

CHAPTER 5

CHURCH HEALTH



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StateoftheBible.org



CHURCH HEALTH

Are churches in America healthy? Your answer may depend on what you mean by “church.” Christians today differ widely on what a church should be. You might go to a teaching church, a missionary church, a sacramental church, or the local outpost for a particular denomination. Your church might feed the hungry, welcome spiritual seekers, or have an awesome worship band. Or maybe it’s a “Cheers” church, “where everybody knows your name.”

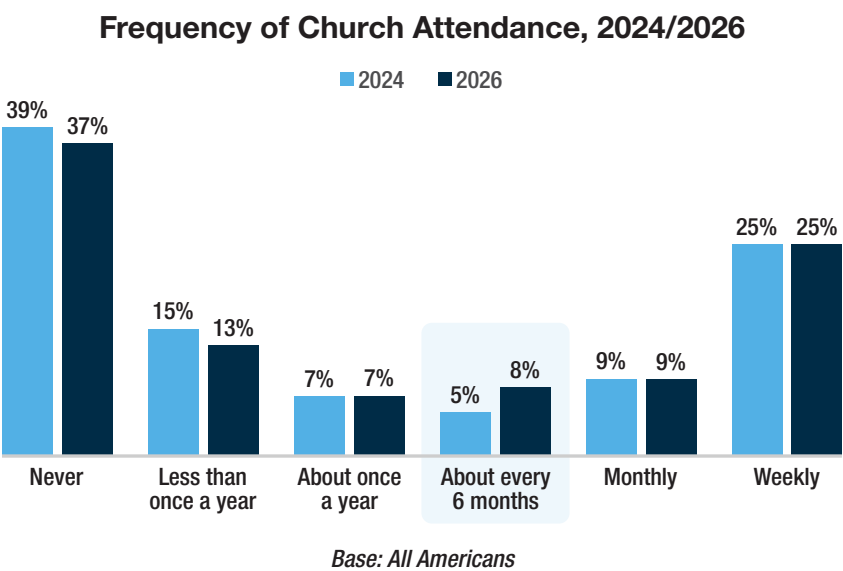
We’re not going to iron out those differences in this chapter. But we will do what we do best: ask questions and report how people respond. Our questions focus on three broad areas relating to church health, beginning with **attendance**. We’re not assuming that bigger churches are better churches, but in the aggregate, America seems to do better spiritually when more people go to church more often.

Our second area of interest is what you might call **spiritual vitality**. Are people growing, serving, and loving one another in their churches? For this, we have borrowed a handful of questions from the REVEAL Spiritual Life Survey, which are now part of our own NextStep Church Assessment.

Finally we look at the **impact of church leadership** with a few questions that zero in on our favorite subject: reading and engaging with the Bible.

ATTENDANCE

Churches have always had ways of figuring out their attendance. For many, it's the faithful usher in the back of the room tallying up the totals. Online viewing has created new counting challenges. *State of the Bible* approaches the matter from the congregation's side. We ask people how often they attend church (in person or online).



More than a third of Americans (37%) say they *never* “attend a Christian church service in person or online.” This is down a few points from the 2024 figure (39%). We see a similar slide among those who say they attend “less than once a year” (15% in 2024, down to 13%). The corresponding increase is seen in the group who attend “about every six months” (5% in 2024, up to 8%). Monthly (9%) and weekly (25%) attendance has held steady since 2024.

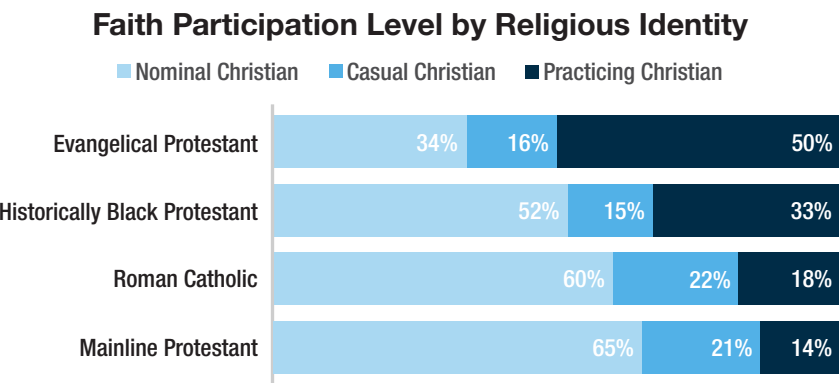
These don’t look like huge statistical shifts. Still, we learn that about 8 million more Americans attended church about twice a year in 2026, rather than never or “less than once a year.” This might indicate that they are newly open to exploring their faith in the company of a congregation.

DENOMINATIONS

Faith Participation Levels provide a fascinating comparison of different denominational groups. By definition, Practicing Christians say they attend church at least monthly, and they also “strongly agree” with the statement “my religious faith is very important to me.” Casual Christians also attend at least monthly, but do not “strongly agree” with that statement. (You might say they have action but less ardor.) Virtually all churches have both of these types of parishioners, along with Nominals, who claim Christian faith (and perhaps church membership) but seldom attend.

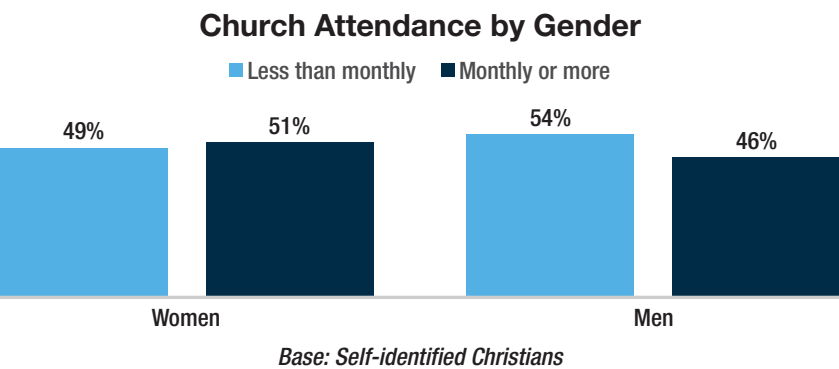
Half of those who identify with Evangelical Protestant denominations are Practicing Christians (50%). A third of those identifying with Historically Black Protestant denominations share that designation (33%). Those identifying with Mainline Protestant (65%)

and Roman Catholic churches (60%) are most likely to be Nominals, attending less than once a month.



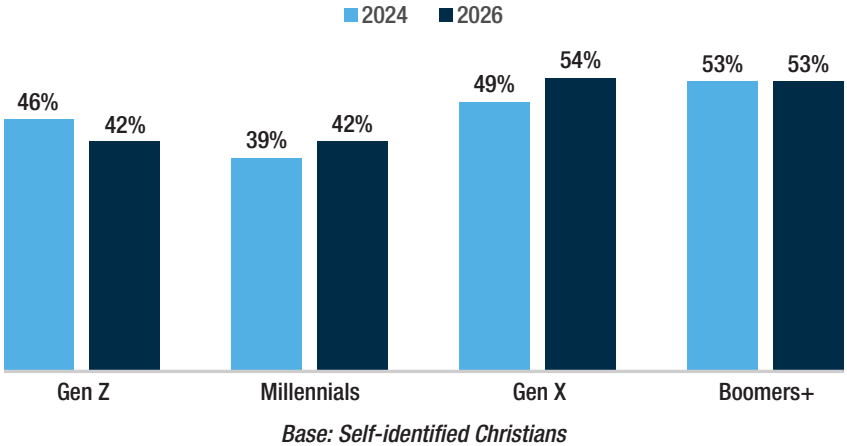
GENDER AND GENERATION

Christian women are more likely to attend church regularly than Christian men. Over half (54%) of Christian men don’t attend church on even a monthly basis and 1 in 5 say they never attend church. However, male churchgoers are more likely to attend in person compared to female churchgoers, a full 30 percent of whom say they worship remotely at least half the time, compared to just 20 percent of male churchgoers.



The Boomer+ generation (born 1964 or earlier) is the only age group in which more than half of self-identified Christians (53%) attend church at least monthly. Gen X has shown a substantial increase in church attendance in the last two years (49% to 54%). While Millennials have long trailed the other generations in church attendance, they too have made gains since 2024 (39% to 42%). Only Gen Z has seen a decrease in the last two years (46% to 42%).

Church Attendance (Monthly or More) by Generation, 2024/2026



If we consider the health of the church in America based on attendance, it's not a pretty picture. Half of self-identifying Christians don't attend church on a regular basis. This is particularly concerning when we look at generational attendance. We already know that there are fewer Gen Zers and Millennials who identify as Christian. But we find here that the majority of those who *do* call themselves Christians are not meaningfully a part of a body of believers. What can we be doing as a church to reach out to these young adults and help them develop a closer relationship with God?

THE CHURCH AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH

“Church activities do not drive spiritual growth,” says Cally Parkinson. “They’re catalysts.”¹ A key architect of the REVEAL Spiritual Life Survey, Parkinson has focused for more than two decades on how churches can effectively promote true spiritual growth in their people. Leadership is crucial, she says. Culture-building is critical. The REVEAL study identified a number of “best practices” of spiritually thriving churches—setting these out in a series of books.²

But first you need to know how you’re doing. How can church leaders know if their people are growing in Christ? Surveys help with that.

Over the years, Parkinson and her REVEAL teammates have worked with thousands of churches, gathering and sharing data, honing insightful survey questions, and helping those churches get a reading on their strengths and challenges.

This year, American Bible Society is taking up that task, offering the NextStep Church Assessment, a free online questionnaire that church leaders can offer their congregations. Those leaders will receive data reports, as well as analysis and recommendations. NextStep builds on the research of the REVEAL team and even uses (with permission) some of the same questions.³

1 Interviewed on *State of the Bible Podcast*, Episode 11 (February 2026). “How to Diagnose Your Church Health—The Spiritual X-Ray.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8ss6OvgYiU>

2 *Reveal*, *Follow Me*, *Focus*, and *Move* by Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson (Willow Creek Association), and *Rise* by Cally Parkinson and Nancy Scammacca Lewis (NavPress).

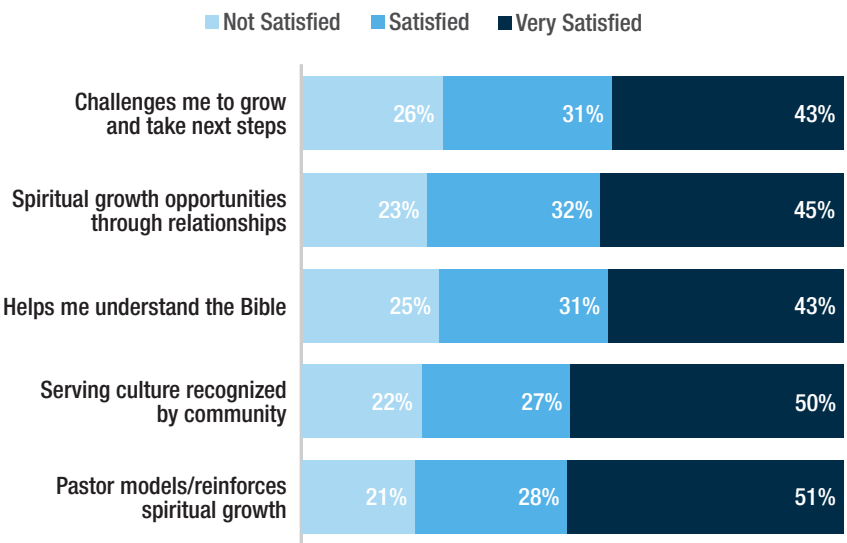
3 For more information on how the NextStep Church Assessment can take your church to the next level, visit church.nextstep.bible.

We have also included five of those questions in our 2026 *State of the Bible* survey.

- My church challenges me to grow and take next steps spiritually.
- My church provides opportunities to grow spiritually through relationships with others.
- My church helps me understand the Bible in greater depth.
- My church promotes a strong serving culture that is widely recognized by the local community.
- My pastor models and reinforces how to grow spiritually.

These statements were offered to “churchgoers,” those who say they attend church at least once every six months. Instead of asking for a level of agreement, we asked about *satisfaction*, on a scale of 1 to 10, from “completely dissatisfied” (1) to “completely satisfied” (10).

Church Health Satisfaction Levels



Churchgoers are highly satisfied with how their churches are ministering to them spiritually.

Responses were generally quite high, with average responses around 8 for each statement. We designated scores of 9 or 10 as “Very Satisfied,” scores of 7 or 8 as “Satisfied,” and any response 6 or under as “Not Satisfied.” (This breakdown is commonly used with Net Promoter Scores, a common user experience metric).

Pause a moment to drink this in. *Churchgoers are highly satisfied with how their churches are ministering to them spiritually.* Too often we focus on complaints. Families have “roast pastor” for Sunday dinner. People leave in a huff because they weren’t included on some committee. Not enough sermons on Leviticus! Church leaders might easily get the idea that they’re doing everything wrong. But our data show differently. Room for improvement? No doubt. But churchgoers across the country are rating their churches at an average of 8 out of 10—and the most common response was 10 of 10.

The first three statements—next steps, relationships, Bible—show little difference in responses. But we see a noticeable jump in the last two statements, about the church’s “strong serving culture” and how the pastor “models and reinforces spiritual growth.” Can we discern a difference here?

The first three statements assume *participation*. The church helps “me” to take next steps, to grow through relationships, to read the Bible. We wonder if there’s a *spectator* aspect to the last two statements. The

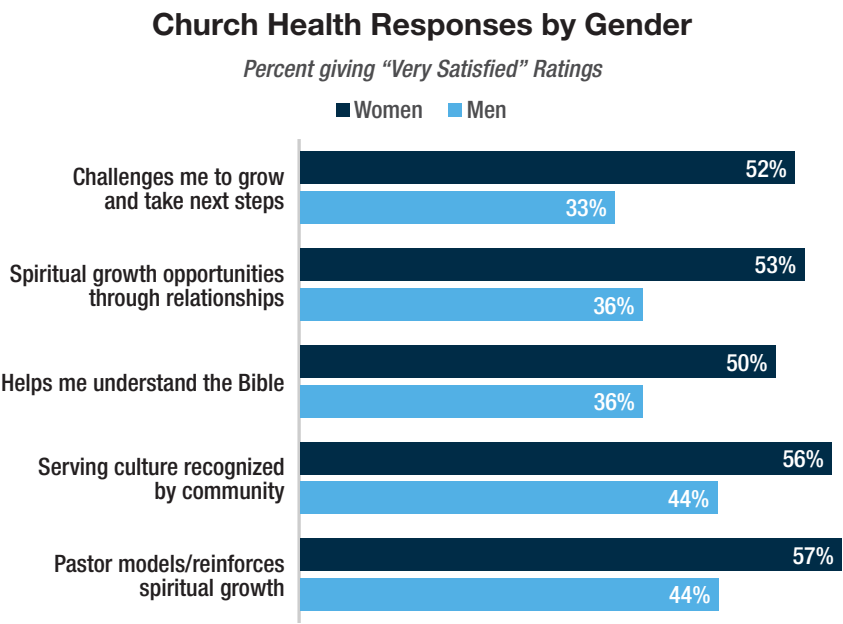
community recognizes the church’s serving culture. The pastor is doing good things. Perhaps it’s easier to observe the work of others.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF CHURCH HEALTH

Are some groups of people more satisfied with their churches in these matters of spiritual growth? Some of the demographic breakdown looks exactly as you might expect, but there are some surprises.

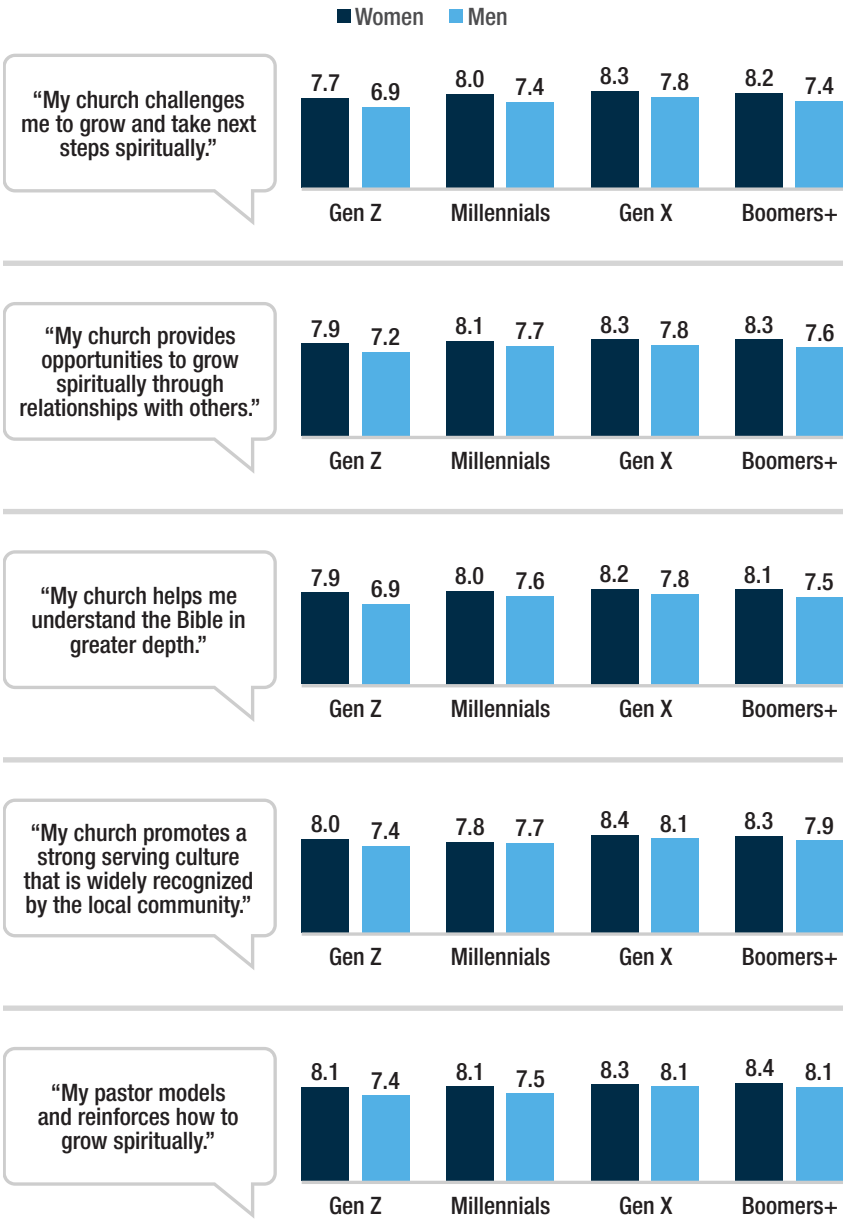
GENDER AND GENERATION

Women are far more likely than men to be “very satisfied” on all five Church Health issues. Men narrowed the gap a bit on the two “spectator” points—the pastor modeling growth and a serving culture recognized in the community.



Church Health Scores by Generation and Gender

Mean ratings on a scale of 1–10



Looking at the average ratings for each of the five Church Health statements, we see that Generation Z is clearly the least satisfied, Generation X the most. But we also see again the positive reactions of women in every generation.

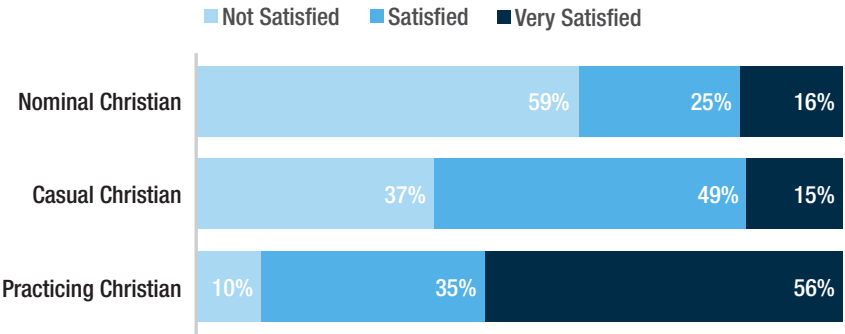
In the last chapter, we noted the precarious position of Gen Z men with regard to their sense of calling. These findings on Church Health add some shading to that picture. Their low scores here suggest that young men are not fully connecting with their churches. Are we offering them meaningful pathways of spiritual growth?

FAITH PARTICIPATION

Combining responses to the five Church Health statements, we find a clear differentiation among the three Faith Participation groups. Practicing Christians give “very satisfied” ratings nearly four times more than either Casual or Nominal Christians (56% to 15% and 16%).

As the middle group, Casual Christians might be expected to give a middle response, and they do. Nearly half of them (49%) provide the “satisfied” rating of 7 or 8 on the Church Health statements.

Church Health Satisfaction by Faith Participation Levels



It's no surprise that a majority (59%) of Nominals give the lowest rating.

While this pattern holds true for each of the five statements, it is most pronounced on “My church helps me understand the Bible in greater depth.” There, two-thirds (65%) of Practicing Christians are “very satisfied,” dwarfing the scores of Casual and Nominal Christians (both 18%).

SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

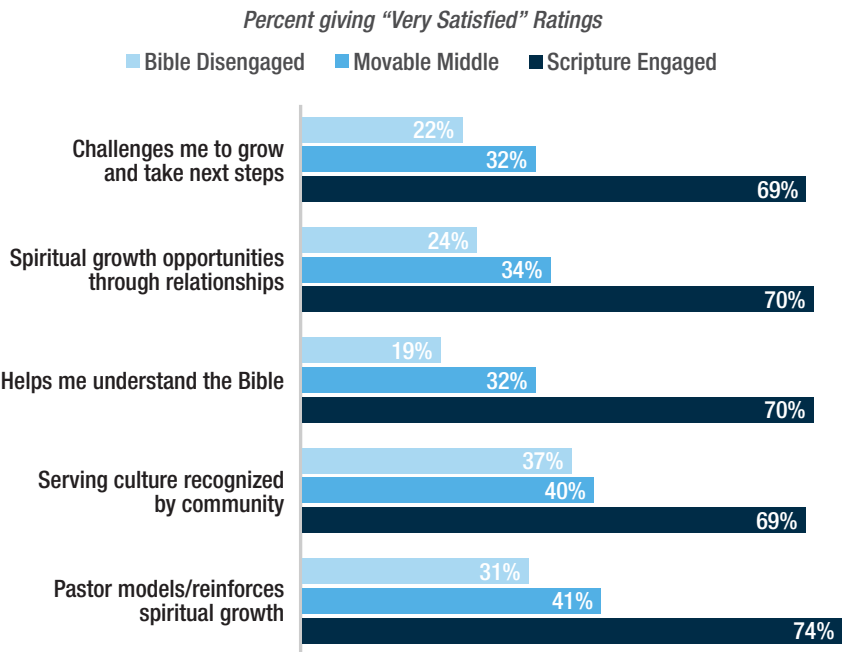
Seven of 10 Scripture Engaged people (70%) give “very satisfied” ratings to the statement “My church helps me understand the Bible in greater depth.” We would expect that. The church helps people know and love the Scriptures. If someone is fully engaged with the Bible, reading it regularly and living it out, chances are there's a church involved.

The surprise here is that the non-Bible statements on this survey have nearly identical results. The Scripture Engaged aren't just learning the Bible at church—they're growing spiritually and they are building relationships that help them grow. It's hard to separate the good things that happen in a healthy church.

It's also interesting to note that the Movable Middle and Bible Disengaged have their highest “very satisfied” scores on the two “spectator” statements. This makes some sense. They might appreciate the way a pastor models and reinforces spiritual growth, or how a church builds a culture of Christ-like service that affects the community, yet these two statements don't require personal participation—and

that’s the very thing that’s lacking in the Movable Middle and the Bible Disengaged. They might be *appreciating* the Bible, but not participating in reading or living it.

Church Health Responses by Scripture Engagement



Before we leave this bank of Church Health questions, note that the highest responses of the Scripture Engaged (74% very satisfied) occur on the statement “My pastor models and reinforces how to grow spiritually.” The value of good church leadership is affirmed. This doesn’t explicitly refer to “biblical preaching,” though many respondents could be thinking of that. But there’s even more here. Good pastors preach the Word and show the way to follow it. By their life and by their words, they set out a path of spiritual growth for all who listen.

CHURCH LEADERSHIP

Apart from the five Church Health statements, we have two other lines specifically about church leadership. On these two questions we don't ask about satisfaction, just how much the respondents agree or disagree. Again, these are presented only to churchgoers, those who attend church at least "about every six months."

- Church leaders encourage me to read the Bible.
- Church leaders often make the Bible relevant to my life.

On both of these statements, two-thirds of these churchgoers "agree" or "strongly agree" and only 1 in 10 disagree.

Healthy churches
have the Bible at
their core.

We find that these two simple behaviors of a church leader make a significant difference in the lives of their church. We also see a very strong correlation between the five Church Health questions and the two Church Leadership questions.

Among those who are Very Satisfied with their churches in each specific area, at least 80 percent also agree or strongly agree that church leaders are helping them connect with the Bible. The relationship is clear: Healthy churches have the Bible at their core.

THE VALUE OF ENCOURAGEMENT AND RELEVANCE

Derick went to church one Sunday because his girlfriend brought him. He didn't care much about the Bible or church or faith, but she did, so he went. Not only did the pastor speak with passion about

Scripture's meaning in the modern world, but he mentioned a Bible app that anyone could get on their phone. Derick downloaded the app, started using it, and has never stopped. The Bible is now a regular part of his growing Christian life.

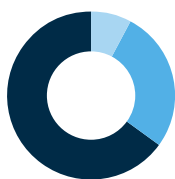
What happens when church leaders encourage Bible reading and demonstrate the connection of God's Word to everyday life? People learn, people grow, people change.

Among churchgoers who “strongly agree” that “Church leaders encourage me to read the Bible,”



14% are not Bible Users
16% are Occasional Bible Users
70% are Active Bible Users,
connecting with Scripture every week

Among churchgoers who “strongly agree” that “Church leaders often make the Bible relevant to my life,”



8% are Bible Disengaged
27% are in the Movable Middle
65% are Scripture Engaged

A healthy church encourages, values, and models spiritual growth, as people hear the Word of God and embrace it in their daily decisions, loving their neighbors in the church, in the community, and throughout the world, loving God with every aspect of themselves. God empowers church leaders to help with that.

A FINAL WORD

Churches in America face struggles, headwinds, even fractures. But overall, the people who attend church say their churches are genuinely helping them grow. Most individual churches are healthier than the headlines show. And we see some simple ways for churches to keep growing in health and faithfulness—simple, but requiring steady effort. Guidance, encouragement, and opportunities to engage the Bible together will strengthen every aspect of church life and welcome people from Nominal to Practicing faith. We can't say it too often: Healthy churches have the Bible at their core. ■

WHAT MAKES A CHURCH HEALTHY, AND HOW WOULD YOU KNOW?

In this episode, Dr. John Plake sits down with **Randy Frazee**, pastor, author, and one of America's most respected voices on spiritual formation, to dig into what the 2026 *State of the Bible* data says about church health and what it takes to lead a congregation toward deep spiritual vitality.

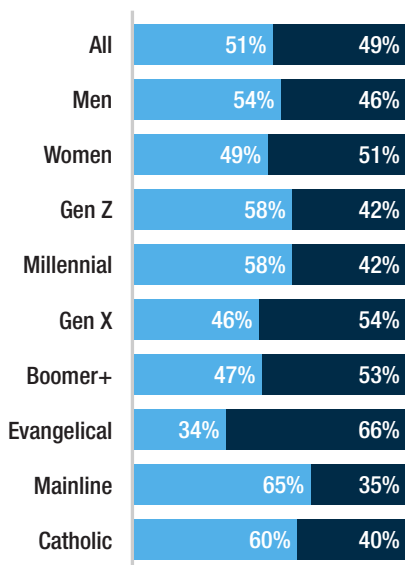




Is the Church in America Healthy?

Church Attendance of Self-Identifying Christians

■ Less than monthly ■ Monthly or more



Church Health Ratings

My church . . .

Challenges me to grow spiritually

7.8

Provides opportunities to grow
through relationships

7.9

Helps me understand the Bible

7.8

Serves the community

8.0

Has a pastor that models
spiritual growth

8.1

**Among churchgoers; Range: 0–10*



Is Your Church Healthy?

TAKE THE CHURCH HEALTH
ASSESSMENT AND FIND OUT!



NextStep for Church is a powerful assessment (free of charge) that gives pastors clear data on their church's spiritual health so they can stop guessing and start leading their people exactly where they need to go.