

Income and education affect church shopping

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Highly educated and affluent Americans are more likely than others to search for a new church—and chances are good they will do their homework before joining a different congregation, according to findings from Pew Research Center.

[Recent Pew Research Center](#) analysis of survey data collected in 2015 reveals education and income levels relate directly to whether Americans look for a new religious congregation and how they look for another place to worship.

‘Where people look, think and act like me’

To a large degree, income and education not only affect whether Americans shop around for a place to worship, but also tend to define the type of church they select, a Baylor University sociologist noted.

“People choose churches where they feel comfortable. ... Often, that means a church where people look, think and act like me,” said Kevin Dougherty, associate professor of sociology at Baylor.

While many churches continue to be segregated by race and ethnicity, Dougherty noted, many worshippers today also gravitate toward congregations that are largely homogenous in terms of income, education and political affiliation.

About half (49 percent) of American adults have [searched for a new church](#)

[at some point](#). However, the Pew researchers' analysis shows a sharp contrast between the 59 percent of college-educated Americans who have sought a new church and the 38 percent with a high school education or less who have looked for a new congregation.

Doing their homework

Among those Americans who have looked for a new place to worship, 44 percent of those with an annual family income of \$75,000 or more checked online to gain information about a congregation. Among those with family income in the \$30,000 to \$74,999 range, 37 percent did online research. Fewer than three in 10 (28 percent) of Americans with family income less than \$30,000 checked the Internet for more information about a church.



The percentage of Americans who talked with friends or colleagues about a particular congregation to learn more also relates to family income—71 percent for those with family income of \$75,000 or more, 67 percent for those in the \$30,000 to \$74,999 range and 65 percent with family income of \$30,000 or less.

“The Pew findings look consistent with what I know of the literature and follow an accepted logic; that is, people with higher socio-economic status have more time, money and resources to invest in thinking deeply about their life choices—because they can,” said Paul Froese, professor of sociology and research fellow for Baylor’s Institute for Studies of Religion.

The link to education is even stronger. Researchers discovered 71 percent of Americans who graduated from college talked to church members before

choosing a new place to worship, compared to 63 percent of those with a high school education or less.

“This goes against the argument that higher educated individuals are leaving the church. Those with higher education and higher income have not necessarily given up on organized religion. They are just making different choices,” Dougherty said. Factors other than denominational affiliation tend to enter into the selection, unlike previous generations, he noted.

Location and worship style are key factors that determine where college graduates choose to worship, with 77 percent saying those matters played an important role in their choice, Pew researchers discovered.

Fewer than two-thirds (64 percent) of Americans with a high school education or less said location was a major consideration when they chose a church, while 71 percent said worship style was important.

Religious education for children ranked higher among those with a high school education or less (62 percent) than among college graduates (51 percent) as a reason for choosing a church.

Eager to serve? Maybe not.

Neither a majority of Americans with a high school education or less or those with college degrees cited opportunities to volunteer as a major factor in selecting a church, but opportunities to serve ranked higher among those with less formal education (46 percent) than among those with a college degree (39 percent).

Three-fourths of Americans with family income of \$75,000 or more cited location as a major factor in choosing a church, compared to 67 percent of those with an income less than \$30,000.

A majority of Americans with family income less than \$30,000 (55 percent) said having friends of family in a congregation played an important role in selecting a church, compared to 47 percent of those with a family income of \$75,000 or more.

Almost half of Americans with family income less than \$30,000 (48 percent) named opportunities to volunteer as a key factor in choosing a church, compared to 39 percent of those with a family income of \$75,000 or more.

Location, location, location

Generally, Americans are much more willing to travel significant distances to attend a place of worship than people in other countries, Dougherty noted.



Kevin Dougherty

“To a large degree, that is a reflection of the free market approach in religion here in the United States, where there’s a plethora of congregational choices,” he said.

Nearly half (47 percent) of churchgoing Americans live six minutes to 15

minutes from their place of worship, and nearly one-fourth (23 percent) travel 16 minutes to 30 minutes to church, Dougherty noted, reporting findings from the [Baylor Religion Survey](#).

Not surprisingly, suburban mega-churches tend to attract families in higher socio-economic groups because they have a wide selection of high-quality programs to offer, and those families have the time and resources to drive a significant distance to a church that provides what they want, Dougherty said.

At the same time, race and ethnicity may increase the distance worshippers are willing to travel, while income tends to limit the distance, he observed. For instance, among African-American Protestants, 40 percent report commuting 16 to 30 minutes, and 19 percent say they drive more than 30 minutes to attend a place of worship.

“A significant number of religious commuters drive from the suburbs and exurbs to attend the historic family church,” Dougherty said.

However, people with limited income and time constraints are least able to drive a significant distance to worship, he observed.

“Certainly, people with higher income have higher mobility,” Dougherty said. “On the other hand, someone who has to report to work on Sunday afternoon at a convenience store can’t afford to drive 45 minutes and then go out to eat afterward. It’s just not practical.”