring in America and report on our 2025 findings on generosity in America.

We look forward to serving with you in 2025. Stay connected with our team at **StateoftheBible.org**. ■



State of the Bible: USA 2024

The 14th Annual *State of the Bible* report features world-class research on Americans' views, beliefs, and interactions with the Bible. **This handy, full-color paperback dives deep on timely topics like the Bible and AI, Loneliness, Human Flourishing, and the Next Generation.** Church and ministry leaders will find actionable insights that help you serve more effectively. Order yours today at Bibles.com!

order your hard copy today



METHODOLOGY

In 2024, the *State of the Bible* research team at American Bible Society collaborated with NORC at the University of Chicago to design and field a nationally representative survey of American adults on topics related to the Bible, faith, and the church. The study was conducted in English and was presented both online and via telephone to NORC’s AmeriSpeak® Panel, using a 23-minute questionnaire. The study produced 2,506 responses from a representative sample of adults 18 and older within all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Data were collected from January 4–23, 2024. The margin of error for a sample of this size is ± 2.73 percent at the 95 percent confidence level.

QUALITY AT A GLANCE

Following are key survey quality indicators, excerpted from a report card prepared by NORC at the University of Chicago in compliance with the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Transparency Initiative. The full report is available upon request by emailing pr@americanbible.org.

SURVEY OVERVIEW

- **Study Population:** General Population Age 18+
- **Sample Units:** 9,997
- **Completed Units:** 2,506
- **Margin of Error:** $\pm 2.73\%$
- **Average Design Effect:** 1.95
- **Survey Field Period:** January 4–23, 2024
- **Median Duration:** 23 minutes

PANEL OUTCOMES

- **Weighted Household Recruitment Rate:**¹ 22.1%
- **Weighted Household Retention Rate:** 78.8%

SURVEY OUTCOMES

- **Survey Completion Rate:**² 25.1%
- **Weighted Cumulative Response Rate:**³ 4.4%

THE AMERISPEAK® PANEL

Funded and operated by NORC at the University of Chicago, AmeriSpeak® is a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. Randomly selected U.S. households are sampled using area probability and address-based sampling, with a known, non-zero probability of selection from the

- 1 The weighted AAPOR RR III for the AmeriSpeak panel recruitment corresponding to the recruitment cohorts sampled for the study. A recruited household is a household where at least one adult successfully completed the recruitment survey and joined the panel.
- 2 The percent of eligible sample members who completed the survey interview.
- 3 The overall survey response rate that accounts for survey outcomes in all response stages including panel recruitment rate, panel retention rate, and survey completion rate. It is weighted to account for the sample design and differential inclusion probabilities of sample members.

NORC National Sample Frame. These sampled households are then contacted by U.S. mail, telephone, and field interviewers (face to face).

The panel provides sample coverage of approximately 97 percent of the U.S. household population. Those excluded from the sample include people with PO Box addresses, some addresses not listed in the USPS Delivery Sequence File, and some newly constructed dwellings.

While most AmeriSpeak households participate in surveys by web, non-internet households can participate in AmeriSpeak surveys by telephone. Households without conventional internet access but having web access via smartphones are allowed to participate in AmeriSpeak surveys by web. AmeriSpeak panelists participate in NORC studies or studies conducted by NORC on behalf of governmental agencies, academic researchers, and media and commercial organizations.

For more information, email AmeriSpeak-BD@norc.org or visit AmeriSpeak.norc.org.

NORC at the University of Chicago is an independent research institution that delivers reliable data and rigorous analysis to guide critical programmatic, business, and policy decisions. Since 1941, NORC has conducted groundbreaking studies, created and applied innovative methods and tools, and advanced principles of scientific integrity and collaboration. Today, government, corporate, and nonprofit clients around the world partner with NORC to transform increasingly complex information into useful knowledge. Please visit www.norc.org for more information. ■



DEFINITIONS

The following definitions are used in this and other *State of the Bible* reports to group respondents by demographics, beliefs, and practices.

Bible Skeptic: Individuals who believe the Bible is just another book written by people that contains stories and advice.

Bible User: Individuals who read, listen to, or pray with the Bible on their own at least 3–4 times a year, outside of a church service or church event.

Correlation: In statistics, the strength of a linear relationship between two variables is often expressed in terms of a numerical value preceded by the italicized letter *r*. In this volume, correlations are only reported when they are statistically significant ($p < .05$) and when the correlation coefficient (*r*) is 0.2 or greater. Following are general rules of thumb for interpreting the qualitative magnitude of a correlation:

- Very Weak: ($r = 0.00—0.19$)
- Weak: ($r = 0.20—0.39$)
- Moderate: ($r = 0.40—0.59$)
- Strong: ($r = 0.60—0.79$)
- Very Strong: ($r = 0.80—1.00$)

Churched: Individuals who have attended a Christian church service in the past six months for any reason other than a special occasion, such as a wedding or funeral.

Division: The U.S. Census Bureau divides the United States into nine geographic divisions, which are groupings of multiple states. These divisions and their population characteristics are used to ensure that survey responses are demographically representative of the United States as a whole.

Generations:

- **Generation Z (1997–2012):** Ages 11 to 27 in 2024. This study includes adults (18–27) in Generation Z.
- **Millennials (1981–1996):** Ages 28 to 43 in 2024.
- **Generation X (1965–1980):** Ages 44 to 59 in 2024.
- **Baby Boomers (1946–1964):** Ages 60 to 78 in 2024.
- **Elders (1928–1945):** Ages 79 to 99 in 2023. This study considers any respondent 79 years old or older to be in the Elders generation. Due to sampling limitations for people of this age, this small group is combined with the Baby Boomer group and listed in the report as **Boomers+**.

Human Flourishing Index: While health care often focuses on pathology—what’s wrong—this is an effort to see health in a

positive way. Do people feel happy, healthy, supported by friends, and so on? The Human Flourishing Index emerged at Harvard University's T. H. Chan School of Public Health in 2017.¹ It has been used (with permission) in the *State of the Bible* since 2020. Researchers focus on six areas of the human experience ("domains"), asking two questions about each.

1. Happiness & Life Satisfaction
2. Mental & Physical Health
3. Meaning & Purpose
4. Character & Virtue
5. Close Social Relationships
6. Financial & Material Stability

The results yield two composite scores on a 0 to 10 scale: the Human Flourishing Index (which leaves out the financial domain) and the Secure Flourishing Index (which includes it).

Loneliness: We measure loneliness using five items from the UCLA Loneliness Scale.²

- How often do you feel alone?
- How often do you feel that you are no longer close to anyone?
- How often do you feel left out?
- How often do you feel that no one really knows you well?
- How often do you feel that people are around you but not with you?

1 VanderWeele, T. J. (2017). On the promotion of human flourishing. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114(31), 8148–56.

2 Russell, D. (1996). UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3): Reliability, validity, and factor structure. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 66, 20–40.

Loneliness scores range from 5–20. We have grouped them into three levels.

- Low: 5–9
- Moderate: 10–15
- High: 16–20

No faith/Other faith: Individuals who do not consider themselves Christian (including atheists, agnostics, and other faiths); Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses are also included, even if they describe themselves as Christian.

Non-Christian: Individuals who consider themselves to be anything other than Christians. This includes those of other faiths (see above) as well as the **Nones**, who do not identify with any religion at all.

Non-Practicing Christian: Self-identified Christians who are not Practicing Christians as defined below. Two subsets of this group are **Nominals**, who identify as Christians but do not attend church at least monthly, and **Casuals**, who identify and attend but do not “strongly agree” that their faith is very important in their lives.

Practicing Christian: Individuals who meet all three of the following criteria:

- Self-identify as Christian, adhering to a historically biblical tradition
- Attend a religious service at least once a month
- Say their faith is very important in their lives

Pathway of Scripture Engagement: American Bible Society’s theory of change: a ten-step logic model describing how individuals with access to the Bible receive it, interact with it, and ultimately are changed by it. See *Appendix 3: Pathway of Scripture Engagement* for further detail.

Region: The U.S. Census Bureau divides the United States into four geographic regions, which are groupings of multiple divisions. These regions and their population characteristics are used to ensure that survey responses are demographically representative of the United States as a whole.

Scripture engaged: Anyone who scores 100 or higher on the Scripture Engagement Scale.

Scripture unengaged: Anyone who scores below 100 on the Scripture Engagement Scale.

Scripture Engagement Scale: Based on responses to 14 survey items about the frequency of Bible use and the impact and centrality its message, this scale provides a high-fidelity, numerical measure of holistic Scripture engagement among U.S. Bible Users. The Scripture Engagement Scale is centered on 100, meaning that approximately one half of U.S. Bible Users score above 100, and the other half score below 100. The scale’s standard deviation is 15.

Scripture Engagement Segments (Full): The Scripture engagement of individuals and groups can be described using the following five segments based on Scripture Engagement Scale scores.

1. **Bible Centered:** Score = 115 or higher.
2. **Bible Engaged:** Score = 100–114.
3. **Bible Friendly:** Score = 85–99.
4. **Bible Neutral:** Score = 70–84.
5. **Bible Disengaged:** Score = Less than 70.

Scripture Engagement Segments (Simplified): The Scripture engagement of individuals and groups can also be described using the following three segments based on Scripture Engagement Scale scores.

1. **Scripture Engaged:** Score = 100 or higher. Includes both the Bible Centered and the Bible Engaged.
2. **Movable Middle:** Score = 70–99. Includes both the Bible Friendly and Bible Neutral categories.
3. **Bible Disengaged:** Score = Less than 70. Same as Bible Disengaged in the Full Scripture Engagement segmentation.

Self-Identified Religion: Respondents are asked, “do you consider yourself any of the following religious faiths?” Their response is their self-identified religion, regardless of their current involvement with any religious organization.

Spiritual Vitality Gauge (svg): From answers to nine concise questions focusing on beliefs, spiritual practices, and faith in action, the svg yields a score between 0 and 100 as a reliable measure of spiritual health. The svg is used by permission of Renovo.

Trauma Impact: Respondents who have experienced at least one traumatic event are asked, “Does the trauma you experienced or witnessed still affect you today? *Select one.*” Response options are:

- Always
- Most of the time
- About half the time
- Sometimes
- Never

Trauma Incidence: Respondents are asked, “Have you ever experienced physical, psychological, or emotional trauma? That is, extreme violence, abuse, or a near-death experience that produces a response of intense fear, helplessness, or horror? *Check all that apply.*” Response options are:

- You personally experienced a trauma
- You witnessed a trauma involving an immediate family member
- You witnessed a trauma involving someone other than a family member
- None of these apply to me

Respondents who select *any option except* “none of these apply to me” are counted as having experienced trauma.

Trauma Severity: Respondents who experience the impact of trauma at least “sometimes” are asked, “Please rate the **severity** of the trauma effects you are experiencing on the scale below.” The numerical response scale has a range of 1–10 with the following qualitative anchors:

- 0 = None
- 5 = Moderate
- 10 = Overwhelming

Unchurched: Individuals who have not attended a Christian church service in the past six months for any reason other than a special occasion, such as a wedding or funeral.



PATHWAY OF SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

The Pathway of Scripture Engagement (PSE) is American Bible Society's theory of change: a ten-step logic model describing how individuals with access to the Bible receive it, interact with it, and ultimately are changed by it. The PSE is the foundation of our empirical research, which shows that consistent interaction with the Bible shapes people's choices and transforms their relationships with God, self, and others.

PURPOSE OF THE PATHWAY

The PSE marks out a set of waypoints along a journey of spiritual formation. When the Bible is made available through translation and distribution, pilgrims may enter the Pathway and begin their journey toward reconciliation with God and others.

The journey along the Pathway brings its own benefits, including wisdom for daily living, increased awareness of God's presence and voice, and generosity of spirit and action. However, what makes the Pathway uniquely valuable is its destination: spiritual health and vitality marked by deeply rooted love for God and healthy relationships with others, particularly those in the community of faith.

The PSE is like a ladder with ten rungs. Users might climb one rung at a time or even skip a rung. They may climb slowly or quickly. It's even possible to climb part of the way up the ladder and then retreat a few steps. As users climb the ladder, their perspective changes with altitude and as distant objects draw nearer. Still, the most important thing about a ladder is that it's leaning against the right building. Similarly, the most important thing about Scripture Engagement is that it is leaning against the building of holistic spiritual vitality marked by love for God and others. According to Jesus, loving God and others are the two great commandments for all his followers (Matthew 22:37–39).

The Pathway of Scripture Engagement



What is Scripture Engagement?

Scripture engagement is consistent interaction with the Bible that shapes people's choices and transforms their relationships with God, self, and others.

- **External Milestone**
- **Internal Milestone**

PROGRESS ALONG THE PATHWAY

The Pathway of Scripture Engagement is also like an old-school map that marks out a journey from beginning to end. The PSE is for anyone who has access to the Bible in their own language because the Bible is the primary vehicle that carries people toward spiritual health.

The PSE shows the landscape and key waypoints, but it doesn't do two important things. First, it doesn't have a YOU ARE HERE marker. Second, it doesn't measure progress toward spiritual vitality. For those tasks, we use the Scripture Engagement Survey to locate an individual on the Scripture Engagement Scale (SES).

The SES is designed to plot an individual's current location on the Pathway and—with repeated measurement—their progress (growth) toward spiritual health. Using a brief survey, individuals and groups can be located on the Pathway¹ and matched to transformative, Bible-based ministry interventions that catalyze movement toward spiritual health.

By translating the Pathway's basic map into an accurate GPS, the Scripture Engagement Scale can guide individuals to the next step in their spiritual journey. It can also help ministry leaders design and deploy discipleship tools that are appropriate to people at every stage of the spiritual formation journey.

¹ Based on our research, a score of 100 on the Scripture Engagement Scale corresponds approximately to step 6 on the Pathway of Scripture Engagement.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Since 2011, American Bible Society has sponsored the annual *State of the Bible* research study in an effort to listen carefully to America's voice regarding the Bible, faith, and the church. Today, the science of listening is a main focus of the Ministry Intelligence team at American Bible Society.

This book is the effort of a small army of gifted individuals who combine their skills and perspectives to produce what you hold in your hand or view on your screen. In this thirteenth consecutive year of the *State of the Bible*, we pause to express our gratitude to those who have contributed most to this work.

The *State of the Bible* research team is led by American Bible Society's Chief Innovation Officer, Dr. John Plake, who joined the team for the 2018 study. Since that time, Dr. Plake has helped to expand American Bible Society's research capabilities, making it possible for us to lead the *State of the Bible* research and produce this report. Dr. Plake serves as the editor-in-chief of this report and oversees the ongoing *State of the Bible* series.

Dr. Jeff Fulks serves as Senior Director of Ministry Insights, where he brings deep insight from the world of behavioral science research and serves as the lead analyst for the *State of the Bible* research. He skillfully incorporates research-proven measures into our work, and leverages years of research experience to uncover the story behind the numbers.

Angel Mann and Sandra Siggins serve as Research and Evaluation Managers, performing countless statistical tests and preparing reams of data for our writing and data visualization specialists. They also help keep the reporting organized.

Randy Petersen of Petersen Creative Enterprises serves as *State of the Bible's* managing editor and lead writer. Randy served for nearly four years as American Bible Society's Director of Scripture Engagement Content. During his tenure at ABS, Randy helped the team write about research and data. He has a gift for parsimony: bringing clarity to complexity without sacrificing truth.

Josh Thomassen of Thomassen Collective handles data visualizations, graphic design, and typesetting. He joined the *State of the Bible* team in 2023 and is bringing a fresh look to our data visualizations and graphics.

Peter Edman is our editorial and quality assurance lead, helping all of us produce a more consistent, high-quality report. We also have regular input from Elisabeth Trefsgar and Bran Van Deinse in assuring sensitivity to the many SOTB audiences. Finally, Eric Elinow works behind the scenes, helping ensure that our website connects you to the most recent version of our report. ■

STATE OF THE BIBLE USA 2024

In 2011, American Bible Society launched a landmark annual study of the *State of the Bible* in America. This is our fourteenth consecutive year of listening and learning how *consistent interaction with the Bible shapes people's choices and transforms their relationships*.

In the 2024 report, the *State of the Bible* research team tracked America's relationship with the Bible, faith, and the church and demonstrating the integration of spiritual foundations to the well-being of individuals and communities. Here are a few highlights:

1. Year after year we have learned when people engage deeply with the Bible, their lives are better, their relationships are better, and they flourish.
2. Bible Use—whether daily, weekly, or 3–4 times a year—is down slightly from last year. But we call out reasons for hope for church leaders.
3. The proportion of people attending church in-person has increased remarkably each of the last three years and is now at 75 percent. Those who attend primarily online are now at 21 percent. We will profile those changes and highlight some surprising trends.
4. Almost half of U.S. adults have experienced grief or loss in the past year, which often result in anxiety and trauma. The groups most at risk are the Gen Z adults and Millennials. We devote a special chapter to the challenges of younger adults and explore how the Bible helps us heal from the effects of loss and trauma.

New chapters released each month from April through December dig deeper with actionable insights for your ministry.



Insights