

THE WAY FORWARD

Charting 5 Priorities
for the Church

Lifeway[®] research
Insights Report

What is the state of the church in the United States?

You may have an anecdotal idea of the state of the church today, but what can research tell us? And why does it matter? For nearly 20 years, Lifeway Research has been conducting studies about faith in culture and matters that affect churches. This research provides insights and information on the realities of the culture in which we live. This, in turn, enables pastors and church leaders to better understand their congregations and communities, which is no easy task.

In fact, at times, pastoring seems like an impossible task. Every day, pastors face leadership challenges, personal difficulties, and spiritual struggles. The work is not often easy, but if you're reading this report today, you'd probably agree the task is worthwhile. And if you're feeling overwhelmed or uncertain about the state of the church today and where to begin or what issues to confront, reading this report is a great place to start. After all, research helps us identify areas of need, better define potential gaps, and see blind spots. And how can we address these without first knowing what they are?

Based on various studies from recent years, Lifeway Research has identified five challenges churches are facing today. Considering the current challenges, we've pinpointed these priorities for the church to begin addressing:

1. **Growing the church through evangelism**
2. **Overcoming apathy**
3. **Investing in adult discipleship**
4. **Reaching the next generation**
5. **Promoting pastor well-being**

This report unpacks each of these issues and areas of opportunity within the church. Of course, your particular experience in each will vary based on you, your ministry, and your context. But we hope the research in the following pages will serve as a benchmark for you and your ministry. Which of these priorities is your church already navigating well? Which areas need some help?

Alongside the research, this report provides insights you can put into practice in your church and ministry. Don't try to implement every possible takeaway tomorrow. Instead, identify one or two next steps for your church and start there. Today.

As we journey alongside you in ministry, we can't wait to hear how God uses your church for His kingdom and glory!

Scott McConnell

Executive Director of Lifeway Research

CURRENT CHALLENGES

CHRISTIANITY HAS DECLINED IN THE UNITED STATES.

Since the 1970s, Christianity has fallen from nearly 90% of the U.S. population to less than two-thirds.

Source: [Pew Research Center](#)

CHURCHES HAVE ROOM TO GROW IN EVANGELISM.

Most Christians in the U.S. (69%) believe every Christian has a responsibility to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus as their Savior, but fewer have told a non-Christian stranger (30%) or friend or family member (38%) about how to become a Christian in the previous six months.

Source: [2022 Lifeway Research study](#)

CHURCHES IN THE U.S. ARE MARKED BY APATHY.

Most pastors say the primary people-dynamic challenge they face in their churches is people's apathy or lack of commitment (75%).

Source: [2022 Greatest Needs of Pastors study](#) — Lifeway Research

REGULAR CHURCHGOERS ARE OK WITH SKIPPING CHURCH.

Most regular churchgoers say they would miss a weekly worship service at least once a year to avoid traveling in severe weather (77%), to enjoy an outdoor activity (55%), or to get some extra sleep (54%).

Source: [2022 Lifeway Research study](#)

A SHRINKING PERCENTAGE OF CHURCHGOERS ARE INVOLVED IN A SMALL GROUP.

The average percentage of worship service attendees who are involved in some type of small group has fallen from 50% in 2008 to 44% today.

Source: [2022 Lifeway Research study](#)

GROUPS MINISTRY LEADERS NEED TO BE TRAINED FOR DISCIPLESHIP.

More than 1 in 3 (36%) churches say they don't provide any training for their small group leaders. And 76% of church leaders acknowledge they need to do more in the area of training.

Source: [2024 State of Groups](#) — Lifeway Research

MOST YOUNG ADULTS DROP OUT OF CHURCH FOR AT LEAST A TIME.

Two in 3 (66%) American young adults who attended a Protestant church regularly for at least a year as a teenager say they dropped out of church for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22.

Source: [2017 Lifeway Research study](#)

THE NEXT GENERATION IS PLAGUED BY TWO FELT NEEDS.

Kids are searching for identity and longing for belonging.

Source: [Flip the Script](#) — Lifeway Kids

PASTORS ARE STRESSED.

Of all the mental challenges U.S. Protestant pastors face, stress stands out above the rest. Nearly two-thirds (63%) point to stress as a mental challenge.

Source: [2022 Greatest Needs of Pastors study](#) — Lifeway Research

THE DEMANDS ON PASTORS ARE HIGH.

Most pastors say they are on-call 24 hours a day (71%) and their role is frequently overwhelming (63%), and half (50%) say the demands of their job are often greater than they can handle.

Source: [2021 Lifeway Research study](#)



PRIORITY

Growing the Church Through Evangelism

"The United States has experienced a dramatic decline in those identifying as Christian. More than a quarter of the population has shifted from Christianity to no religion at all in the last 50 years."

— Scott McConnell, Executive Director of Lifeway Research

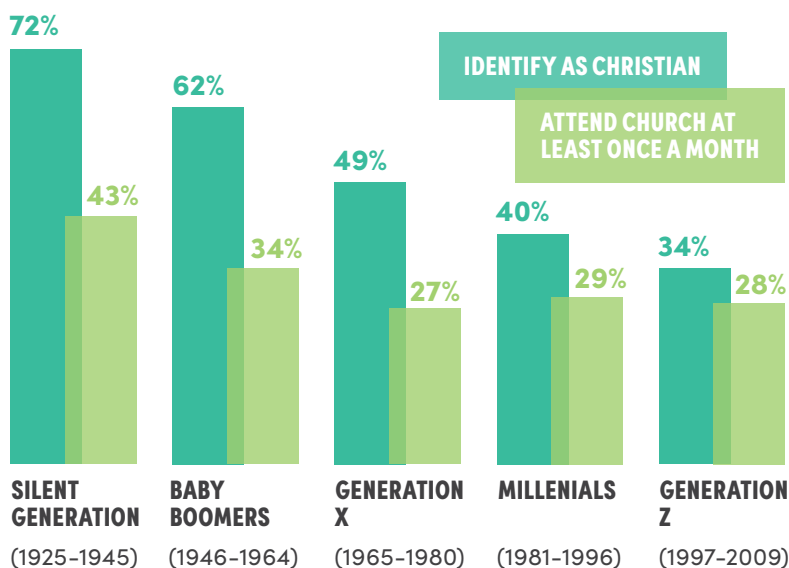
Christianity is exploding around the globe and growing faster than the rate of population. But this has not been the story in the United States. In 2022, Pew Research modeled various scenarios for American religious demographics through 2070. They found the most likely outcome to be Christianity dropping below a majority in 2045 and those unaffiliated with any religion becoming the largest group by 2055. By 2070, 52% of Americans are expected to be unaffiliated and 35% to identify as Christian. And being in the “Bible Belt” doesn’t exclude your church from these issues. If current trajectories continue, the religious demographics of the South in 10 years will look similar to the current West and Northeast.

The story of U.S. religion in recent years has been the rise of the nones—the growing number of Americans who say they are atheist, agnostic, or not affiliated with any religion. Since the 1970s, the religiously unaffiliated have risen from a single-digit percentage of the U.S. population to encompass 3 in 10 adults. That growth has been steady and substantial. Meanwhile, Christianity has fallen from nearly 90% of the U.S. population to less than two-thirds.

Although the latest research from the General Social Survey (GSS), Gallup, and Pew Research indicates the growth of religiously unaffiliated Americans has slowed or even stopped, that does not equate to an automatic rebound of growth for the Christian church. In fact, we’ve seen a steady decline in both Christian identity and church attendance with each passing generation.

Churches are experiencing a dramatic shift as American culture has less and less affinity for Christianity and more and more people walk away from Christian churches. Hovering near all-time lows, only 32% of U.S. adults say they have trust in organized religion or the church, according to a Gallup poll. Gallup’s Honesty and Ethics survey finds trust in pastors continues to fall, with only 30% of U.S. adults saying clergy have high or very high levels of honesty and ethics. Gone are the days when we could assume our neighbors and those we meet in our everyday lives attend church. And the younger the generation, the more likely it is they have no memories of going to church.

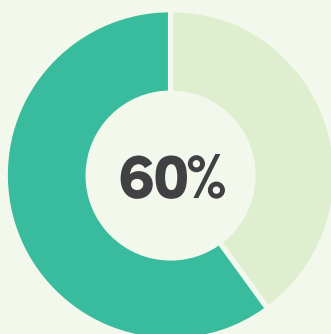
In each generation, **IDENTIFYING AS A CHRISTIAN** and **CHURCH ATTENDANCE** are decreasing.



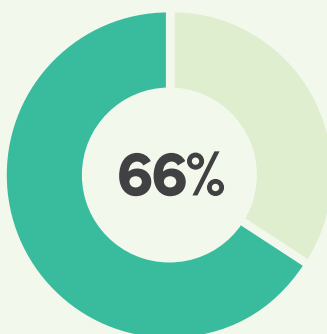
If churches want to see this trend reversed, they must join God's work of advancing His kingdom in their communities. A Lifeway Research study on church health found a church's evangelism was a strong factor that predicted church growth. This should be obvious, but the more effectively evangelistic a church is, the more likely they are to have grown numerically. If you want more people at your church, you need to reach more people with the gospel.

Secularism has a strong foothold in American culture

Source: [Lifeway Research State of Theology](#)



Americans agree that religious belief is a matter of personal opinion; it is not about objective truth.



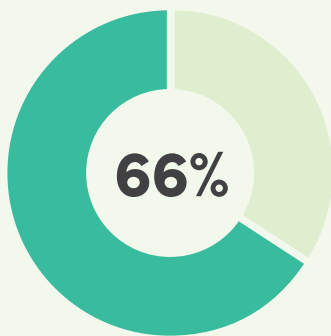
Americans agree that everyone sins a little, but most people are good by nature.

"God has specifically stationed you where you are to draw His people into a lifetime of excitement for evangelism. Don't miss these critical opportunities that have eternal impact."

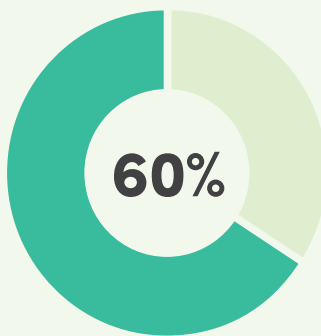
- Ben Mandrell, President and CEO of Lifeway Christian Resources

North America is ripe for a spiritual awakening. But this potential calls for every Christian to take part in telling family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and acquaintances the life-changing message of the gospel.

According to [another Lifeway Research report](#), most Christians say they're ready, willing, and praying to have conversations about their faith with others, but many admit they haven't gotten around to having those conversations. Most American Christians (69%) believe every Christian has a responsibility to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus as their Savior, but fewer have told a non-Christian stranger (30%) or friend or family member (38%) about how to become a Christian in the previous six months.



Americans are open to having a conversation about faith with a friend.



Americans say many of their Christian friends rarely talk about their faith.

Developing a culture of evangelism begins with the pastor, yet more than 3 in 4 pastors (76%) admit fostering connections with unchurched people is a ministry difficulty that needs attention. So, it should be no surprise the people in our pews also struggle to evangelize. For most, their lack of evangelism begins

with their lack of training. More than 7 in 10 Christians (72%) haven't been trained in any method of telling others about Jesus. And two-thirds of Christians (66%) aren't familiar with any method for telling others about Jesus. Their friends notice this gap. Although 2 in 3 Americans (66%) say they're open to having a conversation about faith with a friend, 3 in 5 (60%) say many of their friends who claim to be Christians rarely talk about their faith.

6 WAYS TO CREATE A CULTURE OF EVANGELISM

- 1 REDEFINE SUCCESS FOR THOSE YOU LEAD.** Success isn't seeing someone saved; success is simply sharing the gospel.
- 2 REALIZE SHARING THE GOSPEL ISN'T ABOUT US.** Knowing this takes the pressure off.
- 3 HELP PEOPLE UNDERSTAND THEIR PART IN THE GREAT COMMISSION.** Every believer has a role to play in sharing the gospel and making disciples.
- 4 PRAY TOGETHER FOR OPPORTUNITIES.** When we pray for opportunities to tell someone about Jesus, we can wait and watch expectantly, knowing God will respond because the harvest is plentiful.
- 5 CHOOSE A SIMPLE METHOD FOR SHARING THE GOSPEL.** Choosing a simple method and teaching it repeatedly can help others learn to share the gospel.
- 6 SHARE YOUR STORIES.** Regularly share stories of gospel conversations you've had or attempted to have in the past couple of weeks.

4 FACTORS FOR OPENING DOORS FOR EVANGELISM

1 FRIENDS TOP STRANGERS

If people are going to have a conversation about faith, they'd rather talk to someone they know.

2 IN-PERSON TOPS SOCIAL MEDIA

Non-Christians would rather speak about religious issues face-to-face than try to have that discussion on social media.

3 PERSONAL TESTIMONY TOPS FORCED DISCUSSION

Non-Christians would rather hear your story than listen to a religious lecture.

4 CONVERSATION TOPS PRESENTATION

Conversations create a personal connection, while the forced use of tools can cause people to disconnect.

6 QUESTIONS TO SPARK EVANGELISM

1

Am I genuinely interested in the spiritual condition of others?

2

Do I initiate conversations?

3

Do I make a Jesus impact on the lives of others?

4

Do I intentionally seek to follow up with people?

5

Do I invite people to believe and follow Jesus?

6

Do I guide new believers in discipleship?



PRIORITY

Overcoming Apathy

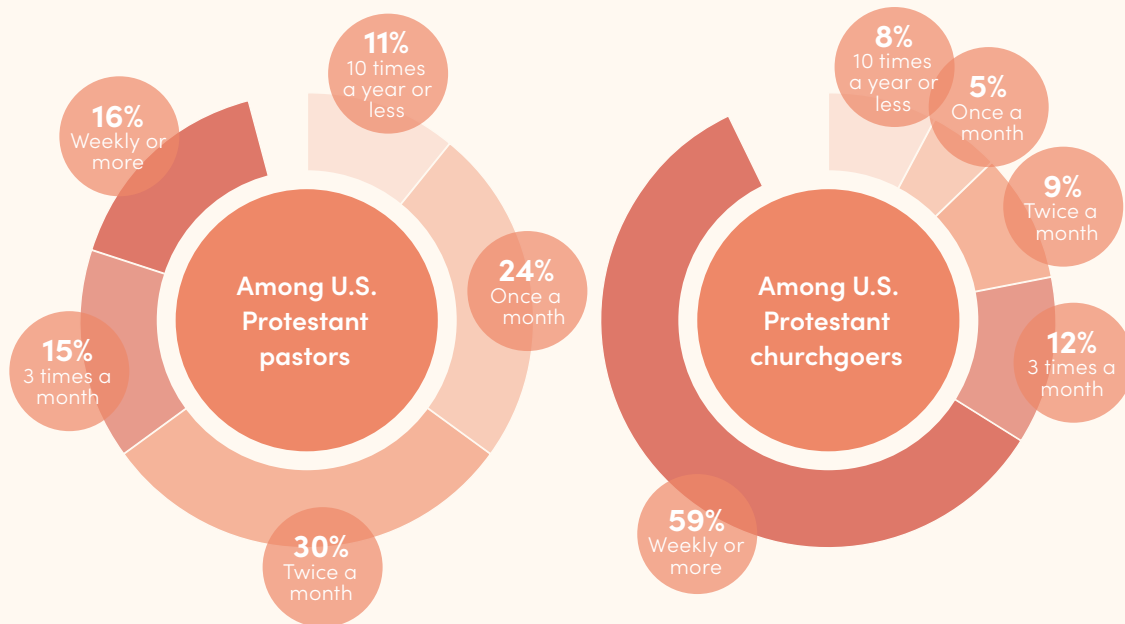
"A lot of people weren't involved—not because there wasn't an area for them to serve but because they just were apathetic toward feeling they needed to help pull on the harness with everybody else. They were more content to just drag with the load behind while everybody else was pulling."

— Pastor, Greatest Needs of Pastors survey

Pastors often deal with churchgoers with strong opinions, but they're more likely concerned about the people in their congregations who don't seem to care much at all. Lifeway Research's 2022 Greatest Needs of Pastors study found most pastors say the primary people-dynamic challenge they face in their churches is people's apathy or lack of commitment (75%).

Pastors see this apathy in the lowering threshold for what qualifies someone as a regular church attendee. A 2022 Lifeway Research study found for U.S. Protestant pastors to consider someone in their congregation a regular churchgoer, 3 in 5 expect attendance at least twice a month, while 1 in 10 include those who attend less than monthly.

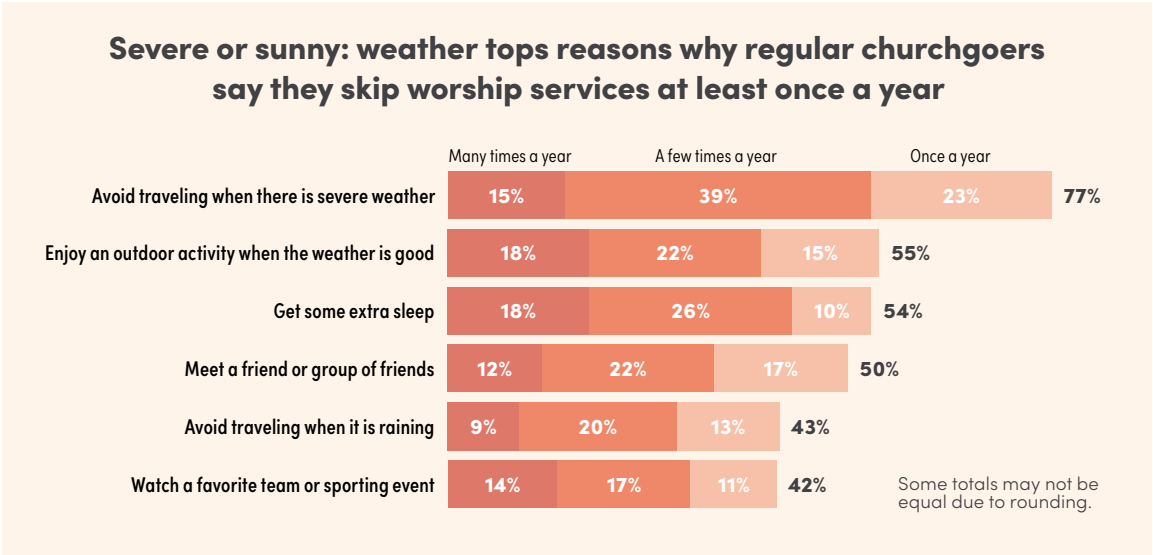
How often does someone have to attend to be considered a regular churchgoer?



Churchgoers themselves are likely to place the standard of regular church attendance near their own frequency. In a study of those who attend church at least once a month, 86% say a regular churchgoer is someone who attends once a month or more.

The more frequently a churchgoer attends services the more likely they are to place a higher threshold for being considered a regular church attendee. Yet, even among those who attend less than weekly, a large portion identify weekly or more as the standard for a regular attendee.

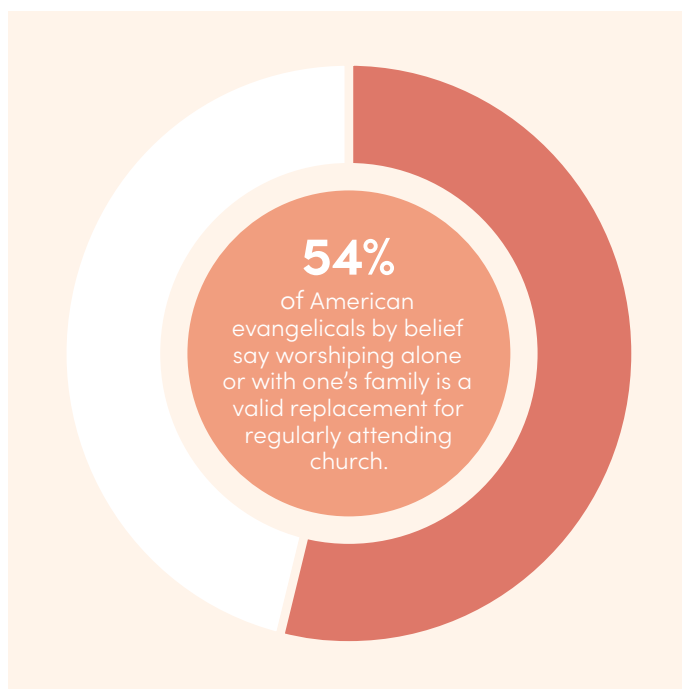
Pastors also notice the apathy of churchgoers when they allow things like weather and sporting events to keep them from attending church. According to another [2022 study from Lifeway Research](#), most regular churchgoers say they would miss a weekly worship service at least once a year to avoid traveling in severe weather (77%), to enjoy an outdoor activity (55%), or to get some extra sleep (54%). Half (50%) would do so to meet a friend or group of friends. Fewer say they'd skip to not have to travel when it was raining (43%) or to watch a sporting event or their favorite team (42%).



Although a [2023 Lifeway Research study](#) of both U.S. Protestant pastors and churchgoers found most in both groups believe it's OK to miss church occasionally for a kid's game or travel sporting event, those in the pews are laxer on the issue than those behind the pulpit.

More than 1 in 3 U.S. Protestant pastors (36%) say it's never OK to skip a weekly worship service for kids' games or travel sporting events, but almost 3 in 5 (58%) see at least some allowance for missing in those circumstances. Based on their perspective on missing services, many churchgoers see the potential impact differently than their pastors. Fewer than 1 in 5 U.S. Protestant churchgoers (18%) say it's never OK to skip church for kids' sports. Around 3 in 4 (74%) believe it's acceptable at least occasionally.

Sometimes, this apathy appears in the form of church members who are willing to watch the service online but not to attend in person. According to the [State of Theology study](#) conducted by Lifeway Research, from 2020 to 2022, the percentage of American evangelicals who say worshipping alone or with one's family is a valid replacement for regularly attending church jumped from 39% to 54%.



Additionally, many pastors say when they try to implement changes in their congregation, churchgoers are not as supportive as they would have hoped. In fact, 46% of pastors find people's resistance to change to be a challenge in their ministry. A 2023 Lifeway Research study found among churchgoers who changed churches for a reason other than a residential move, nearly 3 in 10 (29%) say they made the switch because some things changed about their previous church they did not like. Among the 29% who say they changed churches because the church itself changed, more than half (53%) say too many things in general changed.

Overcoming this apathy in the church requires churchgoers rally behind a common vision. But more than 2 in 5 pastors (45%) say they need to give specific attention to the ministry difficulty of establishing a compelling vision for their church. Without a clearly communicated vision for people to rally around, apathy will abound.

"Many people can be a member of a church but not participate in the work of the church. Pastors see the potential of mobilizing everyone in the church to minister to others in the church and in their community. But getting everyone motivated and moving the same direction can be challenging for church leaders."

— Scott McConnell, Executive Director of Lifeway Research

3 CHURCH MEMBER EXPERIENCES THAT MAY LOOK LIKE APATHY BUT AREN'T

1 EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION

Emotional exhaustion occurs when our mental and emotional energies are spent after enduring a long season of stress. For those facing emotional exhaustion, apathy in church is sourced from debility, not disregard. The mentally exhausted may want to care but lack the emotional bandwidth to do so, at least at the moment.

2 DEPRESSION

Depression occurs for myriad reasons: abuse, loss, illness, medication, genetics, gender, and even aging. For people suffering from depression, life feels feelingless. The apathy others witness in them isn't directed toward God; instead, it's an absence of vitality altogether.

3 MORAL INJURY

Moral injury is an unseen wound inflicted on a person's mind and soul after experiencing a violation of their deepest moral convictions, whether it's something they did or something done to them. While moral injury manifests in demoralized anger, it also leads to demoralized apathy. In their wrestling with the past, apathy overshadows them in the present.

5 KEYS TO CAST (AND SUSTAIN) A VIBRANT VISION FOR YOUR CHURCH

1

REACHING EVERYBODY REACHES NOBODY.

Leverage the principle of laser focus to set a defined scope and timeframe toward what and where God is calling your church to reach.

2

BE CLEAR OVER CUTE.

Remove any words, concepts, or stories that obscure the clear, compelling act of living the vision everywhere and every day.

3

PRACTICE DRIPPING, NOT DRENCHING.

Extend the vision cast beyond one special gathering at the new year into every ordinary gathering all year.

4

LEVERAGE EVERY AVAILABLE CHANNEL.

Think about casting vision from a multi-pronged approach, across platforms, generations, and timeframes. One well-crafted letter or email is not enough.

5

WHAT'S CELEBRATED GETS REPLICATED.

Making a big deal out of small things builds the culture around the vision. Find ways to mark movement toward God's better future and highlight the practices and actions of disciple-making success.

PRIORITY

3

Investing in Adult Discipleship

"We felt like disciple-making ought to be multiplying. We should see people engaging in this process—to not just be a disciple but to also make disciples. Are we seeing transformation in the lives of our folks? Sometimes, but not as much as we would like to see."

— Pastor, Greatest Needs of Pastors study

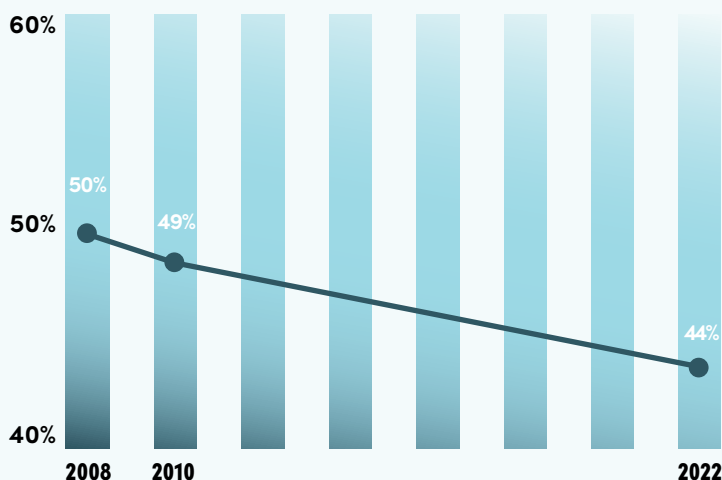
Discipleship is the church's main mission, yet according to Lifeway Research's [2022 Greatest Needs of Pastors study](#), 63% of pastors say disciple-making is a skill they need to develop to help them be better pastors.

It should come as no surprise groups—Sunday School, small groups, life groups—are a powerful tool for discipleship in the life of the church. Time and again, Scripture points to the importance of Christian community in the life of a maturing believer. And [studies from Lifeway Research](#) confirm what Scripture teaches—groups matter. The power of groups is seen in higher levels of evangelism, service, giving, disciplines, and relationships among those who regularly participate.

Along with a congregation's evangelism, small group discipleship is a strong factor that predicts church growth, according to a [2022 Lifeway Research study](#). If you've reached new people and they feel at home in your church, an important step is to get them involved in small groups. A higher percentage of worship attendees involved in groups means a church is more likely to be growing its worship service.

A shrinking percentage of churchgoers are involved in a small group

The average percentage of adult churchgoers involved in a small group, Sunday School class, or similar group at their church, according to U.S. Protestant pastors.



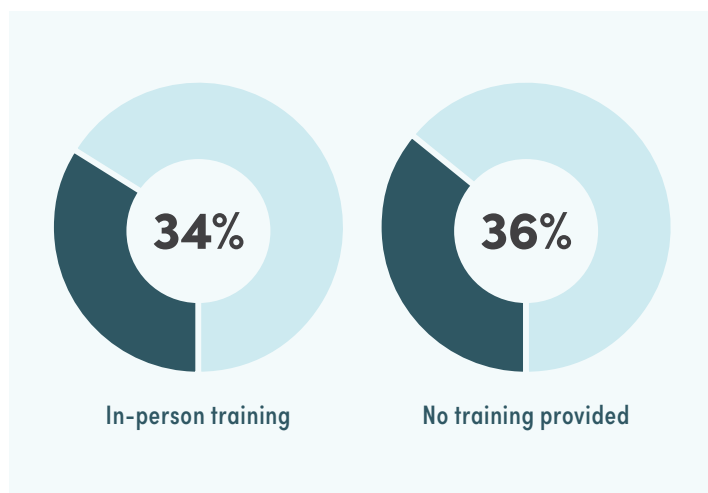
However, it has become increasingly difficult for pastors to move worship attendees into small groups. The same [Lifeway Research study](#) found the average percentage of worship service attendees who are involved in some type of small group has fallen from 50% in 2008 to 44% today. And a [2019 Lifeway Research study](#) indicated a rise in lone ranger Christians over the last decade. Today, 2 in 3 churchgoers (65%) believe they can walk with God without other believers.

Living and interacting with other believers is a central part of a believer's discipleship and growth. The good news is, according to [Lifeway Research studies](#), more than 2 in 3 of those not in a group are open to attending (68%). They may just need some extra encouragement to join. In fact, an invitation goes a long way, with 47% of group participants saying they joined their group because the leader or a member of the group invited them.

But if a group starts to grow, most leaders aren't going to intervene. Nine in 10 (90%) say they don't limit the size of ongoing adult Bible study groups. Small, medium, and large groups all have advantages and disadvantages. Experts, however, suggest groups that grow too large should be split to form new groups. In general, Sunday School and small group leaders agree the right size for a group is eight to 16.

If small group participants are staying in the same group for more than two years, it's likely your church isn't starting new groups, thus limiting opportunities for new members to join and connect. Look for ways to limit group size and multiply the number of small groups available.

But at the end of the day, groups ministry depends on volunteers who lead each small group. In many cases, these small group leaders don't necessarily have formal theological training or educational experience. So, what training do these leaders receive?



"Discipleship happens best within a smaller group of people. Jesus had a group of 12 and an inner group of three. And group members often have deeper relationships in smaller groups because they are known. It's hard to hide in plain sight, but people can disappear in larger groups."

— Ken Braddy, Lifeway's
Director of Sunday School

More than 1 in 3 (36%) churches say they don't provide any training for their small group leaders. Another 1 in 3 (34%) say they provide in-person training. More than 1 in 4 say books are available (28%). Fewer say only new leaders are trained when they start (14%) or video training is available (12%). Around 1 in 5 (21%) say they provide other training for ongoing adult Bible study leaders.

5 STEPS FOR STARTING NEW GROUPS

1 KNOW YOUR POSSIBILITIES.

This first step is all about seeing the possible future of your group ministry. Do you have a group for every kind of person who wants to study the Bible? In essence, you are determining the target audiences for the new group(s).

2 ENLARGE THE ORGANIZATION.

How many new preschool, children, student, and adult groups do you plan to add to reach the new people you identified in step one? Once you've listed all the new groups, determine which ones you can actually start. List those new groups along with the existing groups, and this becomes your new organization.

3 ENLIST AND TRAIN LEADERS.

New leaders must know what's expected of them, what curriculum resources the church will provide for them (and how to use them correctly), and when regular training will take place.

4 PROVIDE THE SPACE.

Perhaps you have empty rooms on your church campus. Or you may want to start new groups at an off-campus location. Your church might even need to begin a second hour of Bible study on Sunday morning. No matter what, groups must have places to meet.

5 GO AFTER THE PEOPLE.

Make calls, visit potential new group members in their homes, use social media to announce the start of new groups, send out mailers, and encourage your church members to tell their friends and neighbors that your church is starting new groups.

6 REASONS WORSHIP ATTENDEES AREN'T GROUP PARTICIPANTS

1 ADULTS FEEL TIME COMPRESSED.

Some adults like to “do church in an hour,” so attending a worship service allows them to feel efficient with their time.

2 BIBLICAL HOSPITALITY MAY HAVE PREVIOUSLY BEEN ABSENT.

It's not that the group members are trying to be rude. They just aren't sensitive to the awkwardness guests feel, so they carry on conversations with the people they know. This often leaves guests on the outside looking in. And when that happens, they vote with their feet and don't make attending a group a priority.

3 PREVIOUS BIBLE STUDY EXPERIENCES WERE NOT ENGAGING.

The lack of engagement and excellence in the Bible study can cause visitors to decide to keep looking for a church home even before they experience the church's worship service.

4 THEY MAY NOT BE FAMILIAR WITH THEIR OPTIONS.

Most churches list available Bible study groups on their website, and they likely have a brochure available at a guest information booth. These are certainly needed, but both are passive ways to get information into the hands of guests. Consider more active ways of encouraging guests to choose a group to attend.

5 THE PASTOR MAY NOT TALK ENOUGH ABOUT GROUP PARTICIPATION.

It could be your church isn't saying enough about its discipleship pathway and the role groups play in it. There should be a regular cadence of invitations from the pulpit for guests (and chronically absent members) to be encouraged to get involved in an adult group. If it's important to the pastor, it's important to the church.

6 INVITATIONS TO ATTEND A GROUP AREN'T BEING EXTENDED.

It's one thing to extend an invitation to attend groups from the pulpit and something else entirely when congregants take ownership and do the inviting. The number one reason people attend a Bible study group is because of the invitation of a group leader or a member of the group.

PRIORITY



Reaching the Next Generation

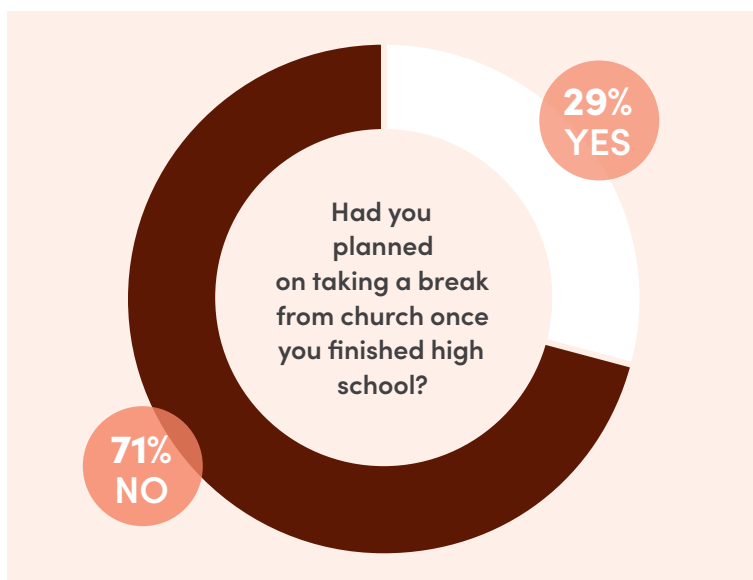
"We want to raise our kids to become sold-out followers of Christ. We want to see a generation of young adults who are alive in Christ."

— Jana Magruder, NextGen Strategic Initiatives Director

A 2017 Lifeway Research study found 2 in 3 (66%) American young adults who attended a Protestant church regularly for at least a year as a teenager say they dropped out of church for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22. The dropout rate for young adults accelerates with age, the study found. While 69% say they were attending at age 17, that fell to 58% at age 18 and 40% at age 19. Once they reached their 20s, only around 1 in 3 say they were attending church regularly.

Contrary to popular narratives, the research did not reveal a generation of teens who were bitter and angry at the church. They weren't burned by the church. And they didn't "lose their religion" because professors convinced them Christianity wasn't true. The research found a group of young adults who were generally positive about their church experience, their Student Ministry leader, and their belief system. Most students simply drifted away from church during their college-aged years.

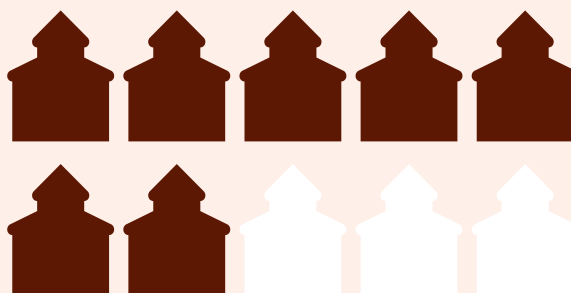
Among church dropouts, 29% say they planned on taking a break from church once they graduated high school. But 7 in 10 (71%) say leaving wasn't an intentional decision. Virtually all of those who dropped out (96%) listed a change in their life situation as a reason for their dropping out. Fewer say it was related to the church or pastor (73%); religious, ethical, or political beliefs (70%); or the student ministry (63%).



The five most frequently chosen specific reasons for dropping out were moving to college and no longer attending (34%), church members seeming judgmental or hypocritical (32%), no longer feeling connected to people in their church (29%), disagreeing with the church's stance on political or social issues (25%), and work responsibilities (24%). Almost half (47%) of those who dropped out and attended college say moving to college played a role in their no longer attending church for at least a year.

However, not all teenagers leave church as young adults. A third (34%) say they consistently attended twice a month or more through the age of 22. But whether or not young adults stay in church is statistically related to their engagement in Student Ministry and Bible study. Young adults who continued attending church after high school are more likely than those who dropped out to say they felt connected to the Student Ministry at their church before age 18 (61% v. 46%). Those who stayed were also more likely than those who dropped out to say a small group Bible study was relevant to their life prior to graduating high school (56% v. 40%).

7 in 10 church dropouts eventually return to some type of attendance, including 31% who attend twice a month or more.



When young adults drop out of church, they're not all gone forever. In fact, 7 in 10 eventually return to some type of attendance, including 31% who attend twice a month or more. What drew them back? God working in their hearts, people extending invitations, and life circumstances causing them to rethink their priorities.

But reaching the next generation begins in children's ministry. As we seek to win the next generation of kids and students for Jesus, the church must understand the felt needs of the increasingly secular culture in which we are called to take the gospel and make disciples. The research in *Flip the Script* reveals two major felt needs plague our current culture: identity and belonging. Kids are searching for identity and longing for belonging. The truth is they will find an answer to these questions some place. And sadly for too many, it will be in the wrong places.

If we build an environment that meets their key emotional needs and teach biblical content to answer their key cultural questions, we have a better hope of reaching this generation.

Once you've offered kids and students extreme hospitality that leads to relationships, their eyes, ears, hearts, and minds will be open to hear, understand, and believe the truth of the gospel. Biblical teaching replaces the secular idea that "I need to define myself from within" with the biblical understanding of identity: "I am who I am because of who God is."

As we evaluate the effectiveness of our ministry strategies and consider the adoption of new methods to reach those who are far from God, we must be careful to not make the mistake of believing the method we use is all that matters. There is merit in thinking we might multiply the impact and influence of our ministries by creating a culture of relational connection that builds a sense of biblical belonging, but in doing so we must not lose sight of the truth that what we teach remains extremely important.

If we want our ministries to produce kids and students who become spiritually mature adults, we must teach them to open, read, and study their Bibles. Churches must use care to make sure they are teaching sound doctrine, being careful to not oversimplify to the point that the doctrine is no longer biblical.

The work you do in preschool, kids, and student ministries lays a foundation for the current and future faith of each child in your church. It is the church's call to faithfully lay a solid foundation on which kids can build secure, mature faith that will last and hold strong.

2 QUESTIONS THE NEXT GENERATIONS ARE ASKING:

1. Who am I?
2. Where do I belong?

4 TYPES OF RELATIONSHIPS EVERY KID NEEDS IN THE CHURCH

FRIENDS: Children with friends in church are more likely to thrive in their faith as adults.

LEADERS: All children need to have adult leaders who care about them and know their names, their needs, and situation.

INFLUENCERS: Children need to see other invested adults and older kids who are involved in the church, committed to their faith, and connected in relationship within the church.

PASTORS: Children need to have a personal connection with pastors, and pastors need to be personally invested in what's happening in Kids and Student Ministry areas.

6 KEY FACTORS TO RETAINING TEENAGERS

3 HOME FACTORS

1 MAKE SURE DAD SHOWS UP.

It matters that dads are involved. The odds of a teenager dropping out of church are 1.27 times higher among those whose fathers did not attend church compared to those whose fathers attended when the teenager was 17.

2 ENJOY CHURCH AS A FAMILY.

It should be obvious to students that their parents find joy in being a part of their congregation. For those who did not indicate that their parents genuinely liked church, the odds of dropping out are 1.49 times higher than those who report their parents really liked their congregation.

3 ENCOURAGE PERSONAL BIBLE READING.

Teenagers who personally engage God in His Word are less likely to drop out. The odds of dropping out are 1.23 times higher among those who did not spend regular time reading the Bible privately prior to the age of 18 compared to those who regularly spent personal time in Scripture.

3 CHURCH FACTORS

1 FOSTER AN ENVIRONMENT OF TRUST AND GUIDANCE.

The odds of a teenager dropping out are 1.23 times higher among those who did not want the church to help guide their decisions in everyday life prior to age 18 compared to those who wanted such help.

2 YOUTH LEADERS SHOULD CARE.

The more a student feels their leader cares about them, the less likely they are to drop out. For every additional level of disagreement with the statement “The youth leader genuinely cared about me” (from strongly agree to strongly disagree), the odds of the teenager dropping out were 1.17 times higher.

3 GET MORE ADULTS INVOLVED.

When teenagers have more adults investing in them, they’re more likely to stick around. The odds of a teenager dropping out who said only one or two adults at church invested in them between the ages of 15 and 18 is 1.35 times higher than those who had three or more adults investing in them. Even more dramatically, the odds of those who had no adults investing in them are 2.65 times higher than those who had three or more adults investing in them at church during those ages.



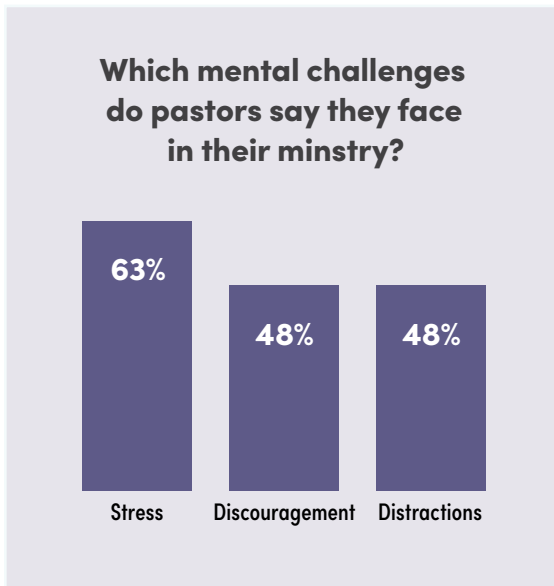
Promoting Pastor Well-Being

"Stress became an obstacle to being a decent human being and a person that reflected the character of Christ in any way. It became an obstacle to being a loving husband and father and to carrying out the things I needed to do at the church. Stress became this fog I had to walk through every day."

— Pastor, Greatest Needs of Pastors study

Lifeway Research's Greatest Needs of Pastors study revealed data behind what many pastors are feeling in ministry, exposing the unique needs and challenges they face in their roles.

As pastors think about their greatest needs, some of those go beyond their ministries and are instead connected to their personal lives. Pastors are stressed and worn out, and they know that needs to change. Of all the mental challenges U.S. Protestant pastors face, stress stands out above the rest. Nearly two-thirds (63%) point to stress as a mental challenge. Distractions and discouragement are also significant factors for pastors. Nearly half of pastors say discouragement (48%) and distraction (48%) are ministry mental challenges they face.



The Greatest Needs of Pastors study also found many pastors worry about their time management skills and how they can balance all the responsibilities they have at church and home.

The primary needs pastors face in their personal lives focus on how they handle their time and work. Half (51%) say time management is an aspect that needs attention or investment today, while 43% specifically point to developing a balance between work and home.

A 2021 Lifeway Research study found most pastors say they are on-call 24 hours a day (71%) and their role is frequently overwhelming (63%). Half of pastors (50%) say the demands of their job are often greater than they can handle. Many say they feel isolated (38%) and face unrealistic expectations from their church (23%). And 1 in 5 pastors (21%) admits they frequently feel irritated at their church members.

"Being a pastor is stressful. It's important for pastors to learn healthy ways of maintaining their mental health amidst the variety of pressures that continue to come their way. Ignoring stress is not the answer. Resilience requires investment."

- Scott McConnell, Executive Director of Lifeway Research

Furthermore, pastors, who make a career of caring for the needs of others, admit they often need to give attention to caring for themselves. More than half of pastors say they struggle to consistently exercise (59%) and avoid over-commitment and overwork (55%). Slightly less than half say they find it challenging to eat right (49%), take time away from their job for hobbies or other interests (47%), and consistently rest (45%).

"Pastors often feel overworked and overloaded as individuals and worry about the toll their work may take on their family. The difficult moments and seasons pastors face require ongoing investment in their spiritual, physical, and mental well-being."

**- Scott McConnell, Executive Director
of Lifeway Research**

5 AREAS OF LIFE YOU CAN'T IGNORE AS A PASTOR

1 HEALTH

Think beyond physical health (though it's important). Here are some important questions we must ask ourselves: Am I spiritually healthy? Am I emotionally healthy? How am I staying physically healthy?

2 HOBBIES

Am I an interesting person? Am I fun to be around? When the conversation runs thin, do I have some fresh things to talk about? Do I have some subjects I want to learn more about?

3 FAMILY

Do I take full ownership of my family? Where am I skirting responsibility? Am I in the room but gone? Where am I getting involved where there's hurt? Am I praying with my family and initiating spiritual conversations?

4 FRIENDSHIP

Every person needs one or two friends who would celebrate the day you quit your job because they would hopefully get more time with you. Enjoy your work friends, but build friendships with people "off the clock."

5 CHURCH

Unless the first four areas are taken care of, we can't succeed in our calling to the church. Our work in ministry is an overflow of the work we do in these other areas.

6 TIMES TO BE A PARENT, NOT A PASTOR, TO YOUR CHILDREN

1 DINNER TIME Make this a fun time with your family. Talk about the highs and lows of each person's day. Don't let church work invade this moment.

2 PLAYTIME Dedicate time to play with your kids. Hide-and-seek and horse rides give way to catch and video games but be with them.

3 DISCIPLINE Your children need correction and consequences, not a sermon. They need to know there is reconciliation and forgiveness.

4 HEARTBREAK Going through pain and heartbreak, kids need a hug and to know you're there for them.

5 STORYTIME Help your kids enjoy stories for the sake of stories, not just as sermon illustrations.

6 PREACHING You don't stop being a dad when you step behind the pulpit. Be careful with what you share about them.

4 WAYS TO RECLAIM YOUR TIME

1 WORK IN TIME BLOCKS.

Battle distraction by blocking off your time according to your strengths. And do your best to not deviate. If you study better in the morning, block off three hours in the morning to do nothing but study. Don't respond to emails one at a time. Block off 30 minutes or an hour to respond to all of them. Same with social media. Working in blocks allows your brain to concentrate on the task at hand, rather than being in permanent sentinel mode for the next incoming communication.

2 DISTINGUISH BETWEEN MEETING, EMAIL, TEXT, AND PHONE CALL/ZOOM FOR COMMUNICATION PRIORITIES.

Along with blocking times for different types of work, prioritize how you communicate based on the audience and the information being shared. Use each communication channel in a way that gets the needed information to the appropriate recipients the most clearly with the right amount of urgency.

3 "LOSE YOUR PHONE" ON PURPOSE.

The mere presence of our phones is a distraction. Pastors need to frequently lose their phones on purpose. By "lose," of course, we mean put it out of reach for extended periods (like during a work block). If the best way to avoid checking our phones is to get them under someone else's lock and key (spouse or ministry assistant, perhaps), then that's a step worth taking.

4 DO A DIGITAL-DECLUTTER.

Digital decluttering is a process recently popularized by professor and author Cal Newport. In his book, *Digital Minimalism*, he recommends setting aside 30 days "during which you will take a break from optional technologies" and "explore and rediscover" activities. At the end of the 30 days, only bring back the optional technologies that align with your life goals.

The Bottom Line on the Church's Priorities

So, what is the state of the church?

It's a complicated picture that's continuing to play out before us. Ministry in the 21st century often feels like uncharted territory. Our churches need pioneering leaders who can help God's people navigate our changing mission field and engage our local communities in new ways, mobilizing churchgoers to bring the gospel to their neighbors.

This mobilization requires us to overcome the apathy in our pews, awakening our congregations' love for Christ evidenced in obedience. Most pastors struggle with what they perceive to be apathy from those in their pews. At the same time, many pastors are struggling to establish a compelling vision for their churches. The gospel is a beautiful and transformative thing. Where might we be falling short in presenting it as such? How can we better help our people develop a love relationship with God that compels them to action?

As the research shows, groups are a powerful tool for discipleship and spiritual growth. And, in turn, the percentage of worship attendees participating in small groups is predictive of a church's worship attendance in five years. This spiritual growth takes place across a church's key ministry areas, including next-gen small groups, adult small groups, and Women's Ministry.

Finally, in the complicated role as pastor, it may seem noble to neglect self, always for the service of others. However, eventually, prolonged self-neglect is a detriment to the people around you—your family, friends, and congregation. Don't run from the boundaries of limitation. Embrace your finitude and rely completely on the God who is infinite.

■ Learn more about our findings, trends, and recommendations for navigating ministry at LifewayResearch.com.

About Lifeway Research

Lifeway Research is a Middle Tennessee-based, evangelical research firm that specializes in surveys about faith in culture and matters that affect churches. Our work has been covered by national and international media, (*Religion News Service, Christianity Today, NPR, The Wall Street Journal, USA Today, The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Atlantic*, and many others) and translated into multiple languages.

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