HOW CHURCH LEADERS ARE RESPONDING
TO THE CHALLENGES OF
COVID-19

COVID-19 Church Survey
Summary Report
March 27, 2020

Churches Pivoting, Anxious, and Getting on Mission

COVID-19 Church Survey of Over 1500 Pastors and Church Leaders

The coronavirus COVID-19 creeped onto the world scene only a few months ago and has spread at breakneck speed, disrupting societies, social units, healthcare systems, and entire economies. Only a few months in, the cost in lives has been too high—those infected and who have lost their lives as a result of the virus, and those suffering as a result of changes in how we daily function (e.g., an increase in suicide rates, domestic abuse cases, depression, and more). Many are wondering how the church, historically a beacon of hope in times of distress, is faring.

Because we wanted to know more about how churches were doing early in this crisis, we wanted to reach out (quickly) to a large number of churches. In partnership with the Billy Graham Center's Send Institute, Exponential, Leadership Network, Catalyst, the Association of Related Churches (ARC), and Discipleship.org, the BGC surveyed a (non-random) sample of pastors and church leaders, seeking to understand their church's current response. Over 1500 church leaders replied.

In the survey, we see that many churches and pastors are taking things day-by-day and making changes at a pace they have never had to work at before—with 53 percent of those surveyed responded that they are uncertain and are taking things one week at a time. It's commendable. Although not panicking, many are struggling with navigating new technological realities of moving online.

Pastors are seeing that the new reality today is that churches must learn to continue to care for their congregations and reach into their neighborhoods in the midst of widespread lockdown and social distancing requirements. It's a time when we are seeking to do effective ministry while also navigating a very high learning curve of ministry and outreach—only 2 percent of responders are meeting as usual. Instead, 47 percent are meeting with a different format in online settings and 36 percent are meeting with the same format but online.

> **"The new reality today is churches must learn to continue to care for their congregations and reach into their neighborhoods in the midst of widespread lockdown and social distancing requirements."**

To say this is challenging would be an understatement for too many of our churches, but this is not the crisis— this is the time before the crisis. Churches are already starting to engage the crisis, but know that challenging times are ahead.

This convenience sample is a snapshot of churches within Exponential and the partnering networks and is not a random or scientific sample. It is a snapshot of a subset of churches (connected to these organizations, online, mostly evangelical, willing to respond, etc.), to help church leaders get an informal understanding for where things are regarding the state of the church and significant challenges as they adapt to their new reality of remote ministry. This survey represents 1573 responses, submitted online from March 18th to 26th of 2020. We will repeat this survey in the coming weeks with willing survey respondents to track responses over time.

> **"This is not the crisis— this is the time before the crisis."**

In the survey, several key issues emerged about how churches and their pastors are responding to the crisis. Reflecting the uneasiness felt across society, most pastors remain unclear on what formats to use for church services or for how long this change will remain. This massive shift to online technology has also proved challenging for pastors unfamiliar in how to leverage online technologies for the level of connection and discipleship to which they'd grown accustomed. In response, pastors and church leaders are primarily asking for practical advice on ministry in this new context. Finally, pastors are generally optimistic about the financial impact of the crisis upon their churches although many are trying to be proactive in guarding against possible fallout.
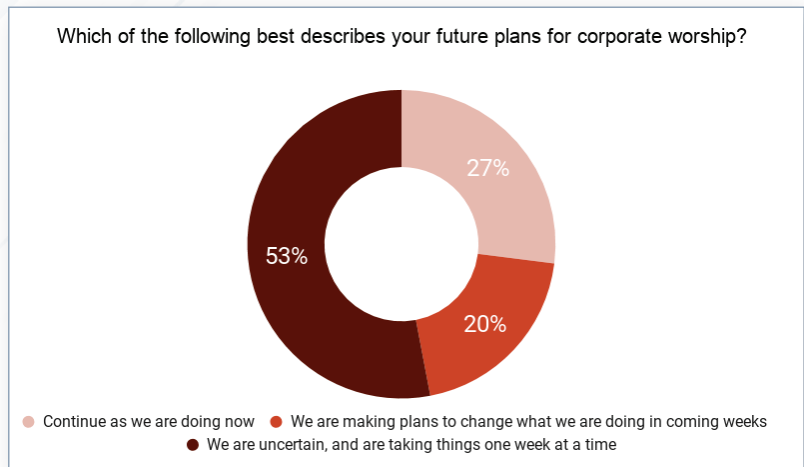
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First, pastors and church leaders reflect the uncertainty we are seeing in other sectors.

In the wake of school and business shutdowns, widespread confusion and uncertainty has been typical across multiple industries. Churches are not exempt from this sense of uncertainty as they try to carve out new routines for weekly services and ministries. In response to the question, "Which of the following best describes your future plans for corporate worship?" over half of the leaders surveyed (53 percent) registered their uncertainty about the future and a willingness to only take things one week at a time. For many of these leaders, this past Sunday was the first time they had preached remotely while still others only limited experience.

This uncertainty is likely to shift as pastors find formats and routines fitting to their contexts. This is further reflected in 20 percent of leaders responding that they were changing what they were going to be doing in the coming weeks. However, until there is clarity on a national scale regarding group sizes, and changes in state shelter-in-place orders, a large percentage of pastors may only be willing to commit to a week-by-week basis.

Which of the following best describes your future plans for corporate worship?

- Continue as we are doing now
- We are making plans to change what we are doing in coming weeks
- We are uncertain, and are taking things one week at a time

At the same time, it is worth noting 27 percent of pastors surveyed expressed a confidence in their current worship format for the foreseeable future. This is surprising considering the novelty of remote services to many churches and possibly suggests that at least some are confident in their adapted format decisions.

Second, pastors are struggling to navigate the obstacles of technology-based ministry.

When we asked "For churches that are doing online gatherings, what are you finding to be the biggest obstacles?" the most common answers related to the shift in content. Over half (51 percent) of respondents said that creating engaging interactions was a significant obstacle in their online gathering. This may signal an underlying frustration for pastors in recognizing that the same style and tools they used for in person gatherings to make connections do not hold as well in online formats. Pastors will need to be willing to adapt not only their content but the way this content is delivered if they want to connect as they do in person. That nearly three in ten (28 percent) of respondents also cited preaching/singing to an empty room as an obstacle reinforces the challenge pastors face in rethinking how they communicate.
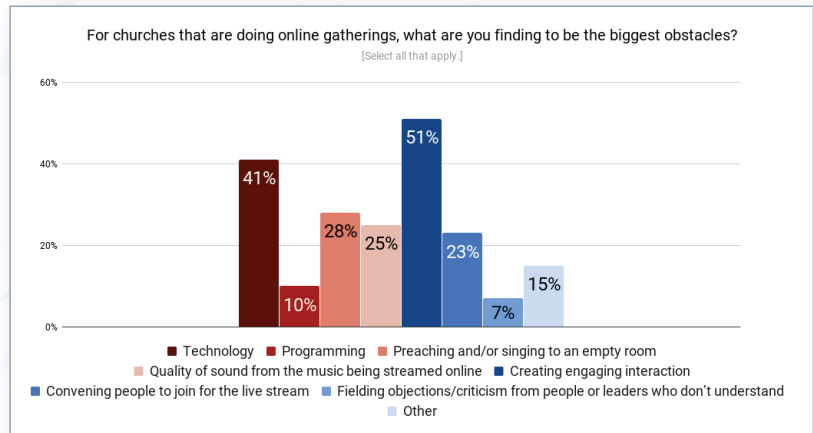
> **"Pastors will need to be willing to adapt not only their content but the way this content is delivered if they want to connect as they do in person."**

More than four in ten (41 percent) signaled that learning new technology was a major obstacle in making the transition. While some churches have a lot of experience in streaming or video conferencing, some are learning these platforms for the first time and with the added pressure of their people learning at home. Considering that this sample was gathered online, with churches connected to organizations know for innovation, it may be surprising that so many found learning new technology an obstacle—and probably means that smaller and traditional churches are experiencing greater challenges.

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This challenge was also reflected in the qualitative comments as many cited the challenge of internet quality, teaching older congregants how to use the technology, or uncertainty in finding the right digital platforms. The tension created by the newness of online technology is exacerbated by our sudden dependence upon it.

Churches recognize that they have little choice but this makes the challenge of learning and teaching within such a short time period even more daunting.

The challenge of navigating technology was also disproportionately chosen by smaller churches in this sample. For churches under 100, the two most common obstacles they selected were "technology" and "convening people to join for the live stream." These were not major obstacles for larger churches, especially those over a thousand. This is likely because larger churches have used online services prior to the quarantine and therefore had an infrastructure and online culture in place. As such, it may prove beneficial for larger churches to see these challenges as opportunities to serve smaller congregations by offering help either unfamiliar or unable to establish online platforms.

For churches that are doing online gatherings, what are you finding to be the biggest obstacles?
[Select all that apply.]

- Technology — 41%
- Programming — 10%
- Preaching and/or singing to an empty room — 28%
- Quality of sound from the music being streamed online — 25%
- Creating engaging interaction — 51%
- Convening people to join for the live stream — 23%
- Fielding objections/criticism from people or leaders who don't understand — 7%
- Other — 15%

It is important to note that only 7 percent of respondents cited objections and criticism from leaders or people who don't understand the necessity of online church as a significant obstacle. While it might have taken a long time for the general public to accept the gravity of the epidemic, church leaders cite little push back from their teams and leaders.
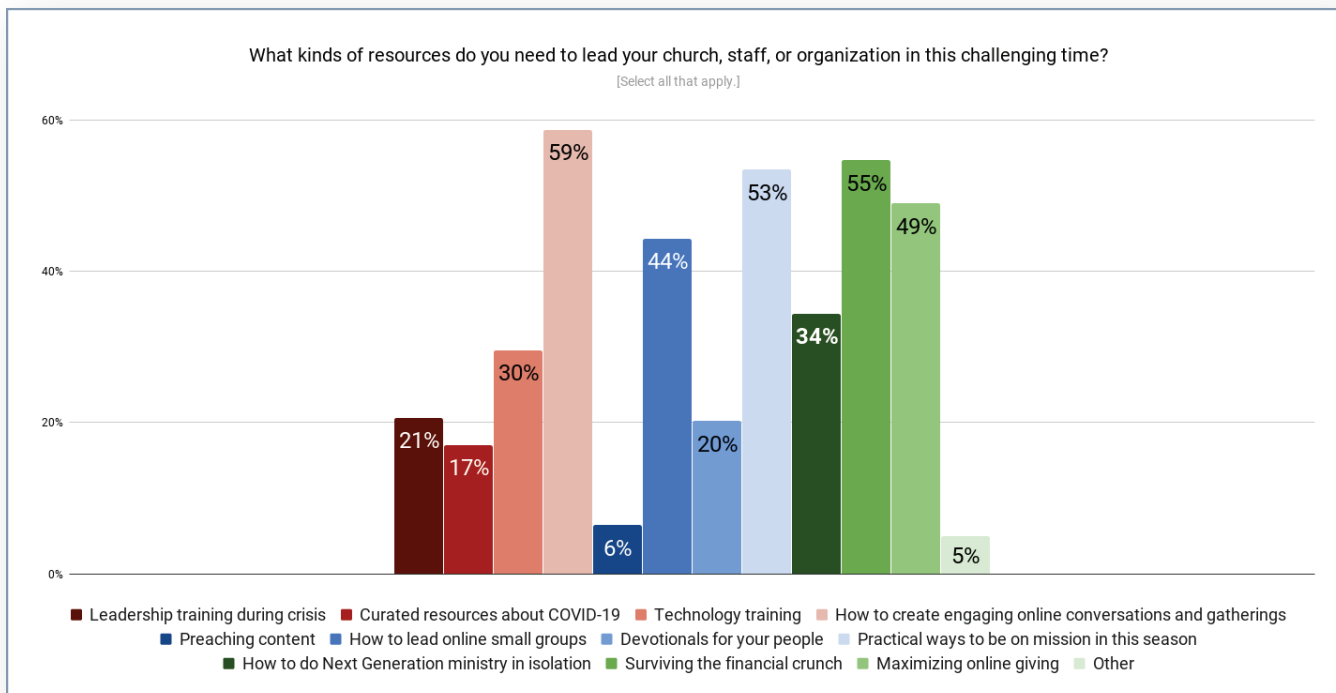
Third, pastors are looking for practical help on how to do ministry in quarantine.

Just as businesses and schools are learning how to operate within the requirements of a prolonged quarantine, churches are thinking through how to adapt every element of their weekly routines. While pastors might have been looking for information or encouragement in the early days of the epidemic, their overwhelming request is for practical advice. When asked "What kinds of resources do you need to lead your church, staff, or organization in this challenging time?" the most common request was for how to create engaging online conversations and gatherings (59 percent). Perhaps recognizing that their initial services were not as fruitful as hoped, pastors are looking for resources to help adapt their content and platforms.

> "Churches are thinking through how to adapt every element of their weekly routines."

Pastors are similarly looking for practical help in major areas of ministry outside of Sunday services. A majority of respondents asked for resources on how to be on mission (53 percent) as traditional avenues of face-to-face outreach and serving are no longer viable. Even as many recognize the opportunity to witness in the midst of a crisis, given governmental restrictions and individual health concerns, understanding the when and how is difficult. Churches also requested practical tips on how to construct online small groups (44 percent). With a variety of online programs, discerning how to best equip leaders to host engaging bible studies and prayer time from their homes can be challenging.

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What kinds of resources do you need to lead your church, staff, or organization in this challenging time?

[Select all that apply.]

- Leadership training during crisis: 21%
- Curated resources about COVID-19: 17%
- Technology training: 30%
- How to create engaging online conversations and gatherings: 59%
- Preaching content: 6%
- How to lead online small groups: 44%
- Devotionals for your people: 20%
- Practical ways to be on mission in this season: 53%
- How to do Next Generation ministry in isolation: 34%
- Surviving the financial crunch: 55%
- Maximizing online giving: 49%
- Other: 5%

Interestingly, the least requested selection was preaching content at only 6 percent. Despite an explosion of online preaching content produced in the last two weeks and pastors regularly cite technology and/or a struggle to connect via online mediums, it seems that continuing to preach to their own people is still a high priority. Upon reflection, pastors may want to consider whether they might better serve the congregations by partnering with other organizations for preaching content in an effort to free up time to focus on connecting. If only for a brief period of time, this might help address the underlying obstacles cited in an earlier question.
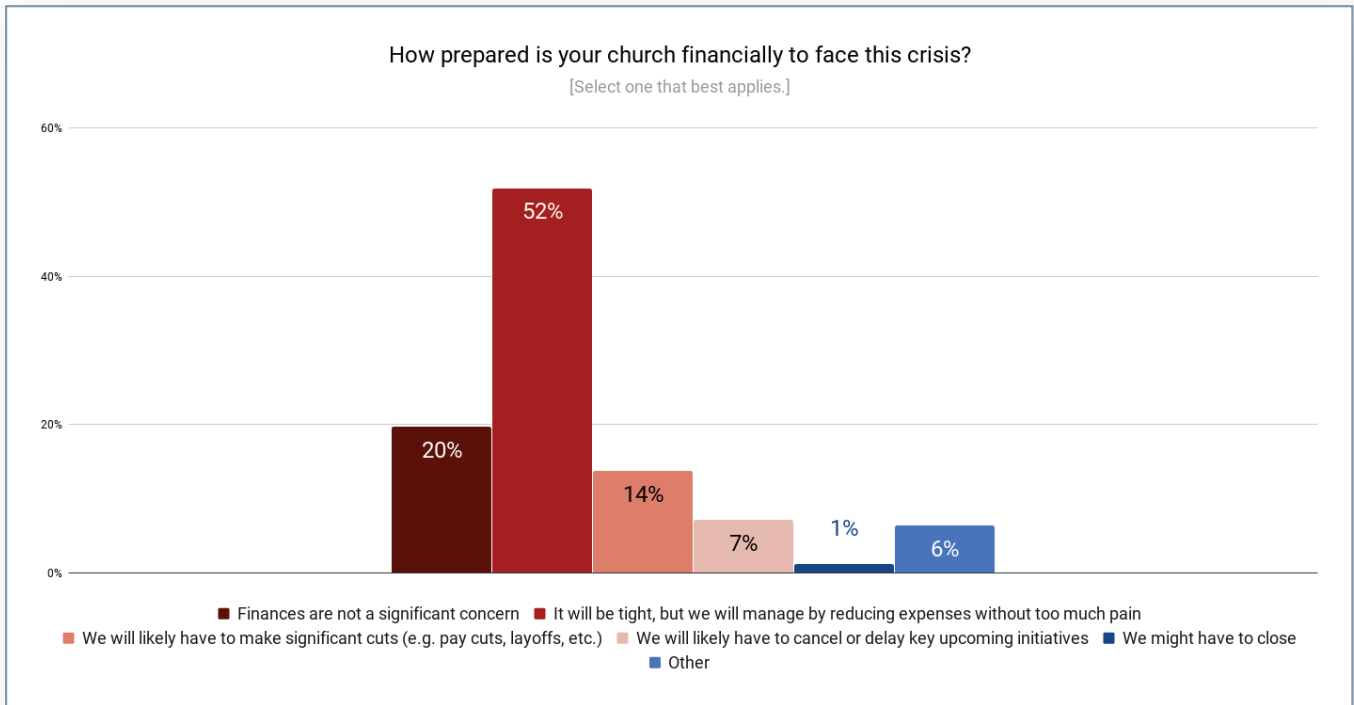
Finally, while pastors are confident about finances, they recognize the coming challenge.

In the wake of the pandemic, the bulk of the energy in churches has understandably gone to adapting services and ministries in addition to caring for the needs of the congregation. While the economy has stumbled and many congregants have either lost their job or been put on temporary leave, the ripple effects on church giving have not yet been fully realized.

This is reflected in pastoral responses to questions about finances. In answer to the question, "How prepared is your church financial to face this crisis?" over half (52 percent) of pastors noted that it would be tight but they would manage by reducing expenses without too much pain. An additional 20 percent responded that finances are not a significant concern. However, 7 percent of churches reported they would likely have to cancel or delay key upcoming initiatives and 14 percent admitted the likelihood of significant cuts including pay cuts and layoffs. Critically, many of the 6 percent of respondents who selected "other" specified either uncertainty over the budgetary implications or that if it lasted more than the few months they'd be in financial trouble. This number is likely to grow as tithing slows in the coming weeks and churches gain a clearer understanding of their financial trajectory. We will focus on this in subsequent surveys.

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How prepared is your church financially to face this crisis?

[Select one that best applies.]

- ■ Finances are not a significant concern   ■ It will be tight, but we will manage by reducing expenses without too much pain
- ■ We will likely have to make significant cuts (e.g. pay cuts, layoffs, etc.)   ■ We will likely have to cancel or delay key upcoming initiatives   ■ We might have to close
- ■ Other

Predictably, churches who are concerned over the financial implications of the pandemic skew smaller. Of those respondents who replied that they might have to close, 53 percent were pastors of churches under 50 members while only one pastor of a churches 500 voiced similar concerns. This might also be due to the bi-vocational nature of many small church pastorates where second jobs may be at risk due to an economic slowdown.

Despite the relative optimism on church finances, the challenge of financial issues is clearly still on the minds of pastors. When asked "What kinds of resources do you need to lead your church, staff, or organization in this challenging time?" a significant percentage of respondents requested help managing financial concerns. Over a majority of pastors

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(55 percent) asked for content on how to survive the financial crunch. Similarly, 49 percent of pastors polled requested content on how to maximize online giving. This is not necessarily tied to concerns over finances as much as a recognition that many members have never given online. Even as pastors are for now focused on connecting to and leading their people, their economic reality is not lost on them. Pastors clearly need help in considering how best to lead their organizations while being sensitive to the underlying health crisis.

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Innovations

We asked pastors and church leaders to respond with innovative strategies or platforms they are using to facilitate church meetings and ministry. Some of the most common answers include:

1. Church hosts daily Facebook live, zoom, etc. devotional or Q/A. Subject is usually fear, God's sovereignty/ love, or evangelism.

2. Small Groups gathering in person to watch sermons; only where this was still allowed by government orders.

3. Small Groups using online platforms to gather for discussion, prayer, bible study, and games (most common were Zoom, Facebook, and Microsoft Teams).

4. Daily newsletter email or video; often focused on bible verses, curated articles, or video clips on YouTube of worship or teaching from other sources.

5. "How To" videos (tutorials) for online activities (using zoom, Facebook live, giving online, accessing streams).

6. Established specific ministries with volunteers and coordinating leaders focused on delivering meals, supplies, medicine, etc. for those most vulnerable. Some specified relying extensively on young people as they were less likely to be impacted by the virus.

7. Coordinated phone calls to every member/attendee; either split up among leadership or assigned to specific volunteers as a new ministry.

8. Several churches were using their parking lots or drive-in movie theaters to create a "drive in" experience for churches.

9. Drafting letters and/or care packages for members' neighbors for them to hand out; focus on introduction, exchange cell numbers, and offer of help/prayer.

Aside from these common practices, there were several innovations that might be helpful to churches, so we are sharing them here.

1. Creating "COVID-19 Kits" filled with toilet paper, hand sanitizer, and dried goods, etc. (cost ~5$); distributing them in low-income neighborhoods.

2. Turning the church into a daycare specifically for healthcare and safety workers (done in cooperation with the city in order to comply with "essential" tag).

3. Delivering sanitized iPads to nursing homes quarantined from visitors so they can connect with family and church services.

4. For high church sacrament observance, set up 5 minute slots throughout the week for families to drive up to observe communion.

5. Downscaled production value; transformed stage into "living room" to emphasize intimacy of worship and preaching.

6. Providing mobile devices along with directions on how to access the streaming services/apps. For churches without the budget to secure enough devices, members with older devices (phones, tablets, computers) they are no longer using can be donated for this purpose if still in working condition.

7. Launched a website aimed at caring for the community (www.covidcare757.com; 757 is area code). Focus on scripture, prayer requests, and offers of assistance.

8. Introduced a 21 day plan of scripture, group devotions, and worship every day at specific times; designed to help congregants establish a new routine in quarantine around church life.

9. Organized the church into groups of 3 households each; focus on caring for each other and checking in. Purpose is to help with oversight by leaders. Ask the "triads" to do ministry together (participate in Sunday service, witness in their neighborhood, pray together, etc.)

10. Drive through food pantry; partnered with the town to host supplies.

11. Setting up "stations of the cross" style prayer in a local park close to the church. At each people find scripture that can be read with their bible app. Posted virtual version of the tour for those at risk to participate.

Conclusions

Significant work is needed in the coming weeks and months to understand the impact of COVID-19 on the church. At this point, we cannot draw concrete conclusions this early into such an unprecedented season. Churches are learning to adapt to new technologies and forging new partnerships that would have been unthinkable only a month ago. Yet this report provides a basic feel for where things are currently as pastors and lay Christians scramble to respond.

As such, we can see that churches are overwhelmingly embracing online services while focusing significant attention on compensating for its weakness in substantively connecting their people. In light of this challenge, pastors are looking for intensely practical resources to help them address this gap between them and their people. However, while pastors remain focused on helping their people transition to remote church life, the reality of the coming financial crunch is clearly still in their minds.

While churches have made their first steps in navigating the transitions to online services and remote ministry, we are only at the beginning of the crisis. As we move into the challenge of caring for the sick, addressing the fears and anxieties of those dealing with loss, and managing organizations with financial and labor deficiencies, the church must be prepared for what lies ahead. How pastors and church leaders minister to their people and communities during this season will likely shape the coming years for churches. There is ample opportunity but now is the time to think innovatively, to work in unity and collaboration, and to remain focused on the mission of the church—to show and share the love of Christ in this and every time.

> **"Now is the time to think innovatively, to work in unity and collaboration, and to remain focused on the mission of the church."**

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The Billy Graham Center, Send Institute, and Exponential are grateful to Leadership Network, Catalyst, discipleship.org and the Association of Related Churches (ARC) for their support and partnership in this survey and report.

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For additional resources:

- *CoronavirusAndTheChurch.com, a partnership with Saddleback Church's PEACE Plan, the Billy Graham Center, and the Humanitarian Disaster Institute.*

- *Leadership in the Coronavirus Crisis podcast (StetzerLeadershipPodcast.com)*

- *Information for Pastors on COVID-19 (https://exponential.org/covid-19/)*

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