



I Love Congregational Life:
A Conversation with Allison Norton and Scott Thumma
July 1, 2026

Mark Ramsey: This is Mark Ramsey of the Ministry Collaborative, bringing back two of our stars of podcasts in the past, Allison Norton and Scott Thumma of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. It's great to have you back. You were here a few months ago, and we've got so many comments from – not just the data, but the insight you shared. And you said, "Well, just wait. There's more coming." Well, that's dropped, so let's talk about it. For either one of you, what are, sort of, the top line insights that you've got from this new tranche of data?

Allison Norton: Yeah. Thanks, Mark. It's really good to be back with you. The big headline here is what we're calling "cautious optimism". Our latest work, coming out of a survey that closed the end of last year, is that across a whole range of indicators – from attendance and finances, to some of those things like congregation's willingness to change and their sense of spiritual vitality – we see a bit of a surge, if we look over the last couple of years. And it's part of a larger pattern. And so, Scott, I don't know if you want to pop in here and talk about what that bigger pattern is.

Scott Thumma: Yeah. Certainly, it surprised us, for sure, because none of our data looked like this in 2023. And then, lo and behold, two years later, it certainly took me by surprise. As we look at not just attendance, which has gone up for the first time in decades, but also a whole host of other variables that trended up; but looking at them across the whole pandemic, what we saw was, right after the brunt of the pandemic, we saw this real surge of creativity, innovation, openness to change. And we talked a bit about that before, Mark. But then, what we saw was this kind of withdrawing and turning inward, and most of the data took a dive.

What we think now has happened, three or four or five years after, is that many of the people either reconciled themselves to, like, "Okay, we're going to die," because there is a chunk of those folks who haven't done well. Or they said, "Well, if we're going to do anything positive, we have to change." And so we do see 30,40 percent of the congregations just really taking the efforts to do new and different stuff, and to be willing and open to do that.

Mark: Hmm. Does this correlate at all to faith traditions, denominations, or anything like that?

Allison: Yeah, it does. So, when we look at some of these markers...Scott talked about attendance, right? And so, one of the surprising aspects out of this, as he mentioned, is that in the last 25 years, that attendance has gone one direction, and it's been one of decline. And we've seen a slight rebound, up to a median of 70 in worship attendance. When we compare, though, across denominational families, we do see that it is really concentrated a lot within conservative Christianity, within Evangelicalism in the US, and also churches of a particular size that made that difference. So, to bump the median up by five, it was really those churches that were hovering around that median. So, it was churches in the sort of 50 up to sort of 150 that experienced that growth, that, sort of, bumped that median up a little bit.

Scott: What we really see is the larger the church, the more likely it is to be growing. We're about to release a megachurch report based on some of the same data, and they grew significantly more than other congregations. But growth at the upper end didn't change the median. What changed the median

was really, as Allison said, these smallish, evangelical churches that were experiencing decline. This time, they grew by five, six, seven percent, and that was enough to bump the median up.

Mark: Yeah, that's helpful. How about generational trends, or generational differentiation?

Allison: Well, one of the things that we're paying attention to is...You've heard a lot in the media and the news of these wonderings, questionings about, "Is there a revival happening? Are young people coming back to churches and congregations?" And our data doesn't really show that story. So, when we look at and compare young people in the church, we find that they are still drastically underrepresented, if you compare to the general population. So, we don't see a real surge in growth of young people coming back or attending churches. And congregations, their largest group still tends to be 65 plus, about 33%. We see that pattern mostly staying the same. No huge differences there. And also, not in terms of gender either. We don't really see evidence in our data that you have, for example, a whole lot more young men coming to church. Now that doesn't mean you might not see this in your local congregation, right? I mean, you might be even in a college town or something, and you see something happening here, but we don't see this in sort of the national picture.

Mark: Yeah. What are you seeing about church finances?

Scott: Well, that is definitely a positive story. The last time we talked, we said we saw a significant turn in income. But this time, it's actually even a greater increase of average income. It's up above \$200,000 for the median church of 70 people. That's far above what you would expect if it was just keeping up with inflation. But we also see a pretty significant increase in costs of being a church, and especially in terms of insurance. We asked that question this time, and it was really surprising. Almost three quarters of all congregations said that their insurance had increased significantly. Many of them had to switch to different insurers. So, that really was a significant blow.

Allison: Yeah. Part of this story is the impact of electronic giving. So, we can't leave that out of trying to, sort of, tell the story of what's going on in church finances. So, the congregations that say that they are offering online giving has risen a lot. So, it went from 58% up to 76%. That also means that the money that's come in electronically has risen from only 10% to 40%. And we've known, through decades of doing this kind of work, that that makes a difference, that that actually increases the per capita giving.

Mark: Yeah. I'm really glad you said that, because I'm still running into churches that are suspicious of that. One of the headlines when you release this was, "This is not a revival, this is a recalibration." And I like that. Help me look under the hood of what "recalibration" means a little bit more.

Allison: One of the things that I would say about recalibration is...Scott talked about the increase in congregation's willingness to change to meet new realities. So that's part of it. Part of it is that we are seeing higher levels than we would expect, at almost 30% of churches strongly agreeing that they're willing to change. I think with that comes an ability to, sort of, think with optimism about this moment, and how we might respond.

The other parts of recalibration are also the ways in which people have changed and switched congregations over the last six years, coming out of the pandemic. So, we know that about 70% of those who are new to their congregation after the pandemic came from a different church. So, the people that are there now are not the same people that were in your church in 2019. And so, that leads to all kinds of changes, as we think about what it means to do ministry, the kind of expectations that newcomers

have of their church to find a place of belonging, to get involved in opportunities for leadership and volunteering. So, there's also that kind of recalibration.

Scott: One of the other things that we see, too, in that same vein, is that, we had always asked churches, "How actively are you looking for new people?"

And, shockingly, 25-30% said, "Oh, that describes us significantly." But that bumped up in this survey by 10, 12 extra points. So, there was this impulse for people to go, "Yeah, maybe we do need to look for new people." And you also see it in the percentage of your people who are trying to recruit new people. So, it's not just the church is interested, it's that the people are getting engaged. And it's not revivalist reality. It really does show that there's a, kind of, new attitude about, "We can't just let sitting as stagnant be the norm." And so, we see fewer and fewer congregations that are stagnant. They're either continuing to decline, or they've made a turn and are trying to increase. And that's a pretty positive message, I think, in many ways.

Mark: I think it's very positive. And, we are on the unscientific side of this at the Ministry Collaborative, but it totally tracks with what we're hearing from the pastors and congregations in our network. Most of them have fundamentally made a decision that, "We've got a way to the future, and we're going." And there are bumps, and there are potholes, but they are not just circling, circling, circling. They are looking up and out, which I find enormously exciting.

Scott: I think one of the things about the pandemic that doesn't get talked about, is that, in fact, that trauma kind of pulled back the curtain on a lot of these dynamics. People were, kind of, in a holding pattern, or, "It'll get better," or, "We're okay with what we have." And the pandemic woke them up to realize that, if we want to survive, we have to do something. It's just not going to naturally come back to what it was. And that has happened most, I think, in the Evangelical world, but we also hear it in the Mainline. We hear it in Catholic churches, Orthodox churches.

But that's not an overt thing that you can put your finger on, and say, "Oh, it's technology", or, "It's this or that," but it really woke folks up.

Mark: Yeah. I do think the pandemic uncovered things that were just below the surface. Is the political bifurcation in the United States in this data somewhere?

Allison: It is in the data in a couple of ways, a bit. So, we don't ask them directly many questions about politics. But as I mentioned earlier, we do see growth concentrated, like Scott said, in the shift toward, kind of, the growing larger churches, but also in conservative Christianity. So, there does seem to be something going on there. We also see though – and this is part of a bigger picture of how people choose which church to attend – we do find that churches are chosen mostly because they feel like they align with people's personal beliefs, values, and perspectives. So, that was our number one choice when people are looking for a new church. They said, "I came here because this place aligns with my personal values, beliefs, and perspectives," which would include all kinds of things, including political.

Mark: Whenever we're doing these podcasts with anybody, I have in mind pastors out there...You know, we have a very diverse network. Basically, anybody that you're surveying, we're probably somewhere. I'm wondering: what is the thing that they can take away? I'm constantly getting asked a version of the question, "Where do I look for guideposts about the future? What should I be thinking about for my congregation?" Can you help us with that?

Scott: Well, they should be thinking about what new thing is Hartford Institute for Religion Research doing. That's the guide for the future.

The younger generations and what attracts them. It may not be traditional models of church, but that is the future of American religion. And if clergy don't get their head around, "How can we address the needs of these future generations, and what models and forms and modes?" It's a dead end, otherwise.

Mark: Yeah. Yeah. This is an auspicious day as we're recording this because, Scott, I just found out, this is your last day in the office before retirement. We're very honored. Thank you very much. And Allison, you're carrying the mantle forward, as you've been working there for a long time. So, I'm going to ask Allison first: going forward, what are you thinking about, curious about, or probing?

Allison: Yeah. Well, there's a few things. I mean, I'm always thinking about what can be actionable out of this data – to your last question, Mark. Like, what does this mean, and how can we respond? And some of the things are not very actionable. Like, the item I said around Evangelical churches of a certain size growing, that doesn't help you very much if you're Roman Catholic, or Mainline Protestant. So, it's really paying attention to what can we learn out of this data that can be actionable. And one of the things that I'm really curious about...well, it's two things. One, is this sort of rebound that we're seeing right now something that's going to continue in a positive trend, or is it going to level off? So, I'm really looking ahead to that next data collection point where we can sort of take a look at what we're seeing with this positive trendline and say, "Is this enduring, or is this sort of a symptom of the moment?"

The other thing that I think is very important is to think about the rise of bi-vocational clergy. So that's another thing we saw out of this data, right? There are large numbers of churches that, leading into the future, are currently – or in the future – led by part-time clergy. And I really want to pay attention to that, and make sure that we're collecting good data about that reality, because it is increasingly the norm.

Mark: Yeah. And we absolutely see that in our network. That is the fastest growing group of participants in the Ministry Collaborative. Scott, not that you have to sum up your entire career in 90 seconds, but...and not that you're not going to contribute anything going forward, but as you look back on your incredibly generative and helpful career to people like us, what's top of mind in the work you've done?

Scott: Well, it's size of congregations. I've studied megachurches my whole career, but also then worked with small churches. But I do think that size has so many dynamics that either make or break a congregation. So, what we're seeing is that concentration, increasing concentration of people in the largest 10% of congregations. But what that means for smaller congregations is they have to get more creative, because a community has to have a small congregation if it's a small community, but that's such a critical component of that community. So, they need to think about mergers. They need to think about collaborating with each other, be more cooperative rather than competitive. So, even at the small size, they have to do some innovative work. Otherwise, everyone's just going to gravitate to the largest congregations. Small congregations will close, and we'll be without the social safety net that our government has forced on congregations.

Mark: Yeah, particularly in rural areas.

Scott: Exactly.

Mark: Yeah. Well, it's always such a joy to talk to you two, and I'm so grateful for the work you continue to do. And Allison, when that next tranche of data drops, I'll be in your email box saying, "Let's talk about it again."

Allison: Absolutely.

Mark: And Scott, truly: on behalf of every pastor that I know that has expressed gratitude for the work you do, thank you for everything you've offered to people who are in the trenches doing this. It is an immeasurable gift.

Scott: Well, it's really been my pleasure, Mark. It's been a great career, and I love congregational life, and so I want it to flourish.