

changing church

AUTUMN SURVEY – MEETINGS AND MONEY

Our research of evangelical churches and Christians show that by October 2020 most churches had resumed meeting weekly (60%); however, less than 30% of evangelical Christians are attending in-person church meetings on a weekly basis.

This is reflected in the average in-person attendance at churches, which stood at 122 before the COVID-19 crisis but is now only 34, while online church services have an average of 126 participants. In the light of the second lockdown in England it is valuable to consider the long road out of the first lockdown for churches and the longer-term trends highlighted. Evidently, the statistics on the number of churches meeting are true for October when the survey took place and will not be true in November where much more stringent restrictions are in place.

In this second report of the findings of our autumn 2020 Changing Church survey we're focusing on meetings and money. The most direct impact for churches at the height of the pandemic was that they had to close public services. Our survey shows that while public services were allowed since early July the road to return for many congregations has been slow and gradual, with many remaining online and most evangelical Christians engaging with online services rather than in-person gatherings. Only 15% of churches resumed meeting in July, and 21% do not plan to restart until 2021 or they are unsure when.

This report digs deeper into what is happening with churches regathering, in their main weekly service, in small groups and with children's work. More than three quarters of church leaders who had resumed meetings cited the lack of social interaction as the biggest challenge; almost as many said not singing was a major challenge. Far fewer said accommodating all who wanted to attend (27%) and enforcing social distancing (34%) were challenging.

We're also taking a look at what is happening to church finances at this time. In a context where economic uncertainty abounds, and many are facing job insecurity or have already lost jobs, it is not a surprise that we found many churches reporting a decrease in donations. Church leaders are concerned about this, with almost a third expecting a decrease over the next three months. What is more encouraging is that most evangelical Christians have remained consistent or even increased their giving: less than 10% have reduced their giving. We also have some insights into why people have changed their giving habits. Almost a quarter of those who have decreased their giving did so because they found giving less convenient or they were not sure how to give. This is helpful as these potential barriers can be easily resolved.

The various lockdowns, firebreaks and tier systems across the UK will pose new challenges to the church. The rollercoaster ride of shutting services, starting up online, working out how to restart, but keeping online options going, to now many returning solely online, has been exhausting. By looking at how we responded as we came out of lockdown over the summer and into the autumn, we hope we can help the church as it does so again.

Be blessed,

Peter Lynas, UK Director

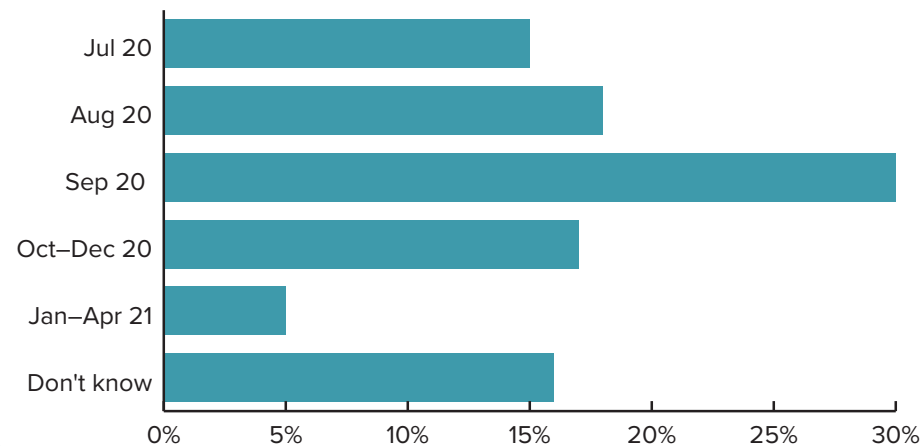
Gathered church

Churches have gradually returned to meeting in person

In July, 15% of churches began meeting in person, and nearly half of all churches resumed in either August or September.

- 21% of churches won't be resuming before the new year, or are unsure of when they will resume.
- Smaller churches are less likely to have resumed meeting and are more likely to be using a platform such as Zoom for video calls for their main weekly services.

When will meeting for church service in person resume? (According to church leaders)



Of those not currently meeting in person, 45% of church leaders state this is due to health concerns. These leaders felt their churches were unable to safely mitigate the risk of spreading COVID-19, or specifically to protect the significant number of 'high risk' members of their congregation.

Singing and social interaction are the biggest challenges for churches as they meet

Where churches are meeting, 77% of leaders identified the lack of social interaction as a challenge, and 72% said the lack of singing is a challenge.

Other concerns for church leaders are:

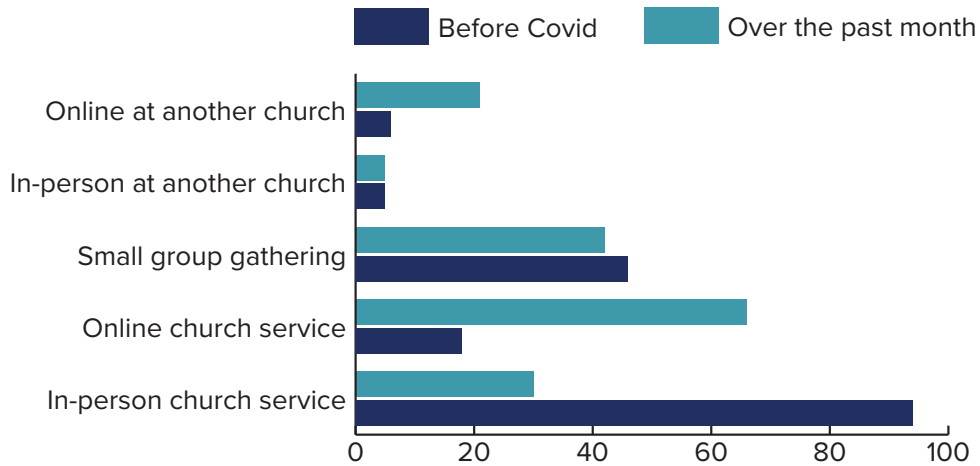
- Being able to accommodate all who want to attend (27%).
- Enforcing social distancing (34%).



Nearly a quarter are visiting other churches

22% of individuals are regularly visiting other churches either online or in person. The number visiting in person is comparable with before the crisis, suggesting a built-in volatility to church attendance; whereas, unsurprisingly, there is a significant increase in those visiting other churches online.

Percentage of individuals attending different services at least weekly (Comparison between before COVID-19 and over the past month)



Looking at who is attending other churches, the most notable difference is at the different age levels:

- Younger adults are much less likely to be attending other churches (just 10% of 25-34 year olds), and
- 11% of 35-44 year olds are doing so weekly.
- This trend is much higher among older people: 30% of 65-74 and 29% of 75-84s.

This could be due to older people being less able to attend physical services that have restarted so watching other services online is a viable option.



Small groups

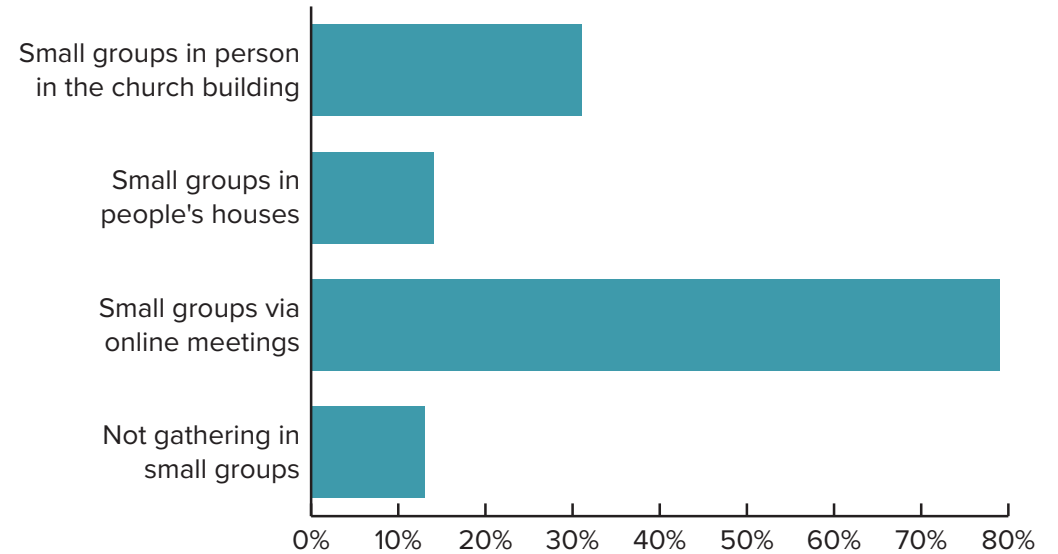
More than four in 10 evangelical Christians take part in weekly small groups

Small group attendance is relatively stable compared to before the coronavirus pandemic. 42% of evangelical Christians are taking part weekly, only slightly lower than before COVID-19 (46%). Small group attendance appears to be correlated with income: people who earn up to £100,000 are more likely to attend a small group.

Since gatherings were first permitted in July, churches have been using their buildings for more than just Sunday services. The stricter rules for meeting in homes has meant many congregations drew small groups, Bible studies and other sessions together in their buildings.

- Eight in 10 evangelical church leaders said they were meeting online for small groups.
- This overlapped with the 31% who were meeting in buildings, and the one in seven meeting in homes.
- Only 8% of churches were meeting for small groups but not doing so at all online.

How small groups are gathering



Children's ministry

Children's ministry has been slow to return to church

This is the area in which churches have been able to resume the least amount of normality.

- Only 28% of evangelical churches are running children's ministry in person.
- More than three out of 10 church leaders are not currently running any children's work.
- The remainder are doing so online.

The most significant factor affecting children's ministry is the size of the church. For larger churches with more than 150 attendees, 90% are providing some form of children's ministry. For smaller churches with fewer than 50 people, this drops to below half.

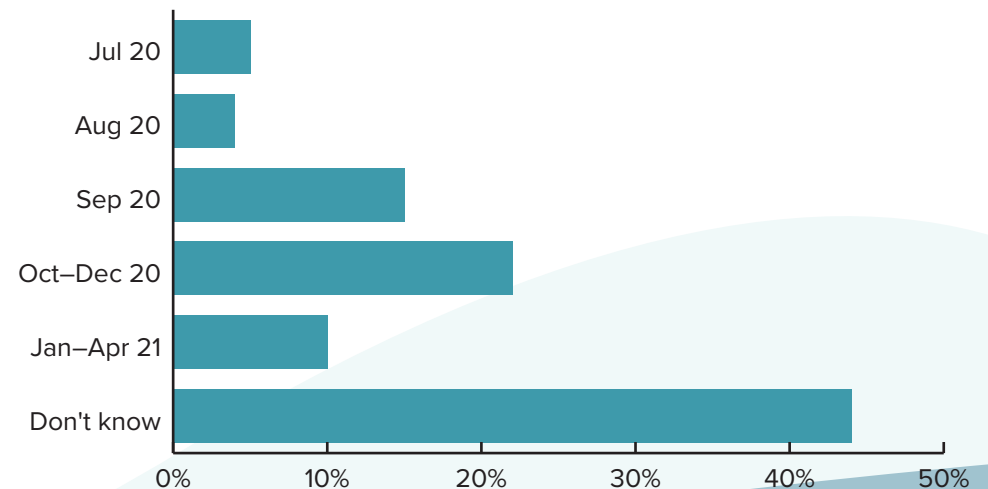
Nearly half of churches do not know when they'll resume children's ministry

This survey was conducted in early October, and with the second England lockdown, the number would likely be much higher just a few weeks later. But it is notable that only 16% of church leaders said they did not know when in-person church services would resume.

However, 44% said they did not know when their children's ministry would resume in person.

Nearly a third of churches feel they do not have either the space or the volunteers required by guidelines, with just 4% feeling they do not sufficiently understand the guidelines.

When will meeting for in person children's ministry resume? (According to church leaders)



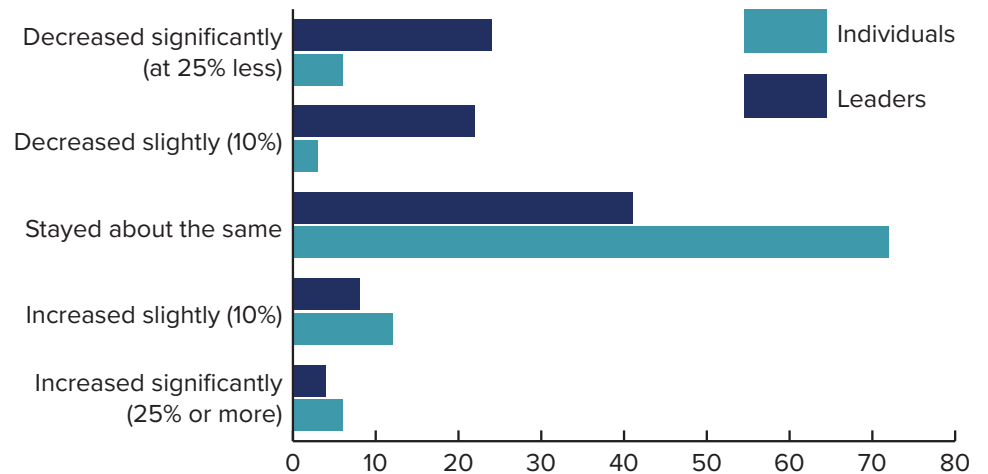
Finance

Leaders are seeing giving drop while those attending have maintained or increased their giving.

Generally, church leaders feel that the amount they receive in donations has decreased, whilst the church attendee results show a slight increase. This may be explained by a small number of high-income givers decreasing their giving. Equally, the survey shows some bias to more committed attenders who are more likely to continue giving, whilst a number of givers on the fringes of church community are less likely to complete this survey.

- Households on the lowest income, below £20,000, were the most likely to have reduced their giving, while those earning between £75,000-£99,999 were most likely to have increased their giving.
- Church leaders in Northern Ireland and Scotland have been hit the hardest, with the average church experiencing a 25% decrease in donations.
- The largest and the smallest churches have experienced more decreases in funding than medium-sized churches, but churches of all sizes have felt a hit financially.
- Presbyterian and Methodist churches are reporting the largest decreases in giving, with Pentecostal and independent churches reporting only very small decreases.

How the financial donations to church have changed between the start of COVID-19 and currently as perceived by leaders and individuals



There are clear reasons why people have increased or decreased their giving, with 25% of those who had decreased their giving not sure how to give or are finding it less convenient.

When asked why they have increased or decreased their giving, participants gave a range of reasons.

Of those who increased their giving:

- 36% of individuals wanted to help the needs of their local community.
- 43% of individuals wanted to help the internal needs of their church.
- 22% of individuals wanted to respond to a specific project or programme.
- 33% of individuals had more disposable income.

Of those who decreased their giving:

- 31% of individuals had less disposable income.
- 11% of individuals were not sure how to give to their church during this time.
- 21% of individuals gave more to other non-church organisations.
- 14% of individuals found giving less convenient.

The vast majority of church giving (over 80%) is directed through online giving/direct debits/standing orders.

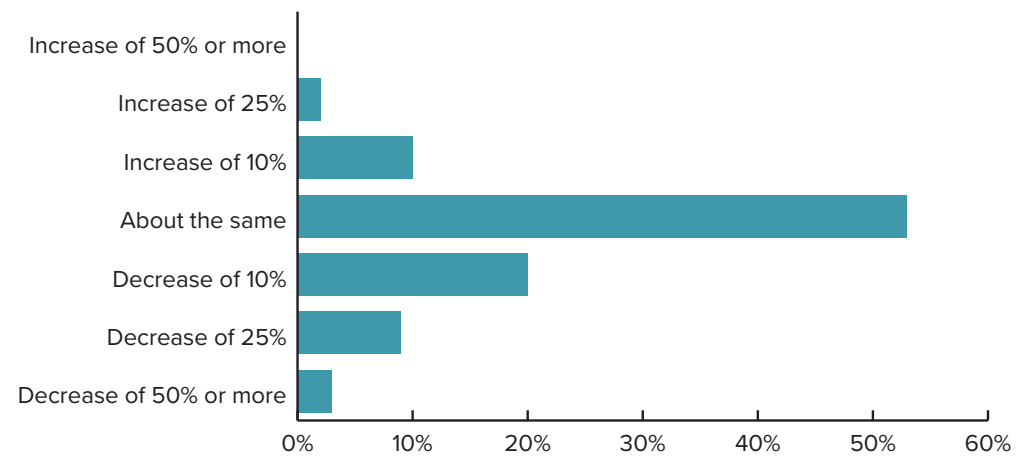
Church attendees indicated that 88% of their donations are directed through online giving/direct debit, 4% are in cheques, and 8% is cash in a Sunday collection. This was very similar to the response of church leaders who indicated they receive 82% of their giving online/direct debit, 7% are in cheques, and 12% is cash in a Sunday collection.

There is a relatively strong correlation between churches that receive more of their donations in person and those that have experienced the largest decreases. It seems that church members who give in cash are not managing to get around the reduction in physical opportunities to attend church and give their money. Direct debits were the least subject to fluctuations during COVID-19.

Almost a third of church leaders expect giving to decrease over the next three months.

When asked about the future, it is clear that church leaders have concerns about income.

Estimated change in donations (next three months compared to typical pre-COVID-19)



Questions for reflection

1. Have you visited other churches during the pandemic? Has your attitude to doing so been different to pre-COVID? Why do you think that might be?
2. What children and youth ministry is your church currently doing? Have you found any creative solutions that could be of value to other churches?
3. Have you felt the uncertainty of the coronavirus pandemic impact your attitude to financial giving?