

100,000 Churches Could Close Over Next Decade

The Wired Word for the Week of October 25, 2026

In the News

Two summers ago, the Rev. Melissa Wagner stood in the pulpit of her 120-year-old United Methodist Church in Belding, Michigan, and delivered a eulogy. Her message was not about a deceased person, but about her congregation. Sitting in front of her were about 12 elderly members in a sanctuary built for a thousand people.

With tears in her eyes, Wagner announced that the church would close because of dwindling membership. "You are still the church," Wagner said. "And while where you worship will change, the one you worship does not."

Wagner's congregation is not alone. Experts project that about 100,000 churches in the United States will shut down or be repurposed over the next decade in a "tsunami" of closings. "Every year the pews are getting emptier and the collection plates getting lighter," one pastor told CNN.

Belding United Methodist Church is one of the congregations featured in the PBS documentary series

"Christianity at a Crossroads." The series explores the ways in which church closings will hurt communities across America, including people who are not part of organized religion. "In so many neighborhoods, the church is the food pantry, the immigration station," said the Rev. Jacqueline J. Lewis. The series argues that most American churches are "engines of social good."

Lifeway Research estimates that 4,000 Protestant churches were closed in the United States in 2024, while 3,800 new churches were established. This is based on analysis of information provided by 35 denominations or faith groups, representing 58% of all Protestant churches. Ten years ago, there were 3,700 closures and 4,000 openings.

According to experts, church closures are happening most often in older communities across the Northeast and Midwest. In Michigan, Pennsylvania, New York and parts of New England, many small towns have aging congregations and fewer young families attending services. In addition to Protestant congregations, many Catholic churches are closing because of declining Mass attendance, a shortage of priests and the cost of aging buildings.

Despite these struggles, Christianity remains the dominant faith in the United States. About 62% of adults identify as Christian, and an estimated 30% of Americans (about 100 million people) still go to church

every week. "Given recent declines in Americans identifying as Christians," said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research, "churches show a remarkable ability to remain open, even with fewer attendees on average. "

Decades of decline in church attendance may have leveled off, according to a new study from the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. The study revealed that the number of people attending in-person worship in the United States has recently increased, for the first time in 25 years.

Although this is encouraging news, Americans are not returning to the pattern of the mid-20th century, when almost half of the population attended a church, synagogue or mosque. Beginning in the 1960s, worship attendance began to decline, often driven by a loss of trust in institutions, clergy sex-abuse scandals and the rise of "nones" -- people who describe their religious beliefs as "nothing in particular. "

Christ Congregational Church in Silver Spring, Maryland, found itself facing difficult choices at the end of this period of decline. Membership fell below 100 people, while the sanctuary cost about \$400,000 a year to maintain. "Every year was so stressful because we were always cutting corners in every budget to pay for the building," said senior pastor Matt Braddock to CNN.

His church, which is featured in the

PBS series, made the decision to close its building. But the congregation continued to worship in the basement of another church, where it experienced revival. Braddock discovered that he liked the intimacy of worship in a smaller space. The church saved enough money to hire staff. Membership stabilized, and pledges are now strong. Braddock said the experience has made him and his congregation rethink how "church" should be defined -- the church "isn't a building, and it never was. "

The series shows that growing churches tend to have accessible parking, lively music, inspiring preaching and hospitality toward visitors. But some churches go farther, such as the Church of the Nativity in suburban Baltimore, Maryland, which makes church fun for young people. This congregation discovered that if children come, they bring their parents. The result is that they have about 800 kids and youths at their Sunday services.

But church vitality can also be found in smaller gatherings. The Church Project in Texas has returned to the practices of early Christianity, with a focus on meeting in small groups in members' homes. The first followers of Christ did not define the church as a building, but instead as a body of believers. As the Rev. Braddock said, church is "the gathering of God's people. Where we are gathering, God's always with us, wherever that is. "

More on this story can be found at these links:

[A 'Tsunami' of Church Closings Is Poised to Remake America. CNN](#)

[Lifeway Research Finds Church Closures Eclipse Openings in the United States. Lifeway Research](#)

[The Churches Disappearing Fastest Aren't Where Many Americans Expect. Cleveland.com](#)

Applying the News Story

TWW Team Member Stan Purdum recalls that author Eugene Peterson described the Christian life as "a long obedience in the same direction." Many of the churches that will close in America have congregations that are faithful but shrinking from member illnesses and deaths. But the faithful continued to gather and worship and do good deeds. Reflect on how you are practicing a long obedience in the same direction. Discuss the challenges of ministry, and what you are doing to keep your congregation healthy. Talk about how you would grieve the death of your church, if such a loss occurred, while also celebrating its contributions to the lives of members and others.

The Big Questions

- 1. What are the biggest threats to the survival of churches today? If your church were to close, how would you respond?**
- 2. What can be done to grieve the closing of a church, while also celebrating the good that it has**

done?

- 3. How does your church serve the wider community as an "engine of social good"? What would happen to your neighborhood if your church closed? Be specific.**
- 4. What is your congregation doing to remain healthy and to maintain its vitality? How is it attracting new members, if at all?**
- 5. How do you understand the word "church" as a gathering instead of as a building? Why is this an important distinction?**

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

[Psalm 137:1](#)

By the rivers of Babylon -- there we sat down, and there we wept when we remembered Zion. (For context, read [Psalm 137:1-6](#).)

Psalm 137 is a song of lament over the destruction of Jerusalem, written by the Israelites in exile. The psalm begins with a description of the setting: The people are next to "the rivers of Babylon," probably a system of channels that brought water from the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers to the city of Babylon. The people wept as they remembered their beloved city of Zion, now destroyed. Making their anguish worse was the mocking of their captors, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" (v. 3).

In response, the people asked themselves the question, "How could

we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?" (v. 4). This is a verse of lament, expressing grief, sorrow and deep mourning. The psalm-writer answers the question by pledging to remember Jerusalem and set it "above my highest joy" (v. 6).

Questions: What is the value of an honest expression of grief, sorrow and deep mourning? In a time of loss, what good comes from remembering? When a church is closed, what should its members remember, and what should be their focus in the future?

Matthew 28:19-20

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (For context, read [Matthew 28:16-20](#).)

In his great commission at the end of the gospel of Matthew, Jesus sends his disciples on a mission to the world. The word "commission" means having the power to perform a particular function, duty or act. When Jesus gives his great commission, he is giving his disciples the power and authority to perform a number of very positive functions, duties and acts.

The passage begins after Jesus has been raised from the dead. He is now full of resurrection life, and he wants to point his disciples to the future -- he wants them to carry the power of

the Resurrection forward. Matthew tells us that "the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them" (v. 16). There are only eleven disciples at this point, since Judas is dead and has not yet been replaced.

When the disciples saw Jesus "they worshiped him, but they doubted" (v. 17). Even though Jesus had been raised, the scars of pre-resurrection life were still being felt. Resurrection life is powerful, but it is not a magic potion that eliminates all doubt and makes everything perfect. Even after Jesus himself was raised, he still had the scars of the Crucifixion on his hands. In addition, the loss of Judas may have made the eleven feel incomplete.

Jesus knew that the disciples would not be complete until they had a mission. So, Jesus gives them authority and power to perform certain duties. His commissioning is not based on wishful thinking, but on the fact that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus. In this passage, he shares his authority with his disciples, and he lays out their mission in two short verses. They are told to make disciples of all nations, all ethnic groups, not just the people closest to them in the house of Israel. They are to baptize, to bring people into community with Jesus and with his followers. And they are to teach -- to teach people to follow Jesus.

Questions: Make disciples, baptize, teach -- how do you perform these

duties in your congregation? Why are they central to ministry and mission? How could a renewed focus on the Great Commission, along with the presence of Jesus, bring renewed life to your congregation?

Acts 11:26

So it was that for an entire year [Barnabas and Saul] met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called "Christians." (For context, read [Acts 11:19-26](#).)

In the early days of the church, the followers of Jesus were fleeing Jerusalem because of the persecution of Stephen. They scattered throughout the Mediterranean region, and some ended up in Antioch, which is in modern-day Turkey. Initially, the refugees from Jerusalem gathered only with Hebrew-speaking Jews. But there were also some followers of Jesus who had their roots in Cyprus and Cyrene. When they came to Antioch, they talked with the Greek-speaking Jews called Hellenists, and they proclaimed "the Lord Jesus" (v. 20).

Reports on what was happening in Antioch "came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch" (v. 22). When Barnabas came and saw the grace of God at work, he rejoiced and encouraged them to remain faithful to the Lord. Then, Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, later known as the apostle Paul. When he found

him, he brought him to Antioch, and for a year "they met with the church" and taught a large number of people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called "Christians."

The word "church" is important in this passage because it means "assembly" or "gathering." When you say you are going to church, you are really saying that you are going to an assembly, a gathering, a meeting. Acts says that Barnabas and Saul "met with the church," a phrase that could also be translated as "they assembled with the assembly," or "they gathered with the gathering" or "they met with the meeting." The heart of the life of the church is gathering.

Questions: What gatherings in the life of your church are most important to you? How does the size of the meeting matter to the quality of the experience, if at all? What kinds of assemblies would enable your faith to be sustained, if you no longer had a church building?

Romans 16:7

Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Israelites who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. (For context, read [Romans 16:1-16](#).)

Paul ends his letter to the Romans with a set of greetings and a farewell. He first introduces the Romans to "our sister Phoebe, a deacon" (16:1) - she traveled to Rome with Paul's

letter and was a significant leader among the followers of Christ at Cenchreae, the port city of Corinth. He stresses that "she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well" (v. 2).

Paul goes on to name members of the community in Rome, listing 27 people -- nine of whom are women. Prisca and Aquila are described as "my coworkers in Christ Jesus" (v. 3). In the book of Acts, Prisca goes by the name Priscilla, and she is described as the wife of Aquila. Paul stayed with them in Corinth, and the three of them worked together as tentmakers (18:1-3). In Romans, Paul sends greetings to "the church in their house" (v. 5).

After naming Epaenetus and Mary, Paul greets "Andronicus and Junia." Some versions of the Bible list the second name as Julia (female) or Junias (male), even though there is no evidence for the name Junias in the Roman world. The two had been in prison with Paul, and he says they "are prominent among the apostles." Junia and Andronicus became followers of Christ before Paul, and Junia was likely the wife of Andronicus or one of his relatives.

Junia was an apostle and "perhaps head of a house church," says TWW Team Member Frank Ramirez. "Women were leaders in these proto-churches, as seen in early Christian art where the women are administering the Love Feast (Communion). Today, now that churches are smaller and the pay is

less, we are seeing the rise of more women pastors, so in a way we're getting back to the original church, like it or not."

Questions: Where do you make connections between women in ministry today and the life of the first-century Christian community? If your church does not ordain women, what are the biblical roles that women play in the life of your congregation? Where do you see important links between Christian gatherings today and the house churches of Paul's day?

For Further Discussion

1. "Christianity at a Crossroads" profiles Alfred Street Baptist Church in Alexandria, Virginia, a 10,000-member congregation that has made the church an attractive destination for people outside their walls. "They still have a packed house but now also have about 15,000 people who view them online," [filmmaker Martin Doblmeier told CNN](#). "It's no longer an in-person church with an online option. It's an online church with an in-person option. That's quite intentional, and a sign of the future." What changes are being made by your church, if any, as it looks forward? What are the risks of innovation, as well as the consequences of not changing?

2. "I'm not saying it's a great development that churches are shrinking," says TWW Team Member Frank Ramirez, "but it's a sign that we no longer have the reign of civil

religion, where it's impossible to do business without belonging to a church, and there are no civil penalties for skipping church. So the ones coming to church are believers." Respond.

3. Since Most Holy Redeemer Catholic Church stopped holding weekly Mass over a year ago, some of its most devoted parishioners have continued to pray in front of its locked gates. [The New York Times](#) reports that Irene Sysak, who has attended services at the church for more than two decades, called it a second home. "Or really, the first home," she said, "our spiritual home." How is your church a spiritual home for you? If you lost this home, how would you find another? What qualities are most important to you?

4. In first-century Antioch, the "hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:21). Where do you see the hand of the Lord in your congregation? Who is turning to faith in Christ, and why? What can you do to assist them?

Responding to the News

In the next week, make an effort to improve the health of your church through investment of your time, talents and treasures in ministry and mission. Focus on the various opportunities to gather as followers of Christ, knowing how central this is to the vitality of the church. Practice "a long obedience in the same direction."

Prayer

We thank you, Lord, for inviting us to meet together as the church, the body of Christ. Help us to grow as disciples, and to build communities of faith that are true spiritual homes, as well as engines of good for this world that you love so much. In Jesus' name. Amen.