

Nearly half in U.S. watched church online during pandemic

October 18, 2021

NASHVILLE, Tenn.—Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, online worship services were a novel concept for many churches. In the almost two years since, however, churches have adapted and reached new people with the adoption of digital streaming.

According to a new [Lifeway Research study](#), 45 percent of Americans say they have watched a Christian church service online during the COVID-19 pandemic, including some who say they don't normally physically attend.

Slightly more than half (52 percent) say they have not watched a church service during the pandemic, most of whom say they don't normally attend church in person either.

"The distance to one's nearest church has changed almost overnight," said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research. "A form of communication that was not even used by most churches before the pandemic has now reached almost half of Americans."

Churches pivoted to online options early in pandemic

In a [previous Lifeway Research study](#) of Protestant pastors conducted prior to the spread of COVID-19, 41 percent said they didn't regularly livestream any portion of their church service or post the sermon online later. At the time of the survey, only around 1 in 4 (27 percent) said they livestreamed either the entire service or just the sermon.

As the coronavirus began to spread and social distancing guidelines emerged, the vast majority of churches quickly provided digital options. By [March 2020](#), Lifeway Research found 92 percent of Protestant pastors said they provided some type of video sermons or worship services online. That climbed to [97 percent in April 2020](#).

In a [Lifeway Research study from early 2021](#), 85 percent of Protestant churchgoers said their congregation offered livestreamed worship services, and 76 percent said their church posted a video of the worship service to watch later.



Additionally, [53 percent of churchgoers](#) said they watched online worship services at their church more in 2020 than in 2019, while 21 percent said they watched more online services at a different church in 2020.

Those who had not attended connected to church online

Throughout the pandemic, Lifeway Research found pastors reporting new people who had previously not attended their church in the past attended or connected online. The latest study seems to bear that out.

When asked, “Have you watched a Christian church service online during the COVID pandemic?” 45 percent say they have, including 30 percent who normally attend church in person and 15 percent who normally do not attend in person.

“It’s not surprising to see churchgoers using online options to view a church service, but there are also those who have not been church

attendees who have at least checked out a church service during the pandemic,” McConnell said.

Americans with evangelical beliefs are three times as likely as other Americans to say they watched church services online during the pandemic and normally attend church in person (64 percent to 20 percent).

Some of those most likely to say they watched church services online during the pandemic but don’t normally attend church in person include young adults ages 18-34 (18 percent) and African Americans (22 percent).

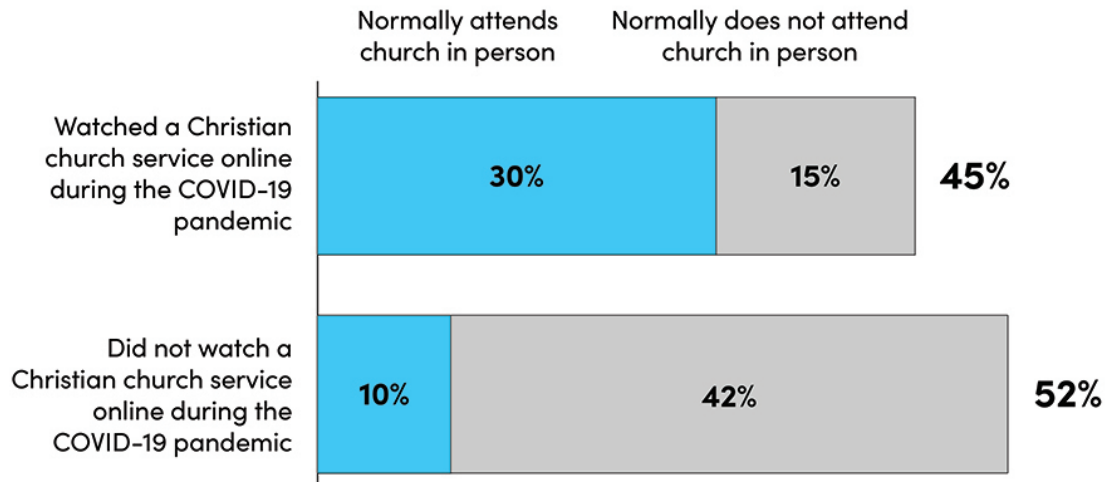
Churches were still not able to reach most Americans with the expansion of digital offerings during the pandemic, however, as 52 percent say they have not watched services online during the pandemic.

Most of those (42 percent) say they haven’t watched online and normally do not attend church in person. Another 1 in 10 Americans (10 percent) say they do normally attend church in person but have not watched a church service online during the pandemic.

“Church participation is in flux,” McConnell said. “Some who were regular, in-person churchgoers before COVID-19 only view online services today, others have never tuned in online despite the pandemic, and still others use both at different times. This shift has created both challenges and opportunities for pastors and church leaders.”

Almost half of Americans watched a church service online during the pandemic

Among U.S. adults



Note: 3% say not sure

Lifewayresearch

Source: Lifeway Research survey of 1,005 Americans conducted Sept. 3-14, 2021

The online survey of 1,005 Americans was conducted Sept. 3-14, using a national pre-recruited panel. Analysts used quotas and slight weights to balance gender, age, region, ethnicity, education and religion to reflect the population more accurately. The completed sample of 1,005 surveys provides 95 percent confidence that the sampling error from the panel does not exceed plus or minus 3.3 percent. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.