

Q3 2024

THE UNSTUCK CHURCH REPORT

BENCHMARKS + TRENDS IN U.S. CHURCHES

Sponsored by:

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THE UNSTUCK GROUP
— WE HELP CHURCHES GET UNSTUCK. —

Introduction

August 2024

Every quarter, The Unstuck Group compiles all the data we've collected to monitor trends in churches in the United States and worldwide. For this quarter's report, we only included churches that provided data during the four weeks between July 1 and July 26, 2024. This provides a very current snapshot of ministries of all shapes and sizes.

We received survey responses from 387 churches ranging from less than 100 to more than 10,000 in physical attendance for worship gatherings. The average in-person attendance of the participating churches was 1,056 people. As you will see in this summary, the average church experienced weekly attendance growth of more than 150 people in the previous 12 months. More importantly, in these churches combined, **there were close to 40,000 people who indicated a decision to follow Jesus in the last 12 months.** That's worth celebrating! In other words, this report reflects the trends of some of the healthiest churches that are making a significant impact on people's lives.

Each quarter, we try to provide a distinctive look at some of the current trends in churches. This quarter's report, for example, includes a targeted look at key differences between growing churches and churches that are plateauing or declining.

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



Key Findings

	This Year	Last Year	Difference
In-Person Average Weekly Attendance	1,056	899	+17%
Online Service Views	686	519	+32%
Decisions to Follow Jesus per 100 Attendees	138	116	+19%
Percentage of Adults and Students Volunteering	38%	39%	
Percentage of Adults and Students in Groups	52%	50%	
Annual General Fund Giving	\$2,211K	\$2,060K	+7.4%

First, let's talk about the differences between growing and declining churches...

I always need to preface this by explaining this doesn't have anything to do with the size of the church. In other words, this is not a "big church" versus "small church" conversation. Many churches with fewer than a couple hundred in attendance are experiencing growth. On the other hand, there are several very large churches—we'd classify them as megachurches—that are in decline. This is not a comparison of size; it's a comparison of trends over time.

Secondly, these distinctions highlight the correlations the data offers between growing and declining churches. I'm not suggesting that any of these attributes cause growth or decline. For example, I'm not trying to make the case that churches are growing their attendance at services in church buildings because more people are watching online than in declining churches. It just so happens that churches with attendance growth also have many more people watching online than declining churches. That should suggest that streaming your services online doesn't cause attendance decline. If anything, it has the opposite effect.

Today, attendance is up 17% in the churches we surveyed, which tells only part of the story. Among all the churches that responded to the survey, many also plateaued or faced an attendance decline. What stood out to me were some key distinctions between the growing churches and those in decline. Here are a few of those differences:

- Growing churches were about 50% more likely to offer only contemporary or modern worship and no traditional worship.
- Declining churches have far fewer first-time connections to the church, indicating that they've become insider focused.
- Growing churches are seeing a much higher percentage of people indicate decisions to follow Jesus within the last 12 months, meaning they are growing AND helping people say "yes" to Jesus.
- Declining churches have larger church boards and four times as many committees.
- As mentioned above, growing churches have a much higher percentage of people viewing online services.
- Declining churches have 30% more paid staff than growing churches, and likewise, they are spending more than 60% of their budget on staffing expenses.
- Growing churches are more likely to have small groups and more people connected to those smaller groups, while declining churches are more likely to have Sunday school.
- Growing churches have 20% more volunteer leaders than declining churches.
- The weekly per capita giving in declining churches is 20% higher than that of growing churches.

I've been studying the differences between growing and declining churches for close to twenty years now, and the data confirms these same differences every time.

Finally, it might be tempting to look at these differences and want to immediately jump to changes in your ministry strategy and methods to better reflect what growing churches are experiencing. I strongly discourage you from doing that. It never ends well when churches start changing the way they do church before first agreeing and uniting together on why they do church.

I hope you and your team find the rest of this report encouraging. We want to help you have better information to make better decisions about the future of your ministry and the mission you are trying to accomplish.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tony Morgan".

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. For example, churches that are tracking 1,000 total people in their database added the names and contact information of 92 new people in the last year.

The average in-person attendance over the previous 12 months increased by 17%.

The average weekly attendance for the last 12 months increased from 899 people to 1,056. This is the total of all people, including children.

The percentage of people making decisions to follow Jesus over the last 12 months increased by nearly 19%.

The number of people who decided to follow Jesus by indicating salvation, baptism, etc., equaled 13% of this year's average in-person attendance.



"This will always be my favorite metric in The Unstuck Church Report because every percentage point reflects another person living in God's grace, mercy and love. It represents the potential for healed marriages, freedom from addictions, finding purpose and so much more. I love celebrating the impact that churches are making as they help people meet and follow Jesus!"

Tony Morgan

Engagement with online services increased last year.

The average number of online service views (one minute or more) per week has increased by more than 30% from the year before. Churches reported an average of 686 service views per week compared to 519 service views per week the year before.



Insights from Joe Park, CEO of Horizons Stewardship

Online engagement continues to increase, especially in growing churches, with an average of 65 online views per 100 people attending in person in this report. I encourage churches to curate digital worship, including on-demand views, with the same care and attention to in-person worship. The viewer should feel like they are participating in worship, not just peering in, which means you will need to craft experiences and messaging for online viewers.

For example, you might cut away from the in-person offering and insert a prerecorded offering talk uniquely crafted for online viewers to encourage in-the-moment participation, such as registering online and giving using a QR code. In addition to your encouragement, orally and visually explain the process by inserting screen share footage of someone filling out the registration or opening the online giving portal and making a gift.

More than one in five churches surveyed is now multisite.

On average, those churches have three locations, including the original location. Of course, this is one area where there is a disparity between large and small churches, as should be expected. More than half of churches with an average attendance of 1,000 or more are now multisite.

Fewer churches offer traditional worship, with more than 70% of churches only offering “modern/contemporary” styles of worship services.

Current research shows that declining churches are more likely to provide multiple worship service styles—think combinations of traditional, contemporary, blended, modern and so on. In other words, the more worship styles a church offers, the more likely it is to experience a decline in attendance.

Children’s ministry in-person attendance is at 16% of overall attendance.

This includes all children from newborn through fifth grade. In case you are curious, the year-over-year increase in children’s ministry attendance was 14%. That means children’s attendance is increasing, but children are becoming a smaller percentage of overall church attendance.

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

Student ministry attendance for in-person gatherings increased by 12%, including 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.

60% of churches surveyed *only* offer home groups rather than providing an option for Sunday school or other midweek group gatherings.



“Given the isolation many people are experiencing and the loneliness epidemic in our world, I hope churches continue to encourage people to connect with others through small groups. It appears from this quarter’s data that more churches continue to lean into the small groups model, and it’s certainly a key strategy for churches that are experiencing growth.”

Tony Morgan

The percentage of group engagement has increased over the last year.

Churches now have 52% of their adults and students participate in a group, up from 50% a year ago.

Volunteer engagement has continued to stall.

Before the pandemic, The Unstuck Group typically saw 45% to 50% of all adults and students serving at least monthly on a volunteer team. Currently, churches are reporting only 38% are serving, down slightly from 39% a year ago.

Churches have a span of care of one volunteer leader for every 17 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).

Ministry Staffing & Structure

Staffing levels are normalizing when compared to attendance.

The average church employs one full-time equivalent (FTE) staff person for every 60 attendees, including all ministry and support staff. By comparison, The Unstuck Group recommends one FTE for every 75 people in attendance.

The average church board or elder team has eight members.

The largest board identified in the current reporting cycle had 32 members.

Churches generally have two additional boards or committees.

Large churches have fewer boards and committees. One church in this reporting cycle had one board and 23 additional committees.

Ministry Finances

Giving to churches has increased in the last 12 months.

On average, churches reported that their total general fund giving was up 7.4% from the previous year.



Finance Insights from Horizons Stewardship

Per Capita Giving is 20% higher in declining churches.

This trend is not new, but it is a longstanding pattern validated by The Unstuck Group and Horizons Stewardship in their work with thousands of churches. Far too often, declining churches misinterpret this as a sign of health rather than the warning it is and fail to take action to turn the tide while they still have the resources to do so. If your church has three or more years of increasing per capita giving and falling attendance, the time to take action is now! - Joe Park

Churches are investing less than half of their giving into ministry staff.

The average staff budget is 49% of the overall ministry budget, including 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. We recommend The Church Lawyers for expert guidance in establishing reasonable compensation policies and practices that comply with IRS rules and regulations. Learn more [here](#).



“This is a real win for churches in recent years. Now that churches are again within a healthy range for staffing compared to overall spending, it frees up more ministry dollars for mission expansion and other key investments that are needed to reach more people for Jesus. Additionally, reduced staffing expenditures tend to translate into a higher focus on volunteer engagement.”

Tony Morgan

On average, churches have the equivalent of more than six months in cash reserves.

This number is well beyond the two to three months that The Unstuck Group recommends.

Churches have very little debt.

On average, their current debt load is 0.6 times their total annual giving. The Unstuck Group encourages churches to keep total debt below 2.0 times annual giving.



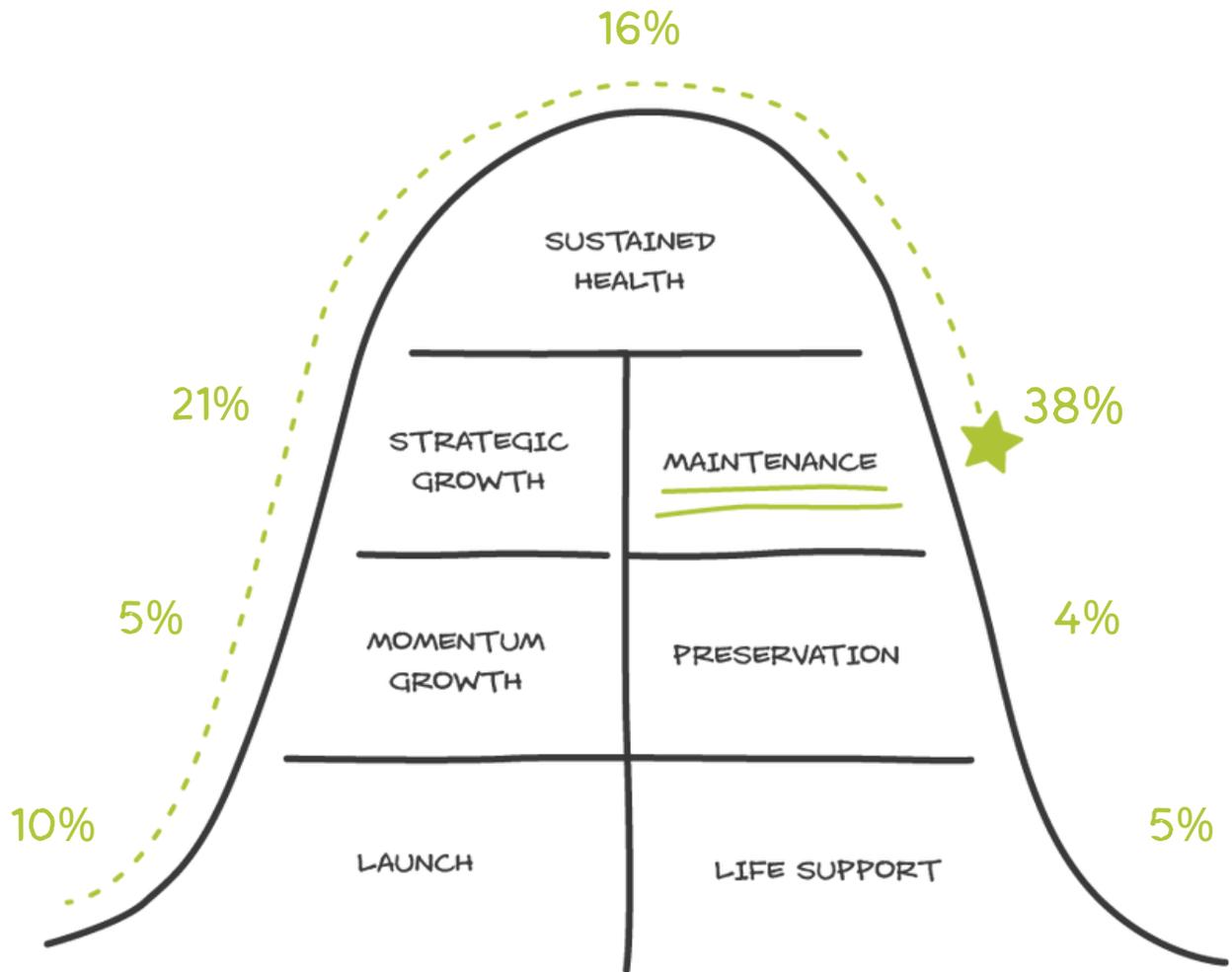
Debt Insights from Horizons Stewardship

How churches manage debt is more important than the amount of debt. Horizons' experience is that when debt is being serviced through the church ministry budget, it negatively impacts ministry funding when it exceeds 50% of annual giving. The problem is solved by asking for gifts above a household's current ministry budget support. When done well, asking for over and above debt elimination has almost no effect on your current ministry funding, so why not ask?

A capital campaign is rarely needed unless your current debt exceeds 100% of your annual giving. One Fund campaigns tend to be expensive and often ineffective at accelerating debt elimination. A more cost-effective option is using a year-round giver development strategy and communicating your need to continue eliminating debt to protect your ministry funding. Such a strategy might include low-key targeted appeals, including debt elimination as an option on your online giving portal and in your year-end giving proposals, or using offering talks to connect the principles taught in financial management courses to how your church is prudently managing its debt. - Joe Park

Lifecycle

(Last 12 Months)



Summary by Church Size

	<200	200-499	500-999	1000+	All Churches
Church Demographics					
Non-Denominational	38%	32%	44%	48%	40%
Year Started	1947	1973	1962	1963	1964
Board Members	9	7	9	9	8
Committees	3	3	2	2	2
Offering Only Modern/Contemporary Style of Worship	43%	74%	69%	84%	72%
Offering Online Services	90%	92%	97%	99%	95%
Multisite Churches	2%	3%	19%	54%	23%
Reach					
Decisions to Follow Jesus as a Percentage of Attendance	6%	11%	10%	15%	13%
Change in Total Contacts Compared to Last Year	9%	6%	9%	9%	9%
Total Contacts to Attendance	5.5	5.3	5.5	4.2	4.3
Attendance Increase from Last Year	11%	17%	14%	19%	17%
Kids as a Percentage of Attendance	17%	17%	17%	16%	16%
Students as a Percentage of Attendance	13%	11%	9%	8%	8%
Online Views Change from Last Year	26%	5%	11%	37%	32%
Online Views as a Percentage of Attendance	41%	33%	38%	68%	65%

	<200	200-499	500-999	1000+	All Churches
Staffing and Finances					
Attendees Per Full-Time Equivalent Staff Person	42	51	56	64	60
Staff Budget Percentage	59%	54%	53%	48%	49%
Weekly Per Capita Giving (Not Including Kids)	\$57	\$56	\$52	\$47	\$48
Giving Increase from Last Year	4.4%	5.7%	7.7%	7.6%	7.4%
Debt to Annual Giving Ratio	0.6	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.6
Months of Cash Reserves	9.4	6.3	6.1	6.5	6.4
Next Steps					
Volunteers as a Percentage of Attendance	45%	42%	37%	38%	38%
Attendees Per Volunteer Leader	14	14	18	16	17
Group Participants as a Percentage of Attendance	48%	51%	53%	52%	52%
Offering Only Home Groups (No Sunday School)	48%	58%	53%	71%	60%

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



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ABOUT THE UNSTUCK GROUP

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.



ABOUT HORIZONS STEWARDSHIP

Horizons Stewardship utilizes a collaborative and integrated ministry framework designed to fit each organization's unique culture and support church and faith-based nonprofit leaders in their mission to grow disciples and fund ministry through coaching, planning, technology, and analytics.

Horizons has over three decades of experience and has developed a spiritually focused approach that consistently yields more funding for ministry and more effective disciple-making strategies. With the support of seasoned ministry strategists, proven generosity guides, and ICF-trained coaches, ministries that partner with Horizons experience, on average, a double-digit increase in giving within the first year.

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