Hartford Institute FOR RELIGION RESEARCH

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A REPORT FROM THE 2024 EPIC ATTENDER SURVEY

WORSHIP ATTENDANCE AND CONGREGATIONAL ENGAGEMENT



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EXPLORING THE PANDEMIC IMPACT ON CONGREGATIONS

Faith Communities Today

Introduction

Worship attendance is often considered one of the clearest indicators of congregational health and religious commitment. Low attendance is frequently interpreted as evidence of dissatisfaction with a congregation or a lower commitment to a life of faith.

The findings from the 2024 Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC) Attender Survey suggest a more nuanced reality. The data for this report—which come from a survey of more than 24,000 US adult, Christian church attenders (Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox) surveyed between September 2024 and January 2025—indicate that worship attendance functions primarily as a measure of engagement rather than a measure of congregational satisfaction or importance of faith.

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As it is discussed in this report, engagement encompasses a constellation of variables, including behaviors that reflect investment in a congregation, participation in regular religious practice, and perceptions of congregational life.

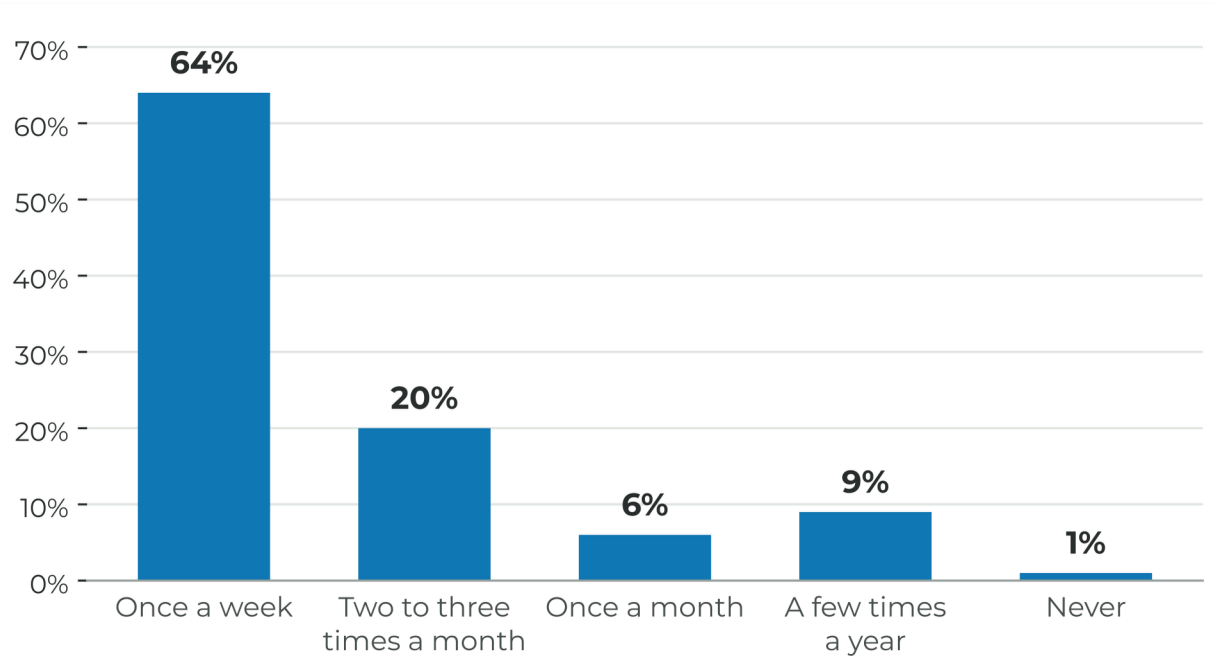
Individuals who attend worship more frequently are substantially more likely to volunteer and give financially, report increasing involvement in congregational life, participate in religious practices, and express enthusiasm about their congregation's future. At the same time, less frequent attenders are less likely to be engaged, yet often remain positive about their congregation, continue to affirm its mission and purpose, and report that faith is important in their lives.

The findings also reveal a possible engagement threshold between weekly attendance and attendance several times per month, where many forms of congregational participation begin to decline.

Patterns of Attendance

Overall, respondents were highly active worship participants, with nearly two-thirds attending weekly or more often. Another one in five attended two to three times per month, 6% once a month, and 10% participated a few times a year or less (Figure 1). Across the sample, the average respondent attended an estimated 41 weeks per year.

FIGURE 1
Attendance frequency



Attendance varied somewhat by age, with older respondents (65 and above) attending slightly more frequently than younger respondents (18-34 and 35-64). The oldest attendees attended 44 weeks per year on average, compared to an average of 38 and 40 weeks of attendance among the other groups.

Congregation size also showed a modest relationship with attendance, with respondents from larger congregations (those with more than 250 in weekly worship) reporting somewhat higher attendance rates than those from the smallest congregations (50 or fewer) (42 weeks per year, compared to 36). Given prior research suggesting that participants in smaller congregations tend to have deeper congregational ties and higher levels of commitment[1], this finding was somewhat surprising, as one might expect them to attend worship more frequently.

Differences among denominational families were comparatively small, with broadly similar attendance patterns across traditions (Catholic/Orthodox; Evangelical Protestant; Mainline Protestant). Between 83-85% of attenders in each denominational family attend at least two times per month, and the average annual attendance ranging from 39 to 41 weeks.

These demographic differences provide helpful context but are considerably smaller than the differences associated with congregational engagement and religious practice, where we turn our attention next.



1. *Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview*

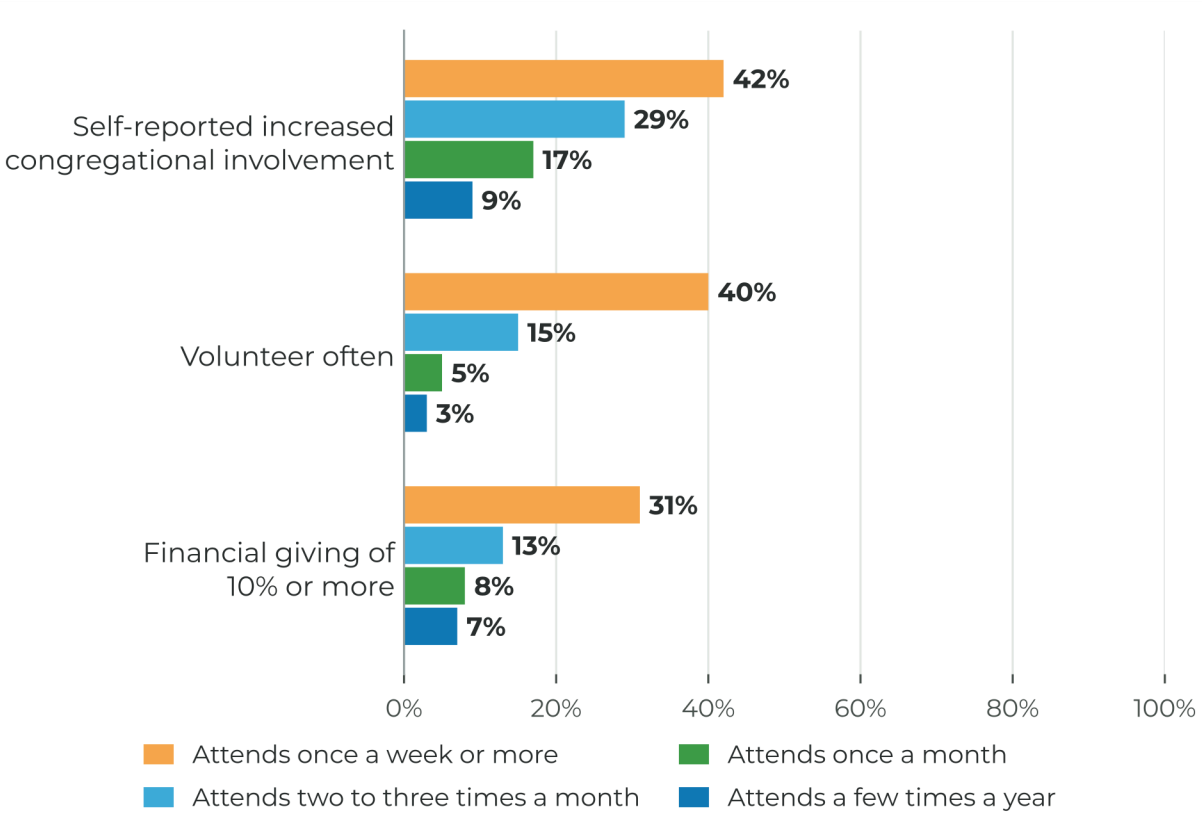
Attendance as a Measure of Congregational Investment

The strongest relationships in the survey are found between attendance and broader patterns of congregational engagement, specifically those behaviors that show investment in the congregation. Individuals who attend worship more frequently are more likely to report increasing involvement in congregational life, volunteering regularly, and giving financially (Figure 2).

Among weekly attenders, 42% reported that their involvement had increased during the previous year. Respondents that attended less frequently were less likely to report increasing involvement and more likely to report declining participation.

FIGURE 2

Relationship between frequency of worship attendance and congregational investment behaviors



Weekly attenders were also substantially more likely to volunteer on a regular basis. Forty percent reported volunteering three times a month or more, compared with only a small minority (3%) of those attending several times per year.

Financial giving followed a similar pattern. Nearly one-third (31%) of weekly attenders reported giving ten percent or more of their income, compared with 13% of those attending two to three times per month and fewer than one in ten among those attending monthly or less frequently. Weekly attenders were also the most likely to report that both their volunteering and financial giving had increased or remained stable over the previous five years.

These findings suggest that worship attendance is closely related to the depth of a person's engagement in congregational life. Frequent attenders are not simply more present in worship; they are more deeply invested in the congregation's ministry and mission.

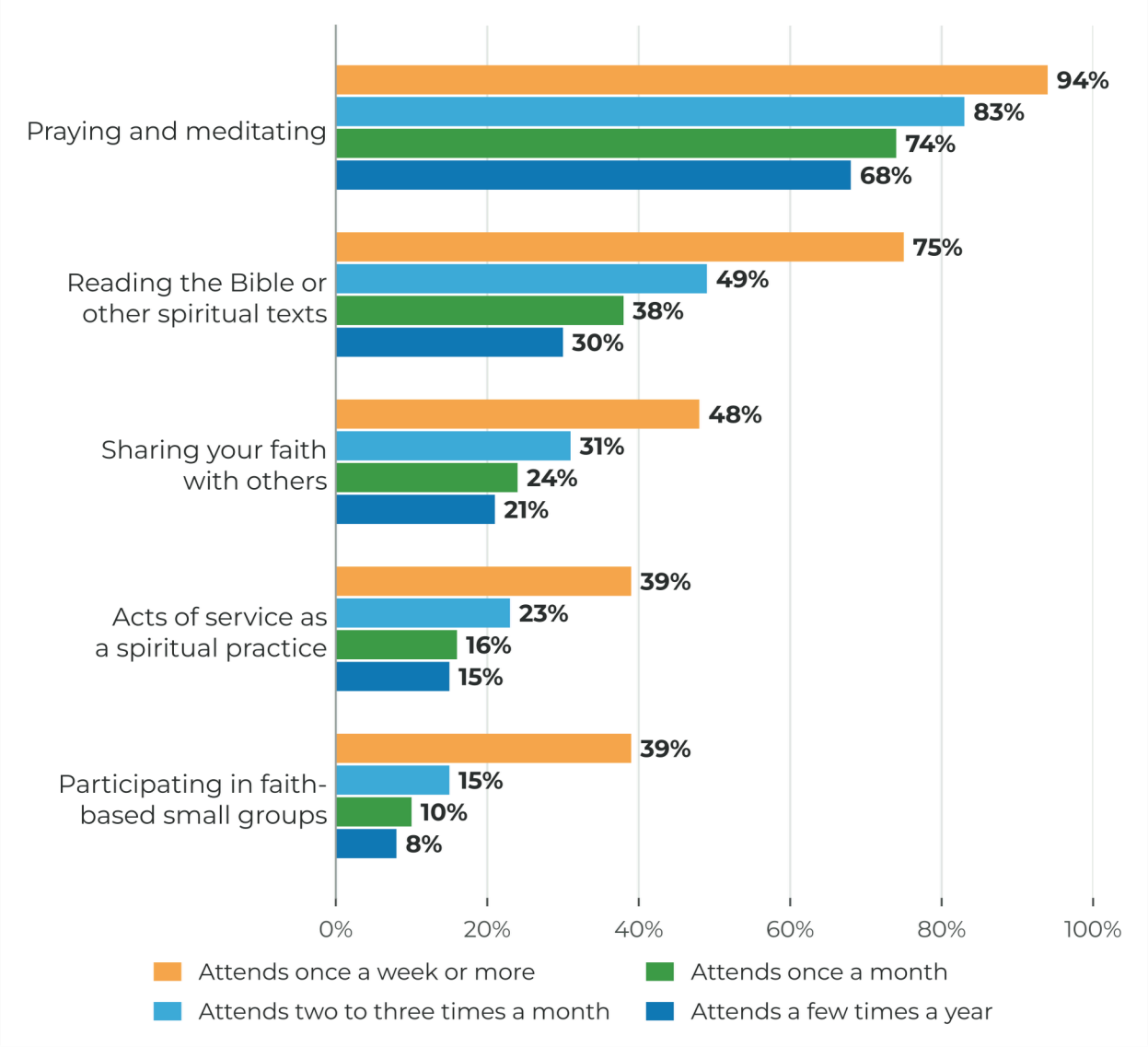
> Frequent attenders are not simply more present in worship; they are more deeply invested in the congregation’s ministry and mission.

Attendance and Religious Practice

Regular attendance in worship is also strongly associated with engagement in the form of traditional religious practices. Weekly attenders are more likely to pray or meditate, read the Bible or other spiritual texts, share their faith, engage in acts of service, and participate in faith-based small groups than those who attend less frequently (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3

Relationship between frequency of worship attendance and traditional religious practices (% reporting weekly engagement in the practice)



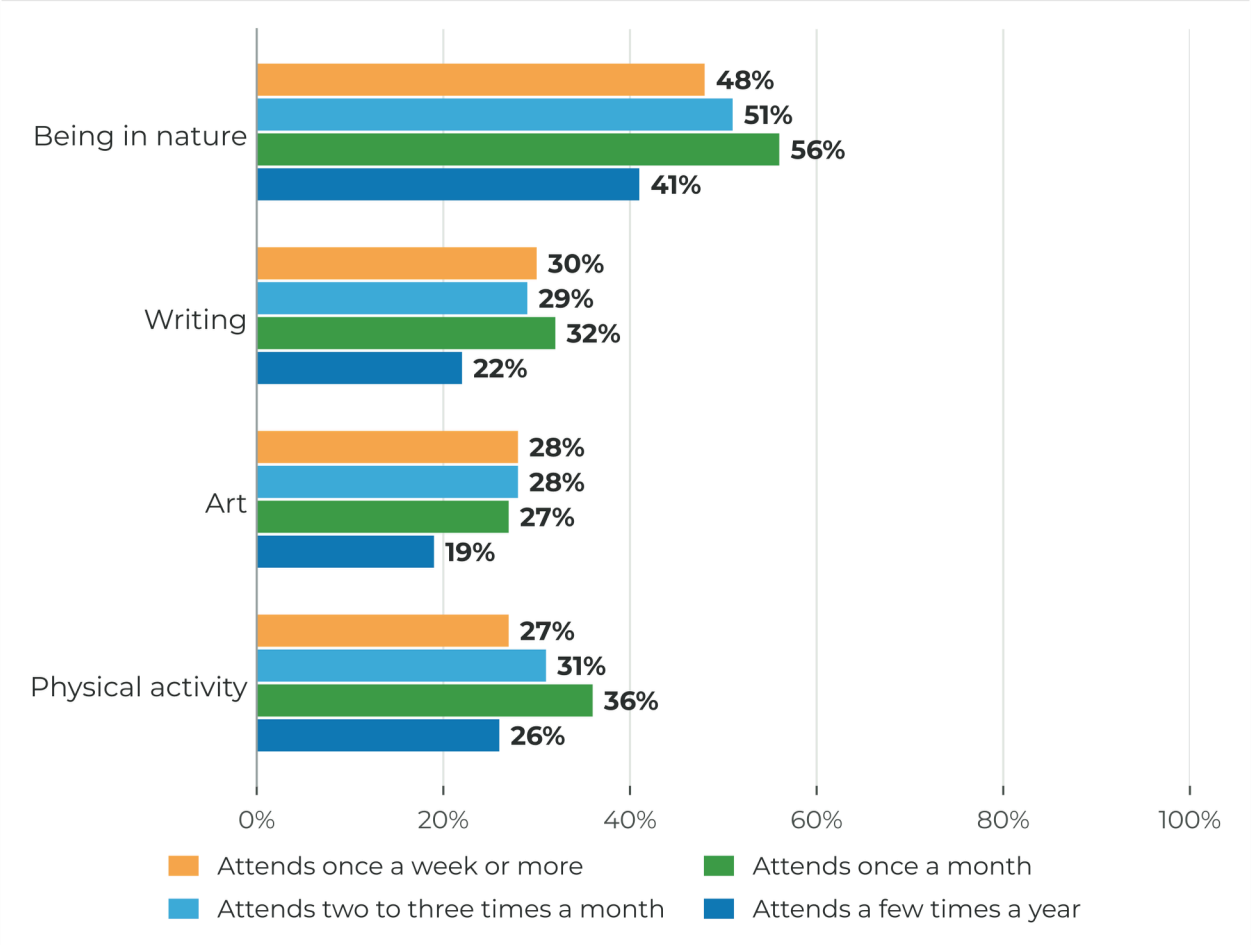
The relationship between attendance and reading spiritual texts is particularly strong. Weekly attenders are the only group in which a majority report reading the Bible or other spiritual texts more than once per week. Participation in small groups follows a similar pattern, declining sharply once attendance falls below weekly participation.

One less traditional practice that follows the same pattern is the use of websites, social media, and other online resources for spiritual development. Weekly attenders were again considerably more likely than less frequent attenders to engage in these activities.

In contrast, spiritual practices such as spending time in nature, writing, creating art, and engaging in physical activity were less practiced overall and showed relatively little relationship to worship attendance (Figure 4). In most cases, respondents with moderate attendance patterns engaged in these activities as often as or more often than weekly attenders. This may indicate that these practices function as a complementary avenue to congregational participation.

FIGURE 4

Relationship between frequency of worship attendance and spiritual practices (% reporting monthly engagement in the practice)



2. Figure 4 presents the percentage of respondents who engaged in each activity at least once a month, as opposed to weekly or more often, given the relatively low frequency overall.

In addition, the importance of faith varied little by attendance frequency, with nearly all respondents indicating that it was at least somewhat important in their lives. Differences emerged primarily in the intensity of commitment rather than in the presence of faith itself. Weekly attenders were more likely to describe faith as very important (94%), but even among less frequent attenders, faith remained highly valued, ranging from 66% among those who attended several times per year to 82% among those who attended two to three times per month.



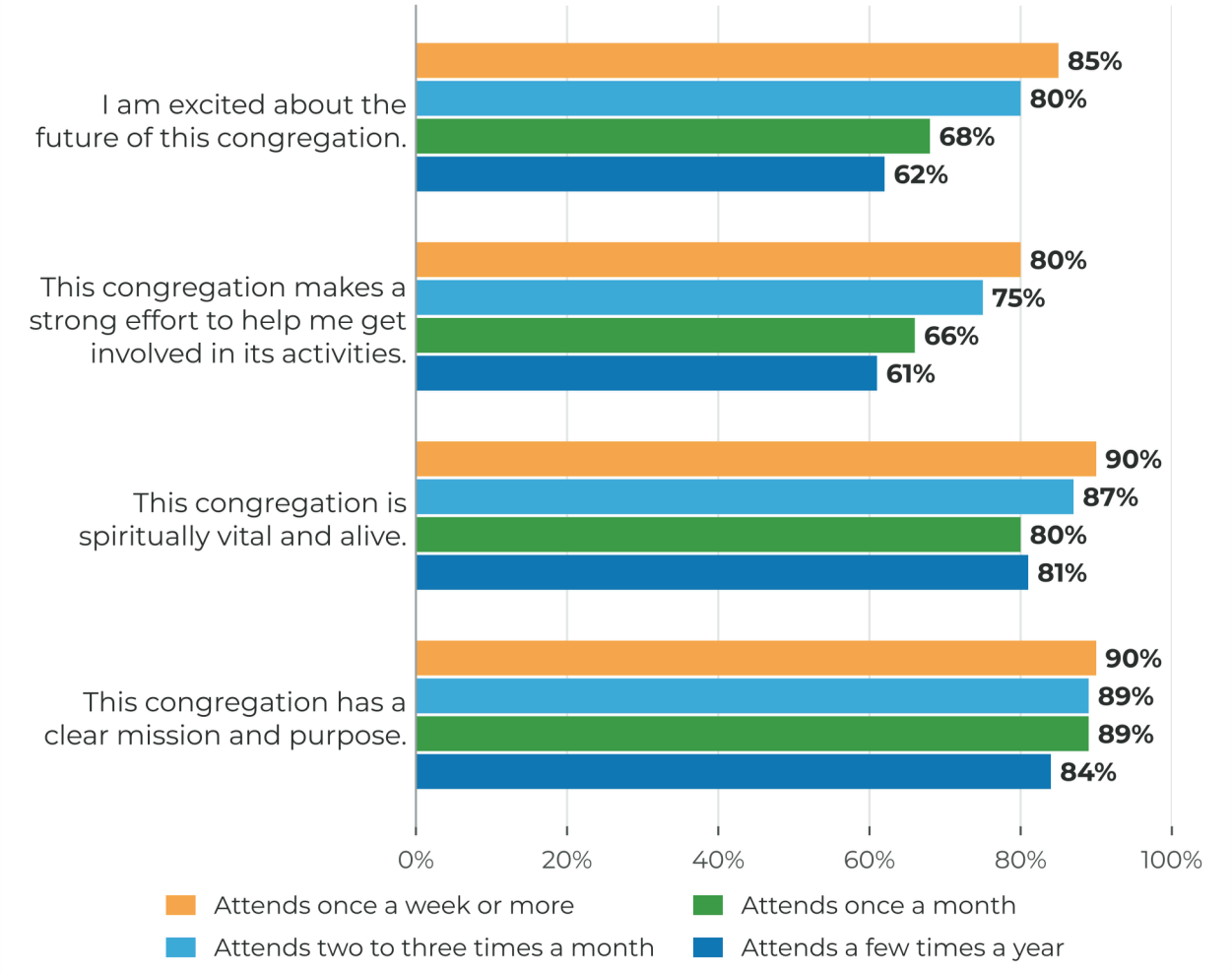
Attendance and Perceptions of Congregational Life

As shown above, attendance is strongly associated with several dimensions of congregational engagement, particularly investment in the congregation and participation in traditional religious practices. Its relationship with perceptions of the congregation, however, is more complex. More frequent attenders tended to express greater optimism about the congregation's future and a stronger sense of connection to congregational life. In particular, weekly attenders were more likely to report excitement about the future of their congregation and to feel that the congregation made a strong effort to help them become involved (Figure 5). Together, these measures capture an important dimension of engagement by reflecting how individuals understand and experience their relationship with the congregation.

On the other hand, attendance is much less strongly associated with perceptions of congregational vitality. Across all attendance groups, respondents expressed remarkably positive views of their congregations. Large majorities agreed that their congregation was spiritually vital and alive and that it possessed a clear mission and purpose (Figure 5). While weekly attenders tended to express somewhat stronger agreement, the differences were modest compared with those observed for behaviors reflecting investment as well as for traditional religious practices.

FIGURE 5

Relationship between frequency of worship attendance and perceptions of congregational life (% agree or strongly agree)



These findings challenge a common assumption that lower attendance necessarily reflects dissatisfaction with a congregation. Many less frequent attenders continue to affirm the mission of their congregation and perceive it as spiritually vital. Understanding this distinction may help congregational leaders interpret attendance patterns more accurately.

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A Potential Engagement Threshold

One of the most notable patterns in the data is that the largest declines in engagement often occur between weekly attendance and attendance two to three times per month.

This pattern appears across numerous measures, including volunteering, financial giving, reading of the Bible or other spiritual texts, participation in small groups, and self- reported increases in congregational involvement.

The findings suggest the possibility of an engagement threshold centered around weekly worship participation. Although attendance itself is only one behavior among many, weekly participation appears to be associated with a broader pattern of engagement that extends beyond worship into congregational life, financial giving, service, and spiritual formation. These patterns point to a model of congregational life characterized by a highly engaged core of weekly attenders— characterized by volunteering, financial giving, participation in traditional religious practices, and increasing involvement over time —and a less engaged periphery who remain connected to the congregation but participate less actively in its ongoing life and ministry.

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Conclusion

The findings from the 2024 FACT Attender Survey suggest that worship attendance functions primarily as a measure of engagement rather than a measure of congregational satisfaction or importance of faith.

Attendance is closely associated with investment in congregational life (e.g., volunteering, financial giving), many traditional religious practices, and a perception of optimism about and connection to the congregation. It is less strongly associated with perceptions of congregational vitality, belief in a congregation's mission and purpose, or the overall importance of faith in a person's life.

Three broader conclusions emerge from the analysis. First, attendance is more strongly associated with behaviors than with attitudes. In other words, attendance appears to be related more to what people do than to their stated beliefs. Second, the data suggest a possible engagement threshold between weekly attendance and attendance several times per month, where many forms of participation begin to decline. Third, the findings support a core and periphery model of congregational life in which the most highly engaged attenders contribute greatly to volunteering, financial giving, and spiritual formation activities, and those who attend worship less frequently likewise participate less frequently in activities outside of worship.

Finally, the weak relationship between attendance and perceptions of congregational vitality suggests that congregational leaders ought not interpret those with low involvement as dissatisfied. Many people may genuinely appreciate their congregation while simultaneously having a low level of involvement in its life. The challenge for congregational leaders may therefore be not simply encouraging attendance but understanding the different ways people remain connected to congregational life and cultivating pathways toward deeper engagement.

Suggested Reflection Questions

- What helps people move toward deeper engagement in your congregation? Are there particular relationships, experiences, practices, or invitations that seem to help people bridge the gap?
- How does your congregation relate to people who attend less frequently? How might you connect to people who value the congregation and its mission but are less frequent participants in its life?
- Where are the easiest entry points into the life of your congregation? What might make volunteering, small groups, service, religious practices, or other forms of participation more accessible to someone who is not already highly engaged?
- How dependent is your congregation on its most highly engaged members? What opportunities or vulnerabilities emerge when a relatively small core provides much of the congregation's volunteering, giving, and participation?

About This Study

The Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study is generously funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. and led by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace (formerly Hartford Seminary). We will continue to release targeted analyses of more specific findings from our topical surveys breaking down how Mainline/Evangelical, multiracial, Black congregations, Latinx congregations, and churches of differing sizes are navigating the pandemic. Sign up to receive our newsletter and like and follow us on Facebook to make sure you receive our reports as soon as they are released. The views expressed in these analyses are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research or its affiliated institutions.

Methodology

This Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC) study is the result of a collaborative venture of 20 denominations from the Faith Communities Today (FACT) cooperative partnership, a network of religious groups and Christian denominations who have been working collaboratively to survey congregations for more than 25 years, and Hartford Institute for Religion Research staff. Together, a questionnaire was crafted by this group. A copy of this questionnaire is available at www.covidreligionresearch.org and should be consulted for the exact wording of items used in this report and the question's general frequencies. Data for this attender survey was collected using two distinctive efforts. The first approach was through the FACT research initiative where 12 participating denominational groups recruited congregational leaders who then distributed the survey to all the people connected to their congregation, including those attending virtually. 764 churches provided 52% of the total responses (n=12,658) between September 2024 and January 2025.

The second approach supplemented the FACT data by purchasing responses from two external panels, namely Survey Monkey Audience (12%, n= 2,784) and Prolific (36%, n=8,723). These supplemental respondents were screened and selected based on having attended church at least a few times a year for services other than weddings or funerals. Taken together, this participant survey represents a weighted number of 24,165 church attenders from more than 80 denominational groups. We designed survey weights to adjust the sample based on denomination and church size using targets derived from several other surveys as comparisons (Pew Religious Landscape Study, National Congregations Study, Faith Communities Today, Baylor Religion Survey, US Congregational Life Survey). The response rate and sampling error for a survey using this methodology can only be estimated. An estimate for the margin of error is +/- 0.6% at the 95% confidence level. Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.

For more information about this study, its methods, or to participate in future surveys, contact Scott Thumma at sthumma@hartfordinternational.edu or Charissa Mikoski at cmikoski@hartfordinternational.edu.

Appendix

Personal Demographics of Respondents

Variable / Category	Percentage
Gender	
Man	39%
Woman	61%
Other	0.2%
Age	
18–34	23%
35–64	46%
65+	30%
Race	
American Indian/Alaska Native (non-Hispanic)	1%
Asian (non-Hispanic)	8%
Black or African American (non-Hispanic)	12%
Hispanic or Latino(a)(x)	4%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (non-Hispanic)	0.2%
White (non-Hispanic)	71%
Biracial/Multiracial	2%
Other	1%
Prefer not to answer	2%
Born in the US	
Yes	90%
No	10%
Education Level	
High school diploma or less	9%
Some college, trade, vocational school, or associate degree	25%
Bachelor's degree	36%
Master's degree or higher	31%
Region	
Northeast	24%
South	34%
Midwest	27%
West	16%

Variable / Category	Percentage
Household Income	
Under $25,000	7%
$25,000–$49,999	15%
$50,000–$74,999	18%
$75,000–$99,999	17%
$100,000–$149,999	22%
$150,000–$199,999	10%
$200,000 or more	11%
Marital Status	
Never been married	20%
Married	64%
Widowed	6%
Divorced	8%
Separated	1%
Other	1%
Household Composition	
Adult who lives alone	19%
A couple without children under 18	25%
One adult with child(ren) under 18	5%
Two or more adults with child(ren) under 18	27%
Two or more adults living in the same household	25%
Political Affiliation	
Strong Democrat	17%
Not strong Democrat	7%
Independent, near Democrat	8%
Independent	10%
Independent, near Republican	9%
Not strong Republican	11%
Strong Republican	28%
Other party	1%
None	3%
Prefer not to answer	7%

Characteristics of the Churches Respondents Attend

Variable / Category	Percentage
Denomination Family	
Catholic/Orthodox	32%
Mainline Protestant	18%
Evangelical Protestant	50%
Congregation Size	
50 or fewer	6%
51–100	10%
101–250	14%
More than 250	71%
Hold Online/Virtual Worship	
Yes	85%
No	15%
Majority Race at Church	
American Indian/Alaska Native (non-Hispanic)	1%
Asian (non-Hispanic)	8%
Black or African American (non-Hispanic)	9%
Hispanic or Latino(a)	3%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (non-Hispanic)	0.1%
White (non-Hispanic)	70%
There is no predominate race	10%
Multiracial Congregation	
Not a multiracial congregation	81%
Multiracial congregation	19%
Stopped Meeting During COVID	
Yes	83%
No	17%

Variable / Category	Percentage
Clergy Leader's Gender	
Man	90%
Woman	10%
Other	0.1%
Clergy Leader's Age	
18-34	2%
35-64	80%
65+	18%
Clergy Leader's Race	
American Indian/Alaska Native (non-Hispanic)	1%
Asian (non-Hispanic)	7%
Black or African American (non-Hispanic)	9%
Hispanic or Latino(a)	3%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (non-Hispanic)	0.1%
White (non-Hispanic)	77%
Multiracial	2%
Other race	1%