



Majority of churches in decline or flatlining; nearly half see dip in giving, study says

By [Leonardo Blair](#), Christian Post Reporter

A majority of churches have fewer than 100 people attending services each Sunday and have declined or nearly flatlined in membership growth, according to a new study from [Exponential by LifeWay Research](#).

The study, which was conducted to help churches better understand growth in the pews, showed that most Protestant churches are not doing well attracting new Christian converts, reporting an average of less than one each month.

“The primary purpose of this study was to obtain a set of objective measures on churches’ reproduction and multiplication behaviors today as well as to understand their core context of growth,” Todd Wilson, chief executive officer of Exponential, said in a release from LifeWay research. “By combining these measures, we can help churches think about multiplication.”

The study found that 6 in 10 Protestant churches had plateaued or declined in attendance in the past 12 months and more than half saw fewer than 10 people become new Christians.

“Growth is not absent from American churches but rapid growth through conversions is uncommon,” Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research, said in the release.

About 8 percent of the 1,000 Protestant pastors polled in the study had no new converts in the last 12 months.

Commenting on the study in a [blog post](#) this week, Thom Rainer, CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources, said the study provides a very realistic picture of what is happening in American churches today.

“The accuracy of this research cannot be overstated. LifeWay Research phoned 1,000 Protestant pastors. Quotas were used to maintain the correct population of each church size. Responses were weighed by region to reflect more accurately the total U.S. population. The sample provides a 95 percent confidence that the

sampling error does not exceed +/- 3.2%. This information from the statistical nerds assures us the study is very accurate,” he wrote.

A breakdown of the statistics showed that 42 percent of evangelical churches experienced growth over the period studied compared to 34 percent of mainline churches.

Only 23 percent of smaller churches with fewer than 50 persons attending worship services on average said they were growing while 59 percent of churches that average 250 or more worshippers weekly said the same.

“That is the lowest of any of the categories of churches and is an indicator that these churches are at the greatest risk of dying,” Rainier said of the churches with 50 persons attending worship services.

While no major differences were noted between evangelical and mainline churches in terms of new converts, denominational differences emerged showing Pentecostal churches reporting more growth in new converts than any other denomination.

Some 57 percent of Pentecostal pastors reported 10 or more new commitments to Christ in their church last year per 100 attendees.

Lutherans, 39 percent; Holiness churches, 38 percent; and Baptists, 35 percent all followed respectively.

“Much work has been done to go deeper on measuring church health,” McConnell said. “But it is still helpful to look at the observable factors of ‘noses, nickels and

new commitments.’ Strategies, programs and rules-of-thumb work differently depending on the trajectory of a church.”