

Impact of COVID-19 on UMC Local Churches – Study Highlights

Project Details

Goal: Support local congregations by understanding what they are facing and how they have sought to continue services and ministries.

Research Objectives:

1. Assess the impact of the coronavirus on local church activity levels
2. Determine the ways local churches are adapting
3. Identify interest in resources and tools to support local church adaptation

Methodology: Online survey using internal database and Survey Monkey platform

Sample: Convenience sample of pastors and lay leaders targeting pastor and church office emails from UMC internal database (21 questions / 3 open ends / 8 minutes).

Field Dates: March 26-30, 2020, nearly 1000 completes.

Topline Findings

- ▶ Almost two-thirds (63%) of respondents are from churches with less than 100 average weekly attendance, and two-thirds (66%) of respondents describe their church as rural or small town. According to GCFA data, small churches are slightly underrepresented. *Larger churches are concentrated in suburban/urban areas. Over half of the smallest churches (< 50) are in rural areas. The medium sized churches are spread across the different areas.*
- ▶ Two-thirds (67%) are using online or livestream worship during the crisis, and 14% have cancelled all services. *Canceling all services is more prevalent in smaller churches, with only 37% indicating they are using an online or livestreamed worship.*
- ▶ Guidance from Bishop or Annual Conference (82%) and state or national government (72%) most influenced coronavirus crisis approach to worship. *Regardless of size, churches equally rely on conversations with other nearby churches.*
- ▶ Two-thirds (66%) plan to continue their current approach to worship, and 13% are unsure of their plans. *Smaller churches are less certain of their future plans.*
- ▶ Almost half (46%) are livestreaming to Facebook or YouTube. Only 5% livestream to their website. *Facebook seems to be the “go to” for smaller churches, if they are livestreaming at all. Larger churches indicate use of multiple methods.*
- ▶ The biggest obstacle to online worship is “connecting with people who are not digitally connected” (73%). *For smaller churches this seems to translate into lack of technology resources (access, knowledge and funds).*
- ▶ Almost half (48%) have canceled small groups/bible studies, and 24% are meeting online. *Large churches seem to have transitioned small groups to online meetings, while smaller churches have had to cancel, likely a symptom of lack of digital connection to parishioners.*

- ▶ 63% say they have canceled onsite services to children and youth (e.g. BSA, daycare). *No differences by church size.*
- ▶ 47% have canceled all on site community services (e.g. AA). *Larger churches seem to be continuing some onsite community service activities. This could be an area worth exploring further to understand the types of activities – school, homeless, jobs, elderly care, and food pantry.*
- ▶ 56% continue to provide volunteers to community service projects. This may be the only way they reach people who are not digitally connected. *No differences by church size.*
- ▶ Most (59%) say “finances are tight, but they can manage by reducing expenses”, and 15% say “finances are not a concern”. The remainder expect to make significant changes. *Finances are more of a concern for smaller churches.*
- ▶ Over three-fourths (76%) say church giving is down. One-third (34%) say giving is down more than 40%. *Giving is down more among smaller churches.*
- ▶ Slightly over half (52%) offer some form of electronic giving at their church. *Larger churches provide electronic giving opportunities. Fewer smaller churches do.*
- ▶ The most beneficial financial resources needed during this crisis are “Tips on surviving financial crunch” and “Maximizing online giving”. *Smaller churches are interested in how to setup ACH and PayPal.*
- ▶ Most needed resources to help churches adjust to the coronavirus crisis are things that will help reach their community and their parishioners spiritually and digitally:
 - 36% - Practical ways to be in mission to our community
 - 34% - Devotional support for members
 - 26% - How To support in setting up an online worship experience
 - 25% - Information on setting up livestreaming opportunities
 - 25% - Initiating social media conversations

Content and coronavirus resources are lower on their list of needs. *Smaller churches need help livestreaming and setting up online worship.*

One thing that seems to be clear – heavy reliance on digital communication does not work for smaller churches – now and not in the past – probably not in the future – without a significant investment in technology.

We hope you can take a moment to review this information and consider how it can inform your work.

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