



**The Yearning Beyond Their Walls:**  
**A Round Table Conversation on Recent Church Attendance Data**

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Ryan Bonfiglio: Hi everyone. This is Ryan Bonfiglio with the Ministry Collaborative, and I'm here with my colleagues, Mark Ramsey, Adam Mixon, and Adam Bornerman. And today we're talking about some recent studies that have come up that show that church attendance is actually on the incline in the past several months, and even year. It's data that is encouraging for many preachers and pastors, but it's data that is also textured. It is not a uniform correction of the church decline that many denominations have seen over the past number of decades. So here, we want to talk a little bit about: what do we see happening? What's going on? And, what are some of the headwinds that the church is still facing, despite these encouraging numbers?

Adam Mixon: Mm. We've got some time before we're going to know exactly what's happening right now, but you can't help but wonder if some of what appears to be people returning to the church is a reaction to the fact that, on the one hand, things are pretty bad on the surface. Things look pretty grim, and folks are remembering the church has something to say to us in difficult times. People are exhausted from online engagement. People are tired. I'm seeing it in our cohorts, even. People are tired of that type of engagement, and people want to – dare I say it out loud? – want to be around other people. And the church is one of the few places you can still go (at least some churches) where you don't have to pay admission. You can come, and you can find welcome, and be in community, and it costs you nothing but time.

Mark Ramsey: Scott Thuma, who we've had on this podcast recently, along with Allison Norton, his colleague – and we're going to have him on again soon – just released this data. They've just had this amazing trove of longitudinal research and religious activity. And just a couple of weeks ago, they did say that median attendance has grown for the first time, basically, in a generation or two. The thing that, when he and Allison were on last time that stuck with me more than anything else, is: 38% of churchgoers joined their congregations between 2020 (i.e. The Pandemic) and 2025. Now, that's great, but what he pointed out was: they joined a congregation that was innovating, changing, and tackling new challenges. But also in this data is: for most faith communities, that hit a wall around 2024. Like, "Enough of this change. We want to get back to normal." So now, in many faith communities, we have two different congregations: those who Joined the Lively, Innovative group, and those Don't You Dare Sit in My Pew group.

Adam Mixon: Wow.

Ryan: And along with that, Mark, I think some of the data suggests that there's a lot of church shifting happening. It's not just a bunch of people who had never experienced church and are all of a sudden rushing to fill the pews, but people are switching churches; they're switching denominations. They're going from small churches to big churches. Bigger churches are getting bigger, smaller churches are getting smaller. So, there are some complex internal dynamics, but I think it's to the point that you're making, also, about innovation. People are choosing churches, perhaps even more because of their willingness to do things differently, than because of a certain doctrinal commitment, or theological alignment.

Adam Borneman: Yeah. Two things there I want to pick up on, Ryan. One, I'm glad you brought it up: I wanted to throw into the mix just what we might call "The Great Consolidation" that's going on in a lot of places. Not everywhere, but in a lot of places, the bigger churches are getting bigger, while ones not so big are not, and are still having a lot of the same struggles. So, it'd be interesting to dig more precisely into that data. And I've talked with Scott Thuma about that, and he said, "Yeah, that's one of the things that seems to be going on."

The other thing you said there, that's rattling around for me in this conversation, is why people are becoming more frequent attenders or members of churches; the motivation behind it. I imagine there is an enormous number of answers for that; but I see, in that sort of consolidation, it seems like with a lot of the pastors we work with, the real struggle they're having is, "Okay...I know we can get people back into this building on Sunday if we provide X, Y, and Z stuff for them to do." And they're also worried: "I don't know that that's what we should be doing."

So, there's a real tension there, I think, in a lot of places of...I think somebody, a moment ago, said something about people looking for something that's normal, or grounded. Well, in a lot of our traditions, that's what that is. It's all the stuff to do – and a lot of that stuff can be great. I was just in a retreat with some of our pastors last week, and that was one of the tensions they were naming, is they thought, "You know, I kind of have a sense of what we could do as a church to have people back in the building on Sunday mornings, but I just don't know if that's what we're called to be, and who God is calling us to serve in this community and in that way." So, lots of tensions, lots of variables, a lot of uncertainty, I think, in most contexts.

Mark: There was another more notable – or infamous – survey recently from the Bible Society in the UK, who said that there was this amazing upsurge in religious attendance throughout the UK. It turned out that that wasn't true, and that their data gathering was shaky, at best. So, there was a headline, "That's going up, and then there's a headline, "This is all wrong." Both of those missed what is still true, which is, as many people now are critiquing that study say, "the data isn't right", but there is a rise in curiosity, in spiritual curiosity.

And Adam, I think this gets to your point: What stuff do we put into faith communities to attract people? It's clearly not, at least from the data I'm seeing, and from just talking to people, it's not, "Let's give people more things to do." People have plenty of things to do, but who is going to address spiritual curiosity?

Adam Mixon: Yeah. There's a couple of things at work there. Number one, we used the term "innovation" before, and how people were drawn to that. And I wonder if maybe that's off just a little bit? When I think about innovation, I'm thinking about technology: new, shiny, or something like that. I think that where there's traction is not so much in the innovation, but in the responsiveness of church leadership to the changing context; that sometimes that is not innovation, sometimes that is retreating to. Sometimes, that is remembering old forms that are still sources of comfort. And I'm not talking about programs. I'm talking about spiritual practices. I'm talking about praying together. I'm talking about small groups, and Bible studies, where people are not just gaining facts or getting information, but learning how to live and be. That's where I'm seeing the shifting. It's not innovative to talk about praying and Bible study, but it is responsive to the needs of people across contexts.

Kind of, sitting right there and being witness to it, people are hungry, and there's room for that. And I, at least, again, in a particular context, I'm seeing some people turning – or remembering – those things as

being substantial and helpful. I guess, then, a good question might be to ask if you're in church leadership and you're surveying how things have changed in your particular context: how are you responding to that?"

The answer might not be: "All the old programs that we used to do. We're just going to revert to those things"...but what are the things that are giving life to people?"

Adam Borneman: Yeah, I do think taking an inventory and assessing our own context is critical in this, but it's also very tricky, because I know...you know, we have a lot of pastors in our network, even recently, who said they really need someone to keep the large macro data in front of them. They want to understand. And by that, I don't just mean ministry trends and church stuff, but also just the culture and what's happening more broadly.

I think one of the great challenges that most ministry leaders face is: even when we know all of that – the undercurrents of the culture and the undercurrents of ministry and all the trends – going back to our immediate context doesn't always match that. So sometimes the gap between what's happening out there versus what's happening right in our own congregations doesn't match up, exactly, and it makes it even more imperative to attend to both: to both keep track of what's happening "out there", so to speak, but also to become even more intensely engaged with the particular variables that are being bounced around in our own immediate context.

Ryan: One of my thoughts on this data is that rising church attendance, however you construe it, it's a lagging indicator of something else. I think the one thing is that people are tired of "bowling alone" – the Robert Putnam idea that, since the '60s, this interest and energy for American community life is on the decline. I'm not sure that that's still the case. In fact, I actually went bowling (which is weird for me) not that long ago. It was in the late afternoon, and the bowling alley was packed. I mean, literally, the bowling alley was packed with people. I don't know if that's a one-off or a trend, but I do think there is a thirst to get beyond the isolation that so many have felt. And I don't just mean the isolation of COVID or social media, but I think a deep, earnest desire for real, authentic, intergenerational connections. The church isn't the only place that that can happen, and, God knows, the church doesn't do it perfectly, but it is a place people still think about for that sort of connectionality to happen.

So, I think church attendance is a lagging indicator of that desire to get beyond isolation. But I think there's also what you've named, too, Mark: this real curiosity; a real, spiritual curiosity. And one of the things we're seeing in the work that I get to do at Candler is that lay people, and even people who don't have church affiliation, they're actually flocking to educational opportunities. And I don't mean sort of your standard Sunday School (although that's important, too), but people are looking for spaces where they can actually dig deep into theology and Scripture, where there is space to ask difficult questions, where the result is not narrow doctrinal alignment, but to cultivate a sense of wonder and curiosity about the complexity of our texts and traditions.

We're actually seeing that adult education, in the work we're doing at Candler, is the front door back into church life for people have left. It's not the living room that you get to once you've done all the other church things and you're really serious, but it's actually gathering people back. It's what's energizing them. And Mark, that's to your point that, I think, curiosity is the lead indicator of what church attendance rise is showing us.

Mark: And I want to say a word in support of innovation; but also, Adam Mixon, you did a good clarification. I am not...oh my goodness...I'm not talking about chasing the next shiny thing, or something clever. That is not innovation. To me, innovation is taking risks, number one, to understand what is deeply meaningful to people, and taking risks in service of that. That is innovation. For faith community leaders, both pastors and board members, that often boils down to, "We're going to stop doing this thing – which is a good constituent service, but has played out – for doubling down on these things that we know will produce growth, even when we get the six petitions or angry emails about letting that go." That, to me, is innovation in its best sense.

Adam Mixon: I kind of want to go back to something that you said years ago, Mark, about how culture has picked the carcass clean, and they left Jesus. Maybe what we're witnessing is the thinness of affinity groups. Ryan, you said it earlier, that people can find connection in places outside of the church, and they're doing it, but it ain't the church. We do have something to offer the world that gives meaning.

Ryan: Can you drill down on that? What is it, with respect to community, that the church offers, that other community-oriented groups don't? What's the difference?

Adam Mixon: The first word that popped in my head was "cosmology". Let me pull this back. I don't know why that's the first word, but a way of seeing and being in the world that is driven by something other than my individual curiosities; something that drives me toward a connectedness, which gives meaning to my life. You're not going to get that (well, somebody might) through a bike riding group or through a bowling team. There is something of our faith that connects us to something that is beyond ourselves. You can sub that out with something else, but it's going to wear thin. It is deep. It's spiritual. It's rich. It's meaningful. It's not easily quantified. You see me struggling here, right? But it's real. It's real.

Mark: Proximity often breeds invisibility. And I think the church is proximate to things that the culture's actually looking for, but they're almost invisible to us. There are now death cafes – 11,000 chapters of death cafes globally – where people will get together (and not just old people or people in hospice) who will talk about death. But they're very clear to say, "This isn't to push a religious or spiritual agenda." We in the Christian tradition actually know something about death and life and life after death. Whenever the church puts down something that we, it's just, we're too close to it, culture will pick it up and use it for its own ends.

If people are thinking about, "life, death, and why am I here", it seems to me those are things the church knows something about at our best. Why are we not making what was invisible back visible and front and center?

Adam Mixon: There it is.

Adam Borneman: That question of "life, death, and meaning" is such a great way to tie this all together, because it gets back to the question of if church attendance (and whatever we mean by that) is increasing, in some way that isn't quite clear, and we're asking, "Why is that?" That becomes a really interesting question for me, and I think for other pastoral leaders, in their own context to say, "Okay, is what's happening in our congregation proximate, in some way, to people exploring life, death, making meaning?" I think any other way of us trying to gauge what's happening with participation and attendance can lead us astray, and lead us away from the things that we hold most dear.

Adam Mixon: I do think that realizing, regardless of what the numbers say, that the church is sitting at a place where we have an opportunity to listen very carefully, and determine how we're going to respond to this new data, and then to remember what we already have in our wheelhouse.

Mark: Yeah. But it's going to take the conviction of faith leaders – both clergy and other lay leaders in congregations – to understand the yearning beyond their walls, and repurpose some of what we are all doing to meet that. And we're going to have to meet that outside our walls, probably.

Adam Mixon: Yeah. Get close to people and listen, right? Yeah.