

GROWTH POINTS

With Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D.

Five Trends Reshaping the Church and How Wise Leaders Are Responding

For more than four decades, I've watched ministry trends come and go. Some flashed brightly and vanished quickly. Others took root and reshaped the landscape of church ministry.

Today, pastors face another pivotal moment. The cultural ground beneath our feet is shifting, and with it, the ways people engage with church, connect with one another, and grow in Christ.

Here are five trends reshaping the church today and some practical steps you can take right now to navigate them with confidence.

1. Declining Religious Loyalty—and the Rise of “Occasional” Believers

One of the clearest patterns emerging across the nation is the steady decline of institutional loyalty. People simply do not attend or serve with the same regularity as previous generations. Even healthy churches report average attenders who show up less than twice a month.

This trend concerns many pastors, but it also reveals a key opportunity: irregular attendees still value spiritual influence, even if they resist predictable rhythms.

Wise leaders respond by:

- Offering multiple low-barrier on-ramps—short courses, mid-sized gatherings, or easily joined serving teams.
- Creating strong digital touch-points—midweek encouragement videos, prayer requests, short Bible teaching clips.
- Shifting from “attendance equals discipleship” to “engagement equals discipleship.”

2. A Growing Hunger for Relational Connection

Despite the digital age's ability to connect people online, loneliness is surging across every demographic. Young professionals, families with children, and even older adults report a deep loneliness.

People may attend a church for the sermon, but they stay because of relationships.

Wise leaders respond by:

- Designing small groups around life stage, life issues, and felt needs.
- Equipping group leaders to foster hospitality, not simply discussion.
- Encouraging every ministry team—from greeters to worship to children's leaders—to function as micro-communities, not task groups.

3. The Shift Toward Team-Based Leadership

Gone are the days when one leader could carry the entire leadership load. The last decade has brought a decisive shift toward shared leadership, especially as churches navigate more complexity.

Today's congregations flourish when leadership diversity is honored and collaboration is intentional.

Wise leaders respond by:

- Forming cross-functional teams that bring together voices from different ministries.
- Offering leadership development pathways that identify, train, and empower new leaders.
- Fostering a culture where questions, creativity, and experimentation are welcomed.

4. The Expectation of Personalized Spiritual Growth

We live in a culture where people expect customized experiences, e.g., personalized newsfeeds, tailored workouts, individualized education plans, etc. The same expectation has migrated to the spiritual arena.

People want to know: *How does this help me grow? What do I do next? How do I take the next step?*

Wise leaders respond by:

- Offering clear discipleship pathways.
- Providing short, focused learning modules.
- Helping people identify their next spiritual step.

5. A Renewed Focus on Mission and Community Impact

Younger generations are drawn to causes that matter. They want to make a difference. They want to serve. They want to see faith expressed in visible ways.

Churches that emphasize mission, compassion, and local impact often see increased engagement from those who otherwise feel disconnected from church life.

Wise leaders respond by:

- Creating frequent, practical service opportunities, e.g., food drives, neighborhood cleanups, foster care support, partnership with local schools.
- Encouraging ministries to articulate how their work advances the mission of God in tangible ways.
- Celebrating stories of life change and community impact.

Which of these trends do you see in your ministry? What's one idea you can use to respond this year?

Growth Points is published twelve times a year. Subscription price is \$29 (US Funds) per year. Permission is granted for use in a local church. For other reprint usage, advance permission must be obtained.

Copyrighted 2026 ISSN 1520-5096