

# **LIFEWAY RESEARCH: Almost all churches and most churchgoers have returned to in-person attendance as pandemic numbers decline**

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (Lifeway) – More U.S. Protestant churches are gathering in person compared to the height of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and pastors say most of churchgoers who ceased attending have returned as well.

Almost all U.S. Protestant pastors (98%) say their church met in person in August, according to a new Lifeway Research study. This marks the highest percentage of churches holding in-person services since March 2020, when COVID-19 became a widespread national health issue.

During the first week of March last year, 99% of Protestant churches met in person but by the end of the month, only seven percent were doing so, according to a previous Lifeway study.

A majority of churches didn't start holding in-person services again until June 2020. By September 2020, 87% met physically but that figure dropped to 76% in January 2021, according to Lifeway Research studies conducted at the time. By August 2021, only two percent of churches did not meet in person at all.

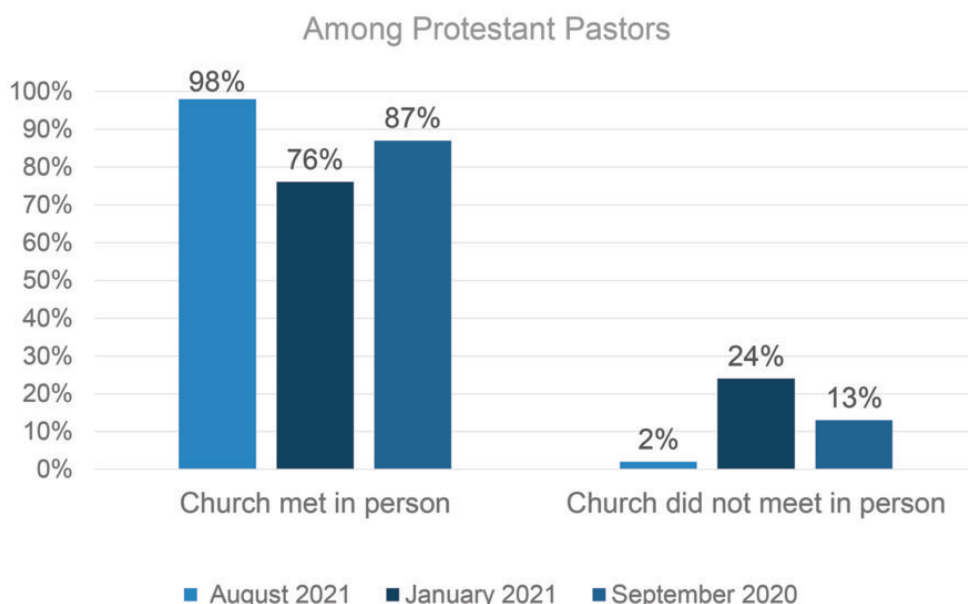
"Every church's path has been different during the pandemic, and each stage of resuming specific aspects of ministry is significant," said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research.

"Worshiping together as a physical assembly of believers in

Jesus Christ is an important element of the Christian faith. For almost all Protestant churches, this stage of ministry is now active again, though other aspects of ministry may not be,” he said.

Earlier this year, even as fewer churches were holding in-person services, 91% of churchgoers told Lifeway Research they planned on attending church services as much as they did prior to the pandemic or even more, once COVID-19 was no longer an active threat to people’s health.

### 23% more churches met in person in August 2021 than January 2021



Lifeway research

Q: "For August 2021, what was your church's average worship attendance in-person on a typical weekend (including all ages from babies to adults but not counting anyone twice)?"

By September 2020, U.S. Protestant pastors reported most churchgoers had returned. The average church drew 63% of their pre-pandemic attendance levels. That dipped slightly in January 2021 to 60%. By August, the average pastor saw 73% of their church members in person on Sunday morning.

“Many pastors and church leaders are anxious for the whole congregation to gather physically together,” said McConnell. “Worship attendance is improving, but there is still a large gap between today’s in-person attendance and pre-COVID

levels.”

While some churches are still below 50% of their January 2020 attendance levels, others report growing during the pandemic. Thirteen percent say they had less than half of their pre-COVID-19 crowd in August, down substantially from earlier in the pandemic.

In both September 2020 and January 2021, more than one in four churches had less than half their normal Sunday morning crowds.

A plurality of pastors (35%) report attendance between 50% and 70% in August 2021. For 30% of pastors, late summer congregations were 70% to less than 90%. Another 13% of churches were 90% to 100% of their previous levels, while nine percent had more people in attendance in August than they did prior to COVID-19. Only two percent of pastors reported growth in January this year.

Some pastors say they are finding it harder to bring back their pre-pandemic churchgoers. While African American Protestant pastors were only slightly less likely than their white counterparts to say they met in person in August (95% – 98%), African American pastors were 12.5 times as likely as white pastors to say their attendance was less than 30% of what it was before COVID-19 (25% to two percent).

Seventy-three percent say their worship service attendance in August was fewer than 100 people, with 40% drawing fewer than 50 on an average weekend. Twenty-two percent report crowds of 100 – 249, while six percent say they reached 250 or more.

The small church, however, has apparently had an advantage during the pandemic recovery period. Pastors of churches with pre-COVID-19 attendance levels of fewer than 50 people are more likely to report August 2021 attendance back to or exceeding previous levels.

Twenty-three percent say they had 90% – 100% of pre-pandemic attendance in August, while 19% report higher attendance compared to January 2020.

“Most small churches are still not back to pre-pandemic attendance, but far more of them are reaching this point than larger churches,” said McConnell. “It’s possible small churches are aided by perceived safety of a naturally smaller gathering, differences in technology options for gathering online, or the strength of relational connections. [R]egardless of the reasons why, in-person worship attendance trends currently look promising for small churches.”

*Lifeway Research is the evangelical research arm of LifeWay Christian Resources in Nashville, specializing in surveys about faith in culture and matters that affect churches. The complete report can be viewed [here](#).*