

Fibbing about church

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Church attendance isn't what it used to be. Along with the general decline in religious affiliation, churches face another challenge: on any given Sunday, even those with strong connections to a church might well miss worship. This has practical implications for ministry, affecting everything from preaching plans to announcement strategies to how newcomers are welcomed; it also raises deep questions about what it means to be a church.

In a new study by the Public Religion Research Institute (see "[Americans stretch the truth about attending church](#)"), 70 percent of Americans told interviewers they attend religious services at least occasionally. Only 36 percent said they do so every week.

The study also makes a more startling claim: some of these people are exaggerating. The real attendance numbers are even lower.

PRRI did two surveys, one as a live phone interview and the other as a self-directed online survey. Phone respondents reported more frequent attendance—a gap that existed, at various levels, across demographics. The researchers posit that the lower online numbers are more accurate.

This research echoes past studies that found congregational head counts don't correspond with the number of people who tell interviewers they go to church. One thing PRRI's creative methodology clarifies, however, is that it's not simply that

people go to church less than they think they do. It's that a portion of them will tell a human being one thing and a web form something else. This gap represents "social desirability bias": in a conversation, people feel pressure to say the "right" thing.

It's discouraging that people attend church even less than they claim. Church leaders know, however, that irregular attendance can signify an evolving commitment rather than a fading one. And while it's easy to dismiss the inflated phone results as the reflection of a vestigial sense of obligation, we could see something more hopeful: some of the people who aren't at church might actually like to be there. They aren't necessarily opposed or indifferent to worship; they're just not prioritizing it, for whatever reason.

One might expect this social desirability bias to be smallest among the religiously unaffiliated. In fact, this group reveals the largest gap (in a tie with Catholics): 91 percent clicked "seldom or never" on the online survey, but only 73 percent said this to an interviewer. Why would they exaggerate their church attendance? Maybe for the same reason that almost a fifth of these "nones" told Pew Forum pollsters that they see their own group's growth as a negative development. They may be unaffiliated, but that doesn't mean they're unanimously pleased about it.

Perhaps some of these responses are motivated by aspiration, not obligation. Some who seldom attend services might actually like to find a faith community, and some occasional attendees may aim to show up more. Studies like this offer hard truths but also hopeful challenges: to hold Sunday services worth showing up for and to reach out to those who attend infrequently. The days of full pews across the land are behind us. But there still are people hungry for more, and the challenge remains to find ways to break bread with them.