



How are pastors & regular church attenders navigating the pandemic?

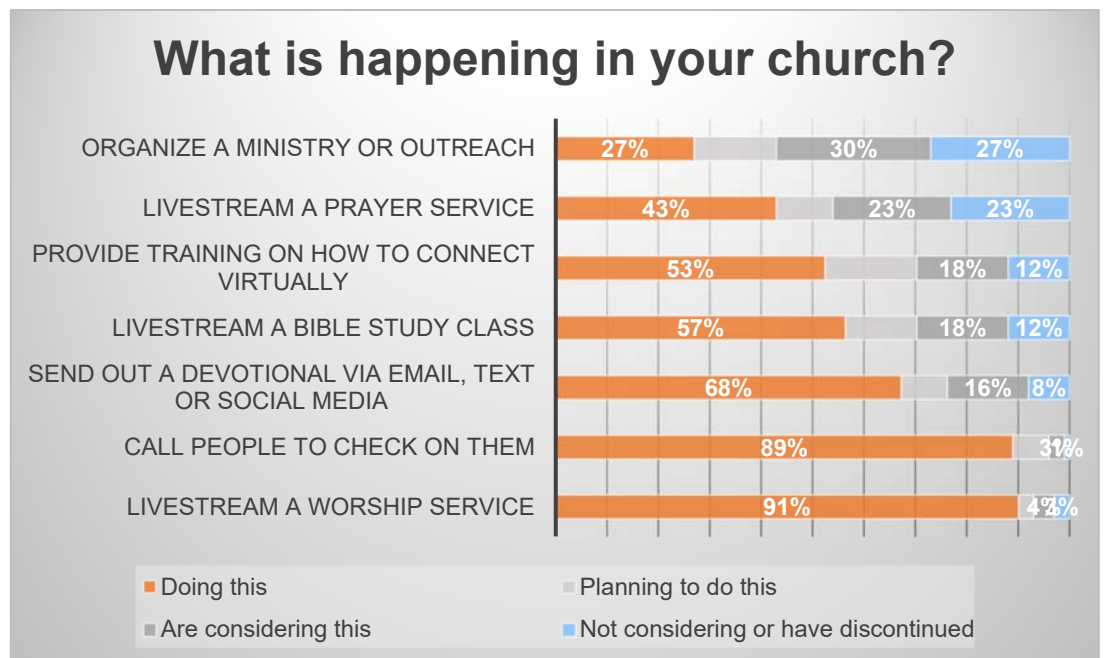
Pamela Caudill Ovwigho, Ph.D. & Arnold Cole, Ed.D.

In order to help churches respond to the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Center for Bible Engagement has been surveying churches and regular church attenders¹. Our initial surveys reveal that pastors and church leaders are pivoting quickly to connect with and minister to their communities. Many pastors say their faith is stronger and online attendance is up, yet 40% say that giving is down. Meanwhile regular church attenders are navigating the significant changes in their daily lives, while trying to stave off discouragement, anger, and fear. The vast majority are participating in online worship services, although 42% of them had not done so before. When asked what if their attendance will go back to what it was before the pandemic, one-third anticipate it will not. Looking ahead to when social distancing restrictions are lifted, we predict that churches could see a 25-35% decrease in attendance among the regular attenders (the core of their congregations) if they return simply to “business as usual”.

Pastors Moving Outside the Church Walls

Our first pastor survey was conducted between April 1-10, 2020, with pastors who previously participated in our city studies or who are using our Bible engagement app. The 76² pastors who responded primarily represent small (75% have 249 or less adult attendees), established churches that are growing (38%) or stable (33%). Because the majority of U.S. churches are small³, we believe these data represent the experiences of the “typical” church.

Churches are using a variety of approaches to connect with their congregants. Nine out of ten livestream their worship services & are calling congregants to check on them. Sending out a devotional (68%), livestreaming a Bible study (57%), and providing technical training (53%) are common approaches as well.



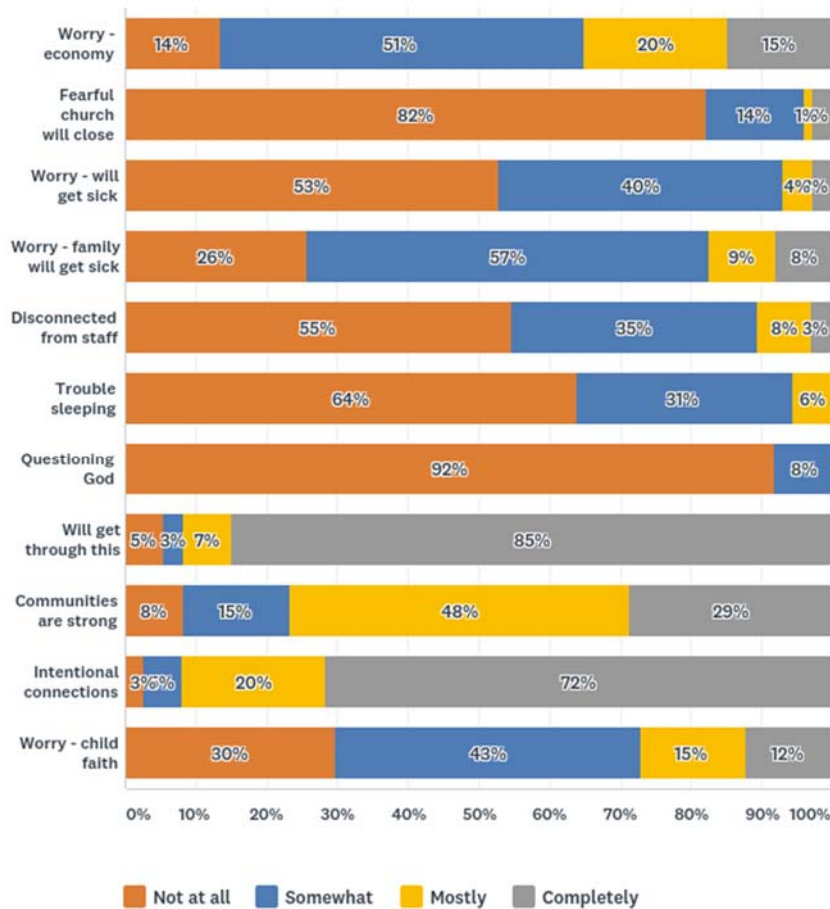
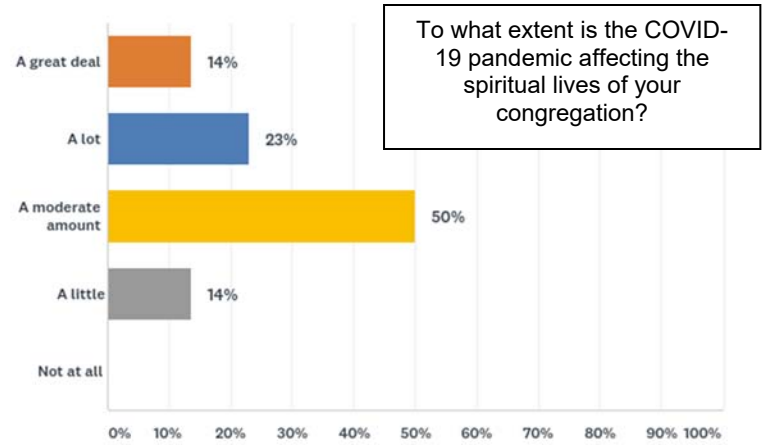
¹ Regular church attenders are defined as people who typically attend church weekly or almost weekly.

² With a finite sample of 1,589 pastors, this survey has a 90% confidence interval and a ±8% error rate.

³ Duke University, National Congregation Survey <http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/>

Pastors identify staying connected with their congregation as their biggest challenge, with 45% of respondents mentioning it. One out of five viewed finances as a significant challenge as well. Church leaders believe that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected people's spiritual lives a moderate amount. As far as their own faith, 57% say their faith is stronger and more important to them, while the remainder have the same faith.

In the early days of the pandemic, pastors expressed a mix of concern and optimism. Most worried at least somewhat about the economy, that their family would get sick, or that children's spiritual education would suffer.



Our second pastor survey was conducted between April 14-23, 2020, with 115 pastors responding⁴. As the graphic on the next page illustrates, three out of five pastors reported that attendance at their online worship services is better than in person services before the pandemic. However, giving was down in most churches (40%).

When considering the period after the pandemic ends, pastors were generally optimistic, anticipating that attendance would be better (44%) or the same (38%). Almost one out of five (18%) predicted that attendance would decrease.

The general optimism among pastors mixes as well with a bit of worry. Most worry at least a little about attendance (61%) and finances (70%). About a third describe their level of concern as “moderate” to “a great deal.”

Thinking ahead to the time when social distancing restrictions are relaxed, many pastors and church leaders anticipate changes in how they minister. They intend to keep their online efforts going, and in some cases, to increase those. If attendance dips, they spoke of reaching out personally to individuals to continue to encourage them. Many spoke of the challenge of building community and relationships. For example:

Creatively seeking active ways to connect with people

I think online services will become an expectation as people have really liked that.

Going outside the walls. Being intentional to minister to neighbors.

More relational connections, incorporating more personal interactions like phone calls.

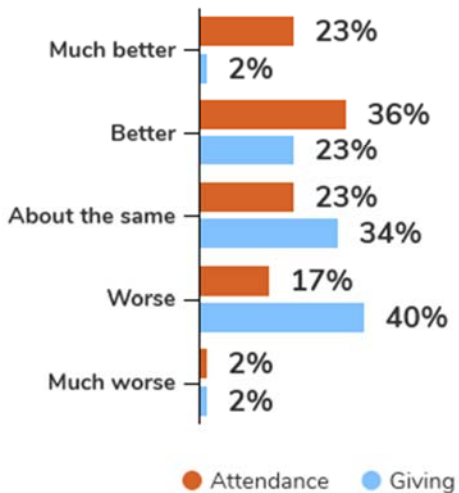
Personally as a pastor I don't see difference for my role, but I'm hoping those in our body start seeing ministry as individuals touching lives and not just program based. Will be a great “reset” for the body.

⁴ With a finite sample of 1,589 pastors, this survey has a 90% confidence interval and a ±6% error rate.

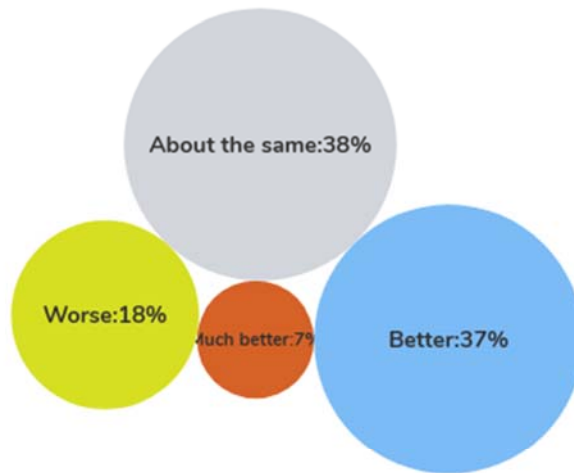
What will church look like after the pandemic?

Based on surveys with North American pastors conducted April 2020
 UPDATED 4/24/2020

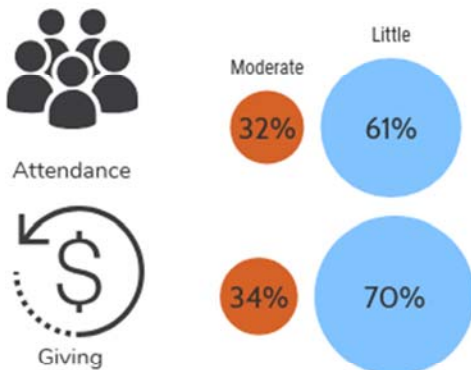
How has attendance & giving been?



When you return to holding in person services, what do you expect attendance will be?



Dealing with Worry



way know encourage emails online try connect find will visits
 will
 continue Personal continue sure Personal contact phone go



Based on data from an online survey with 115 U.S. pastors conducted between April 14th to April 24th 2020.
 For more information about this research visit us at www.centerforbibleengagement.org
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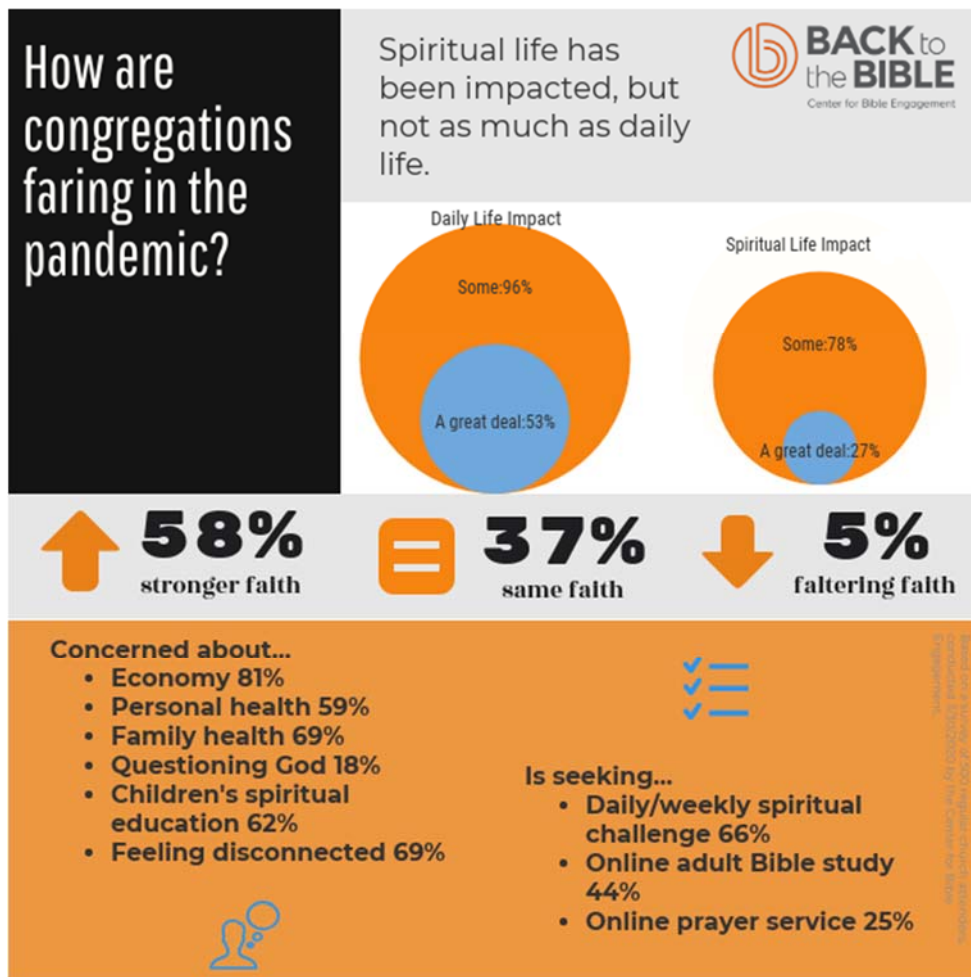
Congregants Connecting Online

We began surveying adults who regularly attend church very shortly after the pandemic reached the United States. A total of 567 people completed our first survey between March 30 and April 10, 2020. The second survey focused specifically on virtual worship experiences included 465 individuals between April 15-28, 2020.

As the following graphic illustrates, nearly all felt the impact of the pandemic on their daily lives, and 78% said their spiritual life had been impacted as well. Crisis can often increase people's faith and make their spiritual beliefs and practices more important to them. More than half of the regular church attenders we surveyed said that their faith is now stronger.

Even with strong faith, pandemic-related concerns remain. Four out five congregants expressed concern about the economy. Feeling disconnected from others, that a family member would get sick, and that children's spiritual education would suffer were also frequent worries. Eighteen percent found themselves questioning God.

When asked what would help them spiritually, congregants strongly supported the idea of a daily or weekly spiritual challenge (66%). A significant minority expressed interest in an online adult Bible study (44%) and an online prayer service (25%).



Our second survey revealed that 92% of regular church attenders had participated in some form on online worship in the past few weeks. This is particularly notable because 4 out of 10 had not attended online at all before the pandemic.

Most commonly this was an online or recorded service from a local church (83% total). For one-third of respondents, attending a live streamed service from their local church was their only virtual worship experience.

As the graphic reveals, however, there is quite a bit of variety. In fact, 39% engaged in “online church” in multiple ways. Full often included viewing a recorded service from a church that is not local to their residence. A total of 37% of respondents participated in worship with a non-local church. For most of these individuals, this was in addition to participating with their local church.

Recently Pastor Greg Laurie shared how the pandemic is affecting online attendance at his church. He stated in a blog post: “For example, we already had an online version of our church service that was beginning to grow. Before the COVID-19 crisis, around 8,000 people viewed it each week. The first week we went exclusively online, that number skyrocketed to 250,000. The following week 350,000 tuned in, and the one after 634,000. Last Sunday we had 1.3 million people watching our livestream!”

Livestreaming creates the opportunity for people to virtually visit any church whether it is down the street or across the world. Given the popularity of some mega churches, we asked survey respondents if they had watched a live stream or recording from six well known ones. Remarkably we found that more than half (52%) who had participated in an online worship with a non-local church had done so at one of these six.

When asked to predict if their church attendance would return to what it was before the pandemic, one-third indicated a good chance of change, with 25% saying they aren’t sure and 9% giving a definite “no.” The direction of change was mixed. Some thought that the social distancing restrictions would lead to a great spiritual awakening, with more people coming to church when the buildings opened again. More commonly though respondents talked about online options making it easier for them to participate in worship and felt that the availability of online options would lead to an overall decrease in attendance.

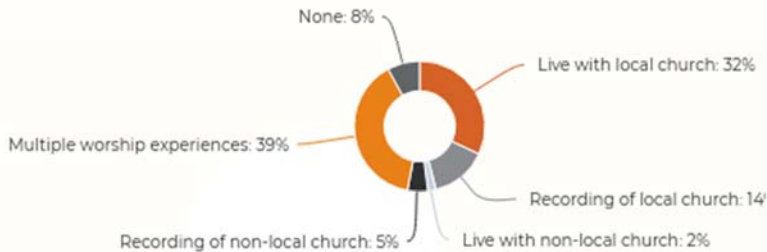
As churches navigating these uncharted waters, it’s important to consider the advantages and disadvantages of both online and in person ministry. The congregants we surveyed spoke highly of the convenience of online worship. Many liked that it helped them still feel connected to their local church. Others also mentioned being able to “customize” the experience in terms of volume, taking notes, rewinding and replaying, and interacting with other congregants via a chat function.

At the same time, the online experience lacks some of the elements that help us to connect in person. Most notably our survey respondents missed the fellowship of sharing a physical space with other believers, including handshakes and hugs. The sacraments including communion and actively serving in church ministries were other elements that are missing from virtual church.

Church: Inside & Outside the Walls

Online Worship Participation among Regular Church Attenders

Do you expect your attendance to go back to the way it was, when restrictions end?



42% did not participate in online worship before the pandemic

66% YES, 25% NOT SURE, 9% NO

Worshipped online with a non-local church



52%

- Calvary Chapel, Ft. Lauderdale (Pastor Doug Sauder)
- Church of the Highlands (Pastor Chris Hodges)
- Harvest at Home (Pastor Greg Laurie)
- Life.Church's Church Online (Pastor Craig Groeschel)
- North Point Community Church (Pastor Andy Stanley)
- Saddleback Church (Pastor Rick Warren)



46%

Of these worshippers, expect attendance may not go back to normal when the pandemic ends.

What We Like & What We Miss



Convenience
Still Local
On Demand Features



Fellowship



Sacraments



Hugs



Serving

What do you like about online worship?

What do you miss about meeting in person?



Data drawn from an online survey with frequent 465 church attenders conducted between 4/15/2020 and 4/28/2020.

For more information, visit centerforbibleengagement.org

About the authors:

Dr. Pamela Caudill Ovwigho serves as the Executive Director for the Center for Bible Engagement (CBE) at Back to the Bible. The CBE surveys thousands of people every year about their spiritual lives.

Dr. Arnie Cole is the CEO of Back to the Bible, an international ministry dedicated to using media and technology to lead people into a dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ. He also serves as Director of Research and Product Development for the CBE.

About the Center for Bible Engagement:

The Center for Bible Engagement (CBE) began in 2003 as a research division of Back to the Bible and has become a major world center addressing Bible engagement and spiritual growth. The CBE goes beyond simply usage statistics to consider attitudes and behaviors that significantly impact spiritual growth and a person's relationship with God. Our passion is developing methods, tools, and resources that will engage people with the Bible and fuel life transformation. We have surveyed more than 400,000 people around the world about their spiritual lives and that number continues to grow each year. The CBE also partners with churches and other organizations such as the American Bible Society, Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, the Jamaica Broilers Foundation, and McLean Bible Church to build an empirical understanding of life transformation through a relationship with Christ and engaging scripture. For more information visit centerforbibleengagement.org.