

Pandemic Response Survey – Executive Summary

On October 13, 2020, NationsUniversity® presented a webinar entitled “From Surviving to Thriving: ‘Church’ in the Post-Pandemic Culture”. NationsU was joined by co-sponsors, *The Christian Chronicle*, Mission Alive, and 21st Century Christian, in notifying congregations of this event as well as a request to complete a survey of their practices during the pandemic. In the three weeks before the webinar, 117 congregations completed the survey.

Key data findings from the survey were tabulated and discussed in the webinar and are attached for further consideration. Summary statements for the five content areas are below.

Leadership – Church leaders (ministers, elders or shepherds) found ways to continue to meet with each other and to support each other in responding to challenges as they emerged. With worship services and most opportunities for in-person contact disrupted, church leaders remained connected to members using e-mail, social media, church websites, and phone and text messages. Key themes discussed in the webinar included:

1. Crises result in identification of weaknesses and serve as accelerants for change.
2. Church leaders should consider developing systems of contact so that all members are connected to a specific elder or other leader for communication of concerns and to maintain awareness of issues.
3. Ministers and other leaders should be flexible in their roles and willing to assume different responsibilities to address emerging needs of the congregation during crisis.
4. Elders who maintained an attitude of “how” we meet and “how” we serve functioned significantly better than those who asked “if” we should meet and “if” we should serve.

Worship – During the most restrictive phase of the pandemic, technology became a key area of focus for church leaders and members. Approximately 2/3 of congregations began to livestream worship services during the pandemic. Other solutions included recording worship services and making these available to members on-line. As restrictions on meeting were eased, some groups began to meet outside in chairs or in cars in the church parking lot. Themes discussed in the webinar included:

1. Churches adapted technology gradually over time to address changing needs.
2. Having “production standards” is a way of conveying how serious a congregation is about providing services to others.
3. Continued livestreaming of worship services is planned by many congregations.
4. Continued adaptation is needed post-pandemic to ensure congregations aren’t left behind as societal changes occur.

Education and Communication – Technology including livestreaming and recording classes for later distribution grew five-fold during the pandemic with 50% or more congregations using these educational methods. Many plan to continue classes using Zoom or similar conferencing technology going forward. During the webinar the creative use of Zoom “breakout rooms” was

discussed as a means of allowing smaller facilitated discussion of a sermon or Bible lesson. A free planning resource “Hybrid Guide to Sunday School” is available from 21st Century Christian. They have also shifted to provide education material in both print and digital formats.

Youth and Children – One third of congregations reported cancelling classes and activities entirely for youth and children during the pandemic. As meetings occurred, distancing or outside activities were commonly seen. A significant shift occurred from planned Sunday School curricula to other approaches to educate and build the faith of youth and children, including equipping parents with resources to share their own faith with their children. Creative approaches to Vacation Bible School and other traditional activities were presented. These included a “drive by” VBS as well as streamed or recorded messages on a nightly basis with handouts and activities. Technology played a role in maintaining connections with youth and children in the form of increased use of social media and on-line meetings. Themes discussed during the webinar included:

1. Given the higher degree of need for interaction in youth and children, congregations should consider how to add “high touch” to the “high tech” media used.
 - a. Take-Home Packets to involve children and youth in video lessons.
 - b. Interactive games that can be played online (bingo, scavenger hunts, etc.)
 - c. Involvement of children and youth in making videos for classes.
2. Creative thinking can occur when events are no longer the goal but building faith is.
3. Activities that can involve both children and parents empower parents to be primary Christian educators in the lives of their children and youth.
4. Home-based or neighborhood-based activities can draw other youth, children, and their parents into a congregation.

Evangelism – Due to pandemic isolation use of traditional evangelistic methods decreased. At the same time, growth occurred in evangelistic efforts using social media, technology such as livestreaming, and online Bible study. Recognizing that their on-line presence has grown, many congregations intend to continue livestreaming as a new “digital front door” in evangelism.

Congregations are encouraged to consider three overarching themes:

1. Maintain a focus on sharing the gospel, equipping church members and building faith, regardless of the formats or methods used.
2. Find creative ways to have a personal touch, listen to others and show love as technology use increases (“high tech” must have “high touch”).
3. Recognize that a rush to technology will result in some church members feeling left behind due to lack of resources, knowledge needed to use devices, reluctance to change and other issues. It is important to walk with our church members rather than several steps ahead of them.

An additional free resource, “The Church Reentry Roadmap” is available at www.21stcc.com. Key survey data are presented in tabular form in the pages that follow.