

Five Reasons Why 2025 Will Be a Pivotal Year for Many Churches

by Thom S. Rainer

Dad told me they were tornado clouds.

I was a kid in the 1960s when he uttered those words. I was too young to realize that we might be facing a potential threat. The technology that could confirm his prediction did not exist. I have vague memories of the clouds having a different tint than typical clouds, but nothing else pointed toward the possibility that a tornado was on the way.

Dad was right. The clouds produced more than one tornado. We were fortunate that the tornadoes did not get too close to my hometown. But I will not forget his warning that a major storm was on the way.

Storm Clouds or New Opportunities?

There seems to be a convergence of issues that could have a profound effect on churches in 2025. Frankly, I could name at least a dozen issues, but these five seem to be the most likely. Their magnitude could be significant as well.

As I will note, these developments are not necessarily storm clouds. On the contrary, there are some potential God-given opportunities for wise church leaders to embrace.

Greater receptivity to the gospel by Gen Z. Those young adults and teenagers born between 1997 and 2012 comprise the group commonly known as Gen Z. Our research at Church Answers, as well as work done by Ryan Burge and others, at least implies that Gen Z is more receptive to

the gospel. I cannot overstate how great this opportunity is. Over a year ago, we introduced The Hope Initiative to help churches move from being inwardly focused to being outwardly focused. Over 1,500 congregations thus far embraced the 30-day challenge. Many of the churches reached young adults and older teens for the first time in years. The words of Jesus in Matthew 9:37-38 are still powerfully relevant today: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. He said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is great, but the workers are few. So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send more workers into his fields’” (NLT).

Approximately 15,000 churches in America will no longer be able to pay a full-time pastor.

Of the 375,000 congregations in the U. S., we estimate that four percent of them will no longer have the funds to compensate a full-time pastor. This shift is enormous, and it might be more significant. Since over one-half of churches today do not have the budget to pay full-time pastors, we can easily see the part-time pastor model becoming the dominant model.

The term “bivocational pastor” begins to disappear. That term needs to go away because it is no longer relevant. “Bi” means “two,” and many part-time pastors have more than two jobs. The more accurate term is “co-vocational,” which is a broad term with many possible meanings. For example, I am friends with a person who serves as a pastor of two congregations while holding down a full-time job in the business world. He is actually closer to a modern-day manifestation of the circuit rider pastor who rode on horseback to serve different churches. Churches should prepare for this transition to the part-time pastor model. It is already the model in a majority of churches. It will soon become the dominant model.

The median time a church will have between pastors will be longer than 18 months. Indeed, a growing number of churches will do without a pastor for two years or more. The role of the interim pastor will be even more critical in 2025. And frankly, denominations and networks must be prepared to resource co-vocational churches, circuit-rider churches, and interim churches to be relevant to the congregations they serve. The day of churches with a full-time pastor serving in traditional-model churches is going away soon.

About 15,000 churches will close. Many of these churches held on tenaciously, but the number of congregations facing imminent closure has grown. For the first time in modern church history, 15,000 of the churches will cease to exist in a period of one year. Notice that we are projecting that 15,000 churches will close and that 15,000 will move from full-time pastors to part-time pastors. Those 30,000 churches represent about one out of twelve existing churches. The change is dramatic.

Though the challenges are significant, I remain an obnoxious optimist about the future of congregations in America. Let me hear your perspective in the comments below. What do you think about the five issues I noted? What would you add to the list of significant changes?