

# 5 DISRUPTIVE CHURCH TRENDS THAT WILL RULE

# 2025



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# As you head into 2025, what should you pay attention to as a church leader?

One of the challenges church leaders have is that day-to-day ministry requires so much time, attention, and focus that it's hard to see the bigger picture.

Yet if you miss the bigger picture, your day-to-day efforts can often miss the mark, no matter how well-intentioned you are.

That's what this annual church trends post is designed to help you and your team with.

This year, rather than go broad, I've decided to investigate the five most significant church trends I see.

By way of background, many trends I've outlined in the last nine years are still active and relevant. If you and your team want to do a deep dive, here are the links.

<a href="#">2024 Church Trends</a>	<a href="#">2023 Church Trends</a>	<a href="#">2022 Church Trends</a>	<a href="#">2021 Church Trends</a>	<a href="#">2020 Church Trends (COVID Update)</a>
<a href="#">2020 Church Trends</a>	<a href="#">2019 Church Trends</a>	<a href="#">2018 Church Trends</a>	<a href="#">2017 Church Trends</a>	<a href="#">2016 Church Trends</a>

## CHURCH TRENDS PODCAST SERIES

Get deep-dive interviews on my Leadership Podcast with guests like JP Pokluda and Jennie Allen on Gen Z and revival, Mike Housholder and Joby Martin on high conversion church growth, David Kinnaman, Glenn Packiam, and Mark Matlock, on changing cultural norms, and the new face of church planting with Noah Herrin.

Get the episodes (as they're released throughout January) on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, YouTube, or wherever you listen to podcasts.



If you're ready to lead more effectively in 2025, here are 5 disruptive church trends that wise leaders will be tracking this year.

# 1. GEN Z IS IN REVIVAL AND RETREAT AT THE SAME TIME

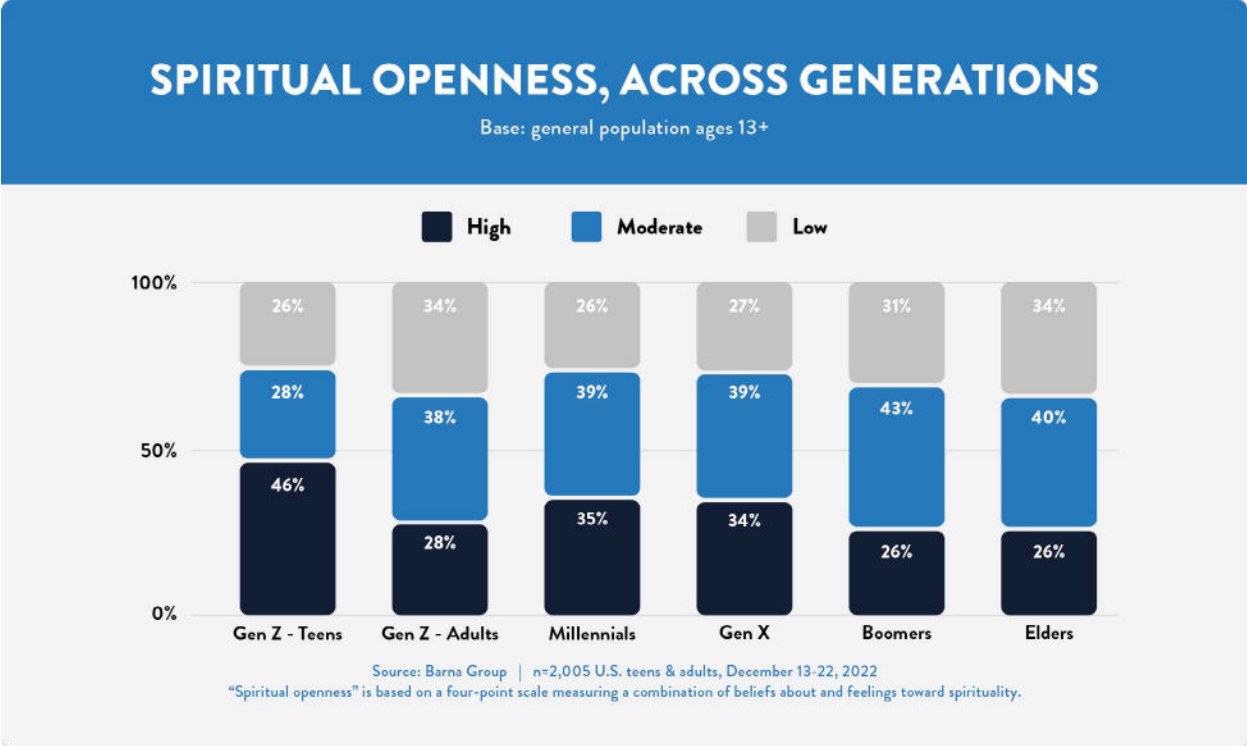
Sometimes you get conflicting data on a trend, and this is what appears to be happening with Gen Z.

If you've been at all active on social media in the last two years, it's almost impossible to miss the renewal (revival?) that's happening across college campuses and with young adults across America, the UK, and in other places around the world. What began or at least crystallized at the Asbury Outpouring in February 2023 has continued in pockets and waves in various places.

The [UniteUS](#) movement that swept across US college campuses in 2024 is a clear indicator that something is happening among Gen Z right now.

The college campus phenomenon corresponds with Barna data showing that Gen Z is generally [spiritually open](#), with over two-thirds of Gen Z saying they are highly or moderately open spiritually.

There are three factors to pay attention to.

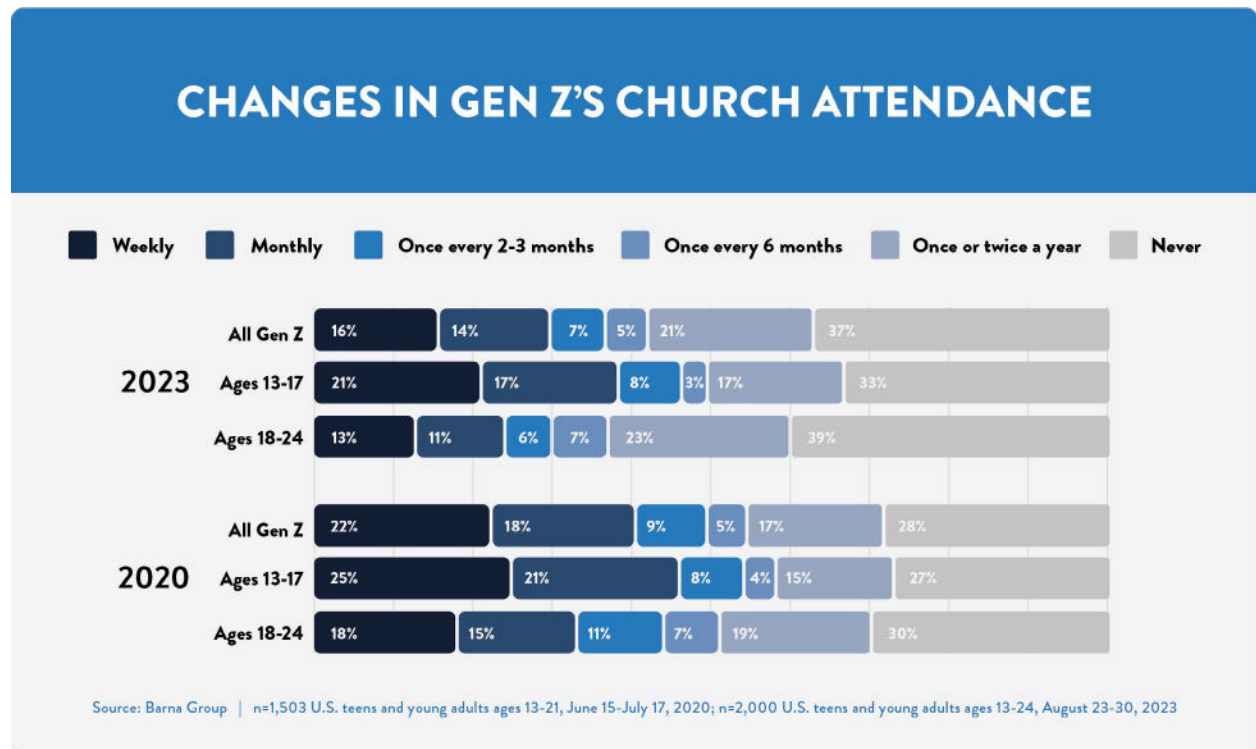


First, spiritual openness doesn't always lead people to Christianity. It can just as easily lead people to Buddhism or a self-directed spirituality (among many other options).

Second, even if peoples' openness leads them toward Christianity, that doesn't automatically translate into church attendance.

Finally, notice the drop off in spiritual openness between Gen Z teens and Gen Z adults. There's a significant 18-point drop in Gen Z's who say they are highly open spiritually once they become adults compared to when they were teens.

That also corresponds to other findings that Gen Z church attendance is down since 2020.



While 22% of Gen Z attended church weekly in 2020, only 16% report attending weekly three years later.

Similarly, the number of Gen Z who never go to church grew from 28% to 37% in just three years.

So while revival is happening across college campuses, many Gen Z are still walking away.

## WHAT'S AT STAKE

So what does the apparently conflicting data mean?

It means that Gen Z is in revival and retreat at the same time.

On the one hand, clearly, the renewal and revival happening in Gen Z is real. Teens and college students are surrendering their lives to Christ, confessing their sins, and joining community by the thousands or tens of thousands. And that's incredible and needs to continue.

At the same time, many other Gen Zs are disengaging from the church and becoming less spiritually open as they get older.

The data starts to make sense when you realize there are almost [70 million Gen Zs in the US](#). So while the stories and movements of renewal are amazing, there is still much work ahead.

## WHAT TO DO

What do you do with a trend like this?

It would be wise to double down on your Student/Next Gen Ministry.

When you look at the meaningful drop in spiritual curiosity and church attendance that happens between Gen Z teens and Gen Z adults, the more you do to keep high school and college students engaged in the faith, the more likely it is that their faith as teens will morph into faith as adults.

Too many churches still nickel and dime Next Gen Ministry and even Young Adult Ministry, underfunding and understaffing it. Wise church leaders will do the opposite in 2025.

And if your church is average-sized and doesn't have much of a Next Gen team or budget, try befriending and even mentoring some young adults or teens in your church and community. Relationships and life changes begin when someone takes an interest in you.



## 2. EVANGELISM IS ON LIFE SUPPORT IN MOST CHURCHES

Over the last five years, the top thing I hear church leaders talk about is discipleship.

It's like COVID created a collective panic attack among pastors as droves of people left the church, never to come back, while an equal number dove into conspiracy theories, partisanship, and angry critiques of church leadership.

Rising from the ashes of COVID was a call for deeper discipleship because (clearly) the way we were doing church was producing fickle, shallow disciples.

There's so much truth in that.

But ask 20 pastors what discipleship means, and you'll get 20 different answers, some of which are fuzzy and unclear.

Drill deeper, and you discover that evangelism is on life support in many churches. Three data points reveal the extent of the crisis around evangelism.

The number of pastors who say their church is very effective at outreach to non-churchgoers dropped from [13% in 2015 to 1% in 2023](#).

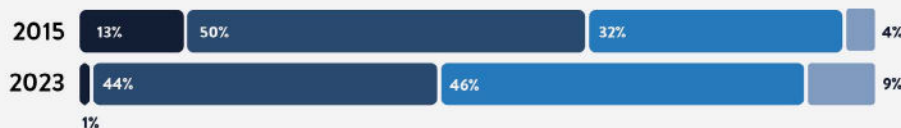
### OUTREACH EFFORTS IN CHURCHES HAVE DIPPED IN RECENT YEARS

If you had to rate your church's effectiveness at discipleship or spiritual formation - that is, helping people become more like Christ - would you say it is...?

Very Effective   Somewhat Effective   Not Very Effective   Not At All Effective   Don't Know



And what about your church's effectiveness at reaching out to unchurched people?



Source: Barna Group | n=897 U.S. Protestant pastors, April-December 2015; n=523 U.S. Protestant pastors, August 28-September 18, 2023

Did you catch that?

99% of pastors say that their church is not very effective at outreach.

First, that's a humble admission. Good on pastors for being honest about the effectiveness of their outreach.

Other studies back that self-assessment as well.

Even when a church is on a list like Outreach's Fastest Growing or Largest Church list, a deeper drill down shows that a lot of growth is simply transfer growth.

Studies show only [3-5% of American churches are growing primarily through conversion growth](#). The remaining growth is mostly transfer growth.

This is a continuation of the [church consolidation trend](#) named here five years ago.

Consolidation means the churches that are growing are picking up people from churches that aren't growing, not from conversion growth.

This has been happening for decades with the disappearance and decline of small and mid-sized churches and the growth of large churches and mega-churches. In the same way book stores consolidated when Amazon and online book sales emerged, or General Motors consolidated after the Great Recession, getting rid of Pontiac, Hummer, Saturn, and other divisions to focus on its remaining brands.

Some final evidence of this trend is found among Southern Baptists. [43% of Southern Baptist churches](#) experienced no converts or baptisms in a calendar year. As in zero. An additional 34 percent baptized one to five people. In other words, 77% baptized zero to five people in an entire calendar year. This is what we're seeing now among American churches.

## WHAT'S AT STAKE

When evangelism is on life support, what's at stake is the very future of the church.

When the church becomes a club for already-convinced insiders, the church has lost its mission.

This isn't 'church growth for the sake of church growth.' If that's all it is, it will fail. Churches that want to grow to prop up the institution, pad their numbers, or simply want a 'story to tell' miss the point.

If God's love truly compels us to reach out to the world, if we genuinely care about our neighbors who are not like us, and if we truly decide to love our enemies, the world might come running. But right now, the church is spectacularly easy to ignore or dismiss.

## WHAT TO DO

Quite simply, churches need to take evangelism far more seriously.

Before he died, Tim Keller published an incredibly [thoughtful and comprehensive reflection](#) on how the American Evangelical church is in the process of succumbing to the same ineffectiveness as most mainline churches.

In other words, the precipitous decline that happened to mainline churches in the 20th century is happening to evangelical churches in the 21st century. The study, while free, is not brief, but it's worth reading, and I think largely points the way to renewal of evangelism in all of its complexity and depth.

The fact that there's no easy answer for the near-death of evangelism in the current church does not mean there's not a solution. It's going to take some work, though.





# 3. CHURCH CLOSURES APPEAR TO BE OUTPACING NEW CHURCH PLANTS 3-TO-1

A few years ago, there were numerous calls to increase the number of church plants. Those calls are more needed now than ever.

There are several reasons for the urgency. First, there's the sheer number of existing churches that are closing.

In the United States, for example, approximately [4,000-10,000 churches close each year](#) (yes, that's a wide range, but it's [difficult to get accurate numbers](#)).

Meanwhile, only ~3,000 churches were being planted each year prior to COVID, which resulted in a significant net loss of churches.

There are no reliable statistics I could surface (after multiple attempts) for post-COVID church plants, but a new study will be done in 2025. Hopefully, we've made some progress.

However, that still leaves us with a potential net gap of up to 7,000 churches lost each year.

With very rough math (again, accurate numbers would be helpful), church closures appear to be outpacing new church plants 3-1. That's an untenable ratio if we want the future of the church to be vibrant.

Bottom line? If you're thinking of planting a church or launching a campus, the need has never been greater.

## WHAT'S AT STAKE

I'm a firm believer in church revitalization, but the data is clear that new churches reach more people than existing churches do. If you wonder why, Tim Keller (again) offers some timeless advice on [why even more church plants are needed](#).

If you want to make the problem worse, look beyond the stats shared earlier to estimate that [8,000-12,000 new churches need to be planted annually](#) to keep up with both population growth and church closures. That could bump the ratio of closures to plants closer to 4 to 1. Ugh.

Without new churches, the presence of the church will continue to diminish, and more and more communities will be without life-giving churches.

## WHAT TO DO

If you are planting a church, the research shows that going slow and building a strong core is the best strategy.

As easy as it is to want to jump the gun and enthusiastically launch, the idea of ‘launch it and they will come’ has been thoroughly debunked.

Most church plants still fail for the same reason that most new businesses still fail. It’s often not a lack of faith— it’s a lack of planning and strategy.

The two keys to a more successful launch and longevity are to fully fund your plant and build a large core team before you hold your first services.

Consider this.

The average church plant launches with \$135,000 of funding and has between 100 and 200 attendees.

However, churches that launch with an average of \$322,000 of seed money have an average attendance of 500+ at launch.

In other words, [the higher the funding, the higher the attendance seems to be.](#)

If you launch with \$70,000, your attendance is likely to be 50 or less. If you launch with over \$300,000, your attendance is likely to be 10x that when you open, largely because you’ve gathered far more invested people who want to make the church happen.

While multisite is often a great way to expand the number of new churches, the late Tony Morgan helpfully pointed out in his [Q4 2023 Unstuck Church Report](#) that multisite, while still an expanding model in America, is not a growth strategy.

Launching campuses is best left to churches who are growing to expand the number of campuses they offer. If you’re an existing church looking to expand, start with growth at your existing location(s) and then branch out accordingly.

Finally, there are a number of [free church growth strategies](#) that, in my opinion, every church should be leveraging.



# 4. THE RISE OF THE NON-DERIVATIVE CHURCH

This trend is a little hard to put a finger on, and I've completely made up the name for it (Non-Derivative Church), but I sense something changing.

For several years, with the proliferation of social media and the rise of [attractional church](#), a lot of revitalized churches and church plants followed a just-add-water approach to their model of church.

You'll recognize the formula:

- A modern band that sings the same worship songs every other growing church is singing
- A relevant and dynamic communicator preaching
- A vibrant Kids Ministry (and perhaps Student Ministry)
- Upbeat serving teams and small groups Boom. You're good to go.

Almost every growing church followed it. Except by the late 2010s, it was no longer producing the kind of growth that it once did. For a while, attractional church was cool, but as every church copied the formula, the uniqueness withered.

As one church leader says, *when you're the only hot dog stand in town, it's not that hard to sell hot dogs.*

In most cities now, though, there are multiple churches doing variations of the same thing.

In 2024, I had the privilege of visiting several churches like Red Church in Melbourne, Australia, and The Village Church in Dallas, Texas. What I noticed amazed me.

Neither church was using a 'cookie cutter' approach to their weekend experiences.

The songs weren't simply the Top 5 songs of the moment. Sure, they were 'contemporary', but it wasn't just a Maverick City Music or Brandon Lake playlist.

Matt Chandler gave an unscripted extended welcome during the 'announcement' window that felt so welcoming and so powerful. Mark Sayers, after his message (which was characteristically 'heady' if you know Mark—he's brilliant), gave people an opportunity to come up and pray to God at the front if they wanted more zeal in their lives.

I don't usually respond to those kinds of things (I was raised Presbyterian), but I felt compelled to go forward to pray. When I finished, I realized about 80% of the room had gone forward.

The point isn't to copy this. (In fact, the streams for both these moments in the service are not even available online.)

The point is that each leader decided to do something that was right for the people they served. It was non-derivative. They weren't copying something they saw someone else do.

It was authentic, real, and unscripted. Something we know [Gen Z values deeply](#). But both of these services were multi-generational. I've seen other leaders breaking away from the 'script,' and it's a refreshing thing to see.

The next generation isn't looking for an echo of the current culture; they're looking for an alternative to it.

## WHAT'S AT STAKE

This trend, if it continues, is encouraging because it speaks to the tension between learning from others and imitating others.

As we've shared numerous times in this space, nothing kills innovation faster than imitation.

On the other hand, if you do something so totally 'out there' that it resonates with no one, you're probably not pastoring effectively, either.

So this leads us to the tension of learning from others without becoming formulaic or trend-chasing.

The leadership of the Holy Spirit is the best leadership there is, but at the same time, the Spirit won't encourage you to do anything contrary to scripture or to the nature of God as God has been revealed to humanity. Similarly, you need to test the spirits (or ideas) you have. And consult with others. Wisdom is found among the counsel of the wise.

So effective leadership lives in that tension of learning from others and trying new things as you are led.

I think that's a very healthy tension to live in.

And if more churches embrace a non-derivative approach, the Church will have the innovation and diversity we need for the future.

## WHAT TO DO

By all means, learn from other churches and best practices, but don't ignore the movement of the Holy Spirit or the uniqueness you bring.

Authenticity resonates.

Practically speaking, open up more vulnerably in your messages. The best definition of vulnerability I know is that vulnerability makes you question whether you're being too transparent. It feels risky.

Second, coach your worship leaders and service hosts to be more sensitive to what's happening in the room, not just committed to reciting scripts.

And finally, in your service planning meetings, don't just fill in the blanks with three songs and a message. Take time to be truly creative.

While this trend is a lot deeper than three simple steps, those steps can usher you into a new, more responsive, and open era.



# 5. THE CHURCH LEADER MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS IS ABOUT TO GET WORSE

So, the good news is that the mental health of church leaders has rebounded somewhat from an all-time low during COVID.

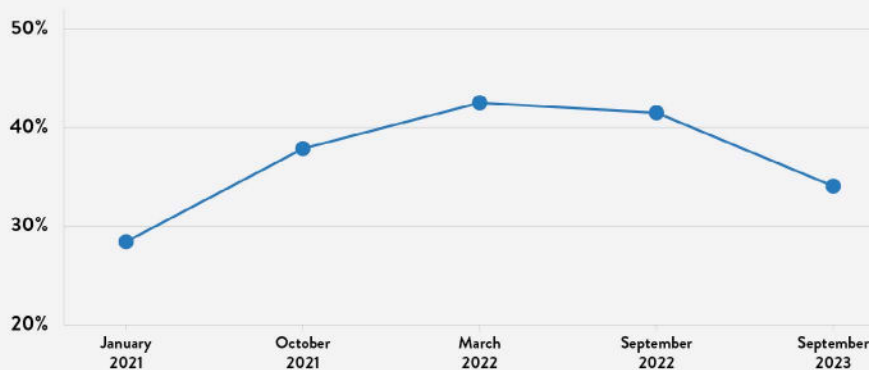
There are storm clouds brewing, though, and that's why I'm not convinced we're out of the woods yet.

The number of pastors who have given real, serious consideration to quitting full-time ministry within the last year dropped from an all-time high of [42% in 2022 to 33% in 2023](#).

While that's encouraging, it still means that a third of all pastors in America are contemplating packing it in.

## PASTORS' IMPULSE TO QUIT MINISTRY HAS PEAKED BUT REMAINS HIGH

Have you given real, serious consideration to quitting being in full-time ministry within the last year?



Source: Barna Group | n=413 U.S. Protestant pastors, January 22-27, 2021; n=507 U.S. Protestant pastors, October 12-28, 2021; n=510 U.S. Protestant pastors, March 10-16, 2022; n=584 U.S. Protestant pastors, September 6-16, 2022; n=523 U.S. Protestant pastors, August 28-September 18, 2023

More alarmingly, though, according to Barna data, [18% of pastors have thought about suicide or self-harm](#) in the last year. That's a staggering statistic.

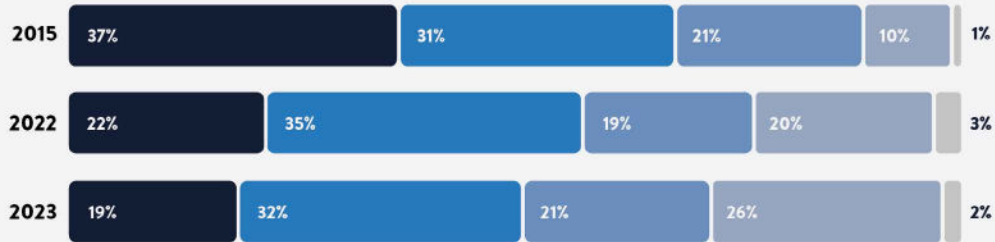
Fuelling this is a pervasive loneliness among senior pastors that is intensifying, not abating. Today, more than ever, pastors are unlikely to be getting the personal support and relationships they need to thrive.

As recently as 2015, 37% of pastors said they were receiving monthly personal, spiritual support from a network of peers or mentors. Today, just 19% of pastors are getting that support, which, of course, means that 81% of pastors are not getting regular personal support that's vital to leaders.

## TODAY, PASTORS ARE SIGNIFICANTLY LESS LIKELY TO RECEIVE PERSONAL SPIRITUAL SUPPORT FROM PEERS OR MENTORS.

How often, if ever, do you receive personal spiritual support, either from a network of peers or from a mentor?

Several times a month or more
  Once or twice a month
  Several times a year
  Not very often
  Never

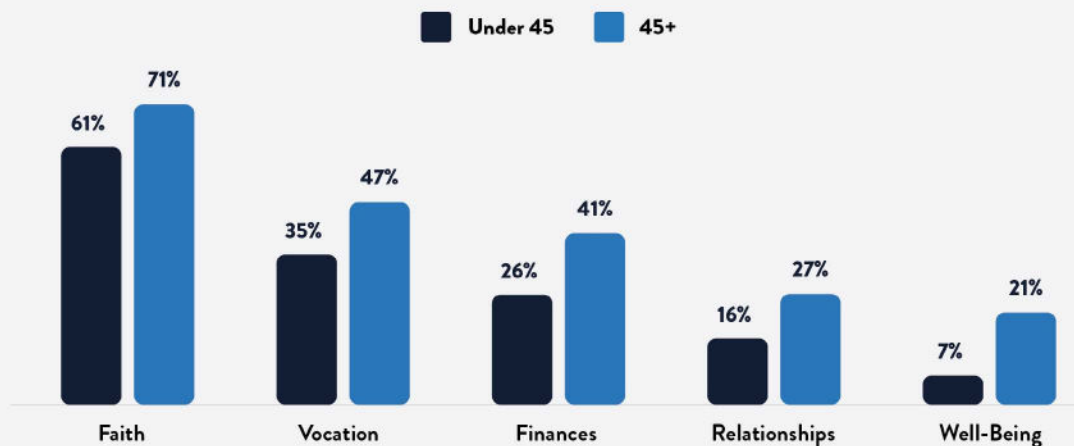


Source: Barna Group | n=510 U.S. Protestant pastors, April-December 2015; n=584 U.S. Protestant pastors, September 6-16, 2022; n=523 U.S. Protestant pastors, August 28-September 18, 2023

There's one trend in pastoral mental health that's sobering and disturbing.

When you look at age-adjusted statistics about how pastors are faring, the results are staggering.

## PASTORS UNDER 45 ARE LESS LIKELY THAN THEIR OLDER COLLEAGUES TO BE FLOURISHING



Source: Barna Group | n=523 U.S. Protestant pastors, August 28-September 18, 2023

While 21% of pastors over the age of 45 say they are flourishing in their well-being, only 7% of church leaders under the age of 45 say they are flourishing.

In other words, the next generation of church leaders are not all right.

Not only is there a shortage of next-gen church leaders ready to step into leadership, but those next-gen leaders are already not thriving.

That's a major concern.

## WHAT'S AT STAKE

As go the leaders, so goes the church.

If the leaders aren't healthy, the church won't be healthy.

We already have a mental health crisis in the church, but what's ahead in the next few years in terms of global instability, economic challenges, and the development of AI is going to push leaders to a new edge.

## WHAT TO DO

It's hard to prescribe something that will magically 'fix' a generational mental health crisis, but that doesn't mean we should do nothing.

At a minimum, senior leaders need to model healthy practices both in their leadership and in their lives. Gone are the days when leaders can or should drive their teams to work 60+ hours a week and remind people "they can sleep when they're dead" or that they should "burn out for Jesus." I know that it still exists in pockets, but it's not only toxic; it's bad theology.

Similarly, I still hear reports of pastors who have embraced personal margin and health in their lives but expect their teams to pick up the slack. So the leader is 'healthy' (if you can call it that), but the team and organization are dysfunctional and overworked. That's a recipe for future failure, too.

The mantra I've embraced since my burnout almost 20 years ago is "Live in a way today that will help you thrive tomorrow." Not survive tomorrow, but thrive.

This isn't just a personal credo; it needs to be an organizational reality as well.

I have a lot more on that in [At Your Best](#), but the reality is we need to see leaders, teams, and churches flourishing.

The call to ministry can be difficult and demanding, but too often, we make it far more difficult and demanding than it needs to be.



# CONCLUSION

These are the church trends I'm keeping an eye on in 2025. I hope and pray they help you and your team thrive, responding to the organizational, cultural, and personal challenges you face.

For more, listen to my podcast series on Church Trends [here](#) and download my free Leader Guide to walk you and your team through the teachings and how to apply what you have learned to your church.

The future of the church, of course, is bright. It gets brighter still if our generation of church leaders sees the moment we're in clearly and responds accordingly.



# TREND 1: GEN Z IS IN REVIVAL AND RETREAT AT THE SAME TIME

1. To what extent is our church seeing any aspects of the Gen Z revival happening through our ministry?
2. What steps can we take to address the factors contributing to Gen Z's retreat from church?
3. To what extent are our overall ministries addressing the issues facing Gen Z?
4. How can we effectively strengthen our Student/Next-Gen Ministry and keep high school and college students engaged in faith?

### Go Deeper

CNLP 701: Jennie Allen and JP Pohluda on Gen Z Revival

CNLP 693: Al Gordon on Revival and Pre-Revival in the Church

Barna Group: [5 Things You Need to Know About Gen Z in 2024](#)

# TREND 2: EVANGELISM IS ON LIFE SUPPORT IN MOST CHURCHES

1. What surprised you most about the state of evangelism in most churches? Why?
2. If you looked honestly at your church growth, what percentage is transfer growth and what percentage is high conversion growth?
3. What practical steps can we take to foster a culture of evangelism within our church, equipping and encouraging members to share their faith?

### Go Deeper

CNLP 702: Joby Martin and Mike Housholder on The Secret to Becoming a High Conversion Growth Church

CNLP 123: How to Have Meaningful, Life-Giving Conversations with Non-Christians (An Interview with Rose Zacharias Meeder)

Outreach Magazine: [Beyond Numerical Growth](#)

Tim Keller: [The Decline and Renewal of The American Church](#)

# TREND 3: CHURCH CLOSURES APPEAR TO BE OUTPACING NEW CHURCH PLANTS 3-TO-1

1. What lessons can your team learn from observing churches that have closed? What conditions and mindsets do you see them embrace?
2. What can your team learn from the mindset and strategies of effective church planters?
3. What could your church do to support more church plants, either through funding, launching them, or adding campuses that result in high conversion growth?

## Go Deeper

CNLP 703: Noah Herrin on the New Realities of Church Planting

CNLP 574: Warren Bird and JJ Vasquez on The New Math on Church Plants and How Church Planting is Changing

Timothy Keller: [Why Plant Churches?](#)

# TREND 4: THE RISE OF THE NON-DERIVATIVE CHURCH

1. Why do you think so many churches are seeing diminishing returns when they imitate other ministries and leaders?
2. When was the last time your church moved 'off script' and innovated? What happened?
3. What nudging of the Holy Spirit might you be sensing that you haven't acted on? What might you do?
4. "The next generation isn't looking for an echo of the current culture; they're looking for an alternative to it." Discuss.

## Go Deeper

CNLP 527: Tim Elmore on Cracking the Code on Gen Z

Carey Nieuwhof: [A Sneak Peak Into 5 Characteristics of Gen Z Church](#)

Relevant Magazine: [How Gen Z Is Shaping the Church](#)

# TREND 5: THE CHURCH LEADER MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS IS ABOUT TO GET WORSE

1. How have you seen the mental health crisis impact the senior staff and volunteers at your church? What has your response been so far?
2. “While 21% of pastors over the age of 45 say they are flourishing, only 7% of church leaders under the age of 45 say they are flourishing.” How have you seen this trend unfold in your church, and how are you responding?
3. What kind of system (if any) do you have in place to nurture and develop next-generation leaders so they can serve in the local church for decades to come?
4. What resources and support systems can your church provide to help leaders navigate the challenges and stresses of ministry and prevent burnout?

## Go Deeper

Carey Nieuwhof: [At Your Best \(Book\)](#)

Carey Nieuwhof: [At Your Best \(Course\)](#)

CNLP 652: Rethinking Rest: How to Maintain Peak Performance

CNLP 654: Matt Chandler Opens Up About Hitting the Wall and Burning Out

# KEY CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

**Gen Z:** The generation born between 1997 and 2012, following Millennials.

**Revival:** A period of renewed spiritual interest or awakening, often characterized by increased conversions and religious fervor.

**Discipleship:** The process of teaching and mentoring individuals to grow in their faith and become mature followers of Christ.

**Evangelism:** The act of sharing the Christian gospel with others in the hope of leading them to faith in Jesus Christ.

**Transfer Growth:** Church growth that is primarily driven by individuals switching from one church to another rather than through conversions.

**Conversion Growth:** Church growth resulting from the conversion of non-Christians to Christianity.

**Church Plant:** A newly established church congregation, often started with the intention of reaching a specific community.

**Multisite Church:** A church model where one central church establishes multiple locations or “campuses,” often with a shared leadership structure and shared resources.

**Non-Derivative Church:** A church model that avoids formulaic approaches and seeks to create unique and authentic experiences tailored to the needs of its congregation.

**Mental Health Crisis:** A widespread and concerning increase in mental health issues, often characterized by symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and burnout.

**Burnout:** A state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged or excessive stress.