

Young adults are dropping out of church in large numbers, survey finds. This is why.

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. —Large numbers of young adults who frequently attended Protestant worship services in high school [are dropping out of church](#).

Two-thirds of young people say they stopped regularly going to church for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22, a [new LifeWay Research survey](#) shows.

That means the church had a chance to share its message and the value of attending with this group, but it didn't stick, said Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research.

"That's a lot of folks saying, 'No, that's not for me' or 'It's not for me right now' at that young age," McConnell said.

LifeWay Research released its [student dropout survey](#) on Tuesday. The Nashville-based entity interviewed 2,002 U.S. adults ages 23 to 30 who attended a Protestant church two times or more a month for at least a year in high school. The interviews were conducted from Sept. 15 to Oct. 13, 2017.

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LifeWay Research is a ministry of LifeWay Christian Resources, which is the publishing arm of the Southern Baptist Convention.

The high dropout did not surprise Pastor Chris Brooks, who leads the Kairos congregation at Brentwood Baptist Church in Brentwood, Tenn. The majority of those who attend Kairos' Tuesday night service are between the ages of 22 and 29.

"There is a substantial amount of people in this age demographic who for whatever reason decided that the church is no longer integral to building their faith or their faith is no longer integral to them," Brooks said.

He loves young adults. They are selfish, but also still trying to figure out who they are and what they want to do, Brooks said. It leads to lively and challenging discussions at church, which he welcomes.

"It's identity and purpose, which are common themes throughout the Bible," Brooks said. "And, they're becoming aware of do they like the God that they were given growing up?"

Why young people say they are not going to church

The 66 percent who said they stopped attending church regularly as young adults cited a variety of reasons for leaving. The survey listed 55 and asked them to pick all that applied. On average, they chose seven or eight reasons, McConnell said.

The reasons fell under four categories:

- Nearly all — 96 percent — cited **life changes**, including moving to college and work responsibilities that prevented them from attending.

- Seventy-three percent said **church or pastor-related reasons** led them to leave. Of those, 32 percent said church members seemed judgmental or hypocritical and 29 percent said they did not feel connected to others who attended.
- Seventy percent named **religious, ethical or political beliefs** for dropping out. Of those, 25 percent said they disagreed with the church's stance on political or social issues while 22 percent said they were only attending to please someone else.
- And, 63 percent said **student and youth ministry reasons** contributed to their decision not to go. Of those, 23 percent said they never connected with students in student ministry and 20 percent said the students seemed judgmental or hypocritical.

"We're tapping into a lot of different feelings and logistical things as well," said McConnell, pointing out that this age group is often in a time of transition.

But leaving was not an intentional decision for many. Of those who dropped out, 71 percent said they did not plan on it.

"A statistic like that says, 'Wow, we need to help these young people plan ahead,'" McConnell said.

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Those who left are not out of reach, experts say

At Iowa State University, it takes students to reach other students with the gospel, said Kendra Gustafson, associate director of [The Salt](#)

[Company](#), which is a Southern Baptist ministry on the Ames, Iowa campus.

"We have found that discipling and equipping our student leaders to reach out to their peers has been probably the most effective form of ministry," Gustafson said. "They really can do it. Give them courage and just boldness to just relationally welcome people in."

McConnell does not think those who have left between the ages of 18 and 22 are out of the church's reach forever.

When the 66 percent who said they left picked reasons for leaving, only 10 percent said they dropped out because they stopped believing in God.

Some who stopped attending church had already returned. At the time of the survey interviews, 31 percent of those who had dropped out as young adults said they were currently attending twice a month or more. Thirty-nine percent said they were attending church once a month or less and 29 percent were not going at all.

"I think the church should continue to reach out to them and be sharing the news of the gospel to have a relation with God, but also to have a relationship with the church," McConnell said. "For many of these young people, they haven't completely rejected the church, they may just be attending less and thinking that's OK."

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