

Nones and Dones: America's Changing Face(s) and Why People Don't Go to Church

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This article was adapted from the author's book *Community as Church, Church as Community* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021).

¹ Sandra L. Colby and Jennifer M. Ortman, "Projections of the Size and Composition of the U.S. Population: 2014 to 2060," US Census Bureau, 2015.

² Adele Banks, "New Survey: Americans Have Limited Knowledge about World Religions, Including Their Own," *Religion News Service*, July 24, 2019.

³ Mark Chaves, "The Decline of American Religion?," *The Association of Religion Data Archives*, n.d., Guiding Papers Series.

⁴ David Voas and Mark Chaves, "Even Intense Religiosity is Declining in the United States: Comment," *Sociological Science*, November 15, 2018.

In my recent book about the decline and resurgence of parishes—their death and resurrection—I tried to go beneath the facile assessment of shrinking faith communities as the result of secularism, an immoral or amoral culture, or a blunt loss of faith. Many factors appear to be at work. American society is characterized by increased mobility and diversity as people move away from "home" pretty much permanently and marry "out" of their ethnic and religious groups. What religious leaders have said, what they have supported, has also driven people away.

One useful way to understand decline is by tracking the religious "nones" and "dones." Several years ago, US Census Bureau research alarmed many by revealing that within the twenty-first century, certainly by 2060 if not considerably sooner, the United States would no longer be a predominantly white and Christian country.¹ A Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) survey shows much the same. What is more, recent Pew Research tells us that Americans know very little about other faiths. But then, they also know little about their own traditions and communities of faith.²

Mark Chaves, the leading interpreter of religion's trends in America, offers a sobering assessment. Looking back on numerous studies over fifty years, he

argues that the data can only be read as documenting a continual decline. This decline is neither dramatic nor abrupt, but rather steady and continual.³ His principal source is the National Congregation Study (NCS), now up to the fourth wave of survey. In an even more recent study, with David Voas, Chaves does not diverge from this conclusion.⁴

These sociologists of religion look at the same indicators—strong affiliation, attendance at services at least weekly and more, how scriptures are interpreted, intensity coupled here with literalism, ties with evangelical communities, and prayer daily. Chaves and Voas find decline in the first three of these indicators since 1973. The decline appears to be generational, and the disappearance of multigenerational families in local congregations is a major cause. We may still think of America as a religiously active country, but Gallup found in 2018 that only 50 percent of Americans belong to a church, synagogue, mosque, or other community. The decline has been cumulative but decisive. Membership in a church or other religious organization remained at 70 percent or a bit more through the 1970s, but the last twenty years have seen a 20 percent decline.

What is the single biggest factor in the decline in church membership? Gallup

researchers point to the ever-increasing number of religious “nones,” that is, those with no connection to a community of faith—no participation and no contribution. But even those with some identification with religion have declined in membership. While there is decline across different population cohorts, including traditionalists (those born prior to 1945), baby boomers (born 1946–1964), Generation X (1965–1979), and millennials (1980–2000), the youngest have far and away the lowest church membership. Millennials come in at 40 percent, Xers at 25 percent, boomers at 57 percent, and traditionalists at 68 percent.⁵

Church bodies also have varying membership numbers. Catholics show higher rates of decline, as 76 percent of self-identified Catholics belonged to a congregation twenty years ago—compared with 63 percent now. Parish membership among Protestants has sunk from 73 percent to 67 percent, with mainline Protestant churches seeing the biggest decreases.⁶ The number of non-denominational parishes is increasing, indicating decreasing “brand loyalty” to the specific churches in which people were raised. This drift away from established denominations to non-denominational churches produces the answer “Christian” rather than “Baptist,” “Lutheran,” or “Methodist,” but Gallup has found such non-denominational are also less likely than those who identify with a particular church body to belong to a congregation.

Another factor is the aging of American congregations, especially predominantly white ones. Meanwhile, the average congregation has shrunk to an average of seventy members and a budget of \$85,000. Sixty-one percent of all congregations are led by a full-time pastor or other leader, but the number

of part-time clergy who also work at other professions continues to climb, as does the number of laypeople who share church leadership and parish work with a member of the clergy. With part-time clergy there is greater lay participation in the leadership and work of the parish, as members take on their baptismal priesthood. The largest congregations amount to only 7 percent of all parishes but account for over half of all the membership.

Notwithstanding significant variations from one case to another, the overall direction is unmistakable. No matter the age group, area of the country, political affiliation, income, or educational level, the trend is one of decline in religious affiliation and membership.

Why Do They Leave, Why Don't They Come?

When attempts are made to explain why congregations are shrinking, why there are so few people under the age of forty in them, and what happened to multi-generational families, numerous answers are given. An important 2010 study by Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell underscored the growing tolerance in many directions—gender, sexual identity, race and ethnicity—as the most constructive and attractive element of change in American religious communities, along with growing ethnic diversity and compassion for those in need.⁷ But Putnam and Campbell also noted the political use of religion and divisions along political, class, and racial and ethnic lines as what continues to drive people from membership and activity in congregations. Since this study was published, other researchers have pointed to increasing economic inequality, partisan media reporting, and the political manipulation of information as deepening divisions in congregations as well as

⁵ “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” *Pew Research Center*, October 17, 2019.

⁶ Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades,” *Gallup: Politics*, April 18, 2019.

⁷ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster), 2010.

the wider society. Gallup's Jeffrey M. Jones concludes that a significant factor is eroding confidence in religious organizations and leaders. Continuing revelations of clergy sexual abuse and malfeasance only heighten the mistrust and, in some cases, outright repulsion of the public.⁸ Some also interpret reports on nones as empirical verification of unbelief, secularism, or even a lack of moral values, but none of these conclusions is accurate. Kaya Oakes is one of several researchers who have listened carefully and respectfully to the nones, to their stories of religious disillusion, distancing from extreme religious positions, and even abuse. It is not possible to write off the nones as being without any spiritual roots. Most survey research shows that they do believe in God, pray, and have strong moral positions. Yet in faith, as in many other aspects of life, they are not big joiners. The reasons why nones do not identify with or attend a church are varied. The same is the case for those who once were members of a congregation or church body but now no longer are—religious “dones.”

⁸ Jeffrey M. Jones, “Many U.S. Catholics Question Their Membership Amid Scandal,” *Gallup: Politics*, March 13, 2019.

⁹ Jamie Manson, “As US ‘nones’ increase we must start asking different questions,” *NCRonline*, October 19, 2019.

¹⁰ Kaya Oakes, *The Nones are Alright* (Ossining, NY: Orbis Books, 2015). “When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean?” *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, April 25, 2018.

In 2019, a symposium at Fordham University brought together Oakes, Ryan Burge, Tara Isabella Burton, and Pew researcher Alan Cooperman to discuss the steady rise of religious nones and the inability of churches to come to grips with this phenomenon.⁹ Cooperman noted that 35 percent of millennials and 29 percent of Gen Xers identify as nonaffiliated, with the last ten years seeing an increase of 30 million not connected to any religious community. Like Putnam and Campbell, he and Burge both made the case that religion's connection to conservative politics was driving younger people from churches. Other factors included the decreasing marriage rate and the waning effect of wanting to pass religion on to one's

children and returning to it in later life, with aging and loss looming.

Kaya Oakes was especially perceptive in her contributions at the conference, as she was in her study. Having trained in spiritual direction with the Jesuits at Berkeley, she has had to turn away millennials seeking spiritual accompaniment in their lives. She noted that would-be evangelizers of the “nones,” such as Catholic Bishop Robert Barron, show little understanding of or experience with younger adults. Barron rather sounds as though the “nones” were to blame for their distance from the church. In my work as a parish priest, I have watched young adults, including my own children disappear from church. The majority of those who grew up in the parish where I served for the last twenty-six years have relocated for education and work. The few that still live in the area do not come. Major holidays, of course, bring young adults “home,” both to parents' houses and to their old parish, as do “rites of passage” such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals. And I have heard horror stories of young adults trying to join another parish, only to find an ethnic enclave, a tight, enclosed clique, or a legalistic pastor who present obstacles. As a professor, I often found in students a spiritual dimension and commitment to doing good. I flinch when I hear clergy appeals to millennials to return to church “to see all they have been missing!” The Fordham conference confirmed my observations and underlined what many researchers have found: that being unaffiliated with a particular congregation or church body is not equivalent to atheism, lack of a spiritual sensibility, or animus toward all things religious. About 19 percent of the nones have their own ideas about God or a higher power, the majority subscribing to a more traditional, biblical God.¹⁰ Nones, according

to Ryan Burge of Eastern Illinois University, now make up 23.1 percent of the population, up from 21 percent three years ago—a number certain to increase further. Nones in America are now as numerous as Catholics—23 percent of the population—and more numerous than self-described evangelicals. Historically, evangelicals have had outsize political clout, but it may be waning. In 2016, 26 percent of the electorate were evangelicals. Burge attributes this turnout, one that is higher than their share of American churchgoers, to their age and race (predominantly white).¹¹ During the past administration, however, a number of evangelicals parted ways with President Donald Trump and the Republican party. In 2019, the editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today*, Mark Galli, published an editorial calling for the former president to be removed from office.¹²

More recently, Burge has pushed his inquiry further. In the 1970s, 38 percent of Americans attended church weekly or more (another third never or rarely and the remainder occasionally). Already by the 1990s, however, this pattern had changed, and the decline continues today.¹³ But what Burge finds really provocative are the life and writings of the late Rachel Held Evans. She documented her upbringing in a rigorous evangelical church where questions and doubts were not allowed. Religion brought, or at least people thought it should bring, absolute certainty. Evans painfully describes her exodus with her husband from this absolutist Christianity and the rupture in family relations it caused them.¹⁴ While nones are typically centrist or progressive in their social, cultural, and political perspectives, Burge notes that half of them still believe in God in some way. So, echoing Evans, he wonders what kind of churches would be possible

homes for those who are “none” or “done” due to overwhelming pressure of certainty and control.

Yet, as Burge knows, across the churches, not just in the evangelicals but now among many others—Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Eastern Orthodox—a wave of neo-traditionalism has emerged, a desire not just to assert unchanging doctrine but also to attack divergence from and questioning of beliefs. The decision of the United Methodist Church in January 2020 to split over unresolvable differences regarding the status of LGBTQ people in the church and ministry is one example.¹⁵

Recent Pew research confirms the pattern described here.¹⁶ It finds that 65 percent of Americans identify as Christian, a decrease from 77 percent ten years ago, while the percentage of religious “nones” is up to 26 percent. There are now more Americans who say they attend services just a few times a year or less (54 percent) than those who go once or twice a month (45 percent). Of those identifying as Christian, the percentage attending once or more a month is the same as a decade ago—62 percent. While the seniors, the Silent Generation, boast 84 percent identifying as Christian, only 49 percent of millennials, those born between 1981 and 1996, do. Thus, houses of worship are less populated by the disappearing elders and are not being filled by the next generation or the one after that. These and other findings, such as that one-third of Democrats are “nones” as opposed to 16 percent of Republicans, come from Pew’s yearly political survey work. Even among those who identify as Christian, the decline continues.

Belief in God characterizes 80 percent of those surveyed as opposed to 19

¹¹ Jack Jenkins, “‘Nones’ Now as Big as Evangelicals and Catholics in the US,” *Religious News Service*, March 21, 2019.

¹² Mark Galli, “Trump Should Be Removed From Office,” *Christianity Today*, December 19, 2019.

¹³ Ryan Burge, “The Age of Nones May Favor Churches Who Welcome Doubters,” *Religion News Service*, January 14, 2020.

¹⁴ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2015).

¹⁵ Sam Hodges, “Diverse Leaders’ Group Offers Separation Plan,” *UM News*, January 3, 2020.

¹⁶ Yonah Shimron, “Pew Report: Older US Christians Being Quickly Replaced by Young ‘Nones,’” *Religion News Service*, October 17, 2019.

percent who say they do not believe. Fifty-six percent believe in a biblical God, while 23 percent say they believe in a power or spiritual force but not that in the Bible. Of those who say they do not believe in God, 9 percent still believe in some kind of higher power or spiritual force. The numbers remain high when it comes to those who try to communicate with God—75 percent—though 47 percent admit God does not reply. Seventy-seven percent of Americans, again, according to Pew research, believe God has protected them. Sixty-seven percent feel God has rewarded them, and 61 percent feel God will judge people's actions. Many surveys find a high level of personal belief in God and of reaching out to God in some manner. This is individual behavior. Yet religion is a highly communal reality, despite the still widespread notion of its intensely personal character.

But why are people distancing themselves from church? Other Pew research suggests that almost half—49 percent—are distanced from participation in church because they don't believe, while another fifth (20 percent) simply dislike organized religion and another almost fifth (18 percent) are unsure of what they believe or what churches profess.¹⁷ Sixty percent of those who don't have anything to do with organized religion say it is because they question religious teachings. Not surprisingly, 49 percent are opposed to the stances religious groups take on social and political issues. Forty-one percent simply do not like religious organizations, while

37 percent don't believe in God and 36 percent find religion irrelevant.¹⁸

What of those who continue to go to church? Of those who attend once a month or more, 81 percent say it is in order to be closer to God. When further queried, they say that they experience this in religious services in various ways. Sixty-nine percent of regular worshippers indicate they attend for their children's moral and religious education, while 68 percent say it is to help them be better people, and 66 percent worship for comfort in times of trouble or sorrow. One would be hard pressed to find anything startling in these findings. On the other hand, for those who do not attend on any regular basis or rarely, almost four in ten or 37 percent say they practice their faith in other ways, outside of churches and services. Twenty-eight percent say they don't attend because they no longer believe in God and 23 percent have yet to find a house of worship they like.¹⁹

My book *Community as Church, Church as Community* studies these trends in detail and examines parishes that are defying the statistics and building a renewed sense of community. Their stories are beyond the limits of space here, but the first step is simply to understand the wider retreat from religious activity, a retreat that appears likely to continue in the coming decades. The nones and dones are essential to this decline, and their experiences are considerably more complex than oversimplified narratives of a loss of faith or morals would suggest. ❁

¹⁷ Michael Lipka, "Why America's 'Nones' Left Religion Behind," *Pew Research Center*, August 24, 2016.

¹⁸ Becka Alper, "Why America's 'Nones' Don't Identify With a Religion," *Pew Research Center*, August 8, 2018.

¹⁹ "Why Americans Go (and Don't Go) to Religious Services," *Pew Research Center*, August 1, 2018.



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