

Is this church attendance study all bad news?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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I know a guy, a committed church member, who missed his own grandchild's baptism. It was far away, on a Sunday that was a busy one for his own church. So he felt compelled to skip the trip and go to church.

This impressed me. It's hard to imagine such a thing at the church where I work. There, a lot of people just show up when they're free, maybe twice a month. People are excited about the church, and many say they'd like to show up more. But for whatever reason, they don't.

[This new PRRI study on church attendance](#) is based on a pretty clever idea: ask the same questions by phone and online, and measure the gap between the results. It's about "social desirability bias," the pressure people feel to say the right thing when they're talking to an actual person. And when it comes to church attendance, this is evidently a very real thing: people are more likely to tell a person they go to church frequently than to click that box on a screen.

The typical takeaways: church attendance is even lower than people say, yet people feel pressure to lie about it. [Here's atheist blogger Hemant Mehta](#):

You want people to think of you as a good person, and one way to do that in our society is by saying you go to church. Even religious people who presumably believe "Thou shalt not bear false witness" will *happily lie when it comes to their churchgoing*. Not many people will honestly admit to someone that they skip church on Sunday or don't give a damn about God.

But when you remove that human connection, the truth comes pouring out....

If I were a pastor, this study would freak me out. It turns out the country is a lot less religious than we thought. We're just afraid to admit it.

I'm not so sure. Obviously, when 36 percent of Americans tell a interviewer they attend worship every week, it's not loads of fun for us church folks to consider that

this discouraging number remains artificially high. But I don't think it's quite fair to assume that all those who fib do so out of some vestigial sense of guilt or peer pressure that they can't quite shake. What if some of them are answering as the faithful worshipers they genuinely aspire to be?

Like others who have read this study, I'm especially interested in the fact that the religiously unaffiliated are more likely than others to exaggerate their church attendance in the phone survey. It recalls the Pew nugget that [almost a fifth of the nones see the growth of the nones as a bad thing](#). Not all the nones are buying nones t-shirts. And the fact that this group includes some who can't quite cut the nominal-faith cord doesn't prevent it from also including some genuine seekers.

Nor does the fact that the people at my church attend worship so irregularly necessarily mean they're not committed to the church. Commitments can wane, but they can also change form. Dealing with less-regular attendance is one of the many challenges worship leaders face these days. But I don't think the fact that some people exaggerate their own attendance is all bad news. It speaks as well of people's hopes and their hunger.