News



Empty pews at a church in Kansas City. Fewer adults are attending religious services in the United States. (RNS/Sally Morrow)



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Fewer adults are attending religious services in the United States, but not necessarily because they don't believe.

Many cite practical or personal reasons for skipping weekly services, according to new Pew Research Center data released Wednesday (Aug. 1).

Most notably, nearly 4 in 10 say they simply practice their faith in other ways and remain "fairly religious by a number of measures," according to Pew Associate Director of Research Gregory Smith.

For nearly 3 in 10 Americans, the reason they don't attend religious services is because they do not share religious beliefs.

But more people say it's because they find another outlet for their faith (37 percent) or dislike certain things about services (37 percent): They haven't found a place of worship that they like, they don't like the sermons at their place of worship or they don't feel welcome.

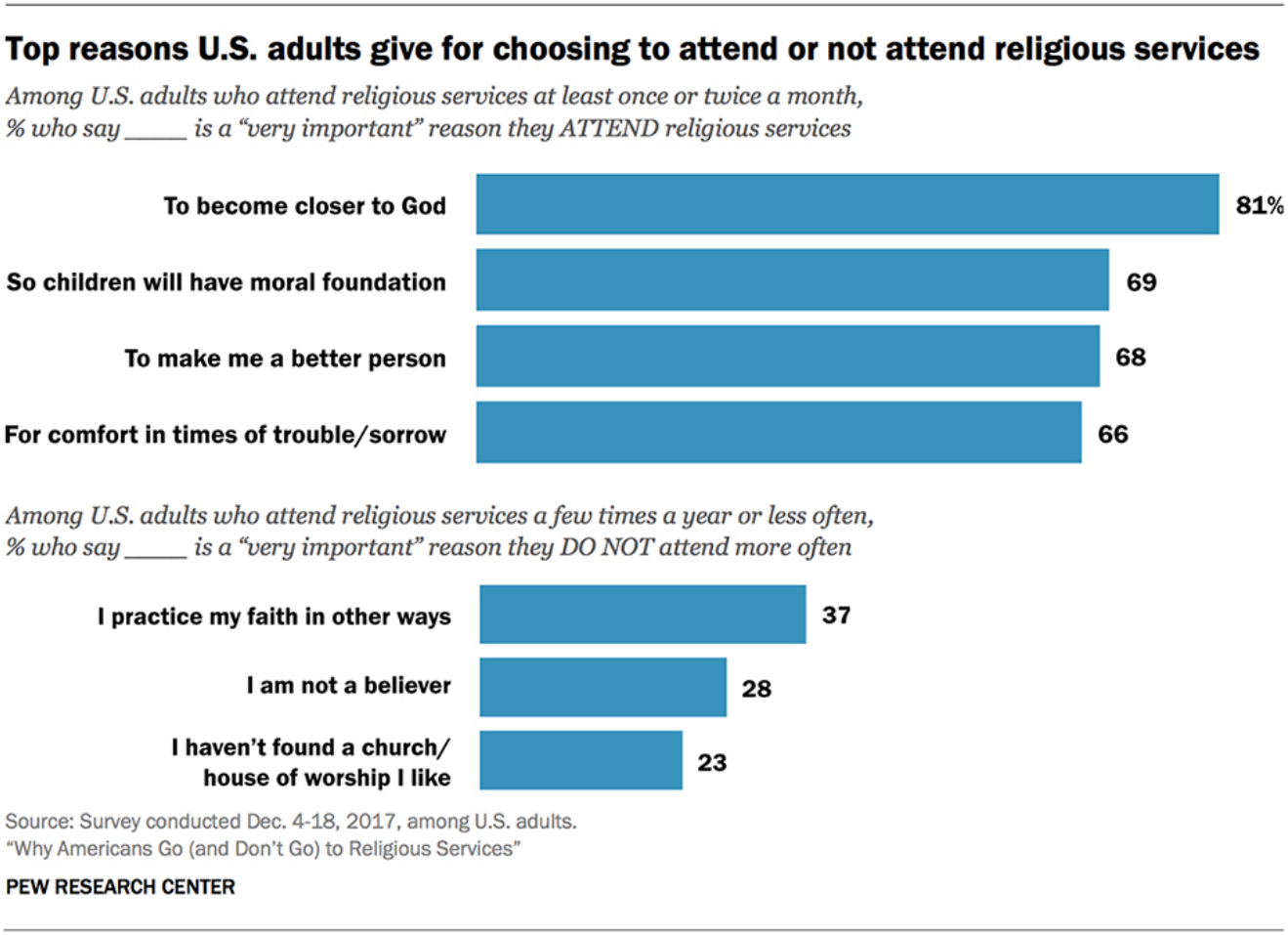
Of those believers who rarely or never attend services, 6 in 10 identify as Christian, and 44 percent say they pray every day.

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It's unclear from the survey results how those respondents practice their faith instead. Smith said those who rarely or never attend services don't seem to be joining community organizations instead. In fact, regular attendees still are more likely to join groups like a club or charity.

The new data follows previous surveys suggesting that the number of Americans attending religious services at least once a week is dropping. According to Pew's 2014 Religious Landscape Survey, those who say they go to church or another house of worship at least once a week fell from 39 percent in 2007 to 35 percent in 2014.

In that same period, the number who say they "seldom or never" go to church, mosque, synagogue or another service inched up, from 27 percent to 30 percent.



Top reasons U.S. adults give for choosing to attend or not attend religious services. (Courtesy Pew Research Center)

The recent survey shows nonetheless that many of those who don't regularly attend services remain "at least moderately religious," Smith noted. Nearly all (94 percent) of those who attend services at least once a month and well over half (61 percent) who rarely or never attend for reasons other than nonbelief say religion is at least somewhat important in their lives.

Of those who attend services at least once a month, most (81 percent) say they do so to grow closer to God, but they also cite giving children a moral foundation (69 percent), becoming a better person (68 percent) and receiving comfort in times of trouble or sorrow (66 percent). Ninety-one percent are Christian and 71 percent pray every day.

Pew surveyed more than 4,700 people on its American Trends Panel, recruited from telephone surveys. Panelists participated in a self-administered web survey between Dec. 4 and 18, 2017. The margin of error for all respondents is plus or minus 2.3 percentage points, according to Pew.