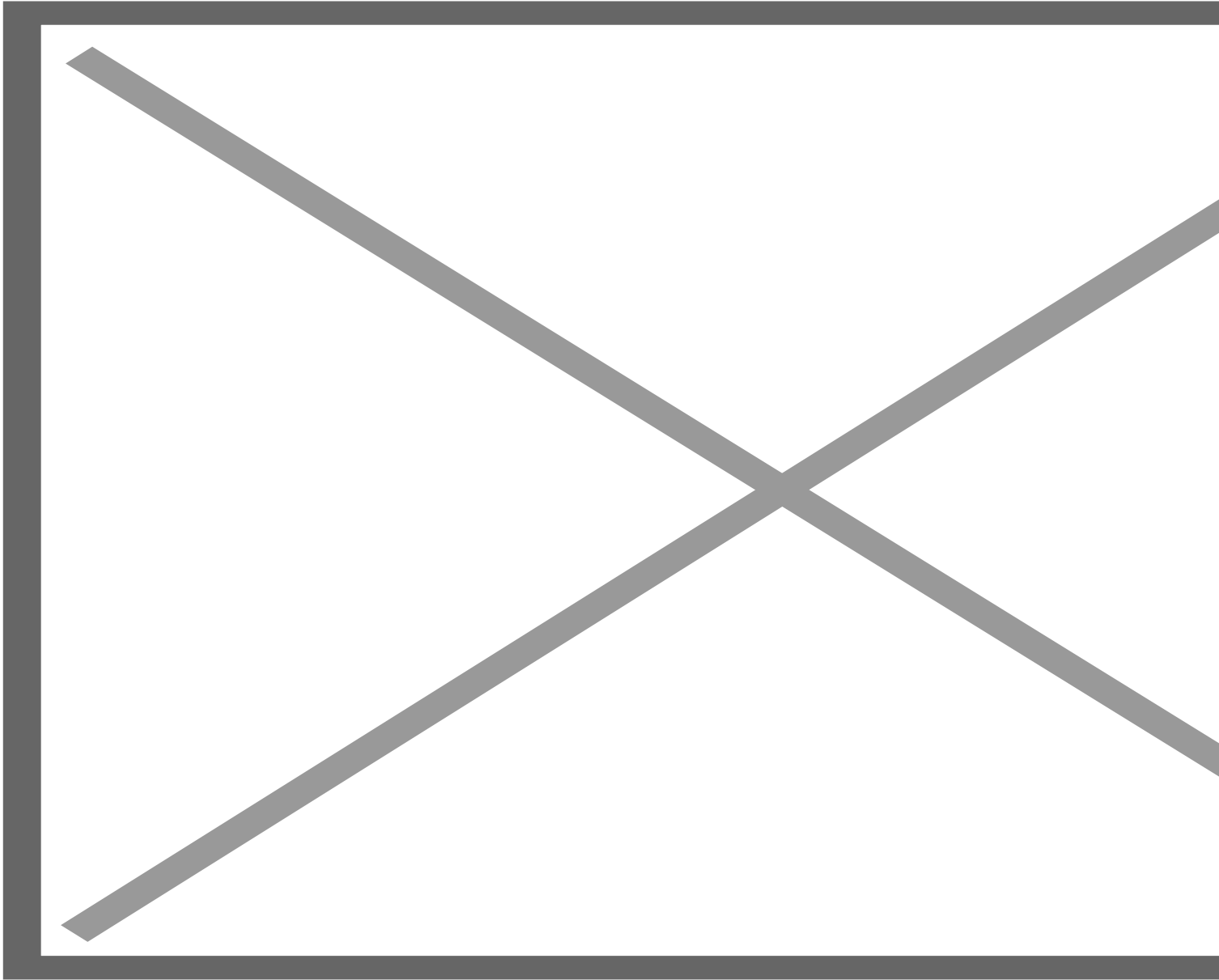


Church attendance up for the first time in decades, according to new report

by [Bob Smietana](#)

April 28, 2026



The past 25 years have been rough for churches and other houses of worship in the US.

The median worship attendance dropped by more than half. Church closures and the rise of the nones—those who claim no religion—have grabbed all the headlines. And faith in institutions like organized religion has plummeted.

Yet a new report from the Hartford Institute for Religion Research shows signs of a shift—for the first time in two decades, attendance is up. More people are volunteering, and there also seems to be a renewed sense of optimism among pastors and other clergy.

“The headline finding is cautious optimism,” Alison Norton, co-director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, told reporters at the annual conference of the Religion News Association, meeting in Atlanta. She added that the data showed a story of resilience and recalibration.

“Across a range of indicators, there are signs of recovery and, in some cases, renewal,” the study’s authors wrote in a report released April 24, which surveyed a representative sample of leaders at 7,453 congregations between September and December of 2025.

Median in-person attendance, which dropped from 137 in 2000 to 45 during COVID-19, is now at 70 adults, which is higher than the 2020 Faith Communities Today survey from the Hartford Center for Religious Research. That report found that the median attendance was 65.

Researchers said the attendance growth, which is self-reported by the surveyed congregations, is not enough to reverse years of decline. Still, said Scott Thumma, director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, it has been a long time since there has been any uptick.

Thumma said researchers had expected to see continued decline and withdrawal. “We were pretty surprised when we saw the 2025 data.” He added that for many congregations, this might be the first sign that the trajectory of decline might be shifted. As the report noted, “this is the first positive gain in median attendance in 25 years.”

Catholic and Orthodox congregations had the highest reported median attendance (200), in part because those traditions have fewer parishes than Protestants. The median evangelical congregation reported 75 worshippers, while the median mainline church reported 50.

Just under half of the congregations (43 percent) said they grew by at least 5 percent, while a similar number (46 percent) reported declining by at least 5 percent. The rest said they were stable. “For the first time in decades, more congregations are stabilizing or growing rather than shrinking,” the authors wrote.

Thumma said that larger congregations are more likely to grow, while smaller churches are more likely to decline.

“After years of constraint, even modest gains can feel like recovery for these congregations,” Thumma said at the Religion News Association conference.

The report is part of a long-term study of congregations during the COVID-19 era and beyond. The survey asked about attendance, giving, volunteers and demographics, as well as how church members and leaders felt about the future of their congregations. About half of the congregations were in the South, with the rest split between the Midwest, the Western US, and the Northeast.

Earlier studies by Hartford showed that at first, congregations responded to the pandemic by adapting quickly to streaming and finding ways to minister when they could not gather in person. Then there was a lull as the pandemic stretched on and churches went into survival mode.

Now that period seems to be over, said Charissa Mikoski, an assistant professor at Hartford Institute for Religion Research, who also worked on the study. And the churches that are growing, said Mikoski, are implementing the lessons of resilience they learned during the pandemic.

“This is not just recovery, it’s adaptation and experimentation,” said Mikoski.

When the data showed attendance was up, researchers were skeptical.

“We did go back and check very thoroughly,” Mikoski said. Other groups, like the Pew Research Center, have shown that the decline of religion in the US has stabilized, at least for now, she said.

“It’s not too surprising if the congregations are feeling better and more volunteers are showing up, the clergy are going to start feeling better,” said Thumma.

Thumma suspects the pandemic acted a little bit like a wake-up call for churches. They could no longer pretend that everything was OK and had to start making changes for the future.

One other positive coming out of the pandemic? Giving is up, in large part because of a growth in online giving, said Thumma.

“People no longer need to be physically present or even remember to give in the moment,” said Thumma.

Median income grew from \$120,000 in 2020 to \$205,000 in 2025. The number of churches offering online giving rose from 58 percent in 2020 to 76 percent in 2025. As of 2025, about 40 percent of revenue came from online giving. Evangelical and non-Christian congregations were most likely to report a surplus. Mainline churches were more likely to report deficits. Thumma also noted that church expenses—especially for insurance and other building expenses—have grown.

Thumma said that it will take some time to know if this growth will continue. The center is planning for a major survey of congregations in 2030 that may shed more light.

The authors of the report were quick to say there’s no major revival in Christianity. The longer trajectory of decline remains in place, they noted. But congregations do seem to be moving past survival mode and planning for the future.

“What it is not is a story of revival or return to a previous era of sort of congregational glory in the United States,” said Norton. “Congregations have been through an extraordinary period of disruption, and though it has taken a while, many have come out of it with greater clarity about who they are and what they’re called to do. That’s showing up in the data in ways that are genuinely encouraging.” —Religion News Service