

# The One Big Reason Church Attendance Is Declining (and Most Church Leaders Are Unaware)

*by Thom S. Rainer*

This one data point might be the most important information on the church and faith I have heard this year.

We at Church Answers have done a pretty good job of explaining the “what” of attendance decline: the frequency of church attendance has declined, and people have simply left the church altogether.

What we have yet to articulate, at least to this point, is the “why” of attendance decline. Why are so many people attending less frequently, and why are they dropping out completely? Our challenge, of course, was getting into the minds of these dropouts and delving into their motivations for leaving. We are fortunate a major research project did just that.

## The One Big Reason

PRRI recently released a massive research project that explains the “why” factor.

People are attending less or not at all for one major reason: In the words of the PRRI study, they “stopped believing in the religion’s teachings.”

That reason was the overwhelming motive of the dropouts (56% versus 30% for the second highest motive).

Did you get that? They left church because they said they did not believe what the church taught. But I suspect that they did not believe because they really did not know what the church taught. In other words, we have an assimilation and dropout problem because our churches are not adequately teaching the Bible and the essentials of the Christian faith.

### The Evidence Is Clear

We have been conducting church health surveys since 1996. We have millions of data points in this longitudinal study (meaning we ask the same questions over several years).

There are two alarming data points in our studies. First, churches are rapidly abandoning evangelism. Second, church members are steadily denying the essentials of the Christian faith. The PRRI study complements our own findings.

### Where Do We Go from Here?

While this problem is not solved with a silver bullet solution, we can begin to emphasize three major actions in our churches. We have worked with enough churches to know that this approach goes a long way toward instilling belief in those who regularly attend your church.

Restart the process with a congregational-wide study of the essentials of the Christian faith. Here is the small group/Sunday school class solution Church Answers offers: <https://www.churchequip.com/courses/a-clear-and-concise-guide-to-christian-beliefs>.

Move your small groups and Sunday school classes more to explicit Bible teaching. While there are many good small group studies available, this new research suggests strongly we need to have more direct Bible teachings in our groups.

Provide your church members a plan to be in the Bible every day. This plan would be more than offering a through-the-Bible reading plan at the beginning of the calendar year. It would mean encouraging them every week to remain in the Bible. The writer of Hebrews says it best: "For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires (Hebrews 4:12).

It's pretty clear. People are leaving our churches because they are not grounded in the faith.

The solution is clear as well. We have to return to the basics and essentials of the Christian faith, and get our church members more immersed in the Bible.

Yes, the solution is clear. The question is clear as well: Will we do it?

Resources:

Research cited: [https://www.ppri.org/research/religion-and-congregations-in-a-time-of-social-and-political-upheaval/?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=newsletter\\_axiosam&stream=top](https://www.ppri.org/research/religion-and-congregations-in-a-time-of-social-and-political-upheaval/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter_axiosam&stream=top)

Small group/Sunday school study: <https://www.churchequip.com/courses/a-clear-and-concise-guide-to-christian-beliefs>