



PEW TO PEW

Learning from
Church Switching Trends

Lifeway[®]research
Insights Report

As the front door to your church opens, you have opportunities to welcome new faces into your congregation, but at the same time, others are making their way out the back door. For some, a residential move caused them to leave your church, but others simply moved to a church across town. This can be a more painful exit for the pastor left behind, but it's also the one pastors are more likely to be able to address. A recent study by Lifeway Research found slightly more than half of churchgoers switch churches at least once as an adult. Our team dug into the reasons people tend to switch churches. The good news is most switchers who changed churches as adults did so because of a residential move—not driven by an issue with their former church. However, 40% switched because they were unhappy or dissatisfied with their previous church, a less palatable reason for their former pastor to hear.

Lifeway Research conducted a comprehensive study on churchgoers in the United States, focusing on reasons people change congregations. The Church Switchers Study surveyed 1,001 Protestant or non-denominational adults who attend church at least twice a month and have switched churches as adults.

It may be sad to hear of a church member moving to another city or state, but as their church family, we want to celebrate with them and send them off well to their new church and mission field. In fact, church switchers tend to find higher satisfaction in their new congregations, indicating that the move often leads to positive outcomes, including deeper relationships, increased involvement, and personal spiritual growth.

While residential moves are a primary driver for changing churches, our study underscores that dissatisfaction with changes in the church, unmet needs, and issues with the pastor significantly influence a churchgoer's decision to leave and find a new church in the area. Understanding the complex motivations behind church switches can guide pastors and church leaders in proactively addressing concerns and fostering more engagement and satisfaction among congregants.

In this study, we take a closer look at both groups—the *movers*, those leaving a church because of a change in location, and the *shakers*, those leaving for reasons closer to home. We hope this report will encourage you to have conversations with those leaving your church and those attending for the first time and to be more proactive in engaging those who may be struggling but have not yet acted. In this report, you'll find actionable insights based on research that you can apply in your church's ministry.

Ben Mandrell,
Lifeway President and CEO

Key Findings

» **Chronic church switching not the norm**

Nearly half of adult Protestant churchgoers (47%) have only attended one church as an adult. Of those who have switched churches, two-thirds (63%) say they have regularly attended only two to three churches as an adult.

» **Residential moves influence decisions**

60% of church switchers indicate that a residential move played a role in their decision to leave their previous church.

» **Motivations for switching churches**

Apart from moves, factors leading to church switching include dissatisfaction with changes in the church (29%), unfulfilled needs (29%), issues with the pastor (27%), and congregational disenchantment (26%).

» **COVID-19 impact**

The pandemic influenced 13% of church switches. Reasons for switching during the pandemic range from temporary church closures (55%) to disagreements over COVID-19 policies (19%) to permanent church closures (9%).

» **First visit**

When churchgoers are visiting a new church, the first event or activity they will likely attend is a worship service (68%).

» **Third time's the charm**

More than 7 in 10 churchgoers (71%) decide to regularly attend their current church after visiting worship services three times or less.

» **New church satisfaction**

Church switchers generally express higher satisfaction with their current congregations, citing factors such as engaging sermons (58%), relevant preaching (58%), and a welcoming community (57%).

» **Future intentions**

A significant portion (78%) of church switchers express an intention to continue attending their current church in the foreseeable future.

» **Involvement and engagement**

Church switchers tend to be more actively involved in the church they moved to—participating in various activities, including worship services (76%), financial support (66%), and volunteering (60%).

THE MOVERS

**Prepare the ones moving
away and welcome those
moving in.**

“ I moved away and had to find a new church. I found one very similar to my last one, so I felt comfortable there and decided to join.”

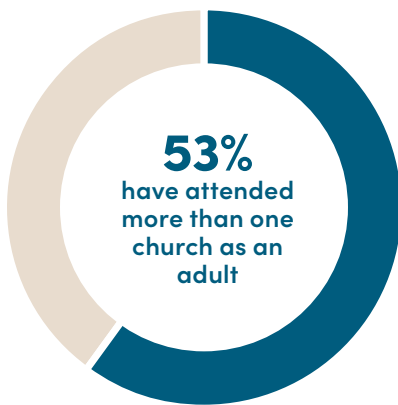


Ready to Launch

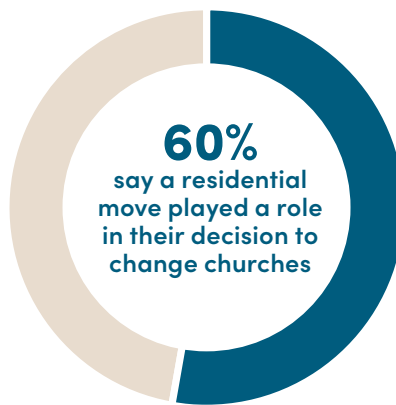
“ I moved to a different state for work. I kind of lost my way spiritually after the move. But when God had worked on me enough, I felt the conviction to come back to His way. I asked around and was directed to my present church.”

Moving to a new home in a new community is the single greatest reason people switch churches. A life-changing decision to move could be motivated by a job, family, finances, or aspirations. One of the most alarming trends we discovered in the study is that 2 in 5 movers (41%) stopped attending church for three or more months before finding their current church. Pastor, consider ways you can help church members moving to a new community find their next church.

Most U.S. churchgoers have changed congregations, moving played a role in most cases.



Among U.S. Protestant or non-denominational churchgoers



Among U.S. Protestant or non-denominational churchgoers who have switched churches

7 ways to help those moving away from your church's community

1. Encourage them to search for a new church.

Two in 5 (41%) church switchers stopped attending a church for more than three months.

2. Help them develop a list of churches to visit.

Seven in 10 movers don't search for a new church before moving (69%). The logistics of moving can be daunting, and finding a new church home is often put on the backburner.

3. Help them know what to look for, specifically in church doctrine.

A large majority of church switchers (86%) said a church's beliefs or doctrine was important in their decision to attend that church, with 56% saying beliefs and doctrines were extremely important.

4. Encourage them to serve at their new church.

Less than half of church switchers (47%) have regular responsibilities at their new church.

5. Teach them solid theology.

Lifeway Research's [State of Theology](#) regularly demonstrates how much theological ignorance and illiteracy there is, even among churchgoers. One of the greatest gifts you can give the "next church" is to be the church that gives someone a theological foundation.

6. Model healthy leadership.

It's imperative pastors take seriously their biblical responsibilities to shepherd the flock God has placed under their care. When someone leaves your church for another, give them the ability to spot healthy, biblical leadership.

7. Pray for them and their new church.

When someone leaves your congregation, pray God continues to work in their life and use them in their new church. Not everyone who leaves one church finds another one. Pray God will lead them to a new place to worship Him and serve.

41% of those who have switched churches say they stopped attending church for more than three months between churches, up from 28% who said the same in 2006.

Throw Out the Welcome Mat

“I moved about 30 miles away to a little town, and I have friends here who told me about my current church.”

When it comes to finding a new church, there's no substitute for personal interactions. The majority of movers used in-person visits to churches (69%) and recommendations from family, friends, neighbors, and/or colleagues (54%) to find a new church. While a worship service is the most common event or activity a visitor will attend first (64%), more than a third of movers first go to another event such as a Sunday School class or small group, social event, service ministry, or an online service.

Each year churchgoers arrive in your community and need a new church. The question is whether they'll find you and what they'll think when they check out your church.

Top 5 resources people use to find a new church when moving to a new community

In-person visits to churches

69%

Recommendations from family, friends, neighbors, and/or colleagues

54%

Church websites

40%

Social media sites (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc.)

32%

Online search tools

30%

“We moved here from a different state. I searched online and found this church after we got settled in, and we started attending.”

Your church’s website is often the front door to your church. Our study found that 1 in 5 movers were first introduced to their current church through the church’s website (20%). And around 1 in 10 found it through social media (12%) or online recommendations (11%).

Among those who were first introduced to their church through the church’s website, more than 2 in 3 (66%) said the church’s beliefs and mission were the most helpful thing on the website. Churchgoers also found simple and practical information such as church location (66%) and worship times (65%) to be helpful. Others found ministries or events (50%), contact information (42%), sermons (39%), staff profiles (34%), and social media contacts (24%) to be helpful.

Ways to become visitor friendly

WEBSITE MUST HAVES

- » Up-to-date information
- » Welcome page
- » Your meeting location address and contact information
- » Worship service times
- » A statement of faith and list of the church’s core beliefs
- » Your church’s mission statement
- » Links to on-demand videos of past services

WEBSITE NICE TO HAVES

- » Highly visible video content
- » Discipleship content
- » Online giving
- » A list of ministries or upcoming events

SOCIAL MEDIA BEST PRACTICES

- » Link to your church’s social media accounts on the church website.
- » Start with a limited number of social media channels; build on your success.
- » Meet your audiences’ felt needs.
- » Create a regular pace for posting your social media content.
- » Follow and engage with your members on social media.

IN-PERSON GUESTS

- » Have a trained team of greeters welcoming everyone.
- » Encourage members to greet and talk to guests.
- » Encourage members to invite guests to lunch or upcoming social gatherings.
- » As a pastor or minister, be easily accessible to guests.
- » Collect contact information from guests if they are willing to share it.
- » Contact guests to thank them for coming and answer questions.
- » Give current congregants cards to use as invitations for inviting new people to your church.

Around 3 in 10 churchgoers who changed congregations say they found their current church because they were invited by someone or heard about the church from a friend. If you're looking to draw people to your church, the people in your pews are some of your best ambassadors.

Churchgoers were first introduced to their new church in these ways

A friend/acquaintance invited me to attend.

30%

I heard about it through word of mouth.

29%

A family member invited me to attend.

26%

I had driven by the church before.

24%

I had always been familiar with the church.

22%

I found the church website.

20%

I found out about it on the internet (Google Maps, Yelp, denominational page, etc.).

19%

Creating a culture of invitation

1. Pray for a spiritual movement in your church.
2. Create momentum by continually preaching and teaching on inviting.
3. Celebrate the faithfulness of those who invite.
4. Set the tone from the top.

Important factors in choosing a church after a residential move

“We looked for churches of like beliefs in the area we moved to and tried the one closest first. We really liked it, so we did not check any more. We felt God wanted us to join here.”

When it comes to choosing a new church after a residential move, the church's beliefs and doctrine matter as much as a good sermon. For most regular churchgoers who have changed churches, **their current church's beliefs and doctrines (86%) and preaching (86%) were important in their decision to attend that church**, with 55% saying its beliefs and doctrines were extremely important and 49% saying the preaching was extremely important.

Following closely behind the preaching in importance were the church's authenticity, unity among members, care for the community, and worship style.



Important factors in choosing a church

Beliefs/Doctrine of the church

31% 55% 86%

Preaching

37% 49% 86%

Authenticity of church members/pastor

36% 48% 84%

Unity among members

46% 36% 82%

Care for community

43% 39% 81%

Worship style

42% 38% 80%

Members with whom I could build relationships

47% 30% 77%

Evidence of God's work/changed lives

36% 41% 76%

Opportunities to learn biblical truth

36% 37% 73%

Location

41% 29% 70%

Music

40% 29% 69%

Worship times

43% 26% 69%

Denomination

36% 31% 67%

Opportunities to serve

38% 26% 64%

Church members similar to me

41% 21% 62%

Low pressure to commit

37% 24% 61%

Acquaintances among church members

38% 22% 61%

Age-appropriate programs for my children

26% 25% 51%

Size of church

27% 14% 41%

Little use of religious jargon

24% 14% 38%

IMPORTANT

EXTREMELY IMPORTANT

Totals may not equal due to rounding.

THE SHAKERS

Understanding why people
leave your church matters.

“I felt unfulfilled in my previous church. I visited and attended services at several different churches and found one that I totally felt would fulfill my needs and joined.”



Where'd They Go?

"I switched because I didn't feel like I was connecting, and the pastor didn't have messages that connected with me in my life. I found my current church by searching online and trying out a few new churches."

Many churchgoers switch congregations without switching homes.

Lifeway Research found **40% of church switchers stayed in their community but left their previous church because of personal preferences or circumstances**. And other studies, [including some from Lifeway Research and Pew Research](#), indicate the pandemic increased the likelihood of churchgoers at least exploring other churches.

At the height of the pandemic, in October 2020, researchers Nicholas Higgins and Paul Djupe surveyed American churchgoers. They found [more than a third \(35%\) reported visiting another congregation](#) in person or online in the previous six months, according to their report published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. Of those who were attending a church in spring 2020, 18% reported no longer attending that same congregation by October, higher than the pre-pandemic church-switching rate by 4 to 5 percentage points. However, Lifeway Research found that by February 2021, only 5% of churchgoers had actually switched churches. Higgins and Djupe found the increase in video offerings allowed more churchgoers to shop.

It seems the pandemic provided an opportunity for people to act on the discontentment they may have already been feeling in their previous church.

"When we dug into the reasons behind disenchantment with the church, we found people pointed to the church being judgmental, hypocritical or insincere, or there were problems with the pastor."

—Scott McConnell,
Executive Director of Lifeway Research

Pastors and church leaders should be aware that, unfortunately, churchgoers switching to another congregation is a normal part of church life; however, they can also work to close their back door as much as possible.

Top 5 reasons people stay in your community but leave your church

29%
**They didn't
like changes
at the church.**

When asked to elaborate, the majority of those disgruntled with change point to the sheer volume of change as the tipping point. Others discontented with changes in the church point to changes in the church's teaching on political or social issues or changes in the church's religious teachings or beliefs. Other disappointing changes include a pastor or other staff member they liked leaving the church, the worship style changing, and members they like no longer attending.

29%
**Their needs
were not being
fulfilled.**

The majority with unmet needs say their church did not help them develop spiritually. Other sizeable groups mention not feeling engaged in meaningful work in the church, not making friends, not finding happiness, not finding answers to life questions, and the church not caring about their situation.

27%
**They became
disenchanted with
the pastor.**

Those disenchanted with the pastor most frequently say the pastor is hypocritical or judgmental. They often indicate the pastor is insincere or not a good preacher.

26%
**They became
disenchanted with
the church.**

Churchgoers who fall into this category most frequently say church members are hypocritical or judgmental. When talking about the church, many say it was not a place where God was at work, it settled for mediocrity, or it lacked a clear purpose or vision.

22%
**They couldn't agree with
some of the church's
teachings or positions on
issues or politics.**

Among those who didn't agree with the church's teachings, people point to the pastor or church being seemingly aligned with a particular political party or ideology, theological issues, teachings on moral issues, and the church being too liberal or too conservative for their taste.

Closing the Back Door: How to Keep People for the Long Haul

“Our churches should be friendly, but they can’t stop there. They must be filled with people who are building deep friendships with each other and seeking to do the same with their unbelieving neighbors and coworkers.”

— Ben Mandrell,
Lifeway President and CEO

Many churches have great success attracting people but often struggle keeping them connected. As your church invests in the lives of new believers and growing disciples, pastors should prioritize increasing the commitment level of those at their church. The more churchgoers are involved—increased attendance, small group involvement, volunteering, etc.—the less likely it appears they are to leave.

Those who have left a local church for another list many reasons for leaving. While these people will be missed, they have helped point out specific things churches can proactively address to help their congregation and reduce additional departures. Your church may do some of these well, but consider identifying two or three things you can focus on improving in the next few weeks.

Overcoming pitfalls of politics

Of the top five reasons people switched to another church in their community, 22% said it was because they couldn't agree with some of the church's teachings or positions on issues or politics. Here are 11 ways to navigate politics in your church.

1. Lead with gratitude for the opportunity to shape your community and country.
2. See political conversations as an opportunity, not an obstacle.
3. Remind Christians that citizenship is something to be stewarded wisely.
4. Seek to be political but not partisan.
5. Distinguish between issues of consequence and issues where there are legitimate differences among believers.
6. Remind God's people who they are.
7. Honor those who are in public office, even when you disagree with them.
8. Ground your people in the hope of Christ.
9. Remember the importance of spiritual formation in an election season.
10. Strive to maintain unity.
11. Model this behavior in your actions, online presence, and conversations.

How to cultivate a church environment people want to stay in

MEET CHURCHGOERS' NEEDS

- » Feed people spiritually.
- » Start new Bible study groups to ensure everyone can find a place to connect.
- » Offer opportunities for meaningful service that fit people's gifts.
- » Make broad appeals to serve and have individual conversations.
- » Establish settings that welcome spiritual questions.
- » Encourage your small groups to regularly have social gatherings outside of church.

GUARD YOUR MISSION

- » Weed out hypocrisy of actions not matching teaching.
- » Weed out hypocrisy of only addressing some sins.
- » Foster mercy instead of judgment.
- » Be transparent that believers are far from perfect and still need God's grace daily.
- » Expect everyone to serve—not just ministers.
- » Keep the kingdom of heaven ahead of political allegiances.

SPARK INSPIRATION

- » Demonstrate humility that creates a welcoming space.
- » Ask members how God is working in their lives; then share these stories.
- » Invest in your preaching skills.
- » Clearly share your church's mission—and do it often.
- » Explain what you are calling people to be part of.
- » Challenge attendees to meet new people within the church and invest in those relationships.

LEAD THROUGH CHANGE

- » Cast a vision that explains the need for change.
- » Repeatedly share core beliefs based on unchanging Scripture.
- » Rally support from other leaders.
- » Clearly communicate the why and the how as you make changes.
- » Be strategic and compassionate in how you approach change.
- » When you meet resistance, ask questions and meet face to face to discover the reason behind the resistance.

The Bottom Line on Movers and Shakers

So what? What do these numbers mean for you and your church?

Are you seeing new faces enter the front door of your church as they move into town? If so, praise God! Continue to look for ways to make your church easy to find, comfortable to visit, and accessible to connect with. If you aren't seeing new neighbors visiting your church, do some digging to figure out if that's because people aren't moving to your area, if they're having trouble finding you when they arrive, or if you're not meeting the needs in your community. In many areas, welcoming new neighbors into the church is a major ministry. But even if few people are moving to your neighborhood, look for ways to proactively engage them so brothers and sisters in Christ aren't left long without a church home.

If you're watching people leave through the back door of your church, take time to figure out why. Grieve the loss of churchgoers who have to leave your church because of a residential move, but also intentionally launch them into their next season and next location. Set them up for success in committing themselves to a new church and community.

But perhaps we can learn the most from those who leave our congregations for another across town. Are they leaving because they don't like change or you're not meeting their needs? Or have they become disenchanted with you as the pastor or with the church as a whole? Do they disagree with the church's teachings or positions on issues or politics? As we learn about our churches from those leaving, we can take steps toward building a church culture where churchgoers stay, committing themselves to one another in a God-honoring way for the good of the Body of Christ and the furthering of God's kingdom.

■ Learn more about our findings, trends, and recommendations for navigating ministry at [LifewayResearch.com](https://www.LifewayResearch.com).

About the Church Switcher Study

The online survey of 1,001 American Protestant churchgoers was conducted July 26–August 4, 2023, using a national pre-recruited panel. Respondents were screened to include those who identified as Protestant/non-denominational and attend church worship services at least twice a month and have attended more than one church as an adult. Quotas were used to balance gender, age, region, ethnicity, education, and religion to reflect the population more accurately. The completed sample is 1,001 surveys. The sample provides 95% confidence that the sampling error from the panel does not exceed plus or minus 3.1%. This margin of error accounts for the effect of weighting. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.

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, (*RNS, Christianity Today, NPR, Wall Street Journal, USA Today, New York Times, Washington Post, The Atlantic*, and many others) and translated into multiple languages.

About Lifeway Christian Resources

In operation since 1891, Lifeway Christian Resources is one of the leading providers of Christian resources, including Bibles, books, Bible studies, Christian music and movies, Vacation Bible School, and church supplies, as well as camps and events for all ages. Lifeway is the world's largest provider of Spanish Bibles. Based in Brentwood, Tennessee, Lifeway operates as a self-supporting nonprofit. For more information, visit [Lifeway.com](https://www.lifeway.com).

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