



Ministry Brands

Coping with COVID-19: Insights from Church Leaders



An Overview of How COVID-19 is Impacting Churches

As America continues to struggle with the impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19), the nation's churches are facing a unique set of challenges. Churches are experiencing lower giving income due to fewer in-person services. Staff and members are having difficulty transitioning to virtual ministries, which are often not fully understood within the context of the pandemic.

To present a more complete picture of the impact of COVID-19 on church finances, staffing, programming, engagement, and communications, Ministry Brands — the leading provider of software, services, and information platforms for churches, ministries, and those they serve — launched a series of wide-ranging surveys to client churches across denominations.

Over 1,400 church leaders from across the country responded, giving firsthand insights into how COVID-19 has affected faith communities. We also uncovered how churches are using technology to sustain and expand their ministries during these unprecedented times.

Ministry Brands is excited to share this research to help all stakeholders, including the clergy, church members, journalists, opinion leaders, and policy makers, better understand the challenges and opportunities facing churches as a result of COVID-19.



The Impact of COVID-19 on Giving Income and Church Finances

Ministry Brands' national surveys show that COVID-19's financial impact on churches is proving to be significant, as fewer in-person services have lowered giving income. Overall, almost 60 percent of respondents indicated that a reduction in giving income is one of the top challenges facing their church. This was particularly noticeable among Catholic churches, a full 67 percent of which expressed concern about reduced giving.

In response to these concerns, there is now an increased use of online giving among church communities of all sizes, across all

denominations. Churches and parishes with robust online giving options established before the pandemic have had the greatest success in inspiring their members to continue and even increase their giving. But many churches are now using online giving for the first time and must confront the need to help members better understand the importance of making online and recurring gifts.

Despite this financial uncertainty, churches continue to show resilience and determination. Overall, 85 percent of survey respondents indicated that their churches have not been forced to make reductions in church staff, while 88 percent reported that they have not had to downgrade or cancel technology and software subscriptions as a result of financial challenges.

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In-Person Worship, Mass, and Sacraments Remain Important

Responses to the Ministry Brands surveys illustrate that in-person worship, Mass, and sacraments remain important for members and parishioners. Churches are also dedicated to maintaining in-person worship while following local and state guidelines. **Across all denominations, 74 percent of responding churches are holding some combination of online services and in-person, socially distanced gatherings.** Among Catholic parishes, 83 percent are offering in-person and online services, while 64 percent of Protestant churches have maintained both forms of worship.

At the same time, 18 percent of all churches surveyed are holding online-only services, while 8 percent are offering only in-person gatherings. In these results, there is a significant contrast between Catholic and Protestant communities. While 38 percent of Protestant churches have switched to online-only worship formats, just 1 percent of Catholic churches have done so. Meanwhile, 13 percent of Catholic survey respondents shared that their churches are only offering in-person services, compared to just three individual respondents representing Protestant churches. No survey respondents indicated

that their churches have completely suspended worship services or Masses.

Among Catholic churches, almost 50 percent responded that they have resumed sacraments such as baptisms, confirmations, funerals, and weddings, with social distancing and other safeguards being observed. Of those that have not, most planned to by October 2020 at the latest, or as state and local governments allowed re-openings.

As services continue and capacity levels increase based on state and local guidelines, churches are now exploring options for COVID-19 contact tracing and communications. Overall, 57 percent of respondents indicated that this as a challenge facing their church.

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Churches Look to Technology to Engage Their Members

As church leaders have confronted the financial challenges sparked by COVID-19, they sought ways to maintain in-person worship. They are also seizing new opportunities to use technology and digital innovations to communicate and stay connected with church members.

Over 93 percent of survey respondents indicated that online worship and livestreamed services are important options for engaging with members and parishioners. There is a greater reliance on in-person Mass among Catholic churches. Most Catholic respondents — a full 88 percent — did select online Mass as an important engagement tool. However, 85% of Catholic churches believe in-person Mass is vital as well, a far greater percentage than Protestant.

Social media is a widely accepted and utilized engagement resource for all denominations. Approximately 80 percent of respondents highlighted that Facebook and other social media channels were a significant way to virtually build engagement with members. Email and newsletters are also popular tools for all churches, according to over 75 percent of survey participants.



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Close to 50 percent of survey respondents indicated that text messaging or mass communication is an important resource. However, the emphasis was greater among Protestant church leaders. In our surveys, 64 percent of Protestant respondents highlighted this as an engagement tool compared to just 35 percent of Catholic parishes. Phone calls are still important for church engagement, according to 66 percent of all survey respondents. Feedback from churches indicates that the process could be simplified with mass communication tools.

Perhaps the greatest opportunity for churches to improve member communications is through mobile apps. Interest in mobile apps peaked during COVID-19 but they remain underutilized. Overall, just 23 percent of churches identify mobile apps as an engagement tool they are using, with greater use being noted among Protestant churches than Catholic parishes.

One significant concern among churches, especially Protestant denominations, is the difficulty in tracking visitor and member engagement at a time when church life has, to a large extent, shifted to “virtual” mode. This was highlighted as a specific concern by 68 percent of Protestant churches taking part in the Ministry Brands surveys.

Finally, though some in-person meetings are taking place, churches and parishes are seeing the value in online small groups and virtual meeting providers such as Zoom or GoToMeeting. Over 60 percent of responding churches selected video conferencing as a current engagement tool, with Protestant churches almost twice as likely than Catholic parishes to be utilizing this technology.

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Churches Are Resuming and Adapting Their Children's Programs

The Ministry Brands surveys found that, while Catholic parishes have been quicker to resume their children's programs, all churches are committed to relaunching kids' ministries as soon as possible.

By the end of August 2020, close to half of Catholic parishes had restarted their Religious Education programs, compared to just over 26 percent of Protestant churches. Of those churches across all denominations that have not resumed children's programs, the majority plan to do so by October 2020.

Technology is directly tied to this aspect of church life as well. All denominations recognize it is important that local and state health guidelines are followed, and as in other areas social distancing will remain in place for the foreseeable future for children's programs — making online activities and engagement vital for churches. Additionally, many churches have struggled with how to seamlessly process payments for their virtual children's programs and religious education — further indicating the importance of technology as faith communities adapt to the realities of COVID-19.

Technology Is Helping Churches and Parishes Bridge the “Communication Gap” — but Some Struggles Remain

As COVID-19 creates a “new normal” for all Americans, there are serious challenges facing faith communities, and the financial impact of the pandemic has been especially profound. But there are also tremendous opportunities for churches to use established and emerging technologies to expand their reach and share the word of God with larger audiences, all while sustaining the financial stability that is vital to successful ministries.

Technology is now a central part of church life, and churches will increasingly look to unified platforms with integrated solutions – for online and recurring giving, media and mass communications, websites, church apps, livestreaming, event registration, and a host of other resources.

As a family of software companies dedicated to empowering churches, ministries, and faith-based organizations in a digital world, Ministry Brands is excited to lead a national dialogue on the challenges and opportunities facing churches in these unprecedented times. Feel free to reach out to Maia Tihista at info@ministrybrands.com with any questions about Ministry Brands’ survey findings, or for more information about how the company is leading churches towards a new way of approaching technology.

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Survey data compiled from 1,400 churches nationwide between July - September 2020.

Ministry Brands is helping more than 115,000 churches thrive in a digital world. To discover a solution to help your faith-based organization thrive during the COVID-19 pandemic, visit ministrybrands.com/our-brands.

