

Pastors say Christmas Eve most-attended holiday service

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NASHVILLE, Tenn.—The closer it gets to Christmas, the more likely church pews will be filled, pastors say.

Half of U.S. Protestant pastors (48 percent) say a Christmas Eve service is their churches' largest event during the holiday season, according to a [Lifeway Research study](#). The frequency of the highest attendance events builds up to Christmas Eve and then tapers off into January.

“Christians have many different Christmas traditions, and so do their churches,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research. “Family and church traditions are most likely to coincide for Christmas Eve services, but many evangelical churches see the highest holiday attendance earlier in December.”

Few pastors point to an event the first week of December or earlier (6 percent) or a service during the second week (10 percent) as their most well-attended. Around a quarter (26 percent) say an event during the third week of the month is top.

While it may not be true for most congregations, early December is the high-water mark for Christmas season attendance at Harrisburg Baptist Church in Tupelo, Miss. Senior pastor Rob Armstrong said attendance starts off strong in December, with their Sunday services the first two weeks of the month being their most attended events.

“Excitement about the Christmas season feeds into the higher attendance in the first few weeks of the month,” he said.

The church's Christmas Eve service also is well attended, but he said the Sunday closest to Christmas and the Sunday closest to New Year's Day have the fewest people show up.

In that regard, the Tupelo congregation is in line with most other churches. Few U.S. Protestant pastors see the largest crowds on Christmas Day (7 percent) or an event during the first week of January (5 percent).

The Christmas season is a prime season for church attendance. Traditionally, Christmas is the second-highest attendance time of the year behind only Easter, according to a [2012 Lifeway Research study](#).

In 2014, more than 3 in 5 Americans (63 percent) said Christmas activities should include a visit to a church service, according to [Lifeway Research](#). [In 2015](#), Lifeway Research found a similar percentage (61 percent) said they typically attend church during Christmastime.

Even among those who don't attend church this time of the year, 57 percent said they would be likely to attend if someone they knew asked them.

Seasonal differences

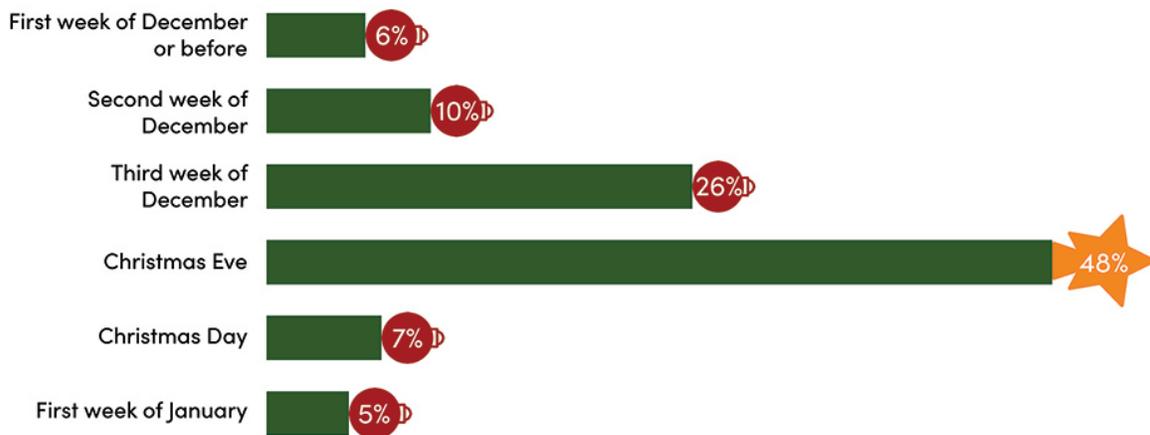
High-attendance events during the Christmas season vary from church to church. Pastors in the South (39 percent) are least likely to say Christmas Eve. Pastors at congregations of fewer than 50 (19 percent) are the least likely to say they have the most people attend an event during the third week of December.

Mainline pastors are more likely than their evangelical counterparts to say their most attended service is on Christmas Eve (60 percent v. 44 percent), while evangelical pastors are more likely than mainline ministers to say their highest attendance event is during the third week of December (30

percent v. 17 percent).

Christmas Eve has the highest attendance for more churches during the holiday season

Among U.S. Protestant pastors



Lifeway research

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Denominationally, some churches fare better earlier in the month, while others see their crowds grow as the season wears on.

Pentecostal (18 percent) and Baptist (15 percent) pastors are more likely than Methodist (3 percent), Restorationist Movement (2 percent) and Lutheran (1 percent) pastors to have their highest attendance during the second week of December.

For the third week, Pentecostals (45 percent), Restorationist Movement pastors (37 percent) and Baptists (35 percent) are more likely than Presbyterian/Reformed (20 percent), non-denominational (17 percent), Methodist (13 percent) and Lutheran (7 percent) pastors to have the largest crowd of the season.

Lutherans (84 percent) are the most likely to say their high-attendance event this season happens on Christmas Eve.

Restorationist Movement churches are unique in that 21 percent say their most popular service is an event the first week of January.

Some traditions have aversion to holiday

John Dobbs, pastor of Forsythe Church of Christ in Monroe, La., said there is a resistance to celebrating Christmas among the autonomous Christian and Church of Christ congregations. “That is based on the truth that we are never actually told in Scripture to celebrate the birth of Christ,” he said.

Dobbs also noted pastors and members at Church of Christ congregations have diverse opinions on how to approach the Christmas holiday.

While many Orthodox Christians celebrate Christmas in January, the first part of the year also provides a natural time of reflection and focus.

“Given the aversion to holidays among many traditional and conservative churches, a day of renewal and beginning again becomes a day of emphasis and engagement,” Dobbs said.

At Harrisburg Baptist, attendance on the Sundays closest to Christmas and New Year’s Day are some of the lowest attended of the season, according to Armstrong, as many are out of town visiting family. Despite what may be smaller crowds, he still believes churches should gather on those days.

“Churches should have worship on Christmas Day or any Sunday close to it,” he said. “It’s OK to have low attendance on those days because people travel.”

Religious traditions specific to varied Christian denominations make a difference in when attendance peaks, McConnell observed.

“Pastors are always eager to see people attending church services, and the Christmas season is one time of year they get to see most of their congregation as well as visitors,” he said. “But the nature of those traditions varies by church with some seeing attendance culminating in a special Christmas Eve service, others a Sunday morning service and others a special musical experience.”

Lifeway Research conducted the phone survey of Protestant pastors Sept. 6-30, 2022. The calling list was a stratified random sample, and researchers used quotas for church size. Analysts weighted responses by region and church size to reflect the population more accurately. The completed sample is 1,000 surveys, providing 95 percent confidence the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 3.2 percent. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.