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EXPLORATORY FORESIGHT REPORT
CHURCH CONGREGATIONS
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This report is part of the Futuring Hub's commitment to equipping denominational leaders with insights to navigate the evolving landscape of church congregations. It supports the Building the Future Together: Church Partnerships, Mergers, and Adoption Models project by applying theo-futures thinking to the potential futures of these models.

Rather than predicting a singular future, this report identifies key signals of change that may shape how church leaders approach partnerships and collaborations. Using a structured foresight methodology (including a modified futures triangle, PESTLE+ analysis, emerging issues analysis, four voices of theology, and causal layered analysis) it highlights significant trends and insights drawn from the Futuring Hub's ongoing theo-foresight research.

The analysis explores three core questions:

- **What?** Identifying key signals of change related to church partnerships, mergers, and adoptions.
- **So What?** Examining the significance of these signals, their implications for **denominational leaders, and the challenges and opportunities they present.**
- **Now What?** Considering actionable insights, next steps, and strategies for denominational staff to proactively engage with these trends.

To help leaders assess the impact of these trends, the report categorizes disruption levels as incremental, substantive, or transformative and introduces a framework for understanding the forces influencing change:

- **The Weight of the Past** – Cultural memory, theological foundations, and historical experiences shaping how churches perceive and engage in partnerships.
- **The Push of the Present** – Current trends and drivers, including economic shifts, technological advancements, and evolving religious identities.
- **The Pull of the Future** – How churches might reinterpret or adapt traditions to remain faithful while preparing for emerging realities.

This report does not provide an exhaustive list of all potential drivers of change but offers a strategic foundation for denominational leaders to engage with the future of church partnerships. To aid interpretation, the following definitions clarify the types of signals and disruptions explored:

- **Established Signals** – Historical patterns and well-documented shifts that continue to shape the present.
- **Emerging Signals** – Trends gaining momentum but not yet fully matured.
- Early Signals – Subtle indications of change that could develop into major disruptions.
- **Compound Drivers** – Complex forces shaping the present and future, emerging from multiple interacting signals.
- **Transformative Disruption** – Fundamental shifts in ecclesial structures, governance, and theology that redefine collaboration.
- **Substantive Disruption** – Significant adaptations in ministry models, leadership structures, and organizational partnerships.
- **Incremental Disruption** – Smaller, evolutionary changes that optimize or refine existing partnerships and structures.

By examining these forces, this report equips denominational leaders with insights and tools to move beyond reactive decision-making toward intentional, strategic engagement with the future of church partnerships.

The Weight of the Past:
Influences on Willingness to Engage in Church Partnerships, Mergers, and Adoptions

Historical experiences, theological assumptions, and institutional structures shape how individuals and churches perceive partnerships—either as opportunities or threats.

- **Personal experiences matter:** Leaders or congregations who have witnessed failed mergers approach these options with caution or pessimism, while those who've seen successful collaboration are more open. Generational differences also play a role—older leaders may see continuity as faithfulness, while younger leaders prioritize adaptability and mission.

- **Emotional Attachment to Legacy & Identity:** Many congregants and leaders see church buildings, church names, and leadership structures as central to their faith experience. Studies on organizational change show that when identity is threatened, resistance intensifies. Merging or partnering can feel like a loss of identity, especially for churches with strong connections to buildings or local histories. Church buildings and property—often seen as symbols of legacy and stability—become key points of resistance when partnerships require relocation or shared space.

- **Institutional memory shapes trust:** Churches with a history of local autonomy often resist structural partnerships, while those from hierarchical governance models may feel past mergers were imposed rather than collaborative.

- **Theological tensions:** Some traditions emphasize preserving stability, while others see partnership as biblical. Some church communities will prioritize doctrinal purity over collaboration, making partnerships difficult. Many traditions have taught a theology of rootedness, where the church is closely tied to a geographic location. This can create resistance to consolidation, relocation, or digital partnerships. Even when churches affirm collaboration in principle, espoused theology (beliefs) often differs from operant theology (practice).

- **Tradition vs. Innovation:** Many churches anchor their identity in historical practices, viewing change as a threat to faithfulness. Others, shaped by revivalist or renewal movements, embrace adaptability as a means of sustaining mission. This tension often determines whether a church sees partnership as a creative opportunity or an institutional compromise.

- **Nostalgia reinforces resistance:** Churches often idealize the past, longing for "better days" when attendance was higher, finances were stable, and churches held cultural influence. This nostalgia can slow decision-making, as congregations compare new possibilities to an unrealistic memory rather than current realities.

Without acknowledging these past influences, partnership efforts risk being seen as institutional strategies rather than mission-driven opportunities. Recognizing these barriers allows leaders to navigate emerging pressures and opportunities with greater wisdom.

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The Push of the Present:
Internal and External Signals of Change

Internal Signals of Change

A system's perspective reveals that churches are being shaped by compound drivers—broad, systemic forces that generate multiple signals of change, influencing their approach to partnerships, mergers, and adoptions. Below is a structured analysis of key drivers, each with several (not all) corresponding signals of change, providing denominational leaders with a transformative foresight perspective.

Compound Driver: Economic and Financial Pressure

Description: Many churches face shrinking financial resources, leading to increased reliance on partnerships, shared spaces, and alternative funding models. Rising operational costs, declining tithes, and shifting economic expectations challenge traditional funding structures.

Reflective Questions:
- How can churches reimagine financial sustainability beyond traditional tithing models?
- In what ways might church mergers or partnerships alleviate financial burdens while maintaining mission effectiveness?
- How can denominational leadership support bivocational pastors and alternative staffing models?

Signal Type	Signal of Change	Description	Disruption Potential	Signal Sources
Emerging Signal	Declining Tithes	Fewer congregants regularly donate, forcing churches to find alternative revenue sources.	High—affects church viability and staffing structures, increasing demand for partnerships.	https://www.givelify.com/blog/2025-economic-outlook-for-faith-and-church-giving/ https://www.canadahelps.org/en/the-giving-report/
Established Signal	Costly Infrastructure	Aging church buildings and rising maintenance costs create sustainability challenges. Many churches are exploring shared facilities/co-location models or are closing all together.	High—affects church closures, mergers, and building repurposing.	https://carleton.ca/panl/2024/four-trends-registered-charities-canada-2023/
Emerging Signal	Sustainable Pastoral Roles	The single-senior-pastor model is declining, leading to bivocational, co-vocational, and shared leadership arrangements.	High—requires rethinking governance models, salary structures, and theological training.	https://digital.faithtoday.ca/faithtoday/library/item/05062024/41880073/ https://robchartrand.com/2024/09/17/why-are-young-canadians-not-considering-ministry/
Emerging Signal	Cost of Living & Economic Pressure on Giving	Rising housing costs, inflation, and economic instability reduce disposable income for donations and make long commutes to church less feasible.	Moderate—may require innovative financial models, social enterprise initiatives, and resource-sharing partnerships.	https://www.fraserinstitute.org/sites/default/files/2024-12/generosity-in-canada-the-generosity-index-2024.pdf

Compound Driver: Digitalization and Technology

Description: Churches are grappling with the rise of digital engagement, AI-driven pastoral care, and online communities, challenging traditional membership, authority structures, and physical attendance models.

Reflective Questions:
- What theological frameworks help churches navigate the shift toward digital-first or hybrid church models?
- How do church partnerships incorporate digital communities?
- What role do AI tools play in pastoral leadership, governance, and discipleship?

Signal Type	Signal of Change	Description	Disruption Potential	Signal Sources
Established Signal	Decentralized Church Communities	Digital platforms enable networked, leaderless, or peer-led spiritual communities, challenging institutional models.	High—undermines traditional church governance and requires rethinking pastoral roles.	https://www.puttyputman.com/post/centralization-decentralization-and-the-future-church https://be.thechurch.digital/blog/the-digital-church-analytic-that-matters
Established Signal	Digital & Hybrid Worship	Churches increasingly offer hybrid services while some experiment with fully digital church models.	Moderate to High—challenges traditional ecclesiology but expands accessibility.	https://www.barna.com/research/worship-shifting/
Emerging Signal	Digital Communities	Increasingly individuals are part of 'digital communities' which exist across borders and cities.	High – this decreases the value of in person gatherings, and forces a new type of belonging and community.	https://www.forbes.com/councils/forbescommunicationscouncil/2025/02/03/the-biggest-social-media-trends-shaping-2025/#

Compound Driver: Changing Religious Landscape

Description: Demographic and cultural shifts are reshaping expressions of faith, church affiliation, and spiritual practices. The church must adapt to a landscape where institutional loyalty is fading, and self-curated spirituality is rising.

Reflective Questions:
- How can partnerships support faith engagement in a post-institutional world?
- What theological shifts are necessary to support networked, decentralized, or hybrid church models?
- How does post-Christendom thinking affect church governance and mission strategy?

Signal Type	Signal of Change	Description	Disruption Potential	Signal Sources
Established Signal	Shift to Post-Christian Society	The church is no longer the default institution for spiritual guidance, leading to declining engagement and a rethinking of mission.	High—requires rethinking evangelism, church planting, and discipleship models.	Jim Davis, Michael Graham, Ryan P. Burge, The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back? Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2023
Emerging Signal	Absenteeism	Increasingly individuals do not regularly attend weekly worship services.	Medium – the lack of consistent attendance presents a struggle to encourage further buy in and planning.	https://churchanswers.com/blog/why-consumer-church-members-leave-your-church/ https://medium.com/interfaith-now/the-high-cost-of-consumer-christianity-69e4c38fbcc
Established Signal	Self-Curated Spirituality	People are increasingly constructing personalized faith expressions, blending practices across traditions rather than committing to a single church.	High—undermines traditional membership models and theological authority.	https://www.christianpost.com/news/revival-of-faith-spiritual-questioning-among-gen-z-study-shows.html
Emerging Signal	Exploring New Church Models	House churches, micro churches, digital faith communities, and multi-site ministries are emerging as alternatives.	High—disrupts traditional governance models but enables adaptability.	https://unseminary.com/is-church-multiplication-on-the-rise-dont-miss-this-conversation-with-warren-bird/ https://visionroom.com/sums/Sums-Better-Together.pdf
Established Signal	Declined Church Attendance	This is a well established signal where church attendance is in significant decline.	High – declined numbers mean less people, contributing to possible economic struggles.	https://edgeofhumanity.com/2024/07/31/faith-in-flux-the-decline-of-church-membership-in-america/ https://churchleaders.com/outreach-missions/outreach-missions-articles/329318-church-attendance-is-dying-heres-whats-next.html
Emerging Signal	Flattening Ecclesiology	There is a growing movement toward decentralized church leadership models, with a shift away from hierarchical governance toward shared leadership, team-based pastoring, and lay-led initiatives.	Moderate—While it fosters inclusivity and adaptability, it also challenges traditional authority structures and theological education models.	Yong, A. (2020). Renewing the church by the Spirit: Theological education after Pentecost. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
Emerging Signal	Bi-vocational Pastoral Model	More pastors are moving toward bi-vocational or co-vocational ministry, balancing church leadership with secular employment. This shift is reshaping expectations around pastoral compensation, leadership structures, and vocational ministry models.	High—Affects denominational credentialing, theological education, and financial sustainability for pastors	https://www.faithward.org/bivocational-ministry-is-on-the-rise-and-this-pastor-is-embracing-it/

Compound Driver: Demographic Shifts

Description: Changing immigration patterns, generational shifts, and ethnic diversity are reshaping church demographics, requiring new partnership models to accommodate multicultural expressions of faith.

Reflective Questions:
- How can mergers or partnerships foster intercultural church expressions?
- What governance structures best support multiethnic leadership teams?
- How does aging church membership impact financial and leadership sustainability?

Signal Type	Signal of Change	Description	Disruption Potential	Signal Sources
Established Signal	Aging Church Demographics	Many congregations are composed primarily of older generations, raising sustainability concerns.	High—affects volunteerism, leadership pipelines, and financial viability.	https://religiousworkforce.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Aging-Church-Membership.pdf https://churchanswers.com/podcasts/rainer-on-leadership/church-members-are-getting-much-older-the-real-stat-and-what-it-means/
Established Signal	Immigration & Multicultural Congregations	Growing multiethnic faith communities challenge traditional worship, governance, and leadership models.	High—requires rethinking partnerships to support intercultural collaboration.	https://digital.faithtoday.ca/faithtoday/library/item/07082024/4202439/ https://projects.communitybasedresearch.ca/files/rjanzen/short_research_report.pdf
Established Signal	Membership Decline	Shrinking in-person attendance and formal church membership due to competing digital engagement models.	High—affects church governance, financial models, and theological education.	https://apnews.com/press-release/ein-presswire-newsmatics/labor-1b0fc4ad5385c712737b1cc017b8c29b https://news.gallup.com/poll/642548/church-attendance-declined-religious-groups.aspx

The Push of the Present:
Internal and External Signals of Change

External Signals of Change
Churches are not insulated from broader societal shifts—they exist within a complex web of political, economic, technological, cultural, and social forces that impact how they operate, how people engage with them, and how they form partnerships. These external compound drivers create both pressures and opportunities for church mergers, adoptions, and collaborations. Below is a systems-oriented, futures-focused analysis of key external drivers, each with corresponding signals of change to equip denominational leaders with a foresight-driven approach to church partnerships.

Compound Driver: Post-Truth and Participation Culture
Description: The rise of post-truth culture, declining trust in institutions, and participatory digital environments is reshaping how individuals engage with faith and authority structures. People increasingly construct their own spiritual identities, resisting top-down leadership and static theological frameworks while demanding more participatory, experiential engagement with faith communities.

Reflective Questions:
- How does the shift from institutional trust to personal autonomy affect church partnerships?
- In what ways can denominational structures accommodate participatory and decentralized models of faith?
- How do mergers and partnerships remain relevant in a landscape of individual spiritual curation?

Signal Type	Signal of Change	Description	Disruption Potential	Signal Sources
Established Signal	Individualism	Faith is viewed as a private, self-directed pursuit, reducing emphasis on communal faith expressions and formal membership.	High—challenges shared theological frameworks and collective decision-making in church partnerships.	https://www.sfu.ca/students/isap/explore/culture/understanding-canadians.html https://canadianfamilyoffices.com/family-business/in-western-culture-we-prize-the-individual-but-is-that-bad-for-family-business/
Emerging Signal	Critical Consumers	Congregants increasingly evaluate churches as service providers, expecting tailored experiences, flexible engagement, and transparency.	Moderate—requires churches to reframe partnerships as dynamic, value-driven collaborations rather than administrative mergers.	https://churchanswers.com/blog/why-consumer-church-members-leave-your-church/ https://medium.com/interfaith-now/the-high-cost-of-consumer-christianity-69e4c38fbcc
Established Signal	Questioning of Traditional Institutions	General distrust in government, media, and religious institutions reduces commitment to hierarchical church structures.	High—affects denominational credibility and decision-making authority in partnerships.	Hughes, P. (2024). Why people are ceasing to attend churches and to identify with religious institutions. *Journal of Contemporary Ministry*, (9).

Compound Driver: Shifts in Belonging and Institutional Commitment

Description: Traditional models of church membership and commitment are shifting as people seek belonging in flexible, non-institutional, and hyper-local ways. Changing geographic patterns, social habits, and cultural values influence how individuals engage with faith communities and how churches form and sustain partnerships.

Reflective Questions:
- How can partnerships and mergers support non-traditional models of belonging?
- What new physical and digital spaces can churches use to maintain community presence?
- How does the need for quantifiable social impact reshape expectations for church collaboration?

Signal Type	Signal of Change	Description	Disruption Potential	Signal Sources
Emerging Signal	Changing of Third Place	As traditional third places (community centers, cafes, local gathering spaces) decline, people look for alternative social connection points, which may or may not include churches.	High—requires rethinking physical space use, partnerships with community organizations, and hybrid engagement models.	https://www.cnu.org/publicsquare/2024/07/03/vanishing-third-places-and-what-can-be-done
Established Signal	Social Anxiety	Rising levels of social anxiety and mental health concerns make participation in large, in-person church gatherings less appealing.	Moderate—may require intentional design of smaller, more intimate faith communities within partnerships.	https://seattleanxiety.com/psychiatrist/2023/2/24/exploring-the-recent-rise-of-social-anxiety-disorder
Emerging Signal	Emphasis on Local	People increasingly seek hyper-local engagement and community impact, favoring churches that meet tangible needs over large, program-driven institutions.	Moderate—shifts church partnership models toward community-based, service-oriented collaborations.	https://www.socialpinpoint.com/community-engagement-trends-for-2025/

Compound Driver: Legal and Policy Changes Affecting Religious Institutions

Description: The legal landscape for churches is shifting, with increased scrutiny on nonprofit financial practices, changes in employment law for clergy, and evolving religious freedom legislation. These shifts complicate governance, property ownership, and partnership agreements, requiring churches to navigate complex regulatory environments.

Reflective Questions:
- How do changes in tax laws and nonprofit regulations impact church mergers and financial sustainability?
- How can churches ensure compliance with new employment laws governing clergy and staff?
- What legal frameworks best support church partnerships and shared governance structures?
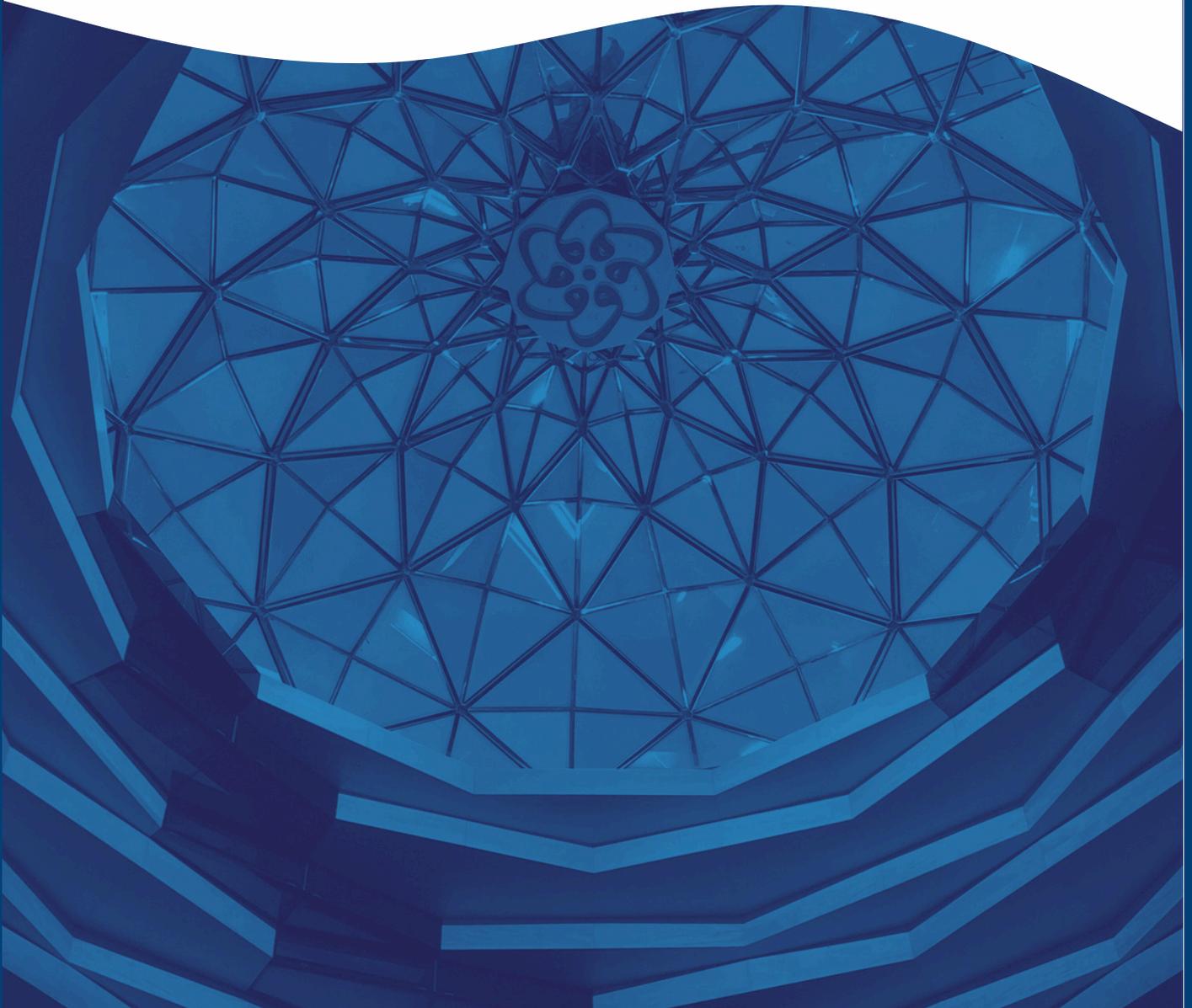
Signal Type	Signal of Change	Description	Disruption Potential	Signal Sources
Established Signal	Increased Government Scrutiny of Religious Nonprofits	Governments are demanding greater financial transparency, affecting tax-exempt status and donation tracking.	High—may lead to increased reporting requirements, reduced donor confidence, and potential loss of financial privileges.	https://www.canadianaffairs.news/2025/01/16/an-irresponsible-proposal-religious-groups-react-to-charitable-status-threat/
Established Signal	Religious Freedom Legislation	Legal rulings on faith-based employment protections, facility use, and religious exemptions impact how churches operate and engage in partnerships.	High—affects church governance, hiring practices, and denominational autonomy.	https://www.canadianaffairs.news/2025/01/16/an-irresponsible-proposal-religious-groups-react-to-charitable-status-threat/
Emerging Signal	Zoning and Land Use Regulations	Urban planning laws affect where churches can operate, build, or repurpose spaces, particularly as cities rezone for commercial or residential priorities.	Moderate—churches may need to engage in advocacy efforts or seek creative solutions for space-sharing and facility use.	Agrawal, S. K., Sangapala, P., Hill, E., & Lang, J. (2024). Human rights and municipal land use bylaws in Atlantic Canada. *Planning Practice & Research, 39*(6), 1032–1055. https://doi.org/10.1080/02697459.2024.2359790 https://oemc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/0911_1315_RePlanning-Places-of-Worship.pdf

Compound Driver: Increased Contextual Complexity

Description: Churches are operating in an increasingly complex and fragmented social environment, shaped by economic instability, shifting work cultures, social polarization, mental health crises, and competing demands on time and attention. These dynamics make traditional models of church engagement less effective, requiring churches to develop more adaptive and contextually responsive approaches to partnerships.

Reflective Questions:
- How do economic pressures, shifting work cultures, and social polarization affect church participation and financial sustainability?
- How can church partnerships respond to increased social fragmentation, loneliness, and declining volunteerism?
- What strategies help churches remain missionally effective in an era of competing priorities and diminishing discretionary time?

Signal Type	Signal of Change	Description	Disruption Potential	Signal Sources
Established Signal	Increased Loneliness & Social Isolation	More people report feeling disconnected from community, reducing their willingness to engage in traditional church participation models.	High—may require rethinking engagement strategies, emphasizing small groups, digital communities, and mental health ministries.	https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/social-isolation-and-loneliness https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf
Emerging Signal	Decline in Volunteerism	People are less available for long-term commitments, making it difficult for churches to sustain volunteer-dependent programs.	High—churches must adapt leadership models, offer flexible engagement opportunities, and explore paid staff roles for critical functions.	https://www.forbes.com/councils/forbesnonprofitcouncil/2024/03/29/the-decline-in-volunteering-is-driving-increased-division/ https://carleton.ca/panl/2023/volunteer-charities-close-at-alarming-rates/
Emerging Signal	Competing Priorities for Time & Attention	Increased work demands, youth activities, and family obligations leave little time for traditional church engagement.	Moderate—churches may need to rethink service times, offer digital discipleship, and integrate faith practices into daily life beyond Sunday services.	Haughton, J., Takemoto, M. L., Schneider, J., Hooker, S. P., Rabin, B., Brownson, R. C., & Arredondo, E. M. (2020). *Identifying barriers, facilitators, and implementation strategies for a faith-based physical activity program.*
Established Signal	Polarization	Churches increasingly struggle with internal and external divisions related to theology, politics, and social issues, creating challenges for collaboration and partnerships.	High—may lead to fragmentation, loss of trust in leadership, and reluctance to engage in partnerships perceived as compromising values.	Rawlings, C. M., & Childress, C. (2024). The polarization of popular culture: Tracing the size, shape, and depth of the "oil spill." *Social Forces, 102*(4), 1582–1607. https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soad150

So What? The Pull of the Future:
Discerning Emerging Signals and Rethinking Church

If the past shapes attitudes and the present creates pressures for change, what future possibilities might emerge?

For generations, church closures, mergers, and adoptions have been the default responses to declining attendance, financial constraints, and leadership shortages. Often framed as survival strategies, these approaches assume that the church, as it currently exists, must be preserved rather than reimagined. However, the future is not asking us to maintain what is, but to discern what could be.

The landscape of faith is shifting—not only in attendance patterns but in how people experience belonging, spirituality, and community. The familiar structures of church life, from Sunday gatherings to pastoral leadership, are encountering forces that make continuity increasingly difficult. If the response continues to be reactive consolidation, we risk missing an opportunity to imagine church differently—not as an institution in decline, but as a dynamic, evolving movement adapting to new cultural, social, and technological realities.

Weak Signals and Emerging Trends Reshaping the Future of Church

Instead of offering fixed models, this section highlights emerging signals that challenge current assumptions about what church is and invite leaders to rethink how faith communities might form in the future.

1. Fragmented and Reconfigured Spiritual Belonging
Weak Signal: The rise of "self-curated spirituality," where individuals construct their faith identity outside of traditional institutions, choosing online communities, spiritual influencers, or informal gatherings over local congregations.

Challenge: Denominations and church structures assume a "whole congregation" model, but what happens when spiritual engagement is increasingly fluid and non-institutional?

Future Possibility: Instead of closing churches, could faith communities decentralize, becoming more modular, adaptive, and connected across digital and physical spaces?

2. Rethinking Church as a Shared Ecosystem, Not a Single Entity
Weak Signal: Growing interest in networked governance, where churches share leadership, finances, and resources rather than operating as isolated congregations.
Challenge: The current approach to struggling churches is often closure or absorption—but what if churches are meant to function more like a movement than an organization?

Future Possibility: Could denominations facilitate clusters of faith communities that operate as shared ecosystems rather than single-location congregations?

3. The Rise of Digital-First Faith Expressions
Weak Signal: Younger generations participate in faith communities online first, whether through podcasts, livestreams, Discord groups, or TikTok theology. Some never physically step into a church building.

Challenge: Mergers and closures assume that physical presence is the defining feature of church, but digital spaces are reshaping how people encounter faith and community.
Future Possibility: Could future churches operate as hybrid hubs, with both digital and in-person communities coexisting in fluid ways?

4. Economic and Social Pressures Demand New Uses of Church Spaces
Signal of Change: Many faith communities are experimenting with shared spaces, using church buildings for coworking, social enterprises, counseling centers, and community hubs.
Challenge: If financial decline leads to selling off church property, are we unintentionally dismantling one of the church's greatest assets—its physical presence in communities?

Future Possibility: Could churches transition into hybrid mission spaces, blending worship, social services, economic sustainability, and civic engagement?

5. Vocational Ministry Is Being Redefined
Signal of Change: Many pastors are bi-vocational or leaving traditional ministry altogether, while faith leadership is increasingly emerging outside of the formal church structure.
Challenge: Traditional church governance assumes a paid, full-time pastoral model, but this is becoming unsustainable.

Future Possibility: Could churches rethink leadership structures, incorporating shared leadership models, digital chaplaincy, or vocationally-integrated ministry?

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Now What:
An Invitation to Rethink the Future of Church

Rather than treating church closures and mergers as the inevitable conclusion of decline, these signals invite us to reimagine what "church" even means in the 21st century. What if the church was not an institution to be preserved but a movement to be continually renewed?

For denominational leaders, this is an urgent call to shift from crisis management to future design. Instead of asking, "How do we save this church?" we should be asking, "What new forms of church are emerging, and how do we nurture them?"
The future of the church is not found in institutional survival, but in faithful adaptation to new ways of gathering, belonging, and discipling. The question is not whether the church will change—it is whether we will shape the change or be shaped by it.

Here are some possible next steps to consider:

- Explore experimental church models—test new forms of faith community rather than relying on institutional survival.

- Develop policies that enable innovation—denominations should support new church expressions rather than only traditional congregations.

- Invest in future-oriented leadership—seminary and ministerial training must adapt to equip leaders for emerging spiritual landscapes.

- Rethink property and resources—instead of selling buildings, explore how they can be reimagined as faith-based ecosystems.

- Engage in theological reflection on change—what does it mean to be the church in a time of transition?

The pull of the future is not away from faith—it is calling us toward a reimagined, revitalized, and adaptive church. The question is, how will we respond?

Conclusion:

This report has examined the evolving landscape of church partnerships, mergers, and adoptions through a research-driven approach, drawing on foresight methodologies, theological reflection, and emerging trends. By identifying key signals of change and their potential impacts, it provides denominational leaders with a structured framework for navigating the complexities of collaboration in a shifting ecclesial context.

The future of church partnerships will not be determined by financial realities alone but by the church's capacity to reimagine belonging, leadership, and mission in response to broader cultural, social, and theological shifts. Change is inevitable, but how we engage with it matters.

Rather than simply preserving institutions, the call is to nurture communities of faith that are resilient, adaptive, and deeply rooted in their mission. This will require openness to new expressions of church life, thoughtful stewardship of resources, and a commitment to theological reflection that keeps faith at the center of change.
No single path forward will fit every church, but by listening, discerning, and engaging with the future intentionally, we can take faithful steps toward what comes next.

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