

When leaders leave the faith, how do churchgoers respond?

July 10, 2020

NASHVILLE, Tenn.—When high-profile Christian leaders announce they no longer believe in core doctrines of the faith, their public pronouncements are met with a mix of emotions from churchgoers, according to a [new survey](#).

LifeWay Research asked more than 1,000 Protestant churchgoers how they feel when individuals well-known for their work in Christian ministry announce they no longer accept their previous faith.

“Rather than speculating on the impact of those leaders who turn away from the faith, we wanted to know from churchgoers what they think,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research.

Many hope those who leave will return

More than three in five churchgoers say they hope the former ministry leaders come back to the Christian faith someday (69 percent) or are sad they’ve abandoned their faith (63 percent).

Concern would also be on the minds of many churchgoers. Fewer than half say they feel concern for the ex-leader’s eternal destiny (44 percent) or concern they may lead others astray (40 percent).

Some question the validity of the leader’s now-rejected faith. More than one in six churchgoers (17 percent) believe leaders who leave Christianity must never have really had Christian faith.

Fewer than one in 10 churchgoers say they are happy for leaders finding a

belief system that works better for them (9 percent), are angry at whoever or whatever pushed them away (9 percent), or identify with the leader's doubts (8 percent). Few say none of these (2 percent) or that they're not sure (3 percent).

"The predominant reaction among churchgoers when they see a leader walk away from their faith is to maintain hope for them while grieving the decision they are making," McConnell said.

"The big question is, 'Will this leader cause others to also walk away?' The data doesn't answer that directly, but we see 8 percent of churchgoers currently have similar doubts and could be considered vulnerable," he said. "Also, the two in five who fear others could follow the leader away from Christianity may simply be speculating or they may know some of those who have these doubts."

Age and attendance make a difference in response

Older churchgoers, those with evangelical beliefs, and those who attend services more frequently are likely to respond differently to a ministry leader leaving their faith than those who are younger, who aren't an evangelical by belief, or who attend less often.

Churchgoers 65 and older are most likely to say they hope the former ministry leader will come back to Christianity someday (77 percent). They also express higher concern for the leader's eternal destiny (54 percent) and are more concerned they may lead others astray (50 percent).

Those in the upper age range are also the least likely to say they identify with the doubts of the ministry leaders leaving the faith (2 percent).

Churchgoing adults under 34 are the most likely to say they are happy

former ministry leaders found a belief system that works better for them (19 percent).

They are also the least likely to say they are sad the former identifying Christians abandoned their faith (50 percent).

Those who attend a worship service at least four times a month are more likely than those who attend less frequently to say they are sad the ministry leaders abandoned their faith (67 percent to 56 percent), have concern for their eternal destiny (49 percent to 37 percent), and are concerned they may lead others astray (46 percent to 29 percent).

More frequent church attenders are less likely to say they are happy those who left the ministry found a belief system that works better for them (7 percent to 12 percent).

Churchgoing evangelicals by belief are more likely than other churchgoers to say an announcement about leaving the faith makes them feel hope the former leader will someday come back to Christianity (75 percent to 62 percent), sad they abandoned their faith (72 percent to 53 percent), concern for their eternal destiny (59 percent to 27 percent), concern they may lead others astray (51 percent to 27 percent), and have the belief that the ministry leader must never have really had Christian faith (20 percent to 13 percent).

Those with evangelical beliefs are also less likely to identify with the doubts of those leaving the ministry (6 percent to 11 percent) and say they are happy the former leaders found a belief system that works better for them (4 percent to 15 percent).

“Churches want to reach and minister to those who are not yet followers of Christ and those who have honest struggles with the truths Jesus taught,” McConnell said. “A leader abandoning the faith may be a distressing situation, but it should also serve as a reminder for Christians to only put

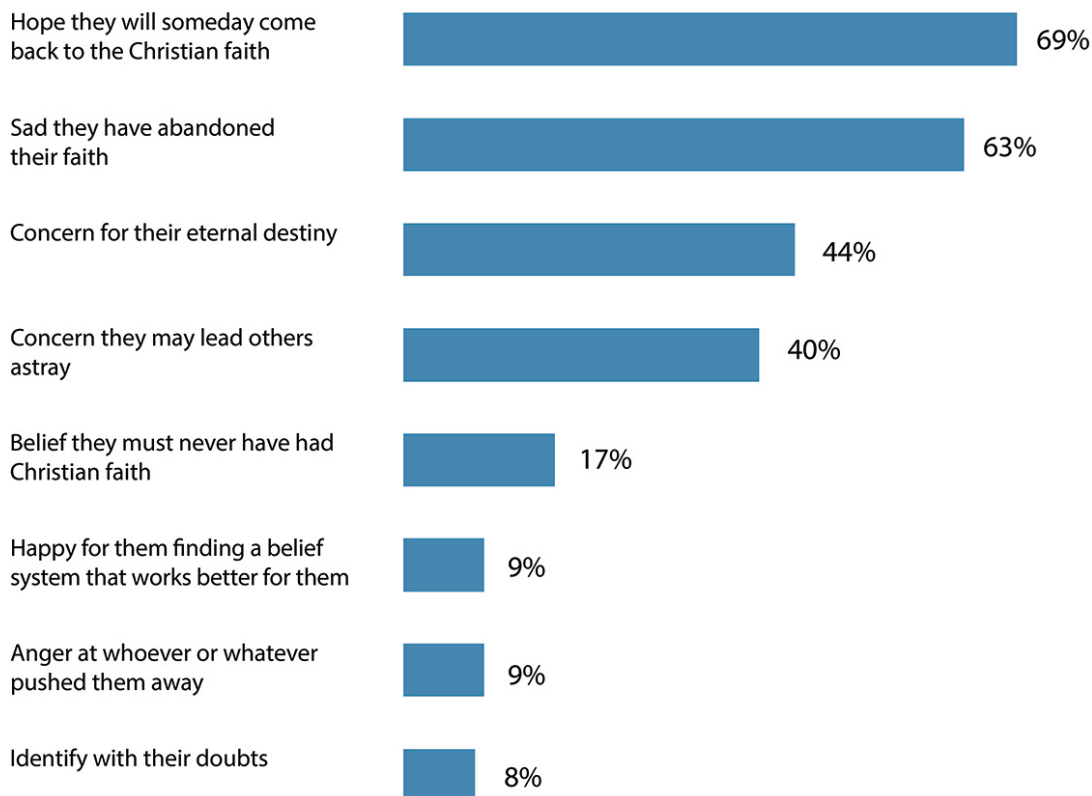
their trust in Jesus.”

The online survey of 1,002 American Protestant churchgoers was conducted September 20-27, 2019 using a national pre-recruited panel. Researchers used quotas and slight weights to balance gender, age, region, ethnicity and education to reflect the population more accurately. The completed sample is 1,002 surveys, providing 95 percent confidence the sampling error from the panel does not exceed plus or minus 3.2 percent. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.

When Christian leaders leave the faith

"If a person who is well known for their work in Christian ministry announced they no longer believed in Christianity, how would you expect to feel?"

Among Protestant churchgoers



Notes: Respondents could select all that apply, 2% said none of these, 3% said not sure