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David Briggs: Don't take faith for granted

Christian leaders ignore the spiritual needs of congregations at their own peril. Even the hardest-to-reach group -- young adults -- appears open to approaches that emphasize spiritual growth.

by [David Briggs](#)



iStock Photo

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Editor's note: A version of this article originally appeared as an Ahead of the Trend column on the [Association of Religion Data Archives website](#).

Men would rather watch Monday Night Football than go shopping. Eating too many Hardee's Monster Thickburgers is linked to obesity. Texting while driving is a bad idea.

There are times when research findings are so obvious they are almost beyond questioning. So it is puzzling that growing evidence showing the importance of congregations cultivating the spiritual lives of the faithful is so routinely ignored.

Puzzling, and damaging to the health of many of the nation's churches, especially those most in need of revival.

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Even though research shows that spiritually alive churches are the most likely to grow, the percentage of U.S. congregations reporting high spiritual vitality declined from 43 percent in 2005 to 28 percent in 2010, according to the latest [Faith Communities Today](#) survey.

The drop was accompanied by a decline in the emphasis given to spiritual practices such as prayer and Scripture reading across nearly all groups aside from white evangelicals and congregations with 1,000 or more attenders.

The most notable slide occurred among white mainline Protestant denominations, which have been aging and losing members faster than any other major religious group.

The reasons are varied: declining financial health in the recession saps morale; aging memberships are less likely to embrace new forms of worship; some denominations have shifted emphasis away from personal piety toward social service programs.

It's not, however, because they don't know any better.

Spiritual and religious

Study after study shows what may appear to outside observers to be simple common sense: A major reason people attend religious congregations is to deepen their faith lives and draw closer to God.

The [U.S. Congregational Life Survey](#) found that the percentage of weekly worshippers who reported growing in faith through their congregation was twice as high as the percentage of more infrequent attenders who reported similar spiritual growth.

The survey also indicated that "grass-roots evangelists," those who feel at ease sharing their faith with others and [invite people to worship](#), were far more likely to strongly agree that their spiritual needs are being met in the congregation and to practice devotional activities every day or most days.

"Worshippers in strong congregations also regularly spend time on their own praying, reading Scripture or using other materials to help them better understand and deepen their faith," survey researchers reported. "In other words, congregations where people spend time on their own cultivating their faith tend to have extraordinary worship as well. They're bookend strengths."

In a survey of megachurches, the No. 1 reason people gave for moving from a spectator to an active participant in their congregation was "I responded to an inward sense of call or spiritual prompting," researchers Scott Thumma of Hartford Seminary and Warren Bird of Leadership Network report in their new book, "[The Other 80 Percent: Turning Your Church's Spectators into Active Participants](#)."

And the No. 1 reason people participated less in their congregation in the past two years? It was a tie between "had less time" and "faith had gotten weaker," according to a separate survey of [parish profile inventories offered by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research](#).

"Surveys of church people clearly indicate an important reality about people who are highly committed: the most involved are also most likely to say they are spiritually fulfilled, to acknowledge spiritual growth, and to express satisfaction with their journey of faith. There is a strong, unmistakable relationship between the two," Thumma and Bird write.

Even the hardest-to-reach groups in the contemporary religious marketplace -- young adults -- appear open to approaches emphasizing spiritual growth.

Researchers Christian Smith and Patricia Snell of the University of Notre Dame examined results from the [National Study of Youth and Religion](#) for their book "Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults." They found that factors that do predict high levels of commitment include frequent prayer and Scripture reading, personal religious experiences and highly religious parents.

Yet spiritual sustenance is often what people both young and old are not getting from their congregations.

The gap widens

In 2000, about three-quarters of white mainline congregations from denominations such as the [Episcopal Church](#) and the [United Church of Christ](#) reported giving a great deal of emphasis to spiritual practices. By 2010, less than two-thirds, or 63 percent, emphasized practices like prayer and Scripture reading, according to the Faith Communities Today survey.

By comparison, the percentage of white evangelical congregations giving a great deal of emphasis to spiritual practices rose slightly, from 90 percent to 91 percent.

It is difficult for many congregations today to remain spiritually vital amid decreasing financial health as a result of the recession and shrinking worship attendance in a time when religious observance is more of a choice than an obligation.

The loss of morale creates an environment where many say, “It doesn’t feel as if God is in this place,” said David Roozen, a lead researcher of the Faith Communities Today survey.

But part of the issue is also the choices many church leaders have made to place greater emphasis on social service programs or church committee work than on promoting spiritual growth.

There is evidence that, going back to the 1960s and 1970s, many mainline Protestant leaders “took faith for granted” while emphasizing other programs, Roozen said.

But activities such as prayer, worship and Scripture reading are integral to the faith of people of all ages, researchers say.

“If they’re going to go [to church], why they want to be there, I think, is for religion,” Roozen said. “They want to connect with God and a community that connects with God.”

The mystery is why that is so hard to understand.