

FLORIDA MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY

THRIVING CONGREGATIONS Program



2025 Cohort

OUR WHY

We've reached an inflection point in the Church where we need to talk about religion in a more thoughtful, nuanced, and statistically driven way. Other faiths are growing as the Black Church shrinks. What is that saying about us?

Historically, the Black Church has been a cornerstone of the black community, playing a vital role spiritually, socially, and politically. However, in the current period, the Black Church, like the Church as a whole, is facing unprecedented challenges. These include a decline in church attendance among the young adults, a shift towards alternative forms of spirituality, the influence of a take-no-prisoners culture, and the financial strain of a pandemic, all of which are impacting black congregations in concerning ways.¹

A new Pew Research Center survey finds that 80% of U.S. adults say religion's role in American life is shrinking – a percentage that's as high as it's ever been in our surveys.

Americans are more likely to say their spirituality has grown than declined

% of U.S. adults who say they have ___ over the course of their lifetime



Note: Those who did not answer are not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 31-Aug. 6, 2023.

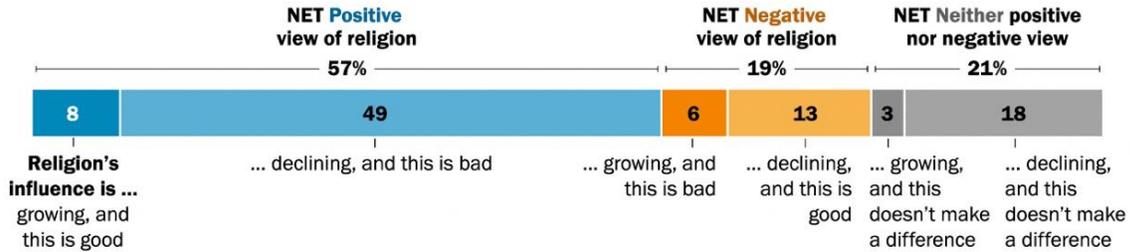
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

¹ The Black Church: Current Challenges and Enduring Hope, Seymour Institute for Black Church and Policies Studies, Princeton University

But Americans are far more likely to say they have become more *spiritual* than to say they have become more *religious*, according to a new analysis of a 2023 Pew Research Center survey:

49% of Americans say religion’s influence is declining and that this is a bad thing

U.S. adults’ views toward religion, based on combined responses about whether religion’s influence is growing or declining and whether this is a good or bad thing



Note: Those who did not answer the question about whether religion’s influence is growing or declining are not shown. “NET Neither positive nor negative” figures include those who did not answer the question about whether religion’s growing/declining influence is good/bad.

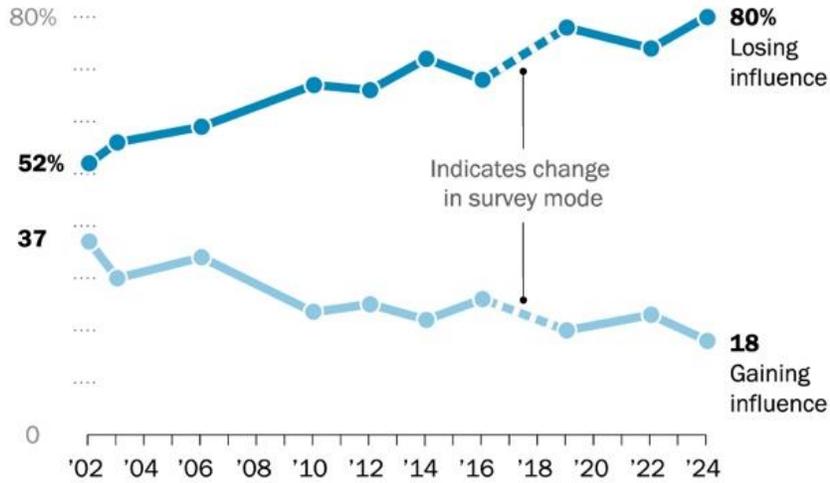
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Feb. 13-25, 2024.

“8 in 10 Americans Say Religion Is Losing Influence in Public Life”

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Share of Americans who say religion's influence is declining is as high as it's ever been

% of U.S. adults who say religion is ___ in American life

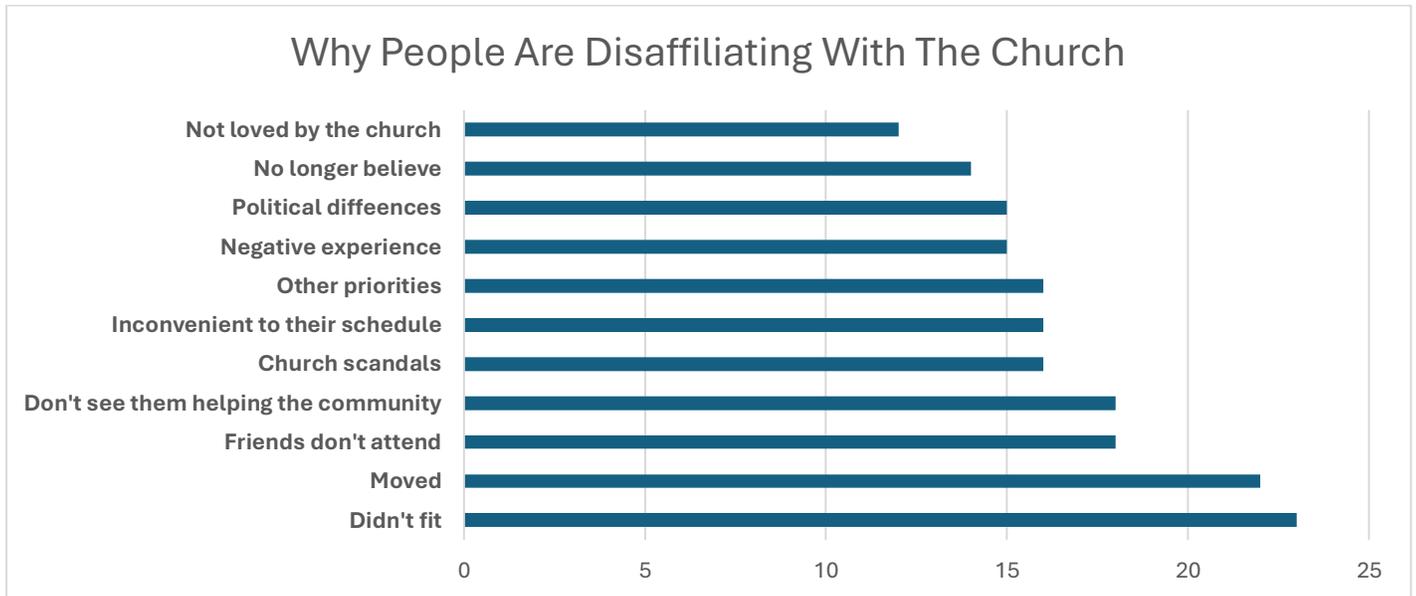


Note: Those who did not answer are not shown. Dotted line indicates a change in survey mode between 2016 and 2019. Data from 2019 and after comes from Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel (ATP); 2016 and earlier used telephone surveys. The wording of the question on the telephone surveys was slightly different than on the ATP; Refer to the Topline for details.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Feb. 13-25, 2024.
 "8 in 10 Americans Say Religion Is Losing Influence in Public Life"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Pew Research also detailed,



Young people also mention 7 additional unquantified challenges: Nontransparent and too focused on finances, inconsistency with the Christian message, only for the successful, polarizing and judgmental, secularization, lack of distinctiveness from other nonprofits, and unbiblical or outdated hierarchy.

Additional research, specific to the Black Church², shows:

- Americans with no religious affiliation rose to almost one in three.
- In 2001, 75% of Americans identified as Christian. By 2021, that number had dropped to 63%.
- 49% of Black millennials and 46% of Black Gen-Zers reported that they "rarely" or "never" attend religious services.
- The Black Church is no longer the central institution in the communities.
- Other avenues outside the Church compete for resources – time, talent, and tithes.
- The Black church is viewed as resting on historical achievements and not confronting the day-to-day challenges as they used to.

The Church's business, mission and vision, social dynamics, and spiritual beliefs must be translated to the changing social and cultural context without sacrificing the Gospel if it wants to be relevant and influential in a culture that is "waxing worse and worse."

This entails nurturing gifts that diminish blind spots, enhance Biblical generativity, and enable people to tackle sin problems with greater creativity and wisdom. Churches, most of all, must cultivate the Christian imagination by holding the deep wisdom of the past and a rich vision of the future in creative tension to discern what we ought to do in the present.

The good news is that many de-churched young Americans say they might return to churches if they find a stable and healthy congregation.

² Glaude, Eddie, *We Are The Leaders We Have Been Looking For*, 2004

WHO ARE WE

Thriving Congregations is a program of Florida Memorial University to create a resource and development center for South Florida congregations at a Historically Black University founded to develop Black churches and Black ministers. Funded by Lilly Endowment Inc., we aim to support institutions that want to help congregations:

- Explore and understand their rapidly changing social and cultural contexts;
- Gain greater clarity about their mission and values;
- Draw on Christian practices from their theological and ecclesial traditions to adapt their ministries to the demands of their changing contexts.

Our ultimate goal is to strengthen your congregations, enabling people to deepen their relationships with God, enhance their connections with each other, and contribute to the flourishing of their local communities and the world. We firmly believe that local congregations, as the primary form of Christian community, have the potential to make a profound impact.

A thriving congregations exhibit a nuanced understanding of their communities and neighborhoods' characteristics, interests, history, and challenges. These congregations attend closely to demographic and social changes in their communities, and they understand the qualities that make their communities both what they are and what they are becoming. As active participants in the community, the congregation members build face-to-face relationships with people in their neighborhoods and understand well how they live, play, work, and gather. Through these close connections with their communities, thriving congregations can listen to the needs and interests of people in their local and regional contexts and develop highly relational and relevant ministries for those they seek to reach.

The Thriving Congregations Team Is Partnering With You To Explore The Church's Testimony In The Context of A Changing Society

OBEDIENCE

Faithful to the Gospel



DISCERNMENT

Informed by tradition

ANTICIPATION

Inspired by hope of Christ return

Relevant to your Ministry setting

CRITICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

We know that too often, we settle for or tweak “what is” rather than imagining the future to which God is calling us and discovering fresh possibilities for the future.

We encourage those around us to hold the deep wisdom of the past and possibilities of the future in creative tension to think expansively and celebrate progress rather than perfection as we ponder four forward-looking questions:

1. What are the storms of a world in flux that will influence our navigation?
2. Where are we going, what might it look like, and how might we discover the best way to get there?
3. How might we draw from wisdom, knowledge, and experience to inform our navigation?
4. How might we, with others, better equip ourselves to fulfill our purpose and navigate toward our destination of flourishing?

If our lenses toward the future are truly to be marked by the curiosity and hope we've described, then our curiosity and hope ought to compel us to continue evaluating the past and learning from it.

Our mission at Thriving Congregations is clear: ***we aim to create a safe and nurturing space for theological reflection. This space is designed to help you, the pastor, reorient your Church towards its destination of flourishing, enhance your preparation for leading the people of God on their faith journey, and ultimately, contribute to the thriving of your local communities.***

We are insatiably curious and honor multiple ways of learning. We don't have all the answers—and never will—so we partner with faith, academic, and community leaders to cultivate Christian imagination by actively engaging in theological inquiry, active listening, deep reflection, exploration, and systemization to uncover how to remain relevant to the culture without sacrificing the Gospel.

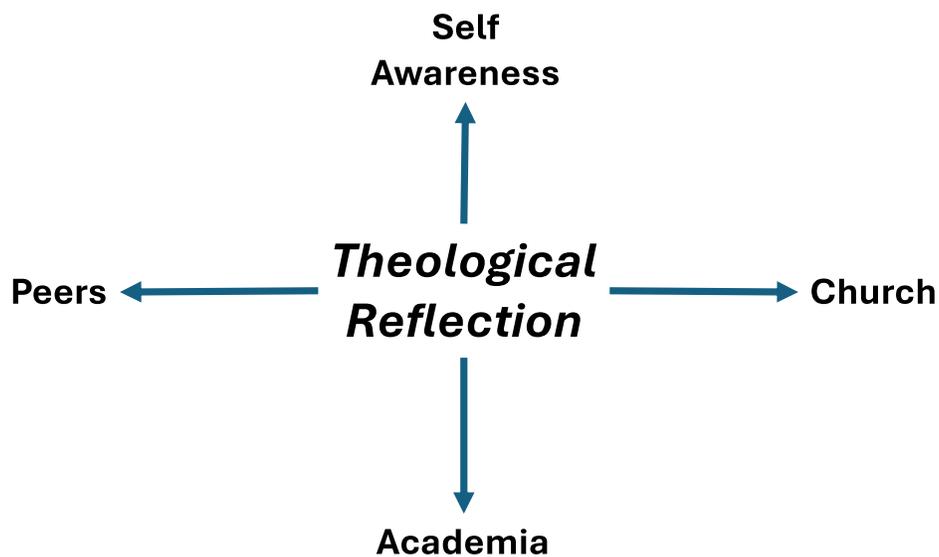
We invite you to join us on this faith journey.

OUR WHAT

Our congregational cohorts are based on a one-year action-oriented, discernment and theological research process designed to help your congregation and community thrive.

We stir your theological imagination, assisting you in helping congregations deepen their theological identities by connecting to their local contexts and collaboratively strengthening their communities in ways that lead to growth. There is no formula anymore. No one solution fits all—no quick fixes.

We engage in intentional and theological inquiry to achieve a flourishing future by co-creating place-based opportunities to imagine new possibilities for theological engagement. We also create Holy friendships with people with different cognitive backgrounds and experiences that are intimate, enduring, and formative, helping each other dream, challenge, and affirm to create a multiplier impact on ministry.



OUR HOW

We create a platform for collaborative inquiry and shared action that capacitates congregations and communities to build knowledge, research, and power to make fundamental changes in their localities that lead to flourishing and thriving congregations.

We invite small groups of seasoned Pastors to journey together through a curated, disciplined way of thinking that holds the past and future together in creative tension, providing custom resourcing from thought leaders, life-giving spaces for reflection and innovation, and transformative networks of connection and support.

The ultimate purpose is to strengthen congregations, helping people deepen their relationships with God, enhance their connections with each other, and contribute to the flourishing of their local communities and the world.

We provide the opportunity for leaders to help one another dream, affirm one another, and challenge one another, creating a ministry multiplier impact.

- 1-yr process that includes 12 concentrated training (1-month "work" periods in between)
- 1-2 leaders from your congregation/community (including the Pastor)
- Training in skills of qualitative observation and research, theological inquiry, marketing, and action-oriented discernment
- Work periods that adapt to your current context and improvise a new way forward by drawing from the wisdom of the past while renewing the institution.
- Work directly with you to develop a ministry team to assess and adapt to your changing contexts
- Tools for unlocking your power to make a difference in your communities
- Monthly pastoral coaching
- Sunday services visits
- Four hosted Flourishing Faith Workshops in the FMU Chapel
- VIP access to the Annual Black Church Conference

Churches engaging in this process leave with a deeper understanding of the systems at work in their community, a vision for where the Church can impact those systems for good, and a roadmap for thriving as they become even more integral to and rooted in the place where they are planted. In other words, reframing what is often heard, "*we can't because*" to "*we can if.*"

**LEARNING, INSPIRING AND FOSTERING TRANSFORMATION
(L.I.F.T.)**

January	Delegation and Evaluation	<i>Helping leaders to operate in new and effective ways. Using research as a tool for effective ministerial work and evaluation</i>
February	Post Pandemic Church	<i>Explore and deepen the understanding of cultural trends that affect the church. Exploration of mission, vision</i>
March	Enhancing Your Online Church	<i>Social media for Your Ministry's Growth</i>
April	Spiritual Formation	<i>Explore how Christians practices that are grounded in their traditions and are appropriate to their contexts may provide both the framework and patterns of activity needed to revitalize their ministries and bring coherence to congregational life</i>
May	Faith and Disability	<i>The Glory of God Seen Through Neurodivergence and Other Disabilities</i>
June	Congregational Care	<i>Exploring systems for every phase of life</i>
July	Worship Experience	<i>Reviewing the experience from start to finish. Strengthening congregational governance</i>
August	Reimagining the Church's infrastructure	<i>Gaining greater clarity about their values, theological convictions and mission in light of their changing contexts. Deepening understanding of ecclesial traditions and denominational relationships and how they can shape and expand ministry opportunities</i>
September	Outreach and Connections	<i>Building and strengthening a sense of community among members of congregations. Activating growth at every level</i>
October	Models of Discipleship	<i>Nurturing deeper relationships with organizations and individuals in the local community to further refocused and clarified mission and mission</i>
November	Mental Health of You and the Congregation	<i>Understanding mental wellness and walking in solidarity with families who are navigating challenging experiences</i>
December	Financial Success Strategies	<i>Revising the vision of the church, and funding it</i>

FLOURISHING FAITH WORKSHOPS

Workshop 1		
	The Common Cold of Mental Illness	<i>Identifying Depression, Anxiety, and Offering Mental Health Support</i>
Workshop 2		
	Social Justice and Political Divide	<i>Where, when, and how should the church engage</i>
Workshop 3		
	Loss and Healing	<i>How to Walk with Hurting Members</i>
Workshop 4		
	Ministry to Every Generation	<i>From Baby Boomers to Generation Z</i>

OUR FOCUS SCRIPTURE

While we recognize the powerful impact of the church, we also recognize the need to reach the current culture that is moving further and further from God. We believe the Church still has the power to play a prophetic role.

"The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry."

Ezekiel 37:1-2

Ezekiel was put down in the middle of the valley and saw the condition of the community. Bones can only exist where something was once alive. We, like Ezekiel, are to encourage the despondent, provide restoration and recovery to the lost in the community, and the power of grace to the most hopeless. When we are awakened, God wants us to do something about it. It's a process—do what brings them together, then preach and pray, inviting the Holy Spirit to restore them.

"And He said to me, 'Son of man, can these bones live?' So, I answered, 'O Lord God, You know.'"

Ezekiel 37:3