

TRYTANK RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The Lay-Led Congregations Project

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Introduction

It's a Sunday morning in a congregation. There is no full-time pastor. The person leading worship worked a full week at another job, prepared the sermon late at night, and will stay after to help organize the next service, check on a member who is struggling, and review the budget with a small group of volunteers. A handful of people will make most of the decisions and carry most of the responsibility.

And yet, the room is not empty. People greet each other by name. They linger after worship. They step in where they are needed. They care for one another in tangible ways. In many of these congregations, this is what vitality looks like: relationships, participation, and a shared sense of ownership.

This is the reality of lay-led congregations today. Leadership is present. Discipleship is happening. Communities remain connected and engaged.

At the same time, everything is being carried within limitations of their situation. Time is limited. Resources are limited. Leadership is concentrated. Structures are often shaped by what can be sustained rather than what is being intentionally built.

A clear picture emerges: Lay-led congregations are not the absence of ministry, but ministry under constraint.

Many congregations are not asking whether they can continue because they see themselves as *already* continuing. The question is whether the systems around them can evolve to support what they are already carrying.

Across Christian denominations, the number of ordained clergy available to serve congregations continues to decline. In response, churches of all sizes are increasingly relying on lay-led leadership models, where individuals help guide and sustain the life of a congregation without an installed, called, or appointed pastor. This shift reflects a broader structural change in how leadership is organized and how ministry is sustained.

The Lay-Led Congregations Project is a multi-denominational, ecumenical study involving the United Methodist Church (UMC), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PCUSA), and the Episcopal Church (TEC). The project explores how lay-led congregations are navigating this shift and how denominational leaders, structures, and resources can more effectively support them.

Using a combination of survey and in-depth interview data, this research identifies key patterns, barriers to flourishing, and emerging adaptations across lay-led contexts. The study focuses on five core objectives:

- Assess the presence and depth of discipleship formation in lay-led congregations
- Understand markers of congregational vitality in lay-led contexts
- Identify gaps in training, formation, and leadership support
- Surface the financial and structural realities shaping these congregations
- Enable cross-denominational comparison and shared learning

The findings offer a clearer picture of how lay-led congregations are functioning today and provide actionable insights to inform leadership development and resource design. As lay-led leadership becomes a more common reality, this research aims to help denominations and leaders move from adaptation toward more sustainable and intentional models of support.

Executive Summary

Lay-led congregations are no longer an exception. They are an increasingly necessary expression of how the Church is organizing and carrying out its mission through the church. Across denominations, these congregations demonstrate strong commitment, relational depth, and ongoing participation in their discipleship and ministry. Leadership is present. Communities are engaged. Ministry is continuing.

At the same time, this work is taking place with significant obstacles. Leadership often emerges through a calling or necessity rather than through clear pathways. Discipleship is active, but its depth is shaped by limited time and capacity. Congregations are deeply relational and engaged, yet many lack confidence in their long-term viability. Leaders feel generally supported but not consistently equipped for the full complexity of their role. Financial and structural pressures continue to shape what is possible.

Taken together, the findings reveal a consistent pattern: lay-led congregations are sustaining ministry through adaptability, relationships, and commitment, but they are doing so within systems that are not fully designed to support them over time. Across five stories, a shared tension emerges between energy and strain:

- Leadership is present, but often informal and difficult to transfer
- Formation is happening, but not always deeply or consistently structured
- Vitality is relationally strong, but does not always translate into sustainability
- Support exists, but is uneven and not always accessible or aligned
- Congregations are adapting, but primarily in response to constraint rather than long-term strategy

These dynamics point to a broader shift. The challenge facing lay-led congregations is not whether they can lead or sustain ministry in the present. It is whether the structures surrounding that leadership can evolve past the mere sustenance of ministry to truly match the reality of community needs.

Key Implications

- Lay-led ministry is being sustained, but not consistently supported by aligned systems
- Capacity, time, and leadership availability are the primary limiting factors
- Training and resources exist, but often do not fit the realities leaders face
- Relational strength is a core asset, but lacks consistent structural support
- Financial and institutional pressures are shaping leadership models more than strategy

Strategic Opportunities

To support lay-led congregations more effectively, denominations and leaders can focus on five key areas:

- 1. Design for sustainability, not just adaptation:** Move from reactive adjustments toward intentional leadership models that align with current capacity and long-term realities.
- 2. Expand and distribute leadership:** Reduce reliance on a small number of individuals by equipping more leaders and building shared responsibility across the congregation.
- 3. Align training with real-life constraints:** Develop accessible, flexible, and practical training that fits within limited time, financial, and geographic realities.
- 4. Strengthen relational and peer-based support:** Invest in mentorship, cohorts, and networks that provide ongoing connections, guidance, and shared learning.
- 5. Align structures and resources with lay-led realities:** Simplify processes, increase clarity, and ensure denominational systems provide tangible, responsive support, particularly in smaller or more isolated contexts.

Lay-led congregations are not failing to adapt. They are adapting continuously. The opportunity now is to move from systems that help them endure, to systems that allow them to lead sustainably over time.

Methodology

This project was conducted by Future of Faith on behalf of TryTank Research Institute from July 2025 to April 2026. This project came to be as TryTank wanted to better understand the experiences of lay leaders and the sustainability of their congregations, partnering with multiple denominations to create shared learning.

This study used a mixed-methods approach, combining survey data and in-depth interviews with lay leaders to better understand their experiences. All data from the surveys and interviews were collected from late January 2026 to early April 2026. Participants were primarily unordained lay leaders although some had certifications or official training through their denomination. A small number of participants noted that they were ordained, though not within the denomination in which they currently serve.

Survey

A survey instrument was designed to capture participant demographics, signs of discipleship formation and congregational vitality, and lay leaders' self-reported roles and training.

To ensure relevance in a range of settings, four versions of the survey were developed, each tailored to reflect the language and structure of its respective denomination. Surveys were distributed by denominational partners through email lists and newsletters. Participants who completed the survey received a \$20 gift card; this was later adjusted so that only the first 50 respondents per survey received the incentive.

Response rates varied across denominations. Despite efforts to encourage broad participation, some denominations were more highly represented in the final sample than others. As a result, findings should be interpreted with an awareness of these differences in engagement.

In-Depth Interviews

A random selection of participants from the survey was invited to participate in a follow-up interview. Two to four individual interviewees in each denomination were chosen based on their interest and availability, and a small preference for congregations from a range of geographies. A total of 11 interviews, which averaged approximately one hour, were conducted and provided space for lay leaders to reflect more deeply on their experiences, roles, and congregational story. Each participant was given five open-ended questions.

Participants who completed an interview received a \$20 gift card for their time.

Demographic Overview

Survey (N = 293)

Age

- 25-34 years: 3.1%
- 35-44 years: 4.8%
- 45-54 years: 12.3%
- 55-64 years: 21.5%
- 65-74 years: 36.9%
- 75 years or older: 21.5%

Race (Select All that Apply)

- Black or African American: 15.4%
- Hispanic or Latino: 2.7%
- White or Caucasian: 81.9%
- Asian or Asian American: 1.7%
- Pacific Islander: 1.0%
- Native American or American Indian: 1.0%

Gender

- Female: 63.5%
- Male: 35.5%
- Non-binary: <1.0%

Region

- Urban: 15.7%
- Suburban: 24.2%
- Rural: 26.6%
- Small town: 31.7%
- Other: 1.7%

Denomination

- The Episcopal Church (TEC): 11.3%
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA): 20.5%
- Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) (PCUSA): 10.9%
- The United Methodist Church (UMC): 57.0%

Current Leadership Role

- Lay volunteer leader: 53.6%
- Lay leader with formal denominational authorization: 17.4%
- Lay leader licensed/commissioned for pastoral functions: 17.1%
- Ordained leader without seminary/M.Div training: 1.4%
- Other: 10.6%

Hours per Week

- Less than 6 hours: 41.0%
- 6-10 hours: 31.1%
- 11-20 hours: 15.0%
- More than 20 hours: 13.0%

Years in Position

- Less than a year: 10.2%
- 1-2 years: 17.4%
- 3-5 years: 27.0%
- 6-10 years: 21.8%
- More than 10 years: 23.5%

How Became a Lay Leader

- Felt an internal sense of call or vocation: 15.0%
- Encouraged or invited by someone in my congregation: 18.8%
- Encouraged or appointed by someone in my denomination or presbytery/synod/judiciary/diocese: 8.9%
- Stepped in because there was an urgent need or no one else was available: 17.7%
- Volunteered after seeing a gap in leadership: 5.5%
- Role evolved naturally from previous involvement or volunteering: 29.0%
- Other: 5.1%

Congregation Membership Size

- Fewer than 50 members: 42.3%
- 50–100 members: 29.0%
- 101–250 members: 17.4%
- 251–500 members: 8.2%
- 501–750 members: 2.7%
- More than 750 members: 0.3%

Average Sunday Attendance

- Fewer than 25 people: 33.8%
- 25–49 people: 37.9%
- 50–75 people: 11.6%
- 76–100 people: 7.8%
- 101–250 people: 7.2%
- 251–500 people: 1.4%
- More than 500 people: 0.3%

In-Depth Interviews (N = 11)

Race

- Native American: 1
- Hispanic/Latino: 1
- Black/African America: 2
- White/Caucasian: 7

Gender

- Female: 8
- Male: 2
- Nonbinary: 1

Denomination

- The Episcopal Church (TEC): 2
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA): 3
- Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) (PCUSA): 2
- The United Methodist Church (UMC): 4

Role Title

- Lay volunteer leaders: 6
- Lay leaders with formal denominational authorization: 3
- Other: 2
 - Ordained leader serving without seminary training
 - Church council chair volunteer

Years In Current Role or Position

- Over 10 years: 2
- 6 – 10 years: 3
- 3-5 years: 3
- 1-2 years: 2
- Less than 1 year: 1

Overall Insights

The following section brings together findings from both the surveys and the in-depth interviews. These insights reflect both shared patterns and lived experiences among lay leaders and their congregations. There were five stories that rose from the data:

- Leadership Formed Through Calling
- Formation Under Pressure
- Relational Vitality, Structural Uncertainty
- Supported and Unsustained
- Ministry Within Constraint

These stories surface moments of strength, areas of tension, and the realities lay leaders are navigating, offering a clearer picture of what it looks like to sustain congregational life today.

Each story will be broken down into these components:

- **Key Headline:** A concise, insight-driven statement that captures the core takeaway of the data story.
- **Key Takeaways:** A synthesis of what the findings suggest at a broader level, using the data in terms of system patterns and emerging realities, helping the reader understand the significance of the story.
- **Narrative:** A cohesive, interpretive story that explains what is happening in the data. This section synthesizes themes across questions and connects them to real-world dynamics, focusing on meaning rather than numbers.
- **Data Anchors:** A structured set of key data points that provide evidence for the narrative. This includes relevant percentages, distributions, and select findings that ground the story in the data without interpretation.
- **Key Quotes:** A set of quotes from the survey or interviews that provide evidence for the narrative.
- **Cross-Category Connections:** Shares how patterns vary across different groups (i.e., denomination, attendance, role, hours). This section highlights meaningful differences and variation within the data. Due to varying subsample sizes, some differences should be taken more directional than others.
- **Actionable Opportunities:** Practical, forward-looking recommendations based on the findings, tailored to key audiences such as denominations, congregations, and leaders.

Leadership Formed Through Calling

Lay leaders step in through calling and need, but leadership is not easily transferred

Key Takeaways

Leadership is present, but not intentionally developed

Lay leaders most often step into their roles through calling, invitation, or necessity. However, there are few shared or structured pathways guiding how leadership is identified, formed, or sustained over time.

Leadership is deeply relational, but difficult to transfer

Because lay leadership is built on trust, history, and long-term involvement, it is often closely tied to specific individuals. This makes transitions uncertain and continuity difficult to maintain.

Leadership concentration creates fragility

Many congregations rely heavily on one or two individuals to function. While this sustains ministry in the short term, it increases vulnerability if those individuals step away.

Sustainability depends on pathways, not just people

The challenge is not a lack of willing leaders, but the absence of clear, repeatable processes to identify and create transition pathways between leaders across the life of the congregation.

Narrative

Leadership in lay-led congregations most often begins through informal and relational pathways. Many leaders describe stepping into their role after being invited by others, growing into leadership through long-term involvement, or responding to a sense of personal calling. Others step in because of an immediate need, filling a gap when no one else is available. In these moments, leadership is less a defined position and more a response to the life of the congregation.

Interviews deepen this trend, with lay leaders describing their roles as emerging through informal involvement. Leaders interpret their pathway to leadership in different ways. Sometimes leadership is understood through the language of ‘calling’, even when it begins with a practical, congregational need. This calling is rarely described as a single moment of discernment. Instead, it develops over time through the community’s already established trust and a pattern of increasing responsibility. Even among those who use calling language, leadership often begins because something needs to be done. What differs is how that

experience is interpreted: some leaders navigate institutional constraints and gaps in support, yet their engagement still can read as grounded in legitimacy and purpose.

At the same time, other accounts highlight leadership as more directly tied to necessity and vanishing alternatives. This contrast shows that within the structural conditions of small congregations with limited membership and clergy, we see a strong echo of the survey results without necessarily producing a single experience of leadership. As in the survey, leaders move laterally across roles without clear systems or processes. For some, this expansion process feels like a natural extension of their calling; for others, it builds pressure.

Because leadership emerges in this way, it is rarely built around clear pathways or shared expectations. Roles are not always formally defined, and responsibilities are not always distributed across a broad group. Instead, leadership develops over time based on what is needed in that church environment.

As a result, leadership tasks often accumulate instead of being systemically drawn up in a contract or church agreement. Leaders take on multiple roles across different areas of congregational life, not through a coordinated system, but through ongoing participation and trust. What begins as a single role can gradually expand, creating a form of leadership that is shaped by continuity rather than design.

This pattern has important implications for sustainability. Because leadership is built through personal involvement and informal pathways, it is not easily transferred. Many leaders express uncertainty about who would step into their role if they were to leave. In these contexts, leadership is not only concentrated, but closely tied to specific individuals, making transitions more difficult to navigate.

Even in congregations where leadership structures are described as clear and functional, the process of entering and sustaining leadership remains largely informal. There are few consistent pathways for identifying or preparing leaders over time.

The data reveals a distinct regularity. Leadership is not lacking, and it is not absent. It is emerging organically, but without the structures needed to distribute responsibility or support continuity. The challenge is not only developing leaders but creating pathways that allow leadership to be shared and sustained across the life of the congregation.

Data Anchors

- 53.6% identify as lay volunteer leaders
- 29.0% say their leadership role evolved naturally from previous involvement

- 18.8% say they were encouraged or invited by someone in their congregation
- 17.7% say they stepped in because there was an urgent need or no one else was available
- 15.0% report an internal sense of call or vocation
- 55.1% say their leadership structure depends heavily on one or two people to function
- 43.3% say they worry that if they stepped away from their leadership role, no one else could take their place
- 32.1% say their main concern in stepping down would be the church closing rather than disciples not being formed

Key Quotes

- "I've always felt the call to ministry and kind of tried to pursue it a little bit in college... While I'm not a called ordained pastor through seminary or anything like that, I do take my role in serving this congregation very similar to that of a called pastor." - **P, ELCA**
- "I don't say really it's a calling because they're the talents I have. My faith says that I need to share the talents I've been given. I would not say it's out of necessity because if it were just by necessity, I wouldn't be doing it, [it] would have to be something that I feel called to." - **L, UMC**
- "I was chosen by the nominating committee...being a small congregation there are only so many people who are willing to participate in the administration of the church...[the pastor] drafted me." - **B, UMC**
- "The pastor came in that morning and said, 'do you want a job?' And I thought, 'what just happened?' And then immediately you also get the thought, 'that's the Holy Spirit. This must be somehow meant to be'...really had no idea what was going to happen." - **S, ELCA**
- "At the beginning, when I went to the National Institute for Lay Training, it felt like a calling...[Then] it just kind of happened. You know, you volunteer for one Sunday and then pretty soon...we're so small, I almost feel now I'm in a place that if I quit, we have no church." - **J, TEC**
- "I think for me God specifically made the call to lay ministry. It was very specific. And every now and then somebody said to me, you know you need to go seminary. And I'd say [to God], 'You're going to come up with the money. I'm not'." - **S, PCUSA**
- "... like I said, I've been born in this church. So usually we have a mission picked, and the person that wants to do the mission usually runs the mission. Okay. So, I guess it's my turn." - **L, PCUSA**

- "When they introduced this lay ministry, I kept hearing 'lay minister, lay minister.' So, I started praying. 'Okay God, is this my next thing?'" - **K, ELCA**
- "It felt more like a calling for me. You know, I was kind of sitting back and just watching a lot for the couple of years that I've been a member. And then finally I was like, 'I really want to be more involved'. So that's how it became about." - **M, TEC**

Cross-Category Connections

Denomination

The data shows some variation in how leaders enter their roles based on denomination. In the TEC, leadership most often evolves through prior involvement (42.4%) or emerges in response to immediate need (21.2%), with little evidence of formal volunteering pathways. It is worth considering that the vestry format of volunteer leadership in the Episcopal church may have something to do with this pathway likelihood, as confirmed by the interviewees who were both Senior or Junior “wardens”. ELCA congregations reflect a dual pattern, with leadership commonly arising both from prior involvement (29.5%) and stepping into need (29.5%).

PC(USA) congregations stand out for their emphasis on relational invitation, with 37.5% of leaders reporting they were encouraged by someone within the congregation, which is the highest among denominations. In contrast, UMC congregations show a more distributed pattern, though still centered on organic pathways, with leadership most often evolving from prior involvement (30.5%) and relational invitation (19.2%), alongside notable shares stepping into need (15.0%) or describing a sense of calling (15.0%). The UMC interview cases are also some of the clearest examples of variation rather than a single dominant pattern, with evidence of extremely formal pathways to leadership, alongside extremely fluid understandings of their position based on context and limitations.

While all denominations rely primarily on informal and relational pathways, PC(USA) leans more heavily on invitation, Episcopal contexts on gradual involvement, and ELCA and UMC reflect a broader mix of organic entry points.

Note: Survey findings for TEC (n=33) and PCUSA (n=32) should be interpreted with caution compared to UMC (n=167) and ELCA (n=61).

Actionable Opportunities

Make leadership pathways visible and accessible: Create simple, shared ways for people to move into leadership.

- Name how leaders are currently identified and invited
- Make next steps into leadership clear and approachable

Move from informal growth to light structure: Help build lay leadership through small, intentional steps.

- Create gradual on-ramps (for example: observe, assist, lead)
- Provide resources to break leadership into smaller, manageable roles

Shift from replacement to preparation: Normalize and support leadership model transitions as part of the role.

- Encourage leaders to identify and mentor others early
- Build transition into regular leadership conversations

Distribute leadership across the congregation: Create models to reduce reliance on a small number of individuals.

- Share responsibilities across more people
- Use team-based or rotating leadership models

Strengthen relational leadership with simple structure: Develop and preserve relational trust while improving clarity.

- Provide basic role expectations and shared practices
- Support mentorship and peer learning among leaders

Formation Under Pressure

Discipleship is happening in lay-led congregations, but its depth is constrained by the competing demands of sustaining congregational life.

Key Takeaways

Formation is shaped more by capacity than commitment

Variation in depth is not driven by lack of intention, but by leadership time, congregational size, and structural support.

Formation is relationally strong but structurally thin

Discipleship is embedded in relationships, worship, and shared life, but some congregations lack consistent, repeatable pathways. This leads to uneven outcomes.

Congregations are balancing discipleship with survival

Formation competes with the work of sustaining congregational life, shaping what lay leaders are able to prioritize.

Definitions of success are not fully aligned

Without clear, shared measures of discipleship, formation often remains implicit rather than intentional in lay-led congregations.

Narrative

Lay leaders consistently describe their congregations as places where discipleship is happening. Formation is central to congregational life and is expressed through practices such as Bible study, prayer, and small groups. Leaders point to markers like ‘spiritual growth’ as a core part of their purpose and identity and helping their members ‘follow Jesus in their everyday lives’; over half say they make ‘intentional time for discipling others’.

At the same time, formation is rarely experienced as expansive or deeply resourced. Most congregations operate within a middle space, offering consistent opportunities but not an extensive or fully developed range. This suggests that formation is something leaders may be sustaining for their congregations rather than significantly building.

Interviews show that formation in lay-led congregations is often less of a clearly defined system and more of a distributed, lived process that is shaped through relationships and necessity. Across conversations, participants gave relatively few references to formal, programmatic discipleship structures, such as sequential curricula or sustained class-based models. However,

they often reflected that formation was occurring through the ordinary rhythms of congregational life: worship, shared leadership, outreach service, and relational care. Even when congregations offer identifiable formation opportunities, these tend to be locally adapted and ad hoc.

Lay-led congregations frequently report high levels of relational engagement, spiritual energy, and shared meaning-making, even when formal formation systems appear limited in depth or regularity. In this context, interviewed congregation leaders often interpreted relational connectedness as evidence of effective discipleship. In some cases, this leads to uneven outcomes. Operational pressures further complicate this dynamic, as the demands of maintaining congregational life can limit the capacity to sustain deeper formation pathways. As a result, lay-led congregations often embody a form of formation that is relationally rich but structurally thin.

This finding is closely tied to how many congregations have become lay-led in the first place. For many, they embrace this model so that the community can continue worshiping together in the absence of traditional clergy structures. Formation is not being built from a blank slate. It is being sustained within already built systems and all the prefigured restrictions that come with them.

Within that context, leaders describe formation as something that competes with the work of sustaining congregational life. The responsibilities of organizing, leading worship, and maintaining day-to-day operations often limit the time and energy available for intentional discipleship. Formation is shaped by what leaders are able to prioritize within limited capacity.

This creates a deeper tension in how leaders understand both purpose and success within their congregations. While many leaders emphasize transformed lives as the goal, there is no full alignment around this definition. Some congregations continue to prioritize discipleship even amid difficulty, while others are more focused on sustaining the congregation itself. This is not instead of formation, but a condition that makes formation possible.

As a result, discipleship and spiritual formation is not experienced in a uniform way. Some congregations are able to sustain consistent and rich opportunities, while others operate with fewer or more limited options. Across contexts, formation reflects not only theological commitment, but the realities of leadership structure, available time, and long-term sustainability.

Overall, this reveals a system where discipleship is present across lay-led congregations, but its depth and consistency are shaped by the conditions required to keep the congregation going.

Data Anchors

- 64.8% agree their congregation forms strong disciples.
- 72.0% say their congregations offer Bible study for spiritual formation.
- 42.0% say their congregations offer prayer groups for spiritual formation.
- 39.2% say their congregations offer small groups for spiritual formation.
- 77.1% agree people in their congregation are equipped to follow Jesus in daily life.
- 56.0% say they make intentional time for discipling others.
- 51.6% report having at least several consistent opportunities of spiritual formation in their church. 43.4% say a few occasional or limited opportunities.
- 63.5% say congregation is lay-led to their community can continue worshiping in their space.
- 52.2% say their leadership team measures success by transformed lives rather than attendance or survival. 30.0% are neutral.
- 32.1% agree that if they stepped down as lay leader, the church closing would be main concern. 51.2% disagree with that statement.
- 48.4% say pressure to “keep the church running” makes it hard to focus on spiritual formation. 30.0% were neutral.

Key Quotes

- “... that [Bible study] class is held together without a pastor... [the class] are the ones they're picking what they want to do next and how they want to do it... we get into some deep conversations, but they're leading the discussion.” - **S, ECLA**
- “I think sometimes in a lay-led congregation, you do see lay people blooming... because you have to. And I think in some ways that’s formation maybe that you’re not seeking, but it forms you anyway.” - **J, TEC**
- “Our goal was we do formation through service... through witness... the mission forms a big part of our service. I think our formation is a continuing theme and a continuing event.... I don’t really think you ever stop.” - **L, PCUSA**
- “I think [formation] mostly is in the way we lead worship and show up for one another... we really have no Bible study... once in a while another congregation nearby will offer something and sometimes people from our parish will go to that.” - **J, TEC**
- “[The church] does not have Sunday school anymore. The books became expensive and there are other things that have to be paid — the apportionments and the district apportionments — as well as the upkeep of the church.” - **H, UMC**
- “I mean, there really is no organized outreach... you’re just trying to keep the doors open, keep the lights on.” - **B, UMC**

Cross-Category Connections

Denomination

In all four denominations, formation is reported most often as structured around a core set of practices, with Bible study emerging as the dominant form overall. This is especially true in UMC (79.0%) and ELCA (78.7%) congregations, where Bible study anchors a broader, programmatic approach to formation. These same contexts also show higher participation in prayer groups and small groups, suggesting a model that is consistent and accessible, but primarily organized around group-based activities.

PCUSA congregations reflect a different consistency. Formation is less centered on Bible study (37.5%) and more oriented toward relational and distributed practices, including small groups (53.1%), mentoring relationships (31.3%), and retreats (25.0%). This suggests a shift away from centralized programming toward a more relational model of discipleship.

Episcopal congregations show the greatest variability. They report the highest share of congregations with no formation practices (15.2%) and lower participation across several structured activities, pointing to a less consistent or more locally dependent formation ecosystem.

Across all denominations, mentoring and relational discipleship remain less common than program-based practices, indicating that formation is more often organized around group activities than sustained one-on-one relationships.

In interviews, denominations theology and culture may shape the language and models of formation, but not the meaningful substance of discipleship. The UMC and ELCA interviews had a slight tendency to describe inherited formation systems that are now thinning, inconsistent, or collapsing due to capacity. Episcopalian leaders appear more comfortable with diffuse, non-programmatic formation, likely due to formation embedded in liturgy and ritual, as well as their rural contexts for community life. Discussions with PCUSA lay leaders emphasized action over theology (witness, service) and less internal programming.

At the same time, leaders across all traditions report that the pressure to sustain congregational life shapes what formation can look like. Roughly half of leaders in each denomination agree that keeping the church running makes it harder to focus on formation. This pressure is most consistently felt in TEC contexts (54.5% agree/strongly agree), while UMC congregations show a broader spread of experiences (49.1% agree; 29.3% disagree). ELCA congregations are the most divided (44.3% agree vs. 41.0% disagree), suggesting that pressure

is highly context-dependent. PCUSA congregations show moderate agreement (46.9%) but high neutrality (34.4%), indicating less clarity or more variation in how this tension is experienced.

A similar denominational pattern appears in how leaders think about what would happen if they stepped down. In TEC congregations, 30.3% agree/strongly agree that the main concern would be the church closing rather than disciples not being formed, while 45.5% disagree/strongly disagree. ELCA congregations are somewhat more likely to express concern about closure, with 37.7% agreeing/strongly agreeing and 45.9% disagreeing/strongly disagreeing. PCUSA congregations again show less certainty, with 31.3% agreeing/strongly agreeing, 37.5% disagreeing/strongly disagreeing, and a relatively large share remaining neutral (31.3%). UMC congregations stand out for having the strongest disagreement with the statement: 30.5% agree/strongly agree, while 56.9% disagree/strongly disagree.

When fully considered, practiced formation in the surveyed denominations reflects a tension between structure and sustainability. While some congregations build around consistent, program-based practices and others lean into relational, distributed models, all are shaped by the same underlying factor: the need to keep the church going. This pressure influences how formation is prioritized, how it is experienced, and how dependent it becomes on the presence of individual leaders.

Note: Survey findings for TEC (n=33) and PCUSA (n=32) should be interpreted with caution compared to UMC (n=167) and ELCA (n=61).

Average Sunday Attendance

Formation becomes more consistent as weekly participation increases, particularly when comparing the smallest congregations to those with slightly larger attendance. Congregations with fewer than 25 people are more likely to report limited formation overall, including the highest share indicating no formation opportunities (11.1%). In these settings, formation tends to be narrower and less consistently sustained, with lower participation across key practices such as Bible study (57.6%), prayer groups (30.3%), and small groups (24.2%).

Congregations with 25–49 attendees show a noticeable shift toward greater consistency and breadth. Bible study becomes far more common (80.2%), alongside increases in prayer groups (41.4%) and small groups (40.5%). These congregations also report higher participation in mentoring relationships and youth or children’s formation, suggesting growing capacity to support both relational and group-based discipleship.

This association highlights how even modest increases in participation can expand what is possible. As congregations move beyond the smallest size, they are better able to sustain more

consistent and varied forms of formation, though the overall model remains primarily centered on group-based practices.

Leadership Hours

Leadership time plays a critical role in shaping the depth and type of formation. While foundational practices like Bible study are present through the survey, more relational forms of discipleship expand significantly as leaders can dedicate more time.

Leaders serving more than 20 hours per week are substantially more likely to engage in mentoring and discipleship relationships (39.5%), compared to those serving fewer than six hours (15.8%). This suggests that relational formation, while often associated with deeper discipleship, is more dependent on available time and capacity. In contrast, leaders with limited time tend to rely on a narrower set of practices that are easier to sustain, resulting in a more program-based and less relational model of formation.

Together, these patterns reinforce that formation is not constrained by lack of intention, but by the practical limits of leadership capacity.

Note: The 20+ hours group (n=38) is small and findings should be interpreted as directional.

Actionable Opportunities

Make formation visible: Provide simple language and tools to help congregations name and map where formation is already happening.

- Create a “formation map” tool
- Build light reflection practices to help congregations regularly assess and name formation in real time

Simplify and focus pathways: Invest in a small number of adaptable, repeatable approaches rather than expanding programs.

- Provide adaptable templates that can be reused across templates (i.e., small group or Bible study model)
- Help congregations identify 1-2 core formation pathways

Expand lay leadership capacity: Equip more leaders through training, coaching, and peer learning to reduce reliance on a single individual.

- Create peer learning spaces
- Develop training or coaching models for shared responsibility of leadership

Design for relational discipleship: Support models that build on relationships, with light structure such as mentoring or guided conversation.

- Guides and prompts for leaders to support meaningful faith conversations in everyday settings
- Introduce mentoring or paired conversation models without heavy structure

Align measures with discipleship: Shift metrics and expectations to reflect spiritual growth, not just attendance or sustainability.

- Small set of practical indicators (i.e., faith conversations, relational depth) to track formation
- Prioritize stories and evidence of growth alongside attendance metrics

Relational Vitality, Structural Uncertainty

Congregations are deeply relational and engaged, yet many lack confidence in their capacity for long-term sustainability.

Key Takeaways

Relational vitality is strong but does not fully translate into sustainability

Lay-led congregations consistently demonstrate deep relationships, a sense of belonging, and engagement. However, this vitality is often experienced as moderate rather than fully thriving and does not reliably translate into the capacity for long-term, sustainable flourishing.

Vitality is relationally defined rather than institutionally measured

Leaders tend to understand their community's vitality in participation, care for one another, and visible shared life rather than membership attendance or growth. This reflects an illuminating window into how congregations define health but also creates challenges in measuring and sustaining it over time.

Energy and participation are uneven and stretched

Many congregations are sustained by a small group of committed individuals, leading to a "hopeful but tired" dynamic where vitality is present but difficult to maintain consistently.

Structural uncertainty shapes how vitality is experienced

Financial pressure, aging membership, and limited leadership capacity create ongoing uncertainty about the future, even in congregations that feel relationally vibrant in the present.

Vitality and sustainability are not the same

Congregations can feel deeply alive and engaged while still facing long-term decline or instability. Vitality is being actively sustained while also not always secured.

Narrative

Lay-led congregations consistently demonstrate strong relational vitality. In the survey, leaders describe communities where people care for one another in tangible ways, feel a deep sense of belonging, and actively participate in congregational life. Vitality is not primarily defined by size or growth, but through relational engagement and shared responsibility of one another within the congregation and in the surrounding community. Strong relationships and a sense of family emerge as the most defining feature, followed by visible engagement through community outreach projects or mission. Vitality is experienced as something lived: this means it is expressed through interpersonal care, participation in what matters or in one another's lives,

and shared ownership of worship and formation. It is not as much measured through institutional strength or expansion.

The interviews support this. Vitality is consistently described less as a measurable outcome (i.e. attendance, or budgets) and more as a relational and participatory condition that is actively produced. Multiple interviewees explicitly resist numerical definitions, redirecting attention toward whether people are engaged, asking questions, and showing up for one another when they need it. Vitality is sometimes recognized when a congregation becomes porous to its surrounding community through outreach or recognition. Vitality is often measured by a group's capacity for ongoing interaction and by visual, observable aspects of community social cohesion, like post-worship lingering, storytelling about one another's lives, and mutual care.

At the same time, leaders do not describe vitality as uniformly strong. Less than half of leaders say their congregation's vitality is strong, while many rate their congregation's vitality at a midway point: present but not fully robust. This reflects a reality in which congregations are functioning and engaged, but not always experiencing the depth, energy, or momentum associated with thriving communities. This complex picture reaffirms itself when looking at how they assess their vitality change over time. Some congregations are experiencing growth or renewed energy, while others describe stability or gradual decline.

Leaders' descriptions of congregational energy on the survey deepen this understanding. While relational life remains strong, the day-to-day experience is often described as "hopeful but tired." Many congregations are sustained by commitment and resilience, yet shaped by aging membership, limited participation, and the reality that a small group carries much of the responsibility. Even where vitality is present, the energy required to sustain it can feel stretched and uneven.

These dynamics unfold within a broader context of structural uncertainty. Congregations are navigating mixed financial realities, limited leadership and membership capacity, and challenges of durability over time. Many are small in size, which further constrains both available resources and participation. As a result, even congregations with strong relational life are not always confident in their ability to "keep the doors open".

Participants in interviews discussed ubiquitous tension between present vitality and future viability without attempting to resolve it. In anecdotes, a congregation can simultaneously feel deeply connected in the moment while having demographic or structural decline. Other interviewees felt comfortable with these tensions as well, describing congregations that feel vibrant because of adaptability, and openness, even while acknowledging constraints such as limited leadership pools, or financial pressure. Across cases, vitality emerges not as a stable

state but as a situational and negotiated experience, shaped by how congregations interpret their own life together and unique capacities.

The data and interview together reveal a clear tension. Relational vitality is strong and widely present. Leaders know what vitality looks like for their community and are actively cultivating it through relationships, and in-the-moment engagement. At the same time, vitality is often shaped by uneven energy, limited capacity, and broader structural shortfalls. Vitality, in these contexts, is not a *predictor* of sustainability; it is something congregations are hanging on to as they try to continue forward.

Data Anchors

- 74.4% say that strong relationships and a sense of family contribute to their congregations' vitality.
- 47.8% say that community outreach contributes to their congregations' vitality.
- 93.5% say people in their congregation care for one another in tangible ways. 72.7% say very true.
- 88.8% feel more like a spiritual family than an organization.
- 84.3% say worship is Spirit-led and meaningful.
- 77.5% say people actively participate in worship than observe.
- 78.2% regularly serve or engage with their community.
- 76.8% say their community would notice if they disappeared.
- 46.7% say their congregation's vitality is strong. 37.9% say it's moderate.
- 45.4% say their congregation's vitality has increased in the last 3 years. 32.1% say it stayed the same, while 22.5% says it decreased.
- 38.7% describe their congregation as at least somewhat financially healthy. Another 34.7% say their congregations are financially stable. 26.7% say they are struggling or in critical condition.
- 47.1% believe their current leadership model is sustainable long-term (in five years). 40.1% are unsure about long-term sustainability.

Key Quotes

- "Seeing people's lives being changed, transformed...growing in their walk with Christ." - **Survey Response**
- "A vital church is alive and active, both in church functions and the community." - **Survey Response**
- "In terms of vitality, I think it's people getting excited about doing things, people stepping up and taking the initiative when there's a problem instead of expecting

somebody else (especially instead of expecting the pastor) to fix it, we're expecting someone else who is going to do this great idea that they've got. - **S, ELCA**

- “A vital congregation... is excited about what they are doing and who they are serving... they wrestle with what it means to love neighbor.” - **S, PCUSA**
- “I think vitality can't be misconstrued as being butts in the seats. It's our people growing, our people thriving, our people seeking small groups. Are they gathering together? Is it intergenerational? Those kinds of things is vitality.” - **E, UMC**
- “...I think vitality is basically our ability to have a connection between God and the community...and the congregation.” - **M, TEC**
- “There's kind of a sense that this is worth continuing, even if it's not the same as it used to be or even if it looks different than what people might expect.” - **P, ELCA**
- “The fact that the community still reaches out to us to do funerals, to pray over the snowmobiles... It's just the fact that we are still here. We're the last Episcopal church that's open in this county.” - **J, TEC**
- “I would think our vitality right now is we're doing okay. We can afford our bills, but both congregations are older — a lot of seventy, eighty-year-olds, even ninety-year-olds. That worries us because if we don't have younger families coming in, will we be able to sustain life?” - **K, ELCA**
- “...The vitality in both my churches, I only see it at its best when we have special occasions.” - **H, UMC**

Cross-Category Connections

Denomination

Data across denominations reveal notable differences in how vitality is experienced, particularly in how relational strength aligns with confidence in the future. Congregations in the ELCA are the most likely to describe their vitality as strong, with 68.9% rating their congregation as strong or very strong. In contrast, this drops to 40.7% in the UMC and 46.9% in the PC(USA), while the TEC is lower still at 36.4%.

Differences are even more pronounced when looking at congregant's confidence in the future of their church. ELCA congregations report the highest levels of hope (85.2%), followed by UMC (79.0%), TEC (69.7%), and PC(USA) (56.3%). A similar pattern appears in perceived community impact, where ELCA and UMC congregations are more likely to say their community would notice if they disappeared (79.0–85.2%), compared to 53.1% in PC(USA) contexts.

In-depth interviews revealed leaders' opinions converging on their congregation's vitality more often than diverging. All denominations consistently described situations of mutual care for one

another and relational strength as the core way vitality could be seen in their church. The differences lie in *how* they see vitality revealing itself most clearly in their community.

UMC leaders were the most mixed but emphasized active mission and lay engagement; dwindling and aging congregations created an energetic but strained atmosphere. ELCA congregations highlighted formation and were generally positive about their vitality but did not overstate the point; they were measured, but aware of the precarity of their situation. PCUSA respondents were the most likely to pragmatically name a lack of vitality possibly because they already framed vitality through visible sustainability and continuity (i.e. *Do people keep showing up?*). Finally, TEC communities centered vitality in their ability to be a worshipful presence, not concerned as much about growing but about their continued role as a community care giver.

This pattern highlights that relational vitality is present in lay led congregations, but its alignment with confidence and perceived impact varies significantly by context.

Note: Survey findings for TEC and PC(USA) contexts are based on smaller samples and should be interpreted directionally.

Actionable Opportunities

Build on relational strength as a core asset: Support models that deepen participation, shared ownership, and community engagement rather than relying primarily on programmatic growth strategies.

- Develop a “Relational Playbook” with practical ways to deepen participation

Expand leadership capacity beyond a core few: Invest in developing additional lay leaders to reduce burnout and distribute responsibility more sustainably.

- A simple leadership pathway toolkit with clear steps and expectations

Align support with small-church realities: Provide resources that assume limited staff, aging membership, and constrained capacity rather than idealized growth models.

- Create ministry toolkit where churches can pick and adapt only what they need

Reframe vitality to include sustainability: Help congregations connect relational health with long-term planning, including leadership pipelines, financial strategy, and participation growth.

- Offer facilitated conversation kits for congregations to discuss future planning
- Create financial and leadership scenario tools to help churches plan proactively

Clarify and track meaningful indicators of vitality: Develop simple measures that reflect both relational engagement and long-term viability, not just attendance or survival.

- Quarterly reflection template that guide leaders through assessing health, energy, and sustainability

Supported and Unsustained

Leaders claim to be confident and committed, even amidst navigating complex roles without consistent systems of support.

Key Takeaways

Leaders are supported, but not with sustainable systems in place

Lay leaders report strong relational support from mentors and congregational members, and general confidence in their capability; however, that support is often informal and locally bound, which makes it inconsistently structured to maintain healthy leadership over time.

The core challenge is capacity, not just resources

Leadership strain is driven by too few people carrying too much responsibility. Even where training and resources exist, limited capacity makes them difficult to use, especially in smaller and more geographically isolated congregations.

Training exists but often does not fit real-life constraints

The barrier is less about availability and more about accessibility. Cost, timing, location, format, and schedule limitations prevent leaders from fully engaging with any existing support services. These challenges intensify in rural or hard-to-reach environments.

Preparation is uneven, and gaps persist in complex areas

Leaders often say they feel generally equipped for their duties. Nevertheless, they also report facing training gaps in areas like pastoral care, conflict resolution, finances, and sacramental leadership, regardless of their previous or present experiences.

Sustainability is a structural issue, not an individual one

Ongoing strain reflects how leadership is organized and supported, particularly in smaller or isolated contexts where access to clergy, training, and other church or nonprofit networks is limited. Addressing sustainability cannot simply be fixed with additional training. It will require changes to denominational systems, leadership expectations, and distribution of ordained or unordained leadership.

Narrative

Lay leaders consistently describe feeling supported in their role. Many point to strong encouragement from their congregation, a clear sense of where to turn for help, and a general confidence in carrying out their responsibilities. Leadership is not experienced as isolated or

entirely unsupported. Instead, it is often grounded in relationships, trust, and a shared commitment to the congregation's wellbeing.

At the same time, this sense of support does not consistently translate into a viable for the congregation's immediate future. Leaders in the survey frequently describe carrying responsibilities that extend beyond their available time, training, or capacity. While many report feeling equipped to take on their role, they also name specific gaps: particularly in complex or specialized responsibilities such as conflict resolution, finances, and sacramental leadership.

Training sits at the center of this tension. Leaders do not describe a lack of training, but rather a lack of training that fits their reality. Opportunities exist, yet are often too expensive, too far away, poorly timed, or difficult to integrate into already full lives. As one leader noted, "Trainings are available, but not local or fall on a Saturday." Another shared, "I need time in my busy life to participate." The barrier is less about availability and more about accessibility, format, and fit.

Even when training is accessed, it is rarely experienced as a cohesive or clearly structured pathway. Leaders describe piecing together preparation over time through denominational programs, self-study, mentoring, prior professional experience, and informal learning. This creates a system that is flexible but uneven. Some leaders draw from multiple sources of support, while others begin with little formal preparation and adapt in real time.

Sustainability challenges, therefore, are not primarily about the absence of training, but about how training is accessed, experienced, and supported over time. Leaders are not entering their roles through a single, defined pathway. Instead, they are navigating a decentralized system that requires ongoing adaptation. While almost three-quarters of leaders say the expectations of their role are clear, only a little over half say they are confident in providing spiritual guidance or pastoral care when needed.

Leaders also highlight the essential nature of this relational support, in the forms of mentorship, peer networks, and connections with others in similar roles. While some have access to these networks, others describe isolation and the need to navigate their responsibilities with limited guidance beyond their local context. Over half of the leaders reported they are open to participating in more training if it is accessible and affordable.

Across the interviews as well, lay leadership reflects a system where essential support is present for immediate work, but less consistently set up to last over the upcoming years. The most dependable form of support is relational: congregations rely on a small group of

committed individuals who step into roles as needed, learn through practice, and support one another through informal care. Together they discover “how to do things” that an ordained person would normally know how to do. Leadership often emerges out of that necessity rather than preparation, with individuals gradually assuming responsibility without clear pathways and with ongoing concern about what would happen if key leaders stepped away.

Leaders do seem to know that institutional support in the form of training systems, denominational structures, or occasional financial resources is available to them. However, interviews suggest that this support is not always aligned with congregational realities. Training is widely available, but not always accessible or usable within the time and capacity constraints leaders face. Institutional expectations, particularly those shaped by clergy-led models, can create friction or leave lay-led congregations feeling peripheral. Financial fragility, aging membership, and limited volunteer capacity further constrain what congregations can sustain, even when resources exist. When first stepping into their roles, interviewed leaders often describe a steep learning curve with a lot of trial and error.

In combination, this reveals a clear pattern. Lay leaders are not unsupported, and training is not absent. However, both support and preparation are often uneven, and decentralized. Leaders are sustained through relationships and adaptability, but the systems surrounding them are not consistently set up to support leadership over time.

Data Anchors

- 85.7% say they feel supported by their congregation.
- 83.2% say they know where to turn for help.
- 80.0% say they feel equipped for their leadership responsibilities.
- 60.4% say there is at least one area they feel unprepared to lead for their congregation.
- 20.1% say their congregation lacks access to training or leadership.
- Training received (top 5):
 - Preaching or teaching: 49.1%
 - Administration / church operations: 48.8%
 - Worship planning or music leadership: 47.1%
 - Financing / budgeting / stewardship: 41.6%
 - Pastoral / congregational care: 37.2%
- Received training from:
 - Denomination or regional body: 44.7%
 - Self-study: 43.3%
 - Mentoring from pastor or leader: 41.3%
 - No training: 9.6%

- Least equipped in (top 5):
 - Sacraments / funerals / weddings: 34.8%
 - Conflict resolution: 30.0%
 - Finances: 29.4%
 - Theology: 29.0%
 - Pastoral / congregational care: 25.9%
- 73.2% say the expectations of their role are clear.
- 57.2% say they are confident in providing spiritual guidance or pastoral care when needed. 26.3% are neutral.
- 54.8% say they have access to a peer network or cohort of other lay leaders.
- 54.6% say they would participate in more training if accessible and affordable.

Key Quotes

- "It is a reality, at least in the Episcopal Church... that clergy people are getting fewer and further between. I wish that the powers that be would recognize that and do more about it... to put things in place to support who we are and to make [lay leadership] a vital ministry... In some ways it feels like we're doing [lay ministry] because we can't have what we really want [i.e. a priest] instead of saying, you know, all right, this is a reality, then we need to face it." - **J, TEC**
- "... just all of a sudden you're the senior warden... and nobody talks to you. Or you find out you're supposed to do something that you didn't know you had to. That happened earlier on, you know, things that I didn't realize when we didn't have a priest that needed to get done... I'd get a letter from the diocese. 'You're late on this report or this.' What report are you talking about?" - **J, TEC**
- "But it still is difficult not having a priest available every day for people that would need some sort of guidance from... a priest being there at all times." - **M, TEC**
- "Basically, the training for elders has been one of the weakest parts... I think it has fallen to the wayside and the elders as a voice, they have been asking for more training, but I don't think they've gotten it. And I know they try to train the pastors, and they try to train everybody else, but they have basically left the elders to fend for themselves." - **L, PCUSA**
- "I didn't go to seminary. I just do it. And I've been doing it for so long that every now and then some of my longtime friends forget that I'm not word and sacrament." - **S, PCUSA**
- "We do have a pastor. She is in her mid-80s and she is still serving, but she cannot do everything as quickly or as much as maybe she once could. So, there are times when

things fall to others because she just physically cannot keep up with everything that needs to be done." - **B, UMC**

- "...we're treated as though, unless the pastor think it's a good idea, we can't do what we think is the right thing to do." - **S, ELCA**
- "... the elements would be blessed till the pastor was there and the deacon would use the same bread and wine the next time... Well, that was fine. And then the chair of our call committee... kind of let it slip [to the Synod point person], which he didn't realize he was going to get us in trouble. But that was contrary to the bishop's preferred policy. She doesn't like the idea of blessing the elements ahead of time." - **S, ELCA**

Cross-Category Connections

Denomination

Denominational context shapes how leaders experience both confidence and support, but not always in consistent ways. Leaders in the Episcopal Church report the highest levels of feeling equipped (89.7% agree/strongly agree), followed by the ELCA (81.0%) and the UMC (79.5%). Leaders in the PC(USA) report lower levels of confidence at 71.4%.

At the same time, confidence in providing pastoral care is notably lower across all groups. Only 61.4% of UMC leaders and 55.2% of Episcopal leaders report confidence in this area, with ELCA (51.7%) and PC(USA) (46.4%) trailing further behind. This gap suggests that while leaders often feel generally equipped, that confidence does not fully extend to more complex or pastoral dimensions of leadership.

Qualitative interviews revealed a key denominational limitation on lay-led worship. Traditions such as the ELCA and TEC, which prioritize sacramental theology, reported greater barriers to worship and ritual support than denominations with more flexible lay leadership roles. When only ordained clergy can preside over Communion, weddings, funerals, or other pastoral duties, lay-led congregations are often left without viable alternatives. Some leaders described a recurring sense of urgency or anxiety as they search for clergy to lead essential sacramental events. Others reported being unable to serve previously consecrated elements or going months without any sacramental life at all. While this challenge is particularly pronounced in rural and small-town areas, where lay-led congregations are more common and access to even shared or rotating clergy is limited.

Access to training can also varies. Leaders in PC(USA) contexts are more likely to report lacking access to training (35.7%), compared to ELCA (24.6%), Episcopal (24.1%), and especially UMC (15.2%).

In aggregate, denominational systems shape how structured and accessible leadership development is but even in stronger systems, gaps remain between general confidence and specific preparedness.

Note: Survey findings for TEC (n=33) and PCUSA (n=32) should be interpreted with caution compared to UMC (n=167) and ELCA (n=61).

Leadership Hours

Time commitment plays a clear role in how prepared leaders feel. Leaders serving fewer than 10 hours per week are the most likely to report feeling unprepared, with 66.1% (less than 6 hours) and 68.7% (6–10 hours) agreeing/strongly agreeing that there are areas of ministry where they feel unprepared. This drops significantly for those serving more hours, with 45.5% (11–20 hours) and 41.7% (more than 20 hours) reporting the same.

This suggests that leaders with limited time are navigating greater gaps in preparedness, likely because they have fewer opportunities to build experience or engage in training.

Interest in additional training is also present across all groups but is especially pronounced among those serving moderate hours. Leaders serving 6–10 hours per week show the strongest interest, with 61.9% agreeing they would participate in more training if it were accessible and affordable. Those serving fewer than 6 hours show more neutrality (42.5%), while those serving more than 20 hours show more polarization, with 56.7% agreeing but a notable 27.0% disagreeing.

This implies that leaders with moderate involvement are most actively seeking additional support, while those at the highest levels of commitment may be constrained by time or burnout.

Finally, access to peer networks varies by time commitment, but not in a straightforward way. Leaders serving 11–20 hours report the highest levels of access (68.2%), while those serving fewer than 6 hours report lower access (54.8%). At the same time, leaders serving more than 20 hours show a split experience, with 51.4% reporting access but 35.1% reporting lack of access. This suggests that even among highly committed leaders, peer support is not guaranteed, reinforcing the uneven nature of leadership support systems.

Note: The 20+ hours group (n=38) is smaller and findings should be interpreted as directional.

Leadership Role

How leaders describe their role also shapes their experience of preparedness. Lay volunteer leaders are more likely to report feeling unprepared (67.5%) compared to those with formal denominational authorization (57.1%) or those licensed for pastoral functions (37.0%).

At the same time, leaders with more formal or recognized roles report higher levels of feeling equipped, with 84.8% of licensed/commissioned leaders and 80.0% of authorized leaders indicating confidence in their responsibilities.

This suggests that formal recognition and role clarity are associated with stronger preparation, while volunteer leaders are more likely to navigate gaps in readiness.

Lay volunteer leaders also report lower on having access to a peer network or cohort of congregation leaders (46.0%) than leaders with formal denominational authorization (66.0%) and those licensed/commissioned for pastoral functions (73.9%).

Note: Findings for those with formal denominational authorization and licensed are based on smaller samples and should be interpreted directionally.

Congregational Structure

The structure of the congregation shapes both training exposure and areas of need. In congregations without paid staff, leaders report higher gaps in areas such as pastoral care (26.7%), boundary training (24.4%), and administration (22.2%). Even in congregations with part-time or full-time staff, gaps remain, particularly in finances (35.9%-39.1%), and conflict resolution (21.7%-29.5%), which consistently appear as areas of lower preparedness across contexts.

This suggests that staffing structures influence the distribution of leadership responsibility, but do not eliminate the need for broader and more consistent training.

Years in Role

Experience in the role shapes confidence, but does not fully resolve gaps. Leaders serving 6–10 years (84.1%) and more than 10 years (83.3%) report the highest levels of feeling equipped. However, even among the most experienced leaders, 47.0% still report areas where they feel unprepared. This suggests that experience builds confidence, but does not fully address the complexity of leadership demands.

Average Sunday Attendance

Leadership gaps shift depending on congregational size, but they do not disappear as attendance increases. Smaller congregations report the most consistent gaps in core operational areas, particularly finances (36.1%) and administration (34.0%) among those with fewer than 25 attendees.

As attendance increases, the pattern changes rather than resolves. Congregations with 25–49 attendees report higher gaps in conflict resolution (39.4%) and sacramental leadership (43.3%), suggesting increasing relational and liturgical complexity. In mid-sized congregations (50–100 attendees), gaps become more distributed, including theology (up to 40.9%) and boundary training (27.3%). Larger congregations (101–250) report some of the highest gaps overall, including pastoral care (45.0%), boundary training (45.0%), and finances (45.0%).

This distribution shows that leadership gaps evolve with size, reflecting a shift from capacity limits to complexity challenges.

Note: Findings for higher-attendance groups (100+) are based on smaller samples and should be interpreted directionally.

Actionable Opportunities

Redesign training for accessibility, not just availability: Shift from centralized, one-size-fits-all training to formats that fit real life.

- Offer short, modular, on-demand options (not just multi-day or in-person events)
- Reduce cost and travel barriers through online or regional access
- Design training that can be used in small time increments

Invest in relational support systems, not just content: Build structures that connect leaders to one another.

- Create peer cohorts or small groups of lay leaders who meet regularly
- Establish simple mentorship pathways (matching new leaders with experienced ones)
- Normalize ongoing check-ins, not just one-time training

Expand leadership capacity at the congregational level: Address sustainability as a people issue, not just a resource issue.

- Help congregations identify and equip additional leaders, even in small roles
- Provide tools for shared leadership and role distribution
- Encourage models where leadership is rotated or team-based

Prioritize training for adaptive and non-traditional leadership skills: Align preparation with the realities leaders are navigating.

- Focus on areas like conflict navigation, community engagement, and leading without clergy
- Include practical guidance on finances, sustainability, and congregational change
- Offer examples from similar lay-led contexts

Simplify and strengthen denominational support systems: Reduce friction in how leaders access help.

- Clarify processes, expectations, and points of contact
- Ensure consistent communication and follow-through from regional structures
- Make support visible, accessible, and responsive to lay-led realities

Ministry Within Constraint

Ministry continues in lay-led congregations, but the systems supporting them are increasingly constrained.

Key Takeaways

Leadership models are being shaped by constraint, not strategy

Lay-led congregations are actively adapting their structures, but these adaptations are primarily reactive. Decisions are driven by declining participation, financial pressure, and reduced capacity rather than long-term vision or design.

Stability often reflects endurance, not health

Many congregations describe themselves as stable, but this stability reflects the ability to maintain current operations under pressure rather than growth or long-term viability.

Leadership is increasingly concentrated and fragile

Responsibility is often carried by one or two individuals, creating systems that are functional but highly vulnerable. The loss of a single leader can significantly disrupt congregational life.

Financial and time constraints are reshaping what leadership is possible

Bi-vocational, unpaid, and hybrid leadership models are becoming the norm. These realities limit leaders' available time, energy, and consistency, shaping leadership's abilities around what can be sustained rather than what is most effective.

Denominational systems are present but not consistently enabling flourishing leadership

While many leaders feel relationally connected to their denomination, fewer experience consistent financial support or clear, enabling structures designed for lay leadership success. This creates a gap between institutional presence and practical impact.

Sacramental churches face heightened structural strain in lay-led contexts

Congregations in sacramental traditions, particularly TEC and ELCA, experience the absence of clergy more acutely due to dependence on ordained leadership for core practices such as the Eucharist. This creates ongoing pressure, limits consistency in worship life, and requires flexible pathways and clearer denominational support to sustain sacramental practice.

Narrative

Lay-led congregations are not simply adapting their leadership models. They are reshaping them under conditions of financial and structural limitations. While most leaders say their

leadership structure is clear and functional, less than half believe their current model is sustainable long-term and four in ten leaders are unsure if it is sustainable. Throughout the report leadership structures are increasingly defined by what is even possible rather than what is ideal, with congregations making decisions in response to declining participation, and reduced financial giving.

Financial health reflects this tension most acutely. While a portion of congregations describe themselves as healthy, most operate in a middle space. They are either stable or managing ongoing strain month-to-month. Stability, in many cases, does not signal growth. It reflects the ability to maintain current operations under pressure. At the same time, a significant share of congregations report financial struggle or instability, reinforcing the uneven and fragile nature of sustainability.

These financial realities are directly shaping leadership structures. Many congregations have moved away from full-time clergy toward part-time, shared, or fully lay-led models. Leadership is often distributed across a mix of volunteers, part-time staff, and occasional clergy support. These hybrid systems rely heavily on flexibility and improvisation rather than consistency.

At the same time, these structures are rarely designed from the ground up. Instead, they emerge as responses to constraint. Congregations reduce staff, simplify governance, and rely more heavily on volunteers in order to match their declining capacity. These shifts are often reactive, rather than shaped by what congregations want to intentionally building toward.

This has led to an increasing concentration of leadership. With fewer people available to lead, responsibility is often carried by a small group of committed volunteers. This concentration exists alongside a sense of structural clarity. Many leaders describe their leadership structures as clear and functional, even as they depend heavily on one or two individuals to operate. The system is organized, but not broadly distributed.

Financial realities also shape the lived experience of leadership. A majority of leaders are unpaid, and many contribute personal funds to support ministry. Bi-vocational leadership is common, which further limits the time and capacity available for sustained engagement. Almost four in ten leaders say their financial situation stayed the same, while a quarter say that it has declined compared to three years ago. Leadership becomes not only a role, but a personal and financial commitment shaped by the boundaries of what is feasible.

Denominational systems provide some support, but not consistently enough to offset these pressures. Many leaders report feeling relationally connected to their denomination. Fewer receive direct financial support or experience denominational processes as clearly enabling

their work. A large portion of communities remain neutral, suggesting that denominational systems are present, but not always actively strengthening their lay leadership.

As a result, many congregations describe their current reality not in terms of growth, but endurance. Endurance subsequently is described as an operating reality. Leaders are focused on maintaining operations, covering basic expenses, and sustaining community life with limited resources. Decisions are often made in response to immediate needs, reinforcing a cycle of short-term adaptation rather than long-term planning.

Within the interviews as well, these constraints are not isolated challenges but deeply interwoven conditions shaping what congregational life is possible. Many communities describe operating in ongoing financial precarity, where basic sustainability is the central concern over and against any possibility of growth. In some cases, even modest compensation for lay leaders is uncertain, reinforcing reliance on underpaid labor. Some leaders report denominational structures often exacerbating rather than alleviating these pressures. Leaders describe resources flowing upward rather than downward, along with inconsistent guidance and policy enforcement that complicate local decision-making.

Capacity realities intensify these conditions. Leadership is frequently concentrated among a small number of individuals, often older and already overextended, leading to environments of burnout and hesitancy among others to step into leadership roles. These challenges are embodied in time, energy, and life circumstances; leaders balance additional full-time jobs, and long commutes while carrying significant congregational responsibility. As a result, the loss or withdrawal of even one key individual can have an outsized impact.

Within this context, lay leaders also discussed how their congregations demonstrate ongoing adaptation. They highlight creative and necessary structural innovations, such as shared clergy models, partnerships with other organizations, consolidating responsibilities into fewer gatherings, or rethinking how buildings and programs are used. In certain cases, tensions with denominational expectations or policies require local workarounds, particularly in areas such as sacramental practice or leadership authority. Yet these adaptations rarely resolve the underlying challenges. Instead, they function as an ongoing negotiation which allows congregations to remain viable but without fundamentally altering the conditions that produce the strain to begin with.

At the same time, there are signs of adaptation and innovation. In the survey, some congregations describe experimenting with shared leadership models, partnerships with other congregations, and new approaches to distributing responsibility. Others are simplifying structures to better align with their current capacity.

Taken together, this reveals a clear dynamic. Lay-led congregations are actively adapting, but these adaptations are most often driven by financial and structural pressure rather than long-term building towards their dreams. Leadership, formation, and vitality are being sustained within systems that remain constrained.

The challenge is not whether congregations can lead on their own. It is whether the structures surrounding that leadership can support their flourishing in the long run.

Data Anchors

- 71.5% say their leadership structure is clear and functional. 20.4% were neutral.
- 47.1% believe their current leadership model is sustainable long-term (in five years). 40.1% are unsure about long-term sustainability.
- 38.7% describe their congregation as at least somewhat financially healthy. Another 34.7% say their congregations are financially stable. 26.7% say they are struggling or in critical condition
- 28.1% say their congregation has a part-time paid lay leader. 16.2% say they have no paid staff and another 16.2% say they have occasional. clergy. 31.3% shared they have other hybrid models other leadership.
- 55.1% say their current leadership structure depends heavily on one or two people to function.
- 65.9% say they are unpaid. 32.4% say that they have personally paid out of pocket for ministry or church expenses.
- 30.7% say their financial situation improved compared to 3 years ago. 39.8% say it stayed the same and 25.9% say it declined.
- 60.6% say they feel connected or supported by their denomination or regional body. 26.6% were neutral.
- 33.2% say their denomination or regional body provides financial support or grants for their congregation. 47.4% say they do not.
- 41.6% say denominational processes support rather than hinder their ability to lead effectively. 36.5% were neutral and 22.3% disagree.

Key Quotes

- "Yeah, honestly it's so hard to get somebody that would want to...find a job here, honestly, that would be something that would support them financially while halftime being a priest, you know." - **M, TEC**

- "For the last 10 years, we have had no clergy at all...we've had visiting priests. So, it kind of has just fallen on me...we've had younger people come and go. But I think without regular leadership, it's just hard to come to sort of sustain." - **J, TEC**
- "I mean, we just keep meeting and we do it. Again, I guess we're kind of rebellious. Sometimes we just do things without ask[ing], like funerals." - **J, TEC**
- "Financially in my first call I went twelve years without a raise. My husband and I took early Social Security so I could stay in ministry. Today I am actually one of the highest paid commissioned pastors in my presbytery." - **S, PCUSA**
- "But when you have worship twice a month and people are not coming, it begins to look like the church is empty. And that discourages the few that are coming. And so, I told [the Superintendent] that I felt that if they had a preaching station, it would allow the church to still exist without putting so much pressure on the members." - **H, UMC**
- "They've been given permission to give communion. We've also been given guidance from the Synod office that they're **not** supposed to do that the way they're doing it. But, you know, I feel like that's between us and God." - **S, ELCA**
- "So I think for me personally, my biggest like barrier, a lot of it is time working 3 to 4, 12-hour shifts a week and then trying to transition into days is extremely difficult. [...] Financial constraints... even to this day, my work has been unpaid. Recently, they have tried to work into the budget where I'll get a \$300 a month stipend." - **P, ELCA**
- "They really don't offer financial support. In fact, it's the other way is that the local churches all support the conference. Money goes, money goes up, but doesn't come down. [...] So those things help keep us going, but there's no constant stream other than ties and offerings." - **B, UMC**
- "...if you don't have a priest, you are just, you really don't have that connection to the larger church unless they make it for you... it's like, it's very clergy centric. It's almost like you don't exist anymore." - **J, TEC**

Cross-Category Connections

Denomination

Financial health varies across denominations, though most congregations remain in a middle space regardless of affiliation. Across all denominations, relatively few congregations describe themselves as very healthy, reinforcing that financial strength is limited regardless of context.

Congregations in the TEC are most likely to describe themselves as stable (41.4%), though a similar share report struggling (27.6%). In the ELCA, financial health is more distributed, with 31.0% describing stability and 24.1% reporting struggle. Congregations in the PC(USA) also

cluster around stability (37.0%). The UMC, which makes up the largest portion of the sample, reflects a similar trend, with 34.4% stable and 21.3% struggling.

Patterns over time show similar variation. Congregations in the ELCA are most likely to report improvement (36.2%) and least likely to report decline (19.0%). In contrast, PC(USA) congregations show more instability, with 33.3% reporting decline or significant decline and a higher level of uncertainty (18.5%).

UMC congregations reflect a mixed trajectory, with 31.9% reporting improvement and 26.3% reporting decline or significant decline. TEC congregations show a similar split, with 31.0% reporting decline.

In discussion of barriers and financial constraints, the most consistent and explicit mentions come up within the UMC and ELCA interviews. These lay leaders describe ongoing budget shortfalls, limited compensation for their work, and little direct financial support for declining membership. A few leaders described the strain of needing to pay the denominational institution monthly or yearly dues when they are already in deficit. The PCUSA and TEC leaders also reference financial stress, but more often embed their concerns within broader structural or sacramental challenges. These two denominations couch their discussion of finances within their desire for structural stability, mostly around better clergy access or building maintenance. From this, we can see that while some denominations show signs of recovery after losing clerical support, their financial trajectories remain uneven and uncertain across contexts.

Access to financial support from denominational bodies varies significantly. Congregations in the Episcopal Church (44.8%) and PC(USA) (40.7%) are more likely to report receiving financial support, while ELCA congregations are far less likely (12.1%). UMC congregations fall in the middle, with 37.5% reporting support, though nearly half (45.6%) report receiving no financial assistance. This uneven distribution suggests that denominational connection does not consistently translate into financial support, which reinforces that the financial hurdles are locality dependent.

Reliance on a small number of leaders is also consistent in each denomination. A majority of congregations in every denomination report that their leadership structure depends heavily on one or two people, including 62.1% in the Episcopal Church, 56.9% in the ELCA, 55.6% in PC(USA), and 53.1% in the UMC. This suggests that leadership concentration is not isolated to a particular tradition, but reflects a broader structural reality across lay-led congregations.

Note: Survey findings for TEC (n=33) and PCUSA (n=32) should be interpreted with caution compared to UMC (n=167) and ELCA (n=61).

Leadership Hours

Access to peer networks varies by time commitment, but not in a linear way. Leaders serving 11–20 hours per week report the highest level of access (68.2% agree/strongly agree). Those serving fewer than 6 hours report lower access (54.8%), while those serving more than 20 hours show a split pattern, with 51.4% reporting access but 35.1% reporting limited access. Leaders serving 6–10 hours fall in the middle, with 49.4% reporting access and 30.1% reporting limited access. This suggests that increased leadership time does not guarantee stronger support systems. Some of the most engaged leaders continue to operate with uneven or limited access to peer networks.

Note: The 20+ hours group (n=38) is smaller and findings should be interpreted as directional.

Actionable Opportunities

Shift from reactive adaptation to intentional design: Support congregations in rethinking leadership models proactively rather than incrementally adjusting under pressure.

- Provide frameworks for designing leadership structures based on current capacity, not legacy expectations
- Encourage long-term planning alongside immediate sustainability

Invest in distributed leadership models: Reduce reliance on a small number of individuals.

- Equip congregations to expand leadership roles across more people
- Provide tools for team-based and shared leadership structures

Align financial strategy with leadership sustainability: Recognize that financial health and leadership models are directly linked.

- Explore models such as shared clergy, pooled resources, or regional partnerships
- Provide targeted financial support that strengthens leadership capacity, not just operations

Design systems that fit bi-vocational and lay realities: Build support structures around limited time and unpaid leadership.

- Simplify expectations, reporting, and governance requirements
- Offer flexible tools that can be used in small increments of time

Strengthen the practical impact of denominational support: Move from general connection to tangible, usable support.

- Clarify processes and expectations

- Ensure consistent access to resources, guidance, and financial support
- Prioritize responsiveness to local context, especially in smaller or resource-constrained congregations

Conclusion

Lay-led congregations are not a temporary adjustment to the Christian landscape. As congregations adjust to a shifting religious leadership body and varying needs of new church demographics, lay leaders expressed the opinion that their system will soon be the norm and not the exception. Indeed, lay leaders are already an increasingly central expression of how the Church is organizing leadership and sustaining community today. Notably, this study shows that leadership is present, discipleship is happening, and congregations remain deeply relational and engaged. These are not communities in decline alone. They are communities actively adapting in order to continue, and often strong in their discipleship.

At the same time, the conditions under which this leadership is taking place are shaping what is possible. Formation is occurring, but often without up-to-date structures. Vitality is strong but does not always translate into long-term sustainability. Leaders feel supported but not consistently equipped for the full complexity of their role. Congregations are adapting their leadership models, but most often reactively in response to realistic limitations rather than through intentional design.

What emerges from this analysis is a shared reality. Vitality is consistently rooted in relationships rather than in formal programming. Lay-led congregations are sustaining ministry through relational strength, commitment, and adaptability, but they are doing so within systems that are not fully aligned to support them over time. The challenge is not whether lay leaders can lead. It is whether the structures surrounding that leadership can evolve to match the reality on the ground.

This moment presents a clear opportunity. As lay-led leadership becomes more common, denominations have the ability to move from supporting this model as an exception to strengthening it as a core pathway of ministry. This includes designing training that fits real life, expanding leadership capacity, aligning financial and structural support, and creating systems that are both relational and sustainable.

The future of these congregations will not be determined solely by the existence of constraints, but by how those constraints are engaged. Where support systems become more accessible, leadership more distributed, and structures more intentional, lay-led congregations have the potential not only to endure, but to lead in new and meaningful ways.