

An aerial photograph of a city, likely Los Angeles, showing a dense urban landscape with various buildings and streets. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent green filter. The text is centered over the image.

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

SECOND ROUND SURVEY

COVID-19 Church Survey
Summary Report
April 21, 2020

This resource is provided in a collaborative effort by The Billy Graham Center's Send Institute, Exponential, Leadership Network, Discipleship.org, and ARC.

COVID-19 Survey of Pastors and Church Leaders

Second Round Survey – April 21, 2020

The world is changing rapidly. Initiatives and solutions that were fresh only a few weeks ago now ring stale in the minds of leaders, searching for ideas to keep pace in the changing context. While we understood the gravity of COVID-19 several weeks ago, few could have anticipated—and indeed many still do not fully appreciate—the depth of change we are living through.

In our initial survey, we uncovered several important issues in the early response of pastors and churches to the virus. For many respondents, the challenges of navigating the initial turn to online church, combined with uncertainty over the length of the crisis, dominated the results. As a result, pastors and church leaders were looking for practical advice on how to effectively make the transition while continuing to minister to their members and communities.

This most recent edition of the survey builds upon many of the same questions while also exploring in greater detail the impact of the crisis upon the financial state of the church and the mental health of the pastor. We are well over a month into the crisis and many have been on shelter-at-home orders for several weeks. This has placed not only a significant strain upon the resources of the church and its members but a burden upon pastors to lead and shepherd through this uncertainty. Even as there are emerging signs of optimism in combating COVID-19, the demands of this season on pastors and church leaders are not likely to lessen in the near future.

As with the previous survey, this is a convenience sample of churches within Exponential and the partnering networks, and is not a random or scientific sample. As such, it represents a snapshot of a subset of churches (connected to these organizations, online, mostly evangelical, willing to respond, etc.), to help church leaders

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get an understanding for how churches are faring and what steps they are taking, as they continue to adapt to remote ministry. The large size of the sample makes it more valuable, and is perhaps the best available snapshot we have until randomized samples can be fielded.

This survey represents 1,937 responses, submitted online from April 13th to 17th of 2020. This survey was conducted in partnership with the Billy Graham Center’s Send Institute,

Exponential, Leadership Network, the Association of Related Churches (ARC), and Discipleship.org. This marks the second survey in what is planned as a series to be repeated over the span of several weeks with willing survey respondents to track responses over time.

This survey yielded several critical takeaways important for pastors and church leaders to consider as they begin to consider issues of reemergence and recovery. For over a month, pastors have needed to be innovative in their services and ministry yet signs of stability in this transition are beginning to emerge. The optimism pastors expressed over financial concerns has continued in this survey although this attitude appears to be in tension with significant declines in giving. Churches continue to prioritize their services and members while seeking help to optimize their other ministries and outreach in quarantine. Even as online articles are the most vital platform for content, many pastors and church leaders are looking for collaborative and discussion based formats for assistance. Finally, this season has witnessed an unprecedented increase in pastoral workload yet leaders remain overwhelmingly positive about their current mental state.

To help equip church leaders for this next phase, this survey includes strategic insights on how churches can respond to the data. In these Future Focus sections, we offer not only next steps but critical resources that may aid churches in responding well.

First, many churches are continuing to innovate in search of the right service format.

When asked about their current approach to corporate worship, 90 percent indicated their services are strictly online. Over half (54 percent) indicated their online services have a different format than their in-person gathering. This marked a six percent increase from the first survey. Thirty-six percent indicated that their online services are following the same format as their in-person gathering, nearly the same as the first survey. Moreover, among the pastors and church leaders who completed both surveys, 15 percent have changed their in-person gathering format to a different one. In essence, an increasing percentage of pastors and church leaders are experimenting with different online formats to find the expression that best suits their members and community.

This desire for innovation is also reflected in a shift in the kinds of resources churches are looking for during this season. The survey asked, “What kinds of resources do you need to lead your church, staff, or organization in this challenging time?” In response, 40 percent of pastors and church leaders asked for technology training, a notable surge from the 30 percent of respondents in the previous survey. While most churches have successfully transitioned to livestream and conference calls, churches are looking for help in leveraging new technology to create engaging experiences for their people and/or to reach out to those spiritually interested in their communities.

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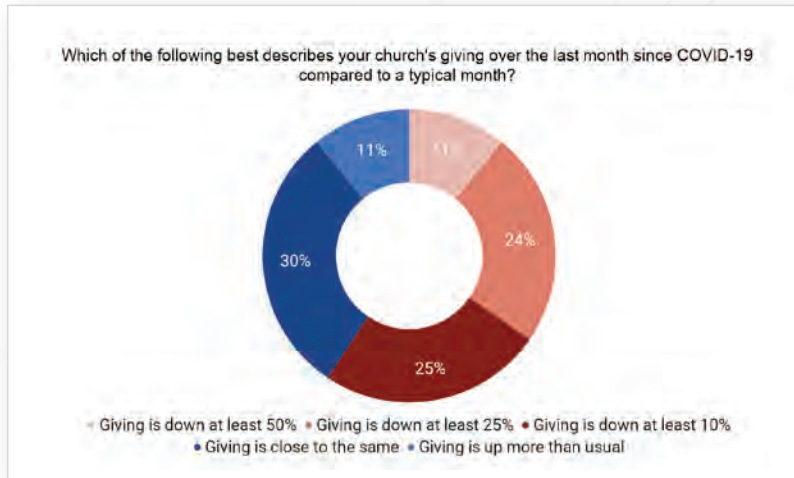
At the same time, there are signs pastors and church leaders are gaining confidence in their current online Sunday services. When asked how best to describe their future plans for corporate worship, the percentage of pastors and church leaders who answered they were going to continue as they are now was up from 27 to 39 percent while those who were uncertain and taking things one week at a time dropped from 53 to 40 percent. This trend was especially distinct among those who responded to both surveys with nearly a quarter (23 percent) switching their answer to continuing what they are doing now.

FUTURE FOCUS

As you establish a normal rhythm around your online weekend services, this is a good time to focus on discipling both existing and potential leaders. Depending on your state guidelines, in the next few weeks to months, smaller groups may be able to meet again in person. This is a good time to begin thinking about what leaders need emotionally and spiritually in order to lead effectively through the spring and summer months. Watch this webinar, *Rise of the Microchurch*, for how to think about decentralizing churches for missional engagement: exponential.org/microchurch-webinar

Second, optimism on finances remains high despite widespread decreases in giving.

As with the initial report, and perhaps surprisingly, the majority of pastors and church leaders remain optimistic regarding finances. When asked how prepared their church is to face the financial crisis, over 80 percent indicated they are either not concerned or that expenses can be reduced without too much pain. Over a quarter



(28 percent) report that finances are not a concern while over half (53 percent) responded that while it will be tight it would not be too painful. Similar to the previous survey, few leaders indicated a concern that layoffs were likely (nine percent) or that key initiatives would have to be cancelled (six percent). In addition, there was a notable increase from the previous poll by those pastors and church leaders who reported finances were not a significant concern—rising from 20 to 28 percent while those citing a likelihood of significant cuts or layoffs falling from 14 to nine percent. Moreover, among pastors and church leaders who completed both

surveys, those that changed their answer from finances being tight to not a significant concern was double those who switched the other way (10 percent to five percent). In essence, not only are pastors and church leaders optimistic but this attitude seems to be increasing even as economic figures falter.

Pastoral optimism was likewise reflected in the kinds of resources pastors and church leaders were looking for during this season. Across the two surveys there was a significant decline in pastors and church leaders looking for resources to help surviving the financial crunch (55 percent declined to 33 percent) and help maximizing giving (49 percent declined to 39 percent). Given the passage of the CARES Act in late March, it is possible that this financial aid allayed many of the concerns of church leaders. Our next round of surveys will address this question.

This confidence is unexpected as we believed that, as the impact of the crisis upon the economy deepened and church members faced unemployment, pastors and church leaders might register a deeper financial crunch. Indeed, this survey did report significant declines in church giving that seemed contrary to the confidence pastors and church leaders have expressed. While 30 percent of pastors and church leaders reported that giving was close to the same, over 60 percent have seen their giving go down. This includes a quarter (25 percent) saying that giving was down at least 10 percent and nearly another quarter (24 percent) at least 25 percent. Most concerning is the 11 percent of pastors and church leaders who replied that giving was down by at least 50 percent.

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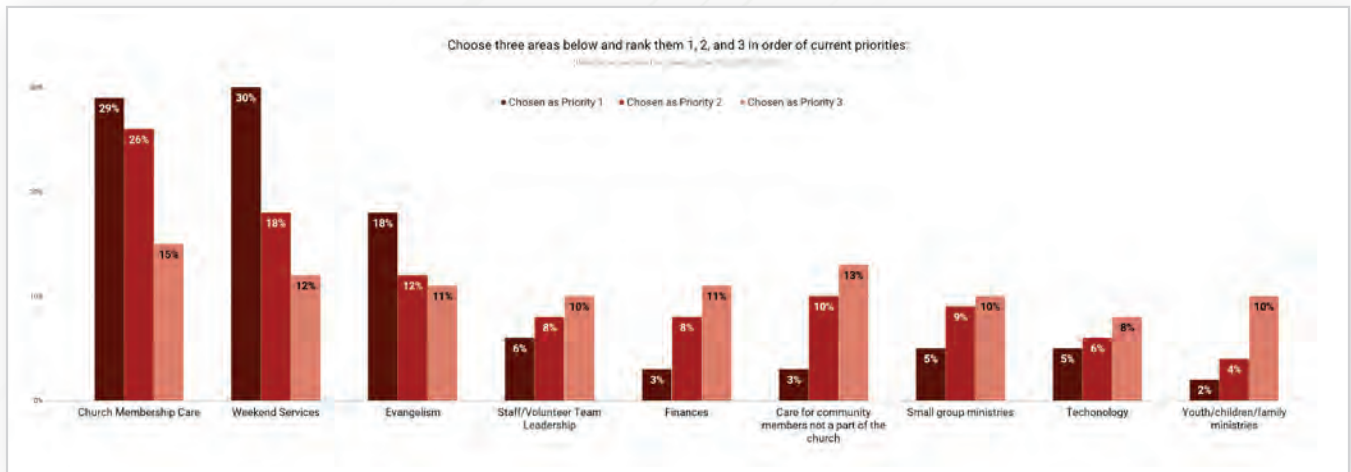
This decline in giving was felt most acutely by rural, urban, and small churches. Among churches that reported a decline of at least 25 percent, rural (41 percent) and urban (44 percent) were notably higher than suburban churches (31 percent). Similarly, 25 percent of churches under fifty recorded giving declining by at least half compared to only four percent of churches over five hundred. Thus, even as pastors and church leaders are increasingly optimistic about giving, there has been widespread and, at least for many churches, deep losses in giving. For these churches, this level of financial recalibration, if prolonged, will have significant and ongoing financial implications.

FUTURE FOCUS

Even as some churches are doing well financially, many are struggling. It is critical at this juncture in the crisis for established churches to begin or continue to support church plants and missionaries. For churches that are able to help other struggling churches, a new ministry called *Churches Helping Churches* was established to coordinate this effort. Go to their website to learn how to give a grant or to apply for one: churchrelief.org

Third, Sunday services and church members continue to be leading priorities.

One of the main struggles for pastors and church leaders in this crisis is to narrow and refine their ministry priorities. The rush to move services online has been followed by a slow evolution in the rest of church ministries and outreach to adapt to the new socially isolated reality. Thus, when we asked pastors and church leaders to rank their three top current priorities, the weekend service and church membership care were the far most common top priority (30 percent and 29 percent respectively) followed by evangelism (18 percent). No other selection registered above six percent as a top priority. When accounting for either a first or second priority, 48 percent of pastors or church leaders selected weekend services, 54 percent selected church membership care, and 29 selected evangelism. In other words, these three ministry areas are the leading priorities among pastors and church leaders during this season of remote ministry.



While pastors and church leaders are prioritizing Sunday services, they continue to look for help in how to engage their people and communities despite social distancing restrictions. The survey asked, “What kinds of resources do you need to lead your church, staff, or organization in this challenging time?”

TOP PRIORITIES:

1. Weekend service
2. Church membership care
3. Evangelism

The top two answers remained how to create engaging online conversations and gatherings (61 percent) and practical ways to be on mission in this season (55 percent). Thus, even as churches have had several weeks to innovate in their gatherings and outreach, pastors and church leaders are still highly motivated to improve.

FUTURE FOCUS

Many churches are familiar with the UP (worship), IN (practicing “one anothers”), and OUT (evangelism and mercy) framework for ministry and discipleship. These first weeks were a significant effort to develop the UP and IN rhythms in this new norm. During Holy Week, many discovered through their OUT engagement that the unchurched have a unique spiritual interest right now. It is a worthwhile effort for you to keep the OUT posture from Holy Week into the spring and summer months, both in word and in deed. See Mike Frost’s list of *35 Ways to Love Your Neighbors Right Now*, Ed Stetzer’s “*Evangelism in the time of Coronavirus*,” and Rick Richardson’s “*Witness in the time of the Coronavirus*.”

Fourth, collaborative platforms are emerging as critical resources sought by church leaders.

When we asked pastors and church leaders what modes of resources have been most effective in deciding how to lead through the crisis, the online articles (61 percent) was the most common answer. However, there is a discernable emphasis upon community based learning among pastors and church leaders as effective formats. Pastor cohorts/regular support groups (53 percent), webinars (48 percent), and conference calls/roundtables (39 percent) were the next three responses, signaling a desire among pastors and church leaders to engage other leaders with their questions and ideas rather than strictly consume media. This is further reflected in the low response to online courses (12 percent) and newsletters (11 percent).

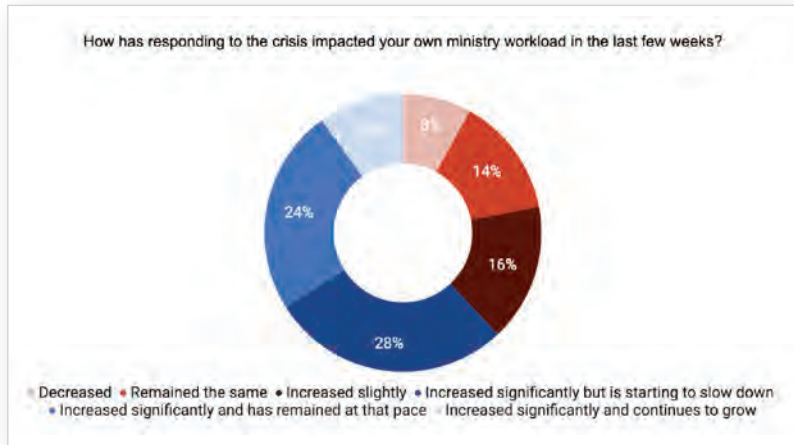
Moreover, content producers should be warned that pastors and church leaders overwhelmingly report an oversaturation with the level of content for church leaders. Nineteen percent of respondents *strongly* agreed while 42 percent somewhat agreed that they were feeling oversaturated compared to only 10 percent that disagreed to any extent. As the shift to online has produced a deluge of new media, pastors may be struggling to sort through the mass to find the content relevant to their priorities.

FUTURE FOCUS

Pastors and church leaders are looking for good information and support systems. If you are a network leader, it’s not too late to develop pastoral cohorts to think through an intentional strategy for how to lead through and out of the pandemic. This is a vital opportunity for pastors and church leaders to make long lasting changes that will further decentralize ministry work in the direction of member mobilization and missional engagement. You can learn more from Catapult Group about designing pastoral cohorts in the midst of this crisis: wearecatapult.org/6weekcoachinggroups

Finally, church leaders are generally positive about their mental state despite significant workload increases.

This crisis has predictably resulted in a significant increase in workload for pastors and church leaders. As the burden to not only lead their organizations through a fundamental reorientation of how they operate, pastors and church leaders are also tasked with caring for their people during an unprecedented season of fear, loss, and isolation.

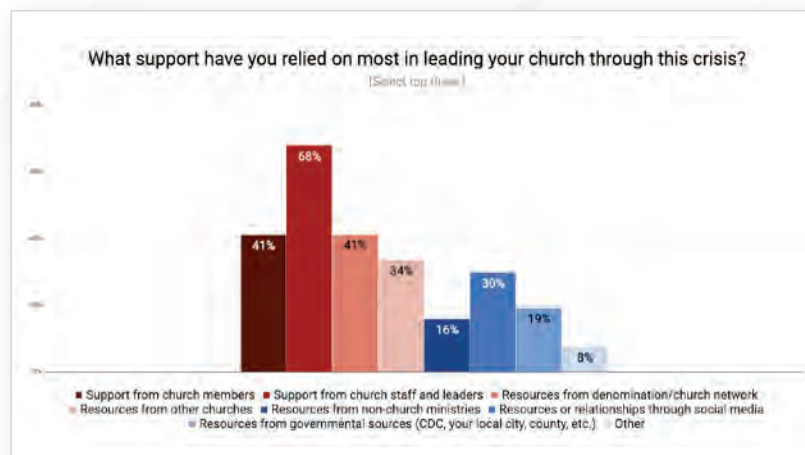


As a result, more than three of every five pastors and church leaders report a significant increase in their workload with 11 percent stating that it has only continued to grow in recent weeks. While the largest block report that this workload is beginning to slow (28 percent), it is not clear what new equilibrium will be established nor whether pastors and church leaders are going to be able to recuperate from the energy expended over the past month.

Despite this increase, pastors and church leaders are optimistic in describing their mental state. The three most common

answers (Hopeful – 46 percent; Encouraged – 38 percent; and Resilient – 33 percent) are positive and speak to the attitude many pastors and church leaders have to the possibility for this crisis to bear fruit in their churches and communities despite it's the current challenges. In contrast, few pastors and church leaders selected the negative attributes commonly associated with burnout such as Lonely (four percent) or Struggling (seven percent). It is important to note, however, that the two leading negative attributes, Exhausted (21 percent) and Uncertain (20 percent) reflect the toll this season has had upon pastoral health even as they remain generally positive. This tension was reflected in the qualitative answers as many pastors and church leaders remarked that they were tired but were quick to temper this admission with a positive attribute such as determined or focused.

Anticipating this burden, we asked pastors and church leaders what top three sources have been the most helpful to them as they lead through this crisis. Despite the widespread online communities and fellowships, many of the most common responses emphasized local relationships within the congregation with over two thirds (68 percent) selecting support from church staff and leaders and 41 percent citing support from church members. These were followed by resources from denomination/church networks (41 percent) and resources from other churches (33 percent). That governmental sources (19 percent) and resources from non-church ministries (16 percent) were the lowest responses may signal that in times of uncertainty, pastors and church leaders are turning to networks and sources with whom they have longstanding trust and relationship.



FUTURE FOCUS

What started as a sprint has turned into a marathon. Pastors and church leaders who are continuing at an unsustainable pace are needing to begin to make place for long term sustainability both for their organizations and themselves. This means that conversations and practices around self-care and soul care are vital perhaps more vital than ever. More than a month into responding to the crisis, it is essential that you, your family, and your leaders find a new normal rhythm for ministry. Especially one that is healthy enough to want to keep after the pandemic is over. We have partnered with many other reputable groups to develop resources for pastors and leaders to focus on their own health during this time: resilientchurchleadership.com.

In conclusion, like much of the world, church leadership is in flux. There are significant and ongoing questions about how best to respond. As financial giving is trending down, pastors and church leaders have remained positive. However, if downward trends continue, that will probably change.

In some ways, the data shows that pastors and church leaders have successfully adapted their ministries and people to the situation. At the same time, there remains a strong impulse to search for more innovative and effective ways to nurture congregations and engage communities. This need will only continue to place major burdens on pastors and church leaders as questions of reemergence begin to take precedence. Thus, it is more important than ever in the coming weeks for leaders to develop healthy rhythms of ministry and rest. This would be greatly aided by the continued seeking out of ongoing resources and communities that equip and refresh pastors to meet the demands of effective ministry during such an unrepresented season.

Report by Andrew MacDonald, Ed Stetzer, Todd Wilson, and Daniel Yang.

This resource is provided in a collaborative effort by:

