

Research shows mixed picture of American Christianity

October 23, 2019

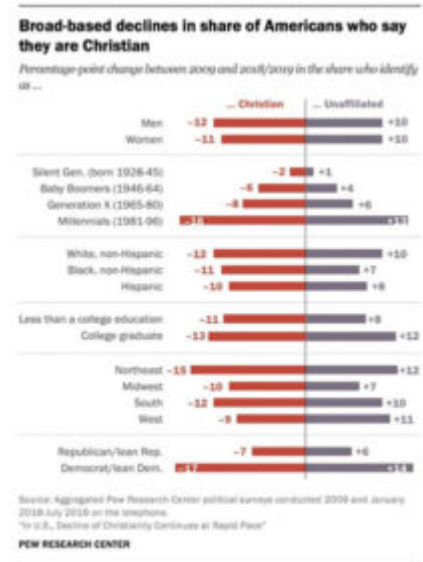
The percentage of Americans who identify as Christian has dropped significantly in recent years and overall worship attendance by Americans declined, but worship service attendance among Christians remained steady, a new study reported.

Meanwhile, giving increased in about half of the nation's houses of worship, another study showed.

Two-thirds of Americans call themselves Christians

[Pew Research Center](#) surveys completed in 2018 and 2019 revealed about two-thirds (65 percent) of American adults describe themselves as Christian. In 2009, more than three-fourths (77 percent) identified as Christians.

Pew released its report, “In U.S. Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” on Oct. 17.



In the most recent surveys, 43 percent describe themselves as Protestant and 20 percent identified as Catholic, compared to 51 percent and 23 percent, respectively, a decade ago.

The share of the adult American population that identifies as religiously “unaffiliated” grew from 17 percent in 2009 to 26 percent in the recent surveys. Of that group, 4 percent now identify as atheist, compared to 2 percent in 2009; 5 percent call themselves agnostic, compared to 3 percent in 2009; and 17 percent say they are “nothing in particular,” compared to 12 percent a decade ago.

Pew Research reported growth in the latter group, often identified as “nones,” cut across multiple demographic groups—Anglos, Hispanics and African Americans; men and women—and occurred in all regions of the United States.

The share of adherents to non-Christian faiths rose slightly, from 5 percent in 2009 to 7 percent in the most recent surveys.

Number of Christians in U.S. down

Pew Research analysts noted the data suggests the actual number of adult American Christians declined in the last decade, as well as their share of the U.S. adult population. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated 233 million adults in the nation in 2009. If 77 percent of the population identified as Christian, that means there were about 178 million Christian adults in the United States a decade ago.

Today, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates there are 256 million American adults. If 65 percent identify as Christian, that means the total number of adult American Christians is about 167 million—a drop of about 11 million.

Age factors into that decline. Today, 84 percent of American adults born between 1928 and 1945 identify as Christian. More than three-fourths—76 percent—of Baby Boomers (born 1946 to 1964) and two-thirds—67 percent—of Generation X (born 1965 to 1980) identify as Christian.

In comparison, less than half—49 percent—of Millennials (born 1981 to 1996) identify as Christian.

Other analysis by Pew Research revealed the overall share of Americans who attend religious services at least once or twice a month dropped 7 percentage points in the last decade.

However, Americans who describe themselves as Christian report they regularly attend religious worship services at about the same rate today (62 percent) as they did in 2009 (63 percent).

Currently, 44 percent say they attend services at least weekly, and 18 percent report attending once or twice a month. In 2009, 46 percent reported attending services at least weekly, while 17 percent said they attended once or twice a month.

Giving increases in about half of churches

Furthermore, a study released by the [Lake Institute on Faith & Giving](#) revealed growth in a significant share of congregations—both in the number of participating adults and in the amount of money the churches receive.

The [National Study of Congregations' Economic Practices](#) showed 39 percent of congregations reported they had a greater number of participants than three years before, and 48 percent of the congregations said they received more money than three years earlier.

Among African American Protestant churches, 62 percent reported an increase in regularly participating adults, and 59 percent reported increase in revenue.

Houses of worship continue to receive the largest share of charitable giving in the United States—29 percent of all charitable funds or \$124.5 billion in 2018.

However, giving to congregations represents a smaller proportion of overall charitable giving than it did in the past. Faith-related giving now is less than 30 percent of all charitable contributions. In the 1980s, it represented more than half of the total.

The study also noted:

- On average, spending on missions causes represents 11 percent of a congregation's budget. Most (61 percent) of the missions budget is spent locally, but 20 percent is dedicated to missions nationally and 19 percent to international causes.

- More than three-fourths of congregations receive some revenue both from individual donations and special fund-raisers, and six out of 10 (62 percent) receive revenue from renting their facilities.
- Nearly one-fourth (24 percent) of people who attend church gave at least once in a digital form in the past year. Congregations received 22 percent of their giving digitally, on average.
- More than one-third (34 percent) of congregations have an endowment. African American Protestant churches and evangelical congregations are less likely than others to have endowments.