Local Church Response to the COVID19 Pandemic - Phase Three

Introduction:

United Methodist Communications has conducted three studies related to local church responses to the COVID19 pandemic. The first study involved 961 churches with the survey open from March 25 through March 29. Phase Two included responses from 972 churches between April 20 through April 24. A third phase ran June 9 through June 14 with 1016 church responses. UMCom Research Team expects at least one more phase in the future.

Survey invitations from the UMCom database went to the same 11,000 randomly selected churches used in previous COVID research. Please note, however, that this represents a “convenience” sample with limitations on how well it represents The United Methodist Church as a whole.

Survey Respondents:

Respondent profiles are very similar between the first two samples, but are slightly different in the third. In this most recent phase, fewer churches under 50 in average attendance participated and more between 50 and 249. This latest group of respondents also are more urban and less suburban.

The survey asked pastors of multi-church charges to respond for the larger or largest church they served. Overall, in all three samples, smaller churches appear to have been slightly under-represented and larger churches over-represented. As expected, most churches respondents came from rural and small towns.

Average worship Attendance	**Phase One**	**Phase Two**	**Phase Three**
Under 50	34%	34%	30%
50 to 99	29	28	31
100 to 249	23	24	26
250 to 499	8	8	8
500 or larger	6	5	5

Area Description	**Phase One**	**Phase Two**	**Phase Three**
Rural	31%	30%	29%
Small Town	35	34	35
Suburban	22	25	21
Urban	11	10	15

Responses by UMC jurisdiction show an over-representation of the Western region with 11%. The South Central jurisdiction, at 14%, is under-represented.

Jurisdictions	Phase Two	Phase Three	GCFA Statistics
North Central	20%	22%	21%
Northeastern	21	21	21
South Central	16	14	17
Southeastern	31	33	35
Western	11	11	5

Overview:

Five key trends identified in earlier research continue in this phase:

1. Trends in pastor attitudes continue to be very positive although feelings of anxiety are rising. Among respondents, 66% now self-describe themselves as hopeful, compared to 43% in Phase Two. Resilience also rose as an adjective with 49% from 28%. Overall, this suggests more confidence in themselves and their church's ability to weather the crisis despite worries about the future. Interestingly, pastors of non-white churches are more likely than pastors of white churches to report positive adjectives, particularly "blessed" (76%), "hopeful" (71%), "encouraged" (55%) and "inspired" (42%). Reflecting a heightened anxiety related to reopening, the percentage of pastors describing themselves as anxious rose from 12% to 35% and the number describing themselves as exhausted increased from 20% to 32%. Pastors of larger churches indicate they are more likely to have feelings of anxiety and exhaustion.

Phase Two Positive	Phase Two Negative	Phase Three Positive	Phase Three Negative
Hopeful, 43%	Uncertain, 22%	Hopeful, 67%	Anxious, 35%
Calm, 34%	Exhausted, 20%	Blessed, 63%	Exhausted, 32%
Resilient, 28%	Stressed, 13%	Resilient, 40%	Frustrated, 28%
Encouraged, 26%	Anxious, 12%	Encouraged, 33%	Struggling, 18%
Inspired, 17%			

2. Since the advent of the pandemic, survey participants point to a higher average worship attendance and recently improved financial performance. Reflecting these positive trends, 42% of pastors agree with a statement that "the pandemic has strengthened the vitality of their church" compared to 19% that disagree.

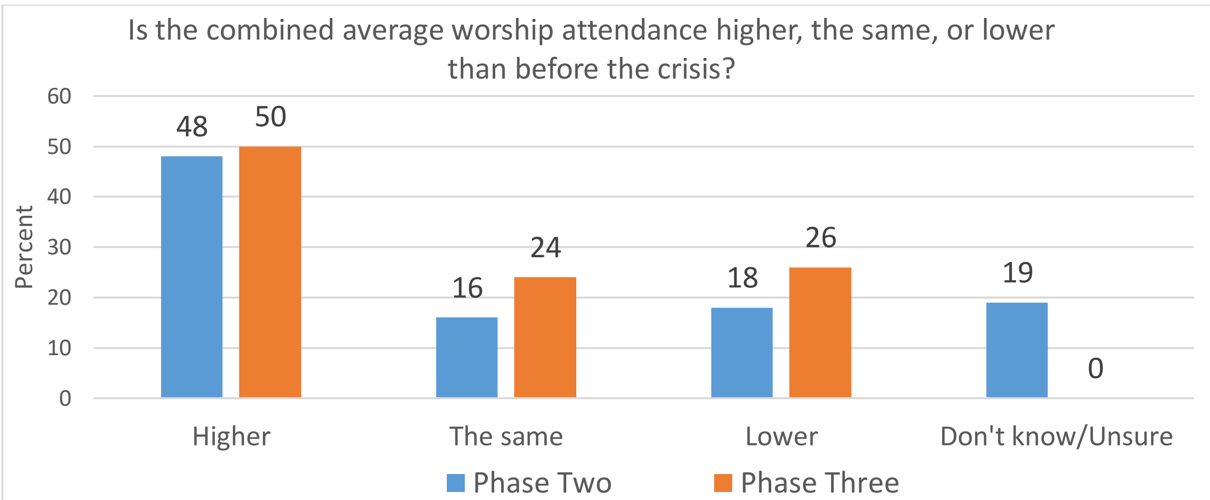
3. Giving continues to strengthen with the percentage of churches reporting declines of over 20% versus "pre-crisis" levels, falling from 66% in Phase One to 12% in this study.

4. Most churches continue to say that no one in their church has tested positive for coronavirus. Of responding churches, 22% report a member being infected by the virus.

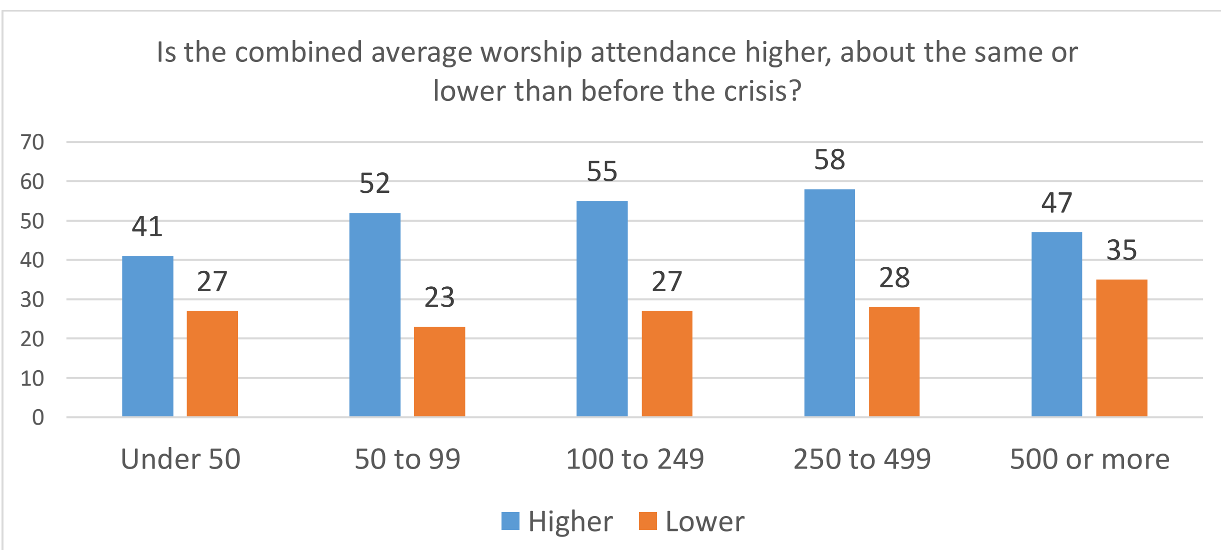
5. The reopening of churches has begun with 22% saying they have restored in-person worship. Smaller churches are more likely to have reopened than larger churches.

Average Worship Attendance:

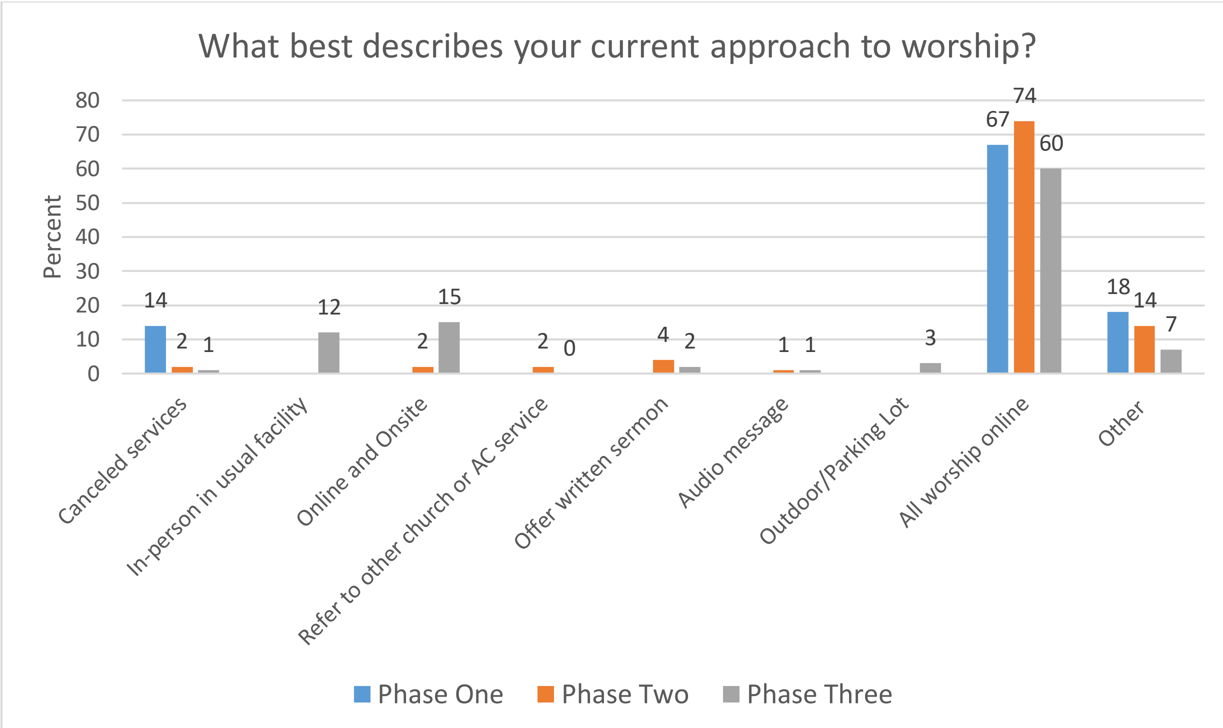
The Phase One survey did not ask about changes in average worship attendance; however, since then, half the churches, 50%, report increased total attendance, compared to 26% saying attendance has dropped. Total attendance is the combination of online attendance with in-person attendance, if any. Please note that the increase in the percentage of churches saying they experienced a decline in attendance came from those who previously said “don’t know”.



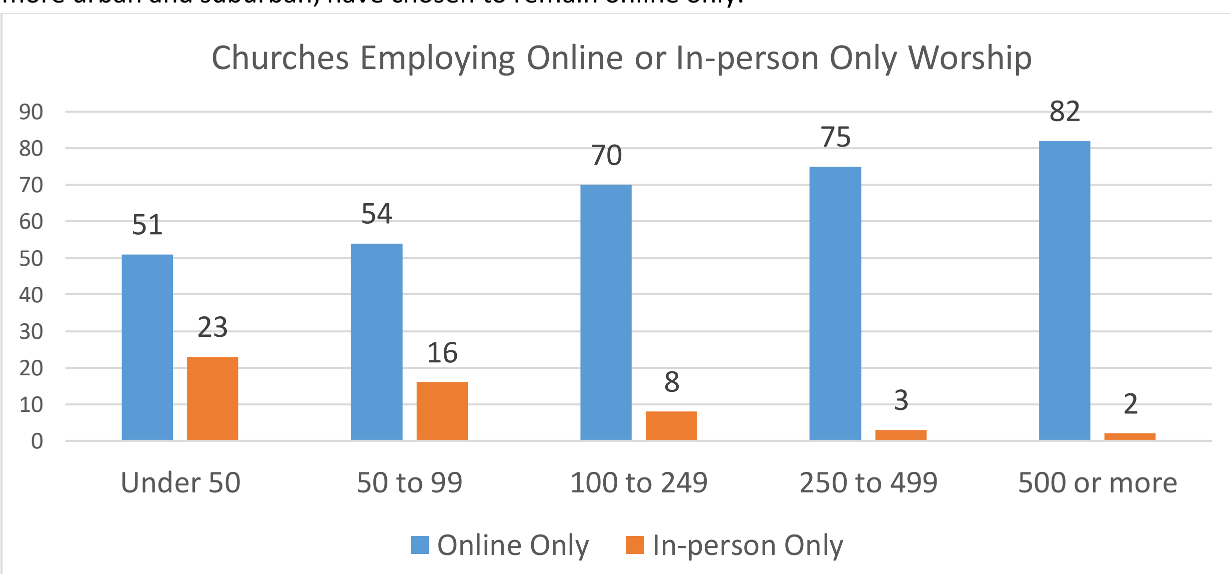
Performance on average attendance is not uniform with churches under 50 in attendance reporting more limited growth.



Churches boosted attendance by aggressively transitioning to online worship formats. Currently, 60% of churches employ online only worship with about 15% using in-person only. Approximately 15% offer both in-person and online worship.

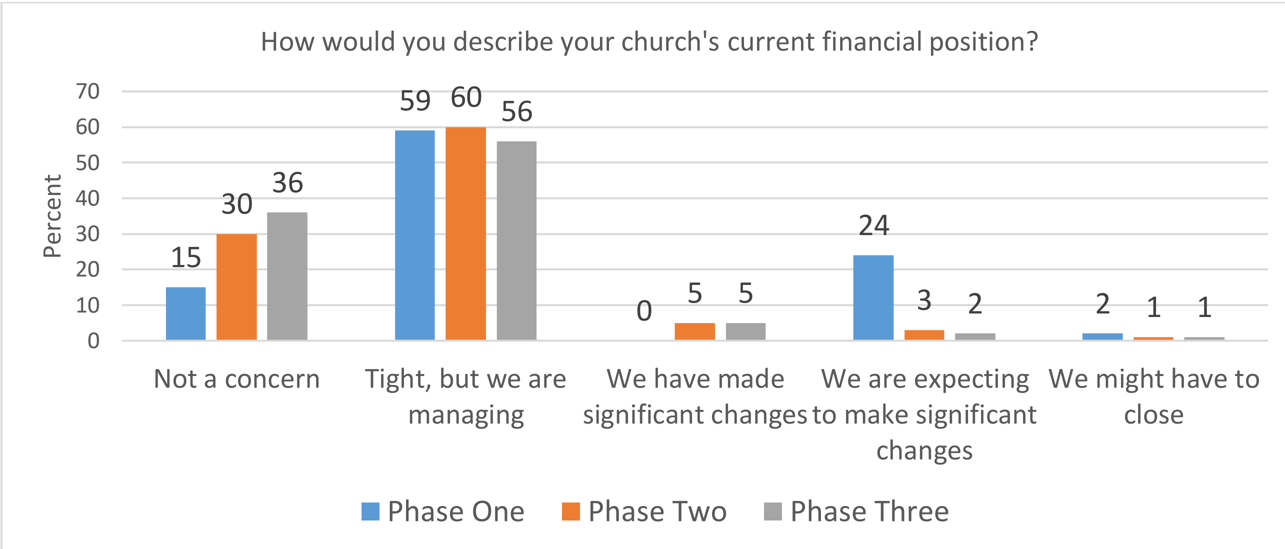


Smaller churches are more likely to say that they use in-person only. Larger churches, which tend to be more urban and suburban, have chosen to remain online only.

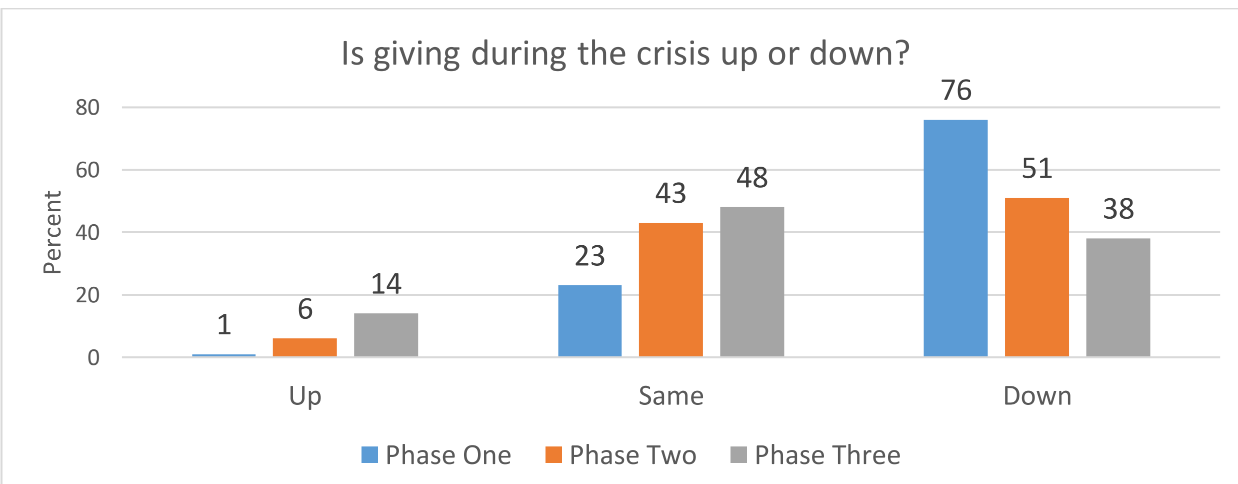


Church Financial Conditions:

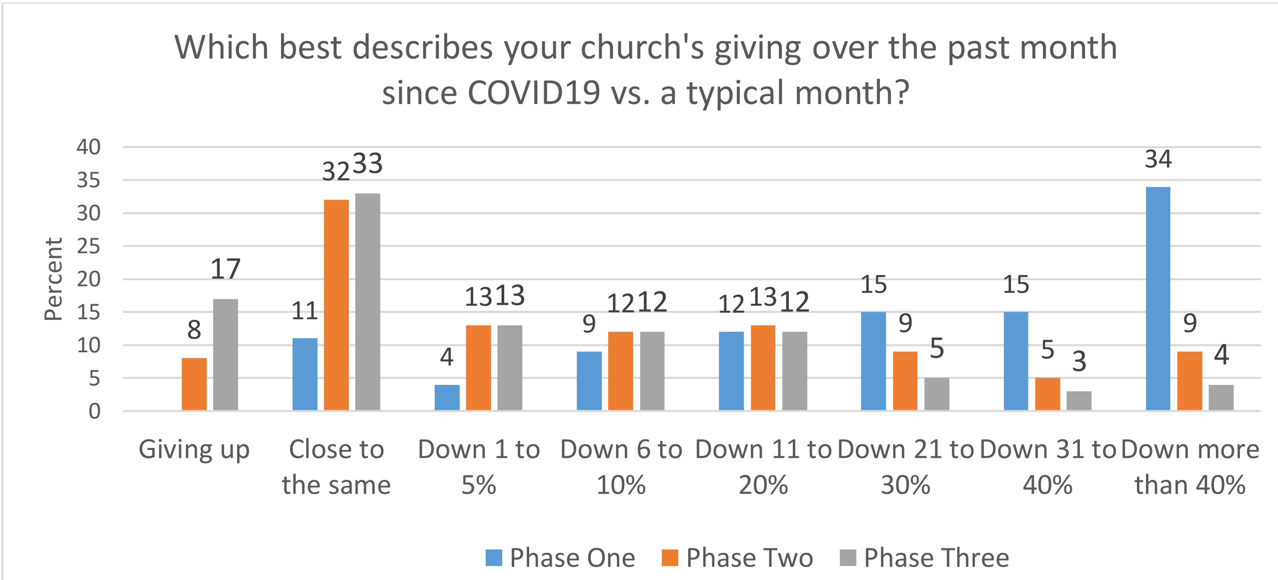
Local churches remain optimistic about their financial conditions. The number of churches that state that finances are “not a concern” increased to 36%, up from 30% in Phase Two, and the number which have or expect to make major changes has dropped from 24% in the last survey to 7% today.



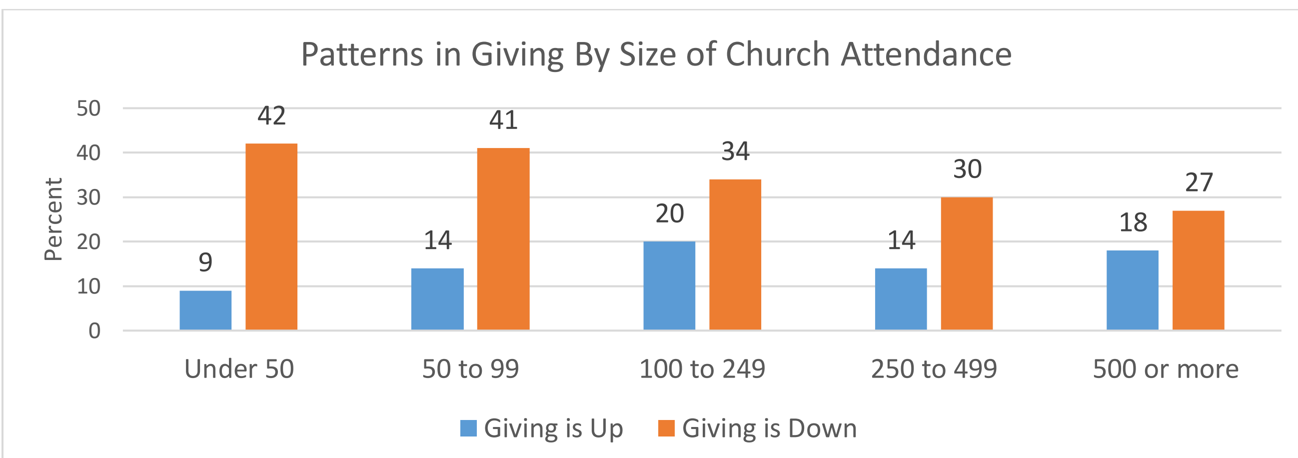
Giving continues to strengthen since Phase One. At that time, 76% of churches reported lower levels of giving versus 51% in Phase Two. In this third phase, the percentage falls to 38%. Please note, overall giving has declined during the crisis.



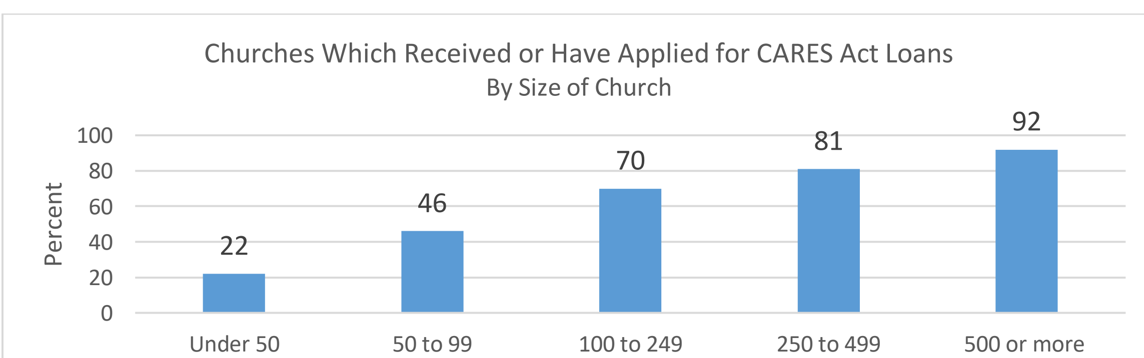
As in Phase Two, even fewer churches report declines greater than 20% or more. Only 12% report giving down more than 20% compared to 64% in March, and 23% in May.



Still, financial performance is not uniform. Declines are more likely among churches under 250 in attendance. This may reflect that smaller churches, particularly those under 100 are significantly less likely to offer ACH, credit card and online giving.

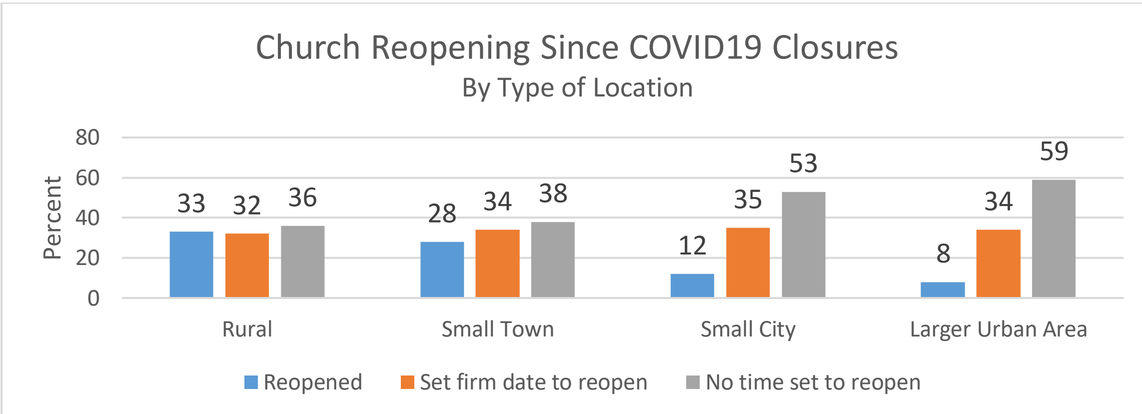


Involvement in the CARES Act also has impacted church financials. Overall, half of the churches surveyed applied for CARES loans, predominantly those that were medium to large in size.



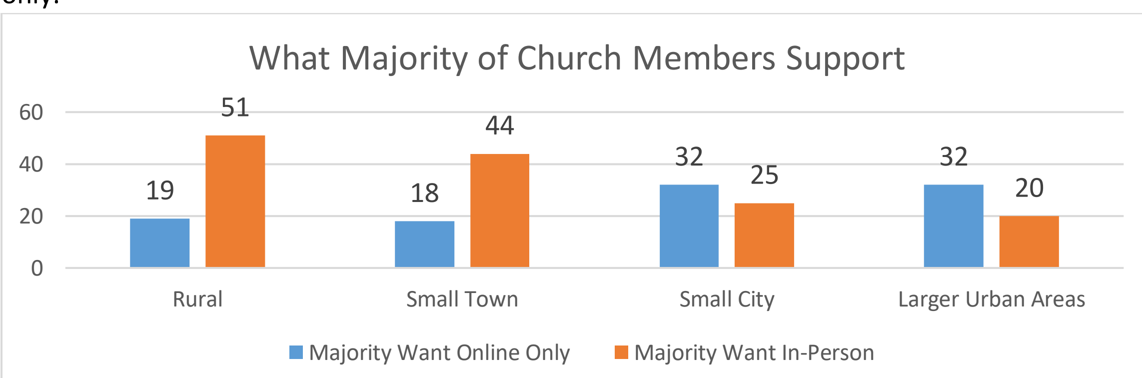
Church Reopening:

About 23% of churches have reopened since the panic forced many to discontinue in-person worship services. Rural churches and those in small towns are more likely to have reopened.



For churches that have not reopened, the expected "timetable" for reopening is early to mid-summer with 37% indicating June, 32% July, 9% August 9%, and 7% September. October and later months comprised 2% with 13% not knowing.

Churches from rural and small town areas generally report majorities of members wanting to return to in-person worship while churches from small city and larger urban areas indicate a preference for online only.



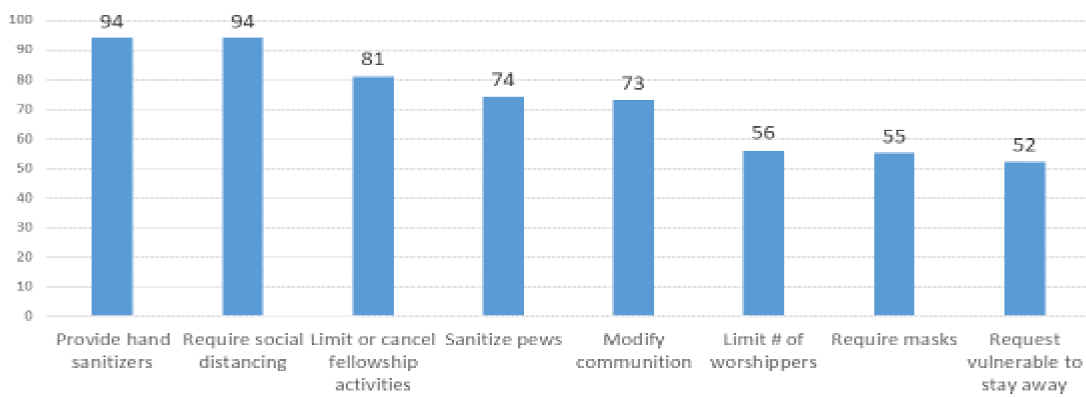
Bishops and Annual Conference leaders are the biggest influencers of whether a church decides to reopen or not. Fully, 91% of churches indicate that the directives from bishops and Annual Conference leaders influence their decisions to reopen. State mandates, District Superintendent directives, and opinions of members also are considered in making decisions; however, rural and small town churches are more likely to emphasize the opinions of members than are churches in more populous areas.

How important are or were the following in your decision to reopen or not reopen?

Potential Factor in Decision	% Very Important
Directives from bishop or A C Leaders	71%
Directives from District Superintendents	58
Governor mandates	58
Local government mandates	47
Member opinions	47
Local church leaders	46
Recommendations of nationally recognized physicians	45
Recommendation from local physicians	35
Lack of an available vaccine	31
Federal leaders	18
What other churches are doing	8

Once they reopen, churches indicate that they will embrace the following "restrictions" in helping to keep parishioners healthy. Few differences exist between the churches by size and location; however, larger churches are less likely to consider limiting worshippers.

Which, if any, of the following is your church observing or is likely to observe once it opens?

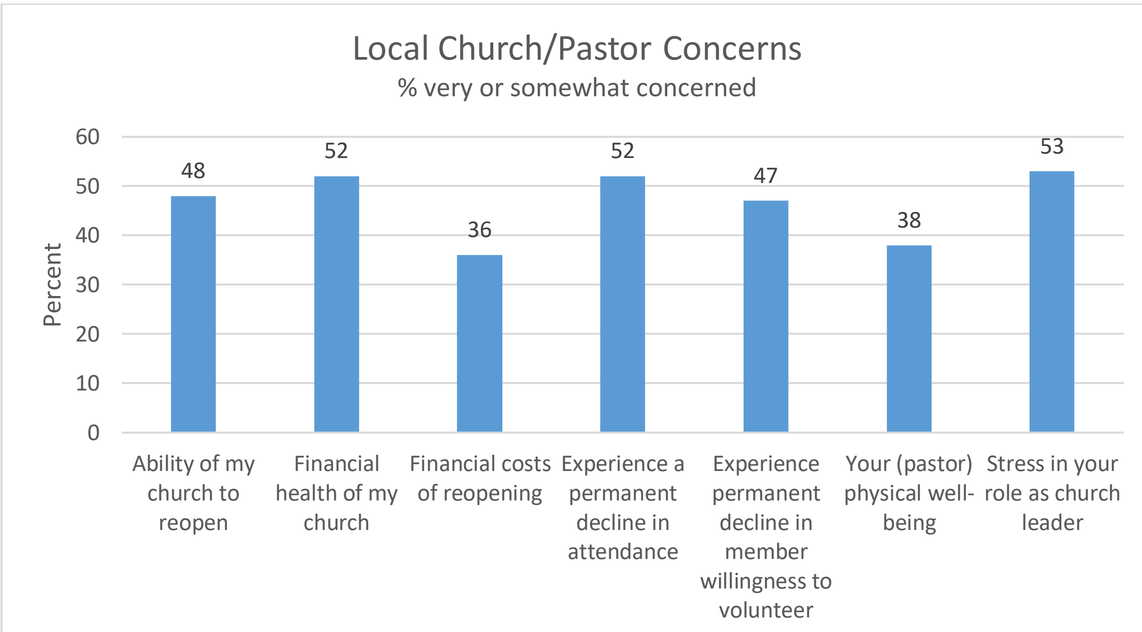


Other Church Activities:

The pandemic continues to impact small groups and other activities at churches. Only 9% of reopened churches that have re-established small groups for all ages, with an additional 14% reopening only adult groups. Similarly, only 3% of churches plan on a Vacation Bible School program this summer.

Local Church Concerns:

Pastors express moderate levels of concern over the ability of their churches to reopen or to have the necessary financial health.   There were few differences in these concerns by size or church location.



Movement of churches to digital-only status:

Agency executives asked for information on the number of churches considering going "digital-only" and closing down physical facilities. Of the 1000 churches involved in this study, only 2 said they have decided to move to digital-only status, with 10 or 1% saying they continue to study that option. 15 or 1.5% have considered that move and rejected it.

If you have questions or comments about the research, please contact Chuck Niedringhaus at cniedringhaus@umcom.org or Teresa Faust at tfaust@umcom.org.