

Q1 2021

THE UNSTUCK CHURCH REPORT

BENCHMARKS + TRENDS IN U.S. CHURCHES

THE UNSTUCK GROUP[®]
— WE HELP CHURCHES GET UNSTUCK. —

Introduction

MAY 2021

In 2020, The Unstuck Group refreshed the “Vital Signs” assessment tool to reflect changing ministry paradigms that churches have embraced since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Churches that engage the [Unstuck consulting process](#) and subscribers to the [Unstuck Learning Hub](#) get free access to the assessment tool.

Over the last 12 months, 171 churches completed the assessment to help us get a picture of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on ministries. The average pre-pandemic attendance of churches that participated was 803 people. That included churches ranging in size from under 100 to over 10,000 people.

The churches that participated on average started their ministry in 1954. The oldest church that participated dates back to the early 1700s. Most of the churches are connected to a denomination, but about a quarter of the churches that participated indicated they were non-denominational churches.

Read on for some of the key takeaways from the most recent assessment results in the categories of **ministry reach, connection, staffing and leadership, finances and overall health**.

KEY FINDINGS

CATEGORY	METRIC
In-Person Average Weekly Attendance	-28%
Online Service Views	+123%
Number of People Baptized - Previous 12 Months	-52%
New People Added to the Church Database	-35%
Adults & Students in Small Groups	+9%
Total General Fund Giving	+1.7%
Current Total Cash Reserves	22 weeks

Ministry Reach

Churches connected with fewer new people in the last 12 months.

Specifically, there was a 35% decline in the number of new people that churches started tracking in their database over the last year compared to the year before.

On average, the number of new people added was equal to 8% of the total number of people in the church's database. The pace of decline in reaching new people exceeds the decline in year-over-year in-person attendance.

The average in-person attendance over the previous 12 months of churches dropped by more than 28%.

The average weekly attendance for the previous 12 months declined from 803 to 577. This includes the total of all people including children.

The number of baptisms over the last 12 months declined by 52% across all churches.

This year, the number of people baptized equaled 3% of this year's average in-person attendance. That's down from 5% the year before. The decline in baptisms is far higher than the decline in in-person attendance. This is another metric that suggests churches are reaching fewer new people.

The decline in attendance continues to be offset by the increase in online service views.

The average number of online service views (one minute or more) per week has more than doubled from the year before. Churches reported an average of 881 service views per week compared to 395 service views per week the year before.

Most churches offer multiple service times to reach more people.

Of the churches surveyed, 71% offered multiple weekend services across all their locations. We asked churches to include weeknight services if attendance is meant as a "weekend service" option.

One in five churches surveyed is now multisite.

On average, those churches have 2.6 locations including the original location.

Of the churches that have one style of worship, about three out of five (59%) offer "contemporary" styles of worship services.

Just 8% of churches still offer only traditional services. And 18% of churches offer multiple styles of worship services. The number of churches offering multiple styles of worship is actually increasing, when we know from previous research that declining churches are more likely to offer multiple styles of worship.

Children's ministry in-person attendance is down to 14% of overall attendance.

This includes all children from newborn through fifth grade. The year-over-year decline in children's ministry attendance was 36%. This suggests that churches are reaching fewer younger families during the pandemic.

Student attendance has also declined over the last year.

Student ministry attendance for in-person gatherings dropped by 21%. Currently the average student ministry is 7% of overall attendance. This includes all students in sixth through twelfth grades. That's the smallest percentage of students compared to overall attendance that we've ever recorded in our quarterly reports.

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This continues to be the most concerning metric as we reviewed the data this quarter. At a minimum, my hope would be that the decline in the number of new people and the decline in baptisms would mirror the decline in in-person attendance. Unfortunately, that's not the case.

The declines are more significant in both categories. That suggests churches are re-engaging people who were previously part of the churches but are not having as much success connecting with people outside the church and outside the faith in this season.

-- Tony Morgan

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Ministry Connection

About one in five churches has discontinued a membership- or partnership-type commitment.

Currently 18% of churches do not offer membership as a connection point to the church.

Home groups are the primary option churches offer to connect people into smaller gatherings beyond the weekend services.

Of the churches surveyed, 80% offer home groups as an option to connect with other people. Just 10% only offer Sunday school as an option.

Small group participation has increased through the pandemic.

Churches are seeing 63% of their adults and students participate in a group. Participation in groups has increased by 9% in the last 12 months.

Volunteer engagement has also started to recover.

In this reporting period, 43% of all adults and students served at least monthly on a volunteer team. The number of volunteers increased 11% from the previous year.

Churches are increasing their use of email to stay connected with their congregations.

The number of people currently opted in to receive email communications (i.e. newsletters, content email lists, etc.) increased by 23% from the previous year.

Ministry Staffing & Leadership

Staffing levels remain high compared to attendance declines.

The average church employs one full-time equivalent staff person for every 47 people in attendance. That includes all ministry and support staff. We know from previous research that growing churches have 35% fewer staff positions than declining churches.

Churches lean on part-time staff more than other sectors of the economy.

The average church has 50% of their staff working part-time. By comparison, the current national average remains at 20% part-time workers according to the Department of Labor.

Churches have a span of care of one volunteer leader for every 12 people in attendance.

Leaders include adults and students who are serving in roles where they are responsible for leading a team or a group of other people (i.e. team leaders or groups leaders).

The average church board or elder team has 9 members...when the largest board was excluded.

The largest board identified in the current reporting cycle had 179 members.

Churches generally have only a few additional boards or committees.

Churches on average have three additional boards or committees beyond the primary board. One church had 22 additional committees.

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At The Unstuck Group, we actually advocate for a unified board model where only one board handles the functions that are often dispersed across multiple different boards and committees in churches. By that, I mean that personal, finances, facilities, etc. are usually managed by different teams in churches. That, of course, often slows down decision making, prevents churches from making healthy changes and routinely leads to more division in the church.

We, instead, encourage churches to have one lay-led board to handle these functions and then encourage everyone else on these boards and committees to join a team to engage the ministry of the church.

-- Tony Morgan

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Ministry Finances

Giving has increased during the pandemic.

Churches reported on average that their total general fund giving was up 1.7% from the previous year. At the same time, the total number of giving units declined by 6% year-over-year. That means fewer people were more generous through the last year.

Churches are at the top end of the financial investment we recommend for staff.

The average staff budget is 55% of the overall ministry budget. This includes the cost of all salaries and benefits. We recommend that churches try to keep staffing budgets between 45% and 55% of the overall budget. The Unstuck Group does not collect salary information for individual employees.

Churches average having the equivalent of 22 weeks in cash reserves.

That's well beyond the six to eight weeks that The Unstuck Group recommends. This has jumped significantly from pre-COVID when churches indicated they had 15 weeks in cash reserves.

Churches are continuing to reduce their level of debt.

On average, the current debt load is 0.6 times the church's total annual giving. The Unstuck Group encourages churches to keep total debt below 2.0 times annual giving.

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There are several data points here that suggest that churches have generally made it through the last year in a better financial position than they were pre-COVID:

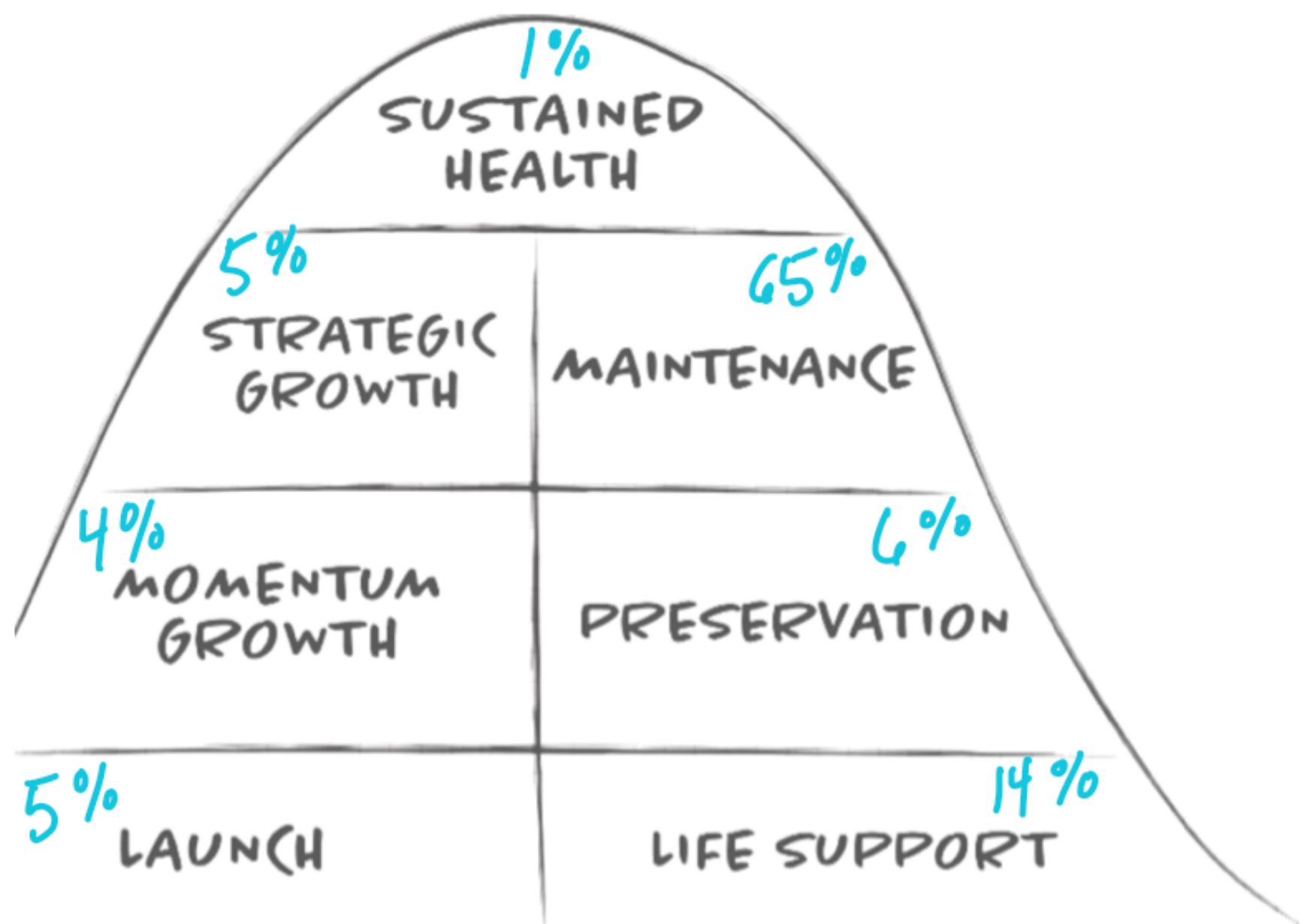
Giving is up. Cash reserves are up. Debt has been reduced. Our hope is that churches will leverage this financial health to begin investing in refreshed vision that helps us make more disciples of Jesus.

-- Tony Morgan

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Ministry Health

85% of churches are currently sitting on the downward slope of the typical church life cycle.*
In particular, the majority (65%) of churches are in Maintenance phase. For a detailed description of each phase of the life cycle, check out [The Unstuck Church: Equipping Churches to Experience Sustained Health](#) by Tony Morgan.



*This observation reflects the results of 381 churches who completed the leadership team version of the Unstuck Church Assessment in the last 12 months, which incorporates objective metrics of church health, along with the subjective perspectives of the church's leadership team members. You can take the assessment for free at theunstuckgroup.com/lifecycle.

ABOUT THE UNSTUCK GROUP

We help pastors lead thriving churches by guiding them to focus vision, strategy, team and action. [The Unstuck Process](#) helps you:

- 1. **Assess your church's health** and do an honest reality check of where you are today and what needs to change
- 2. **Make a strategic plan** to move your church towards a clarified vision
- 3. **Structure your team effectively** to execute on the strategy, aligning every individual's work to the church's priorities
- 4. **Put the strategic plan into action** with unprecedented follow-through

Over the last 11 years, we've worked alongside and built relationships with the leadership teams at 500+ churches. Through our [church consulting processes](#), we've helped churches grow their ability to clarify vision (*where they believe God's called them to go*) and their strategies (*how they are going to get there*). Our goal is to help you lead a thriving church that continually reaches new people and helps them take next steps towards Christ.
>>> Interested in learning more? [Let's talk.](#)

For more information related to this survey and the summary of the learnings, contact our team:

- 🌐 theunstuckgroup.com
- 📞 844-486-7882
- ✉ help@theunstuckgroup.com