

THE UNSTUCK CHURCH REPORT

BENCHMARKS + TRENDS IN U.S. CHURCHES

Sponsored by:

THE
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LAWYERS

THE UNSTUCK GROUP[®]

— WE HELP CHURCHES GET UNSTUCK. —

Q3 2022

Introduction

AUGUST 2022

Every quarter, The Unstuck Group compiles all the data we've collected to monitor trends in churches in the United States and around the world. For this quarter's report, we only included churches that provided data during the six weeks between June 23 and August 4, 2022. This provides a very current snapshot of ministries of all shapes and sizes.

We received survey responses from 315 churches that ranged in size from under 100 to several thousand in physical attendance for worship gatherings. The average in-person attendance of churches that participated was 646 people, and those same churches also had 427 views every week through their online services or messages.

One of the unique features of this quarter's report is the summary by church size that is included at the end of the report. As you'll see in that table, the data points to several areas where there's little to no difference between small churches and large churches. Examples include the number of churches offering online options, kid's ministry attendance and engaging volunteer leaders. On the other hand, there are some areas where there seems to be a disparity between small and large churches including decisions to follow Jesus, the pace of attendance growth, small group participation and the use of multisite strategy.

Read on for some key takeaways from the most recent assessment results in the categories of reach, connection, staffing and leadership, finances and overall health to gain some best practice wisdom from other church leaders.

KEY FINDINGS

CATEGORY	THIS YEAR	LAST YEAR	DIFFERENCE
In-Person Average Weekly Attendance	646	496	+30%
Online Service Views	427	545	-22%
Decisions to Follow Jesus per 100 Attendees	13	11	+18%
Adults & Students Volunteering	37%	38%	
Adults & Students in Small Groups	62%	68%	
Annual General Fund Giving	\$1,718K	\$1,620K	+6%

First, a word about “attendance” in churches...

You will notice in this report that we are using physical attendance at worship services as a baseline for tracking other church health metrics. You might be wondering, why isn't The Unstuck Group factoring in online engagement in some of these metrics? Well... that's actually a very good question.

First of all, we *do* encourage churches to continue to track both online engagement and attendance at worship gatherings. In our hybrid world, both metrics are needed to monitor overall health.

The challenge we have, of course, is that we're trying to collect data from churches of all shapes and sizes, and many of them are not tracking online engagement well. Those who are tracking these metrics use widely different formulas. Some even try to convert online viewers into an “attendance” number, which we find is less than accurate or helpful for ministry decision-making.

Because of that, we have chosen to keep the baseline for these metrics as simple as possible so that we can provide apples-to-apples comparisons...which is what pastors and church leaders want from us.

Secondly, here's another little slice of data regarding physical attendance that makes me think that it's still a fairly accurate measure of true connection to churches even on this side of the pandemic. It has to do with weekly per capita giving across churches. To calculate per capita giving, I take the annual general giving amount and divide that by 52 weeks. Then I take the weekly giving total and divide it by the average physical attendance (not including kids).

Here's what's fascinating, from the data we collected for this report, the current per capita giving amount is \$62 per attendee per week. Looking at inflation adjusted giving from five years ago in 2017, giving was at \$65 per person per week. The current number is, of course, based on in-person attendance post-pandemic. The 2017 is based on in-person attendance pre-pandemic.

If, as I'm hearing many pastors argue, there are many more people who are solely connected to churches online on this side of the pandemic, the per capita giving amount, which is just based on *in-person attendance*, should be much higher than it was five years ago. Instead, per capita giving has actually gone down.

We are now in our third year of our new normal. Even so, I know there are pastors and church leaders who want to believe either that they have a lot more people engaging online than they used to or that people are attending less frequently than they did before the pandemic or both. Because of that, some pastors still want to equate online engagement with people showing up on Sunday morning. The data we're collecting, especially as it relates to giving, would indicate otherwise.

All that to say, almost all churches are facing the same challenges related to shifting attendance patterns. So, even though Sunday attendance certainly doesn't factor into all the ways people engage with a church, it still seems to be an appropriate baseline for tracking volunteers, groups, giving, staffing, etc.

Remember, no one metric is perfect, and that's why we use a more holistic analysis in our [Unstuck consulting process](#). We get a much clearer picture through our on-site engagements to determine the overall health of the church.



— Tony Morgan
Founder & Lead Strategist of The Unstuck Group

Ministry Reach

Churches are connecting with new people.

Specifically, there was a 9% increase in the number of new people that churches started tracking in their database over the last year compared to the year before. As an example, churches that are tracking 1,000 total people in their database added the names and contact information of 88 new people in the last year.

The average in-person attendance over the previous 12 months increased by 30%.

The average weekly attendance for the previous 12 months increased from 496 people to 646. This includes the total of all people including children. Though churches have not returned to attendance patterns before the pandemic, churches are seeing growing attendance again.

The percentage of people making decisions to follow Jesus over the last 12 months increased by nearly 20%.

The number of people who made decisions to follow Jesus by indicating salvation, baptism, etc. equaled 13% of this year's average in-person attendance. That's up from close to 11% the year before.

Engagement with online services continues to decline.

The average number of online service views (one minute or more) per week has gone down more than 20% from the year before. Churches reported an average of 427 service views per week compared to 545 service views per week the year before.

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“What's fascinating is the fact that there seems to be a correlation in the data between more online engagement and higher attendance at physical worship gatherings.

I think most pastors want to believe that one of the reasons why people are not coming back to church is because many people are watching online. I trust that there are people who are still only engaging online and probably many more that are doing a combination of both, but the data indicates higher online engagement and higher attendance go hand-in-hand. We also saw this evidence in the data we were collecting before the pandemic.”

-- Tony

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More than one in five churches surveyed is now multisite.

On average, those churches have 3 locations, including the original location. This, of course, is one area where there's a disparity between large and small churches as should be expected. Nearly 60% of churches that average 1,000 or more people in attendance are now multisite.

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“Because of the natural attrition rate in churches which is typically about 15% each year, this percentage increase in new people probably isn't sufficient to sustain churches going forward. Churches need to continue to prioritize both a 'reach' strategy (connecting with new people) AND a 'spiritual formation' strategy (helping people take their next steps toward Christ) to remain healthy.”

-- Tony Morgan

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Ministry Reach, cont.

Now that the worship wars are behind us, 71% of churches only offer “modern/contemporary” styles of worship services.

Just 3% of churches surveyed still offer only traditional services. And only 8% of churches offer multiple types of worship services. We know from previous research that declining churches are more likely to offer multiple styles of worship service—think combinations of traditional, contemporary, blended, modern and so on. In other words, the more worship styles a church offers, the more likely the church is experiencing a decline in attendance.

Children’s ministry in-person attendance is at 18% of overall attendance.

This includes all children from newborn through fifth grade. The year-over-year increase in children’s ministry attendance was 43%. This suggests that the increase in overall attendance can largely be explained by more younger families with kids coming back to church.

The average church has 8 students for every 100 people attending weekly gatherings.

Student ministry attendance for in-person gatherings increased by 25%. Currently, the average student ministry is 8% of overall attendance. This includes all students in sixth through twelfth grades.

Ministry Connection

Home groups are the primary option churches offer to connect people into smaller gatherings beyond the weekend services.

Of the churches surveyed, 89% offer home groups as an option to connect with other people. In fact, 3 out of 5 churches only offer home groups. Just 8% of churches only offer Sunday school as an option.

Small group participation has increased through the last year; however, the percentage of group engagement has declined.

Group participation went up by 18% year over year. Churches are now seeing 62% of their adults and students participate in a group. That's down from 68% in 2021.

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“Obviously, this is more of a reflection of people coming back to worship gatherings than a decline in group engagement. However, it's good to see the group engagement levels normalizing again. When the group or volunteer engagement numbers get too high, it indicates that churches are also reaching fewer new people.”

-- Tony

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The recovery in volunteer engagement has stalled.

Before the pandemic, The Unstuck Group would typically see 45% to 50% of all adults and students serving at least monthly on a volunteer team. Currently, churches are reporting only 37% are serving, and that's down slightly from 38% in 2021.

Churches have a span of care of one volunteer leader for every 14 people in attendance.

Leaders include adults and students who are serving in roles where they are responsible for leading a team or a group of other people (i.e., team leaders or group leaders).

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“This data point may be more alarming than the numbers around volunteer engagement. In the past, we've found that healthy, growing churches tend to have one volunteer leader for every 10 people in attendance. It's not unusual for the healthiest of churches to have closer to one leader for every five people. On the other hand, we also know that declining churches typically have about half the volunteer leaders of healthy churches—closer to one to 20 people in attendance. I view the number of people leading teams and groups as a critical lead indicator of overall church health and growth.”

-- Tony

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Ministry Staffing & Leadership

Staffing levels remain high compared to attendance.

The average church employs one full-time equivalent staff person for every 43 people in attendance. This number includes all ministry and support staff. Again, we know from previous research that declining churches have significantly bigger staff teams than growing churches. The last time we collected data on this metric, declining churches employed 56% more full-time equivalent employees than growing churches.

The median church board or elder team has eight members.

The largest board identified in the current reporting cycle had 65 members.

Churches generally have three additional boards or committees.

Large churches have fewer boards and committees. The data indicates that churches that have attendance of 1,000 or more people typically only have one additional committee beyond their board. One church in this reporting cycle reported having a board and 34 additional committees.

Ministry Finances

Giving to churches has increased slightly in the last 12 months.

Churches reported on average that their total general fund giving was up 6% from the previous year.

Churches are investing about half of their giving into ministry staff.

The average staff budget is 49% of the overall ministry budget. This includes the cost of all salaries and benefits.

We recommend that churches try to keep staffing budgets

between 45% and 55% of the overall budget. The Unstuck Group does not collect salary information for individual employees.

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“This data on giving, of course, includes a number of months before the recent economic downturn. It will be interesting to see if the inflationary pressure on the economy will impact financial contributions in the months to come. Anecdotally, I know pastors have started talking about giving plateaus and declines for the first time in several years.”

-- Tony

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Churches average having the equivalent of almost five months in cash reserves.

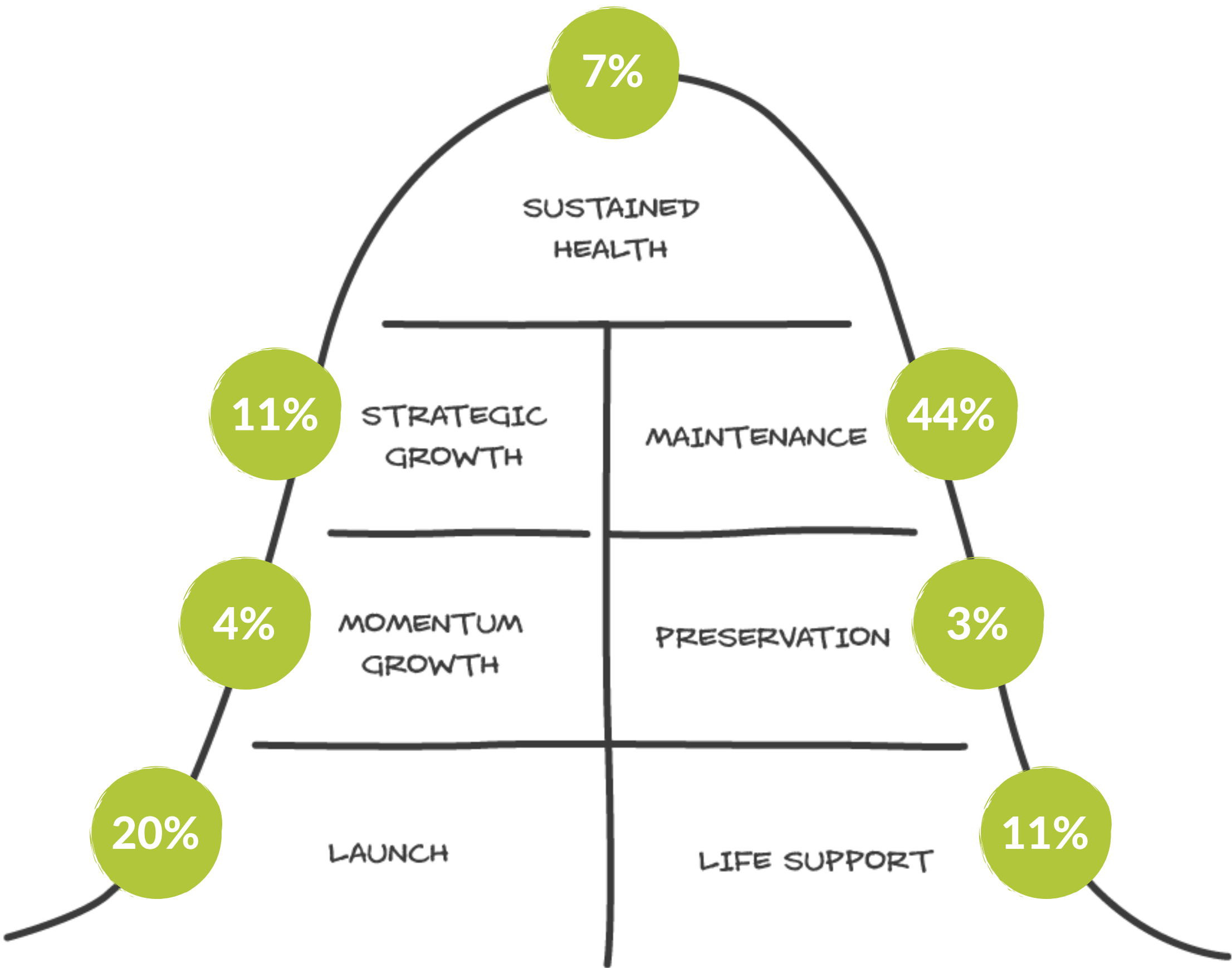
That's well beyond the two to three months that The Unstuck Group recommends. The amount of cash reserves continues to increase and is up significantly from pre-COVID, when churches indicated they had closer to three months in cash reserves.

Churches have very little debt.

On average, the current debt load is 0.8 times the church's total annual giving. The Unstuck Group encourages churches to keep total debt below 2.0 times annual giving.

Church Lifecycle Data

(Last 12 Months)



Summary by Church Size

CATEGORY	<200	200-499	500-999	1000+	ALL CHURCHES
Church Demographics					
Non-Denominational	30%	31%	28%	59%	36%
Year Started	1947	1959	1959	1963	1957
Board Members	7	9	9	8	8
Committees	3	3	2	1	3
Modern/Contemporary Style of Worship	54%	71%	78%	89%	71%
Offering Online Services	94%	96%	100%	98%	96%
Offering Home Groups	56%	59%	57%	70%	59%
Multisite Churches	4%	10%	26%	59%	22%
Reach					
Decisions to Follow Jesus as a Percentage of Attendance	7%	10%	10%	17%	13%
New Contacts Compared to Last Year	13%	8%	2%	8%	9%
Total Contacts to Attendance	3.3	4.8	4.7	5.7	5.2
Attendance Increase from Last Year	24%	25%	25%	35%	30%
Kids as a Percentage of Attendance	19%	17%	16%	19%	18%
Students as a Percentage of Attendance	11%	9%	8%	8%	8%
Online Views Change from Last Year	-14%	-20%	-11%	-25%	-22%
Online Views as a Percentage of Attendance	59%	57%	53%	73%	66%
Staffing & Finances					
Attendees Per Full-Time Equivalent Staff Person	31	41	36	48	43
Staff Budget Percentage	59%	55%	58%	49%	49%
Giving Increase from Last Year	5.4%	4.4%	2.7%	8.1%	6.0%
Debt to Annual Giving Ratio	1.0	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.8
Months of Cash Reserves	8.0	5.1	4.6	4.5	4.8
Next Steps					
Volunteers as a Percentage of Attendance	41%	44%	34%	37%	37%
Group Participants as a Percentage of Attendance	47%	56%	47%	72%	62%
Attendees Per Volunteer Leader	13	11	15	13	14

TAKE THE VITAL SIGNS SURVEY

The Unstuck Church Report is fueled by self-reported user data. [Take the survey](#) to contribute your church's data to a future report.

ABOUT THE CHURCH LAWYERS

The Church Lawyers are a team of Christian legal professionals personally called to empower and protect churches, ministries, and their leaders to fulfill their mission by providing biblically informed and ministry-focused legal solutions. Whether governance, employment, litigation, or other matters, The Church Lawyers walk alongside their clients as they navigate legal issues facing ministries today.

>>> Interested in learning more? [Click here](#).

ABOUT THE UNSTUCK GROUP

Most organizations start, grow, thrive, lose momentum, decline, and eventually end. **That doesn't have to be your church's story.**

The Unstuck Group helps pastors grow healthy churches by guiding them through experiences to align vision, strategy, team and action. Our core services include ministry health assessments, strategic planning, staffing and structure reviews and multisite and merger planning. Learn more by visiting theunstuckgroup.com.

Over the last 11 years, we've worked alongside and built relationships with the leadership teams at 500+ churches. Our goal is to help you lead a thriving church that continually reaches new people and helps them take next steps towards Christ.

>>> Interested in learning more? [Let's talk](#).

For more information related to this survey and the summary of the learnings, contact:

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