

# changing church

AUTUMN SURVEY: REFLECTIONS  
ON THE WAY FORWARD

## COVID-19 has enforced change. Society is changing. The church is changing too.

Since the pandemic started, the Evangelical Alliance has carried out two surveys of the evangelical UK church to find out what is changing both among us and around us. The survey findings help to give us a snapshot of what's happening and bring greater understanding of this uncharted territory so that together we can navigate the church into a desired destination.

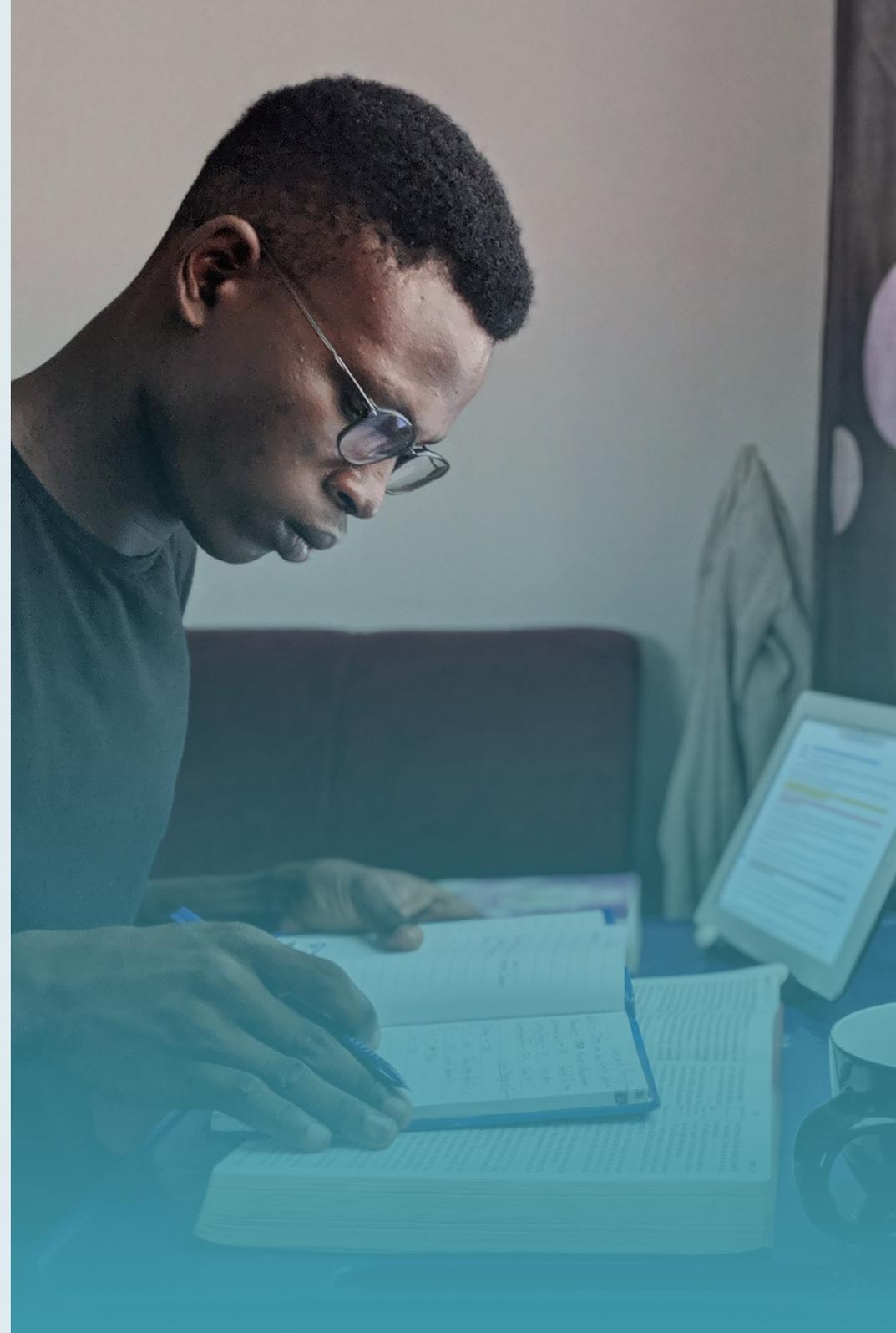
This report on the future of the church does not point to one model of church in the post-COVID Britain. Rather, it's an invitation for us to connect and reflect together on the deeper lessons and underlying questions that have emerged during this season of change.

The report creates an opportunity for you to consider how this strange season may prompt a formational journey for you, your church and your community, as you keep steering with wisdom into the future.

The Changing Church: autumn survey revealed that the majority of individual respondents had gathered, either in person or online, with their church community for worship in the past month. How might we continue to utilise the digital space as part of our gatherings going forward?

At the same time, church leaders highlighted how challenging children's ministry has been during this time. What might we be learning about family faith formation during COVID-19 that could positively impact families in our church communities in the future?

When considering church identity and activity, how might the reduction in income reported by nearly half of church leaders who responded be an opportunity to release and equip more people as volunteers to serve their church and community?



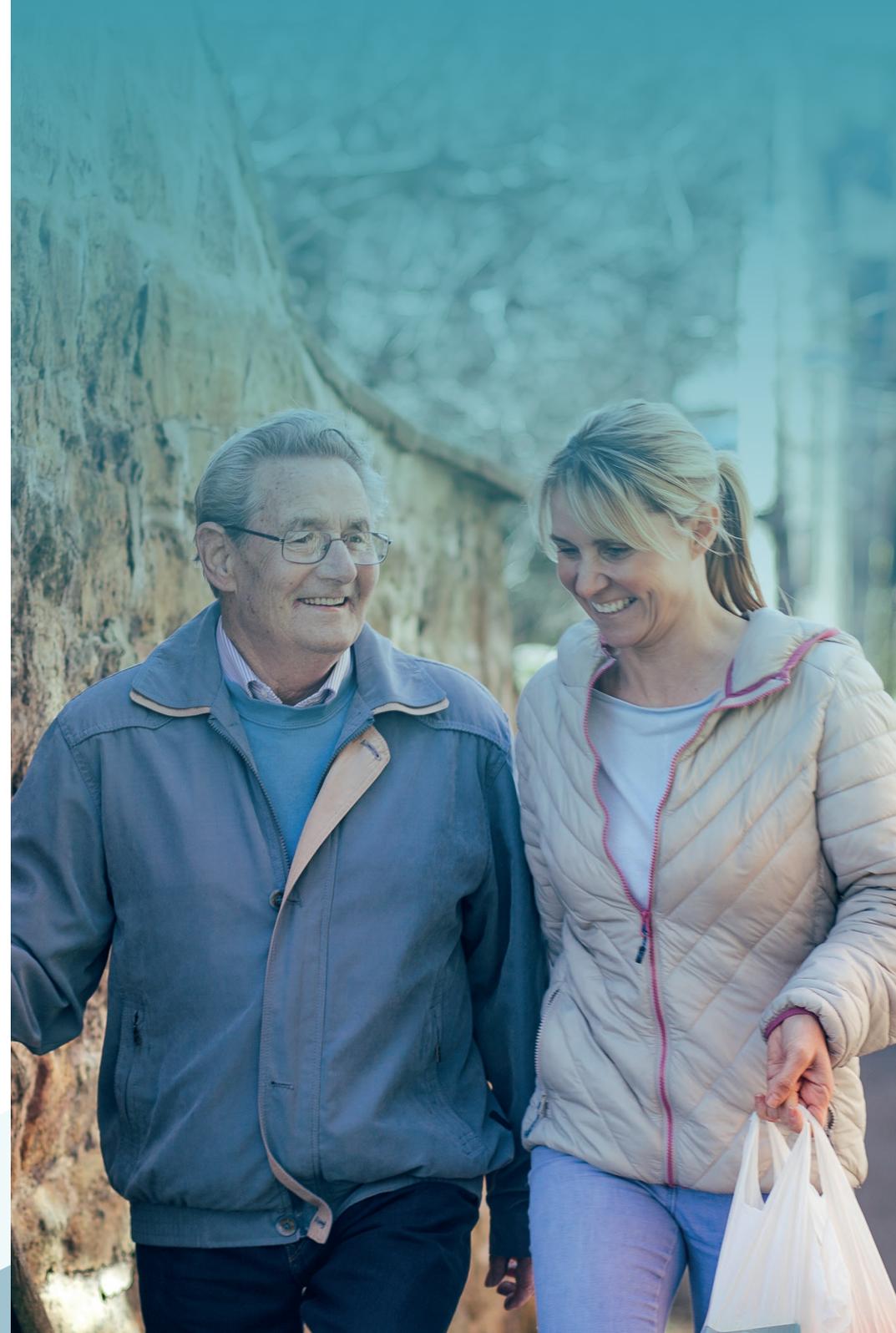
# What is the church?

The New Testament describes the church using imagery: people of God, body of Christ, new creation, temple of the Holy Spirit, and so on. Above all, these images reflect the corporate identity and nature of church.

Church is essentially a 'we' – one body of God's people, united in Christ, one in calling, one mind and spirit, bound to one another as we share in Christian community.

The western lens of individualism can too often misread scripture and form church activity that addresses the individual but overlooks the corporate identity of church. As lockdown and social distancing restrict the ways in which we enact our communal identity, and digital platforms default to individual engagement, there is a danger that our essential community identity might be lost to an existing individualism in the church.

Belonging to church extends across geography and time. We belong to church ancient, and we belong to church global. Church as a 'we' spans the distinct and diverse characteristics of its individual members and communities. Church unity is not something we must attain and secure. In Christ, our unity is achieved for us, [despite the various social dividers of our cultural age.](#)



# What are 'we' for?

The Bible narrates the unfolding story of salvation-history and presents how God is gathering up the broken fragments of the sin-shattered cosmos to restore and renew all things. The church as God's people inhabit this salvation story both as recipients of salvation and renewal, but also as agents for the same. Those who God has gathered up now become a part of His gathering activity.

The missional identity and purpose of the church are bound together, as we glorify or make known the person and work of Jesus in our word, deeds and character. The mission of God is not an optional appendix to a church, but flows through everything we are, say and do – God's mission in His world is who we are and why we exist.

## Priorities and values

COVID-19 forced every sector, including the church, to understand and refresh their priorities, mission and values. A common tension expressed by church leaders was one of priority: was the most important activity to care pastorally and focus on discipleship for those within the church, or to reach out to those outside the church?

COVID-19 has afforded us the opportunity [to consider our purpose and priorities](#) and to explore how both aspects of church life are vital and are not mutually distinctive but actually intersect. This intersection is represented through more than half of church leaders saying they would find resources on evangelism and discipleship helpful or very helpful in

the future. Growing in our faith and sharing our faith are important values that continue to flow through the DNA of the evangelical church in the UK.

## Fullness of our gospel mission

The gospel of Jesus Christ addresses every aspect of broken humanity and [has a vital role to play in the renewal of our communities](#). COVID-19 urges us to refresh our understanding of how we can increasingly minister the fullness of the gospel in a way that meets every human need and proclaims Jesus as we do.

As we consider what learnings we can take forward, it seems pertinent to reflect that 44% of individual respondents said a main barrier to them sharing the gospel was that they lacked significant relationships with non-Christians. How might we help to facilitate the growth of friendships with people in our communities both now and in a post-COVID-19 world?

We've also found that 86% of individual respondents offered their time and skills to their church's coronavirus response, suggesting that people have wanted to play their part in ministering the fullness of the gospel to their communities. What lessons can we learn from how people have responded with their gifts and skills to this crisis, as we continue to think about the church's role in the ongoing social transformation of their communities?

# So, we gather

The autumn survey asked church leaders about the biggest challenge they faced around gathering in person, when this was allowed at the start of October. 77% of leaders identified the lack of social interaction as a major challenge and 72% were challenged by the lack of singing. As we continue to move our eyes from the research to the future church, how could we facilitate social interaction in ways other than through our main gathering? When considering the role of praising God within God's people, what other forms of praise and worship can we glean from, to help the people of God continue to praise Him?



## Formation into and for

Certainly, “the weekly gathering for worship is by far the most important thing we do”. It is in the public gathering of God's people where we rehearse again the redemption story of God and re-root our identity and purpose within this cosmic story. It is through sharing liturgy, songs, prayers, sacraments, fellowship and the written word that we are formed out of the competing stories of the world and drawn into scripture's true story, reaffirming our whole-life allegiance and worship together as we proclaim and live Jesus as Lord.

As we've together been facing the COVID-19 pandemic, it continues to give us an element of a shared experience to journey through as church communities. 91% of church leaders had occasionally or regularly referred to lockdown restrictions in the past three months. Whilst our experiences of the pandemic are all unique, it has provided us with a common lens to help us focus on what we do together as a church and how we can be the church in our community. Looking forward, what aspects of our gathering during the pandemic will we want to maintain? What's the gold that God has been forming in our church communities through this challenging time?



# And then we scatter

The weekly gathering plays a significant role in our formation for whole-life worship, as we can be equipped and inspired to live a faith that is embedded in time and place and embodied through every aspect of our lives. Our vision for our neighbourhoods, workplaces and local communities can be refreshed as we remember them as places of God's renewal and therefore recover our roles there as a sacred act of worship.

The Changing Church: autumn survey encouraged us that despite restrictions, churches are still engaged in community transformation, with large increases in churches helping to deliver food and medicine. Nevertheless, we also found that 30% of church leaders did not know what to do this Christmas, demonstrating that we're still operating in high levels of uncertainty. At the same time, whilst churches are continuing to meet increasing local needs, a third of church leaders are concerned about finances in the future. Going forward, churches may have smaller staff teams but more opportunities for volunteers to engage.

The pandemic has pushed us all into unknown areas which continue to draw us into creative missional spaces. Whilst this can feel relentless at times, how could we try to keep a level of agility and openness to try new things as we move forward as church communities?

## The digital space

As the season has changed from summer to autumn, varying levels of restrictions have been imposed again across the UK. 84% of church leaders said that in October they were meeting in some form online, even

when in-person gatherings were allowed. We need to acknowledge that digital platforms have been a wonderful tool to facilitate church gatherings, and like it or not, will be here to stay in some form.

An area for reflection is on what form of digital media works for different elements of church community life. 88% of church leaders who were hosting online meetings have found that they have attracted viewers who would not normally attend church services. The online broadcast continues to offer an accessible space for people to explore Christianity. However, as we think about how we will continue to utilise digital platforms as church communities, what other lessons have you learnt about which digital platforms work best for particular purposes?

## Prayer and presence

In this season, many familiar structures of how we worship as a church community have been removed, the weight of pastoral care issues have increased, the needs in the community have intensified. This season has brought the church into a fresh and real recognition of our human need to pause, to pray and to seek the presence of God as we step forward into uncharted territory. The Evangelical Alliance's UK day of prayer marked this awareness as we joined together, postured to seek God's presence in united prayer.

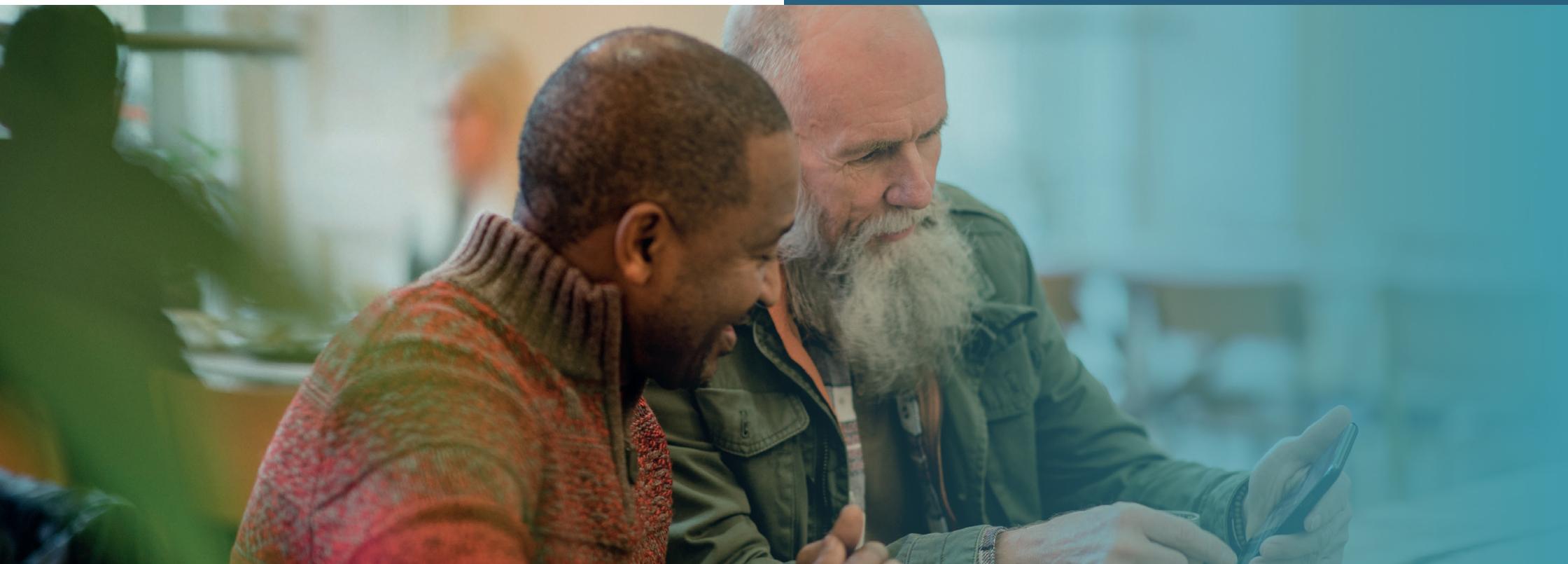
Had church function and operation become so predictable and controllable that COVID-19 starkly reminded us that we are God's people, in His mission, in His world? Throughout lockdown, and beyond, we, God's church, must continue to [adopt a posture which is a prayer-filled reliance](#), sensitive to His presence, participating with His Spirit as we watch and wait with expectation.

## Future church

Despite the many weighty challenges, frustrations and restrictions, we declare together again that we believe in the one holy, universal church, as the people and place God chooses to work out His good purposes in the world He so loves. We invite you to continue to join us in these discussions as together we navigate a full expression of church into the future.

## Looking ahead, how can we:

- be intentional to enact and protect the 'we' factor at the heart of church?
- explore creative ways to connect as community within restrictions?
- monitor and explore the creative use of digital platforms in order to maximise community connection?
- construct avenues which allow pastoral care to flow within the church out towards those beyond the church boundaries, becoming chaplains to the communities around us?





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