

# Churches Still Recovering From Pandemic Losses

[Church Life and Practice](#) | [Pastor Views](#) | [Lifeway Research](#) | Mar 1, 2022



Aaron Burden photo | *By Aaron Earls*

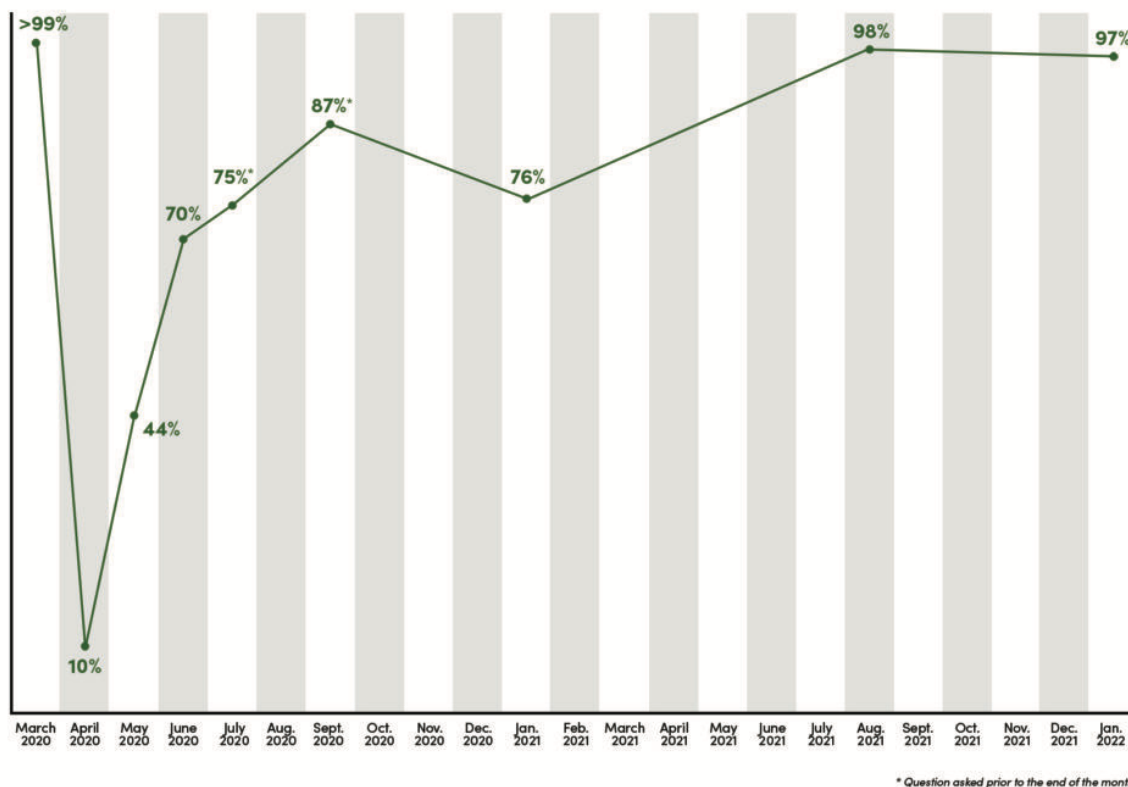
Compared to the beginning of 2021, more U.S. Protestant churches are gathering in person and more churchgoers are filling the pews. The return to pre-pandemic attendance levels has stalled, however, in recent months.

The latest Lifeway Research study found, despite a new variant wave of COVID-19, 97% of U.S. Protestant churches met in person during January 2022, while 3% say they did not gather for in-person services.

The percentage of churches meeting in person is statistically unchanged from an [August 2021 Lifeway Research study](#), when 98% of churches physically gathered, but is up significantly from the 76% that met in [January 2021](#).

# Churches remain open at pre-pandemic levels

Percentage of U.S. Protestant pastors who say their church met in person at all that month



Lifeway research

Source: Lifeway Research surveys of U.S. Protestant pastors conducted March 30-31, 2020; April 27-29, 2020; July 20-22, 2020; Sept. 2 - Oct. 1, 2020; Feb. 1-11, 2021; Sept. 1-29, 2021; Feb. 1-11, 2022

“Almost all churches are able to meet in person for worship, though a few are struggling to reopen their doors,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research. “Many more churches are working to restart all their important ministries and continuing to encourage people to resume in-person participation.”

More than 1 in 5 U.S. Protestant pastors (22%) say their church is close to their January 2020 attendance, with 10% saying they are at 90% to 100% of pre-pandemic levels and 12% reporting attendance is now higher than before COVID-19. The same percentage of pastors (22%) reported crowds reaching at least 90% of their pre-pandemic attendance in August 2021. In January 2021, however, only 8% of churches had such levels.

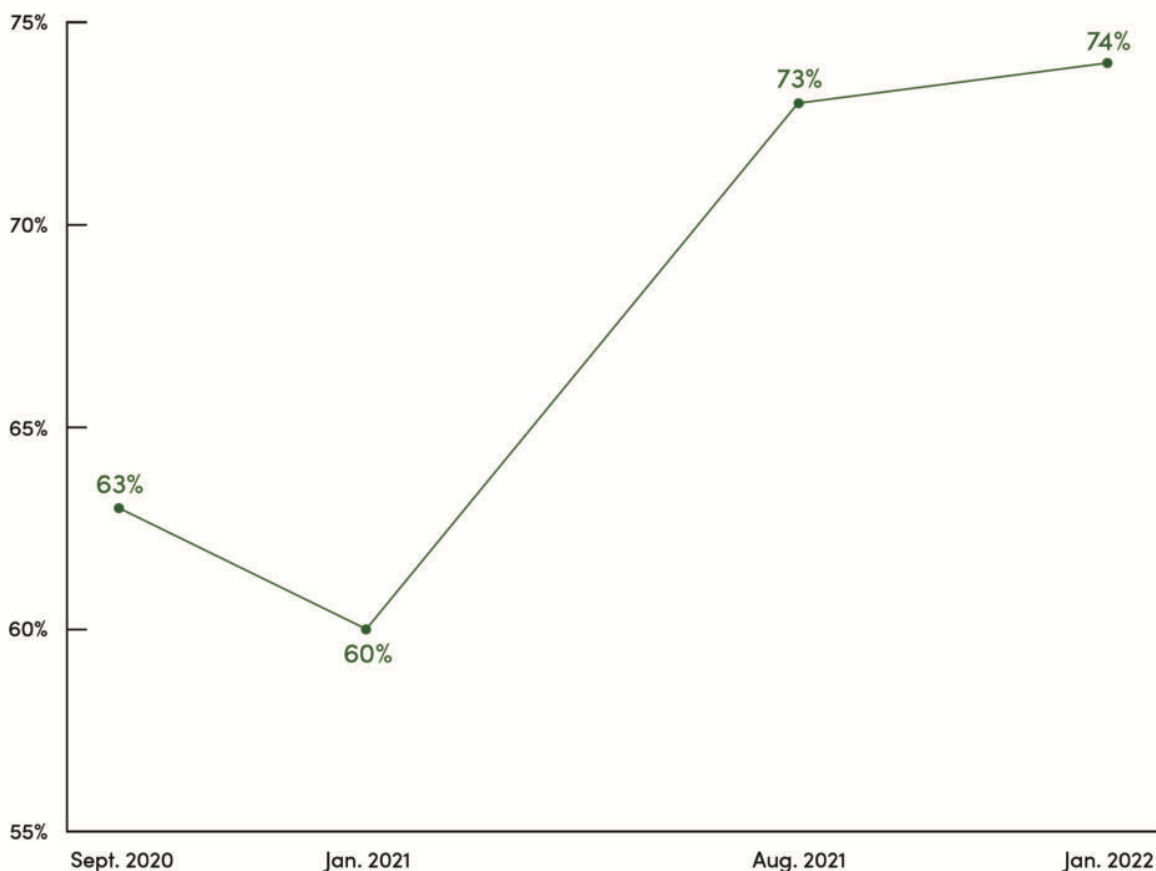
Compared to January 2021, far fewer churches today have crowds of less than half of what they had in January 2020. At the beginning of last year, 31% of churches were at less than 50% of their pre-pandemic attendance levels, including 8% of churches that were below 30%. Now, 14% are below 50% attendance, and only 1% still say their congregation is less than 30% of what it was before COVID-19.

More than 8 in 10 churches have an attendance of at least half of what it was prior to the pandemic. The average U.S. Protestant church reports attendance at 74% of what it was prior to COVID-19, which means 1 in 4 pre-pandemic churchgoers are still missing from in-person worship services.

“People’s return to in-person worship services has stalled,” said McConnell. “There has been virtually no change in average attendance since August 2021. Some of this is the direct impact of COVID with people getting sick, needing to quarantine or being at high risk. But this also likely includes healthy individuals choosing to not return.”

## Churches still missing 1 in 4 in-person churchgoers

Average worship service attendance compared to pre-pandemic among U.S. Protestant pastors



Note: Respondents were asked to estimate the average in-person worship service attendance the previous month as a percentage compared to January 2020 (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic).

**Lifeway** research

Source: Lifeway Research surveys of U.S. Protestant pastors conducted Feb. 1-11, 2022; Feb. 1-11, 2021; Sept. 2-Oct. 1, 2020; and Sept. 1-29, 2021

The smallest churches, those with attendance less than 50 before COVID-19, are the most likely to be back at pre-pandemic levels. More than a third of those small churches (37%) report their attendance is at least 90% of what it was in January 2020, including 18% who say they have grown numerically during the pandemic. Most churches shifted to some type of online video services during the height of the pandemic. Now, many are asking those watching online to participate in person.

In January 2022, more than 9 in 10 U.S. Protestant pastors (94%) say their churches provided some type of video content for their congregations, including 84% who livestreamed their worship services and 10% who posted a video of the sermon later. Prior to the pandemic,

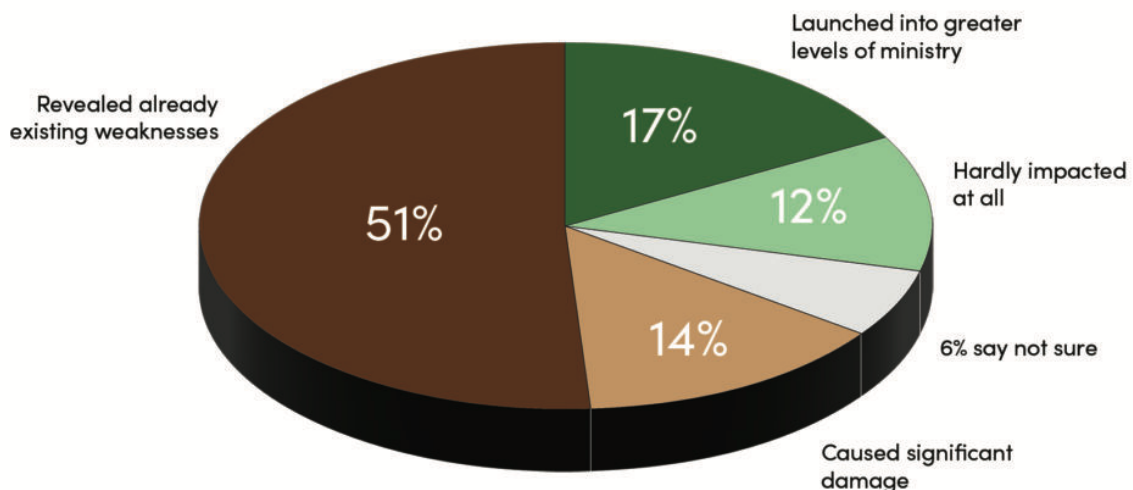
Lifeway Research found 2 in 5 churches said they neither livestreamed their service nor posted the sermon online later. As the pandemic progressed, more churches shifted to livestreaming services. In March 2020, around 2 in 3 pastors (65%) said they livestreamed services, and more than a quarter (27%) posted a sermon online later. With more churches using online video in recent years, 45% of Americans said they watched a Christian church service online during the pandemic, including 15% who say they normally don't attend church, according to a 2021 Lifeway Research study.

Now, however, as almost all churches are holding in-person services again, many pastors say they want to see some online viewers transition to physical participation. Three in 5 pastors (60%) say they are exhorting online worshipers, who are able, to resume or begin to attend in person. "Livestreaming has done a lot of good for churches, allowing members to hear weekly messages during the pandemic and allowing churches to reach new people," said McConnell. "Many pastors are hoping and actively working to reduce the number of shut-in members who are physically able but aren't gathering in person with other believers."

Evangelical pastors (70%) are more likely than mainline pastors (49%) to say they're specifically encouraging those watching online to physically attend if they are able. Pastors of churches with 200 or more in attendance on Sunday (72%) are more likely than smaller churches to also say they're asking those able to transition from online to in person. The pandemic continues to have a lasting impact on congregations, and most pastors say that it's been a negative one. Half (51%) say COVID-19 revealed weaknesses that already existed in their ministry, and 14% say the pandemic caused considerable damage to the church's ministry. Far fewer say COVID-19 has hardly had any ministry impact on the congregation (12%) or has launched the church to greater levels of ministry (17%).

## Half of pastors say the pandemic revealed weaknesses at their church

Among U.S. Protestant pastors



Note: Respondents were asked "Which is most true for your church?"

Most congregations have faced COVID-19 directly. Almost 9 in 10 pastors (88%) say someone in their church has been diagnosed with COVID-19 in the last six months. Around 1 in 5 congregations (21%) say a churchgoer has died from COVID-19. Additionally, 88% of U.S. Protestant pastors say attendees at their church have helped each other with tangible needs in the past six months. Almost 2 in 3 (63%) say churchgoers have recently met pandemic-related needs in the community. In a 2021 Lifeway Research study, most Americans (53%) said churches in their community have been helpful during the pandemic.

While only 12% of churches say they have grown numerically during the pandemic, most say they have connected with new people during the last six months. More than 4 in 5 pastors (83%) say new people who haven't attended their church in the past have recently attended or connected in person. Around 3 in 4 pastors (74%) say they've had new people attend or connect with their church online in the past six months. Still, a third of pastors (33%) say the considerable number of needs within their congregation has made it hard to focus on reaching their community. Two in 5 U.S. Protestant pastors (40%) admit that it has been hard to keep a positive tone among the church leaders during the pandemic. Two in 5 pastors (40%) admit that it's hard to keep a positive tone among the leaders of the church. When asked directly about the attitude of the congregation, a quarter of pastors (24%) say the church is concerned about having fewer people and activities than before the pandemic, 27% say their congregation is moving forward but is exhausted trying to cover all the bases, and 44% say the congregation is excited about what God is doing today.

### **Ministry recovery**

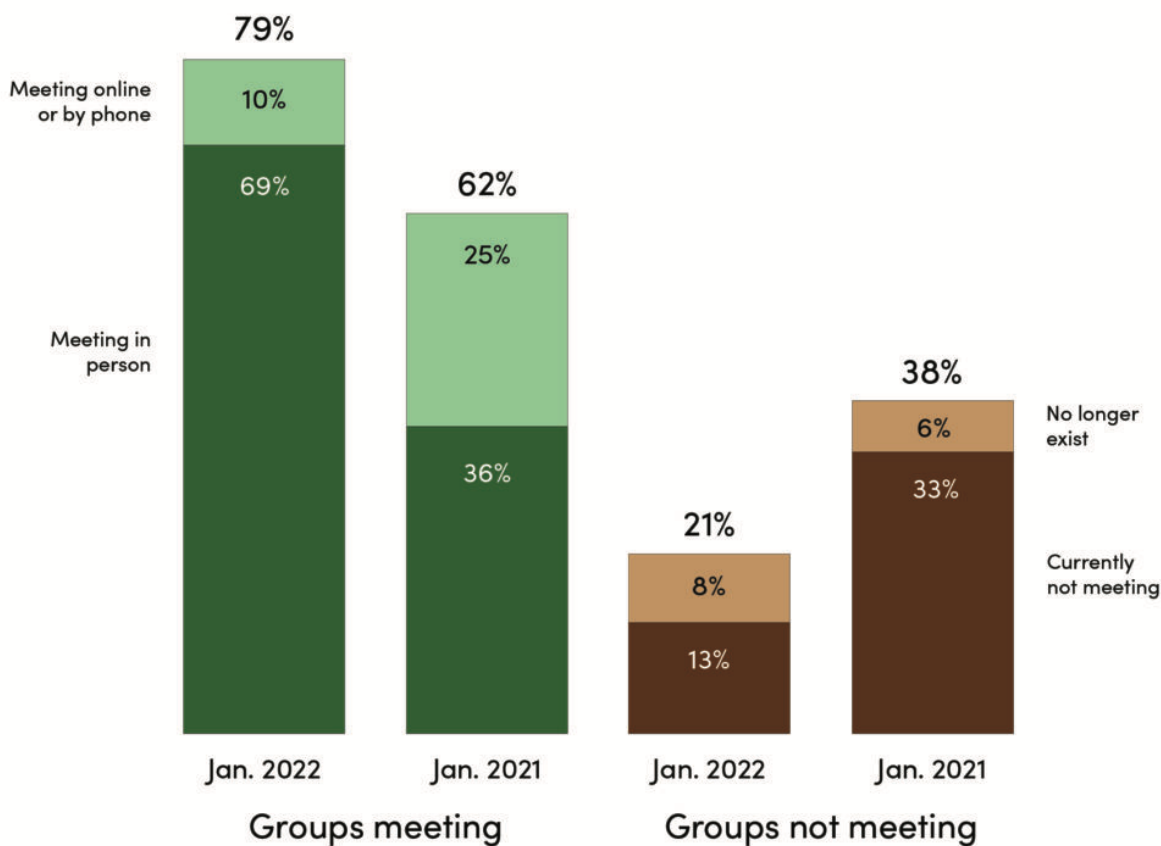
In addition to returning to in-person worship services, most U.S. Protestant pastors say their churches are also **restarting small groups, student ministry and kid's ministry**. More small groups are meeting now, and more are meeting in person compared to last January. On average, pastors now report 79% of their small group classes for adults that existed prior to the pandemic are now meeting, including 69% that are gathering in person. In January 2021, 36% of groups that existed before COVID-19 met in person, 25% connected online or by phone, 33% didn't meet and 6% no longer existed. Today, 13% of groups aren't meeting and 8% no longer exist. Among churches that had student and kids ministry activities prior to the pandemic, most have restarted but have yet to see their attendance return to pre-pandemic levels. Churches also remain more hesitant to resume all activities for children compared to teenagers. Almost 9 in 10 pastors who had student ministries prior to COVID-19 say they have resumed at least some activities in person (86%), including 70% who say all their activities are back to meeting in person. The average pastor with at least some of their student ministry activities meeting in person says attendance for those is 65% of what it was prior to the pandemic. Most (58%) say attendance is below 90% of pre-COVID levels, but 33% report attendance close to early 2020 levels. Another 10% say their student ministry has grown.

Like student ministry, close to 9 in 10 churches who had kid's ministry activities before the pandemic say they have restarted at least some activities in person (86%). Churches are less likely, however, to say all their activities for children are back to gathering in person (64%). Almost a quarter of churches (22%) say they are only doing some of their kids' activities in person. "The typical church has made great progress this last year in resuming Bible studies for all ages." — @smcconn

In the average U.S. Protestant church holding at least some of their kids ministry activities, 64% of kids are participating compared to pre-pandemic attendance. Three in 5 (60%) say attendance is below 90% of what it was before COVID-19. And again, like with student ministries, 32% report attendance close to early 2020 levels, and 8% say their kids ministry has grown. “The typical church has made great progress this last year in resuming Bible studies for all ages,” said McConnell. “Restarting Sunday schools and small groups have allowed the majority of pre-pandemic participants to re-engage in this vital connecting point.”

## More adult small groups meeting now than in Jan. 2021

Among U.S. Protestant pastors



Notes: Some totals may not be equal due to rounding. Respondents were asked: “Of the adult small groups/Sunday school classes/Bible studies that existed in your church before COVID-19 (January 2020) estimate what percentage of groups fit each description.”

## Aaron Earls

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Aaron is the senior writer at Lifeway Research.

*For more information, read the [complete report](#).*



### Methodology

The online survey of 560 Protestant pastors was conducted Feb. 1-11, 2022. Invitations were emailed to the Lifeway Research Pastor Panel followed by two reminders. The probability sample of Protestant churches was created by Lifeway Research through direct recruiting from random samples selected from all Protestant churches. Pastors who agree to be contacted by email for future surveys make up this Lifeway Research Pastor Panel. Each survey was completed by the senior or sole pastor or a minister at the church. Responses were weighted by church average attendance, region, ethnicity of pastor and whether the pastor self-identified as evangelical or

mainline to reflect the population more accurately.

The final sample is 560 usable surveys. The sample provides 95% confidence that the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 6.2%. This margin of error accounts for the effect of weighting. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups. Comparisons are made to a survey using the same methodology conducted Feb. 1-11, 2021, with 430 completes, April 27-29, 2020, with 470 completes and March 30-31, 2020, with 400 completes.