

Pandemic Distress:  
**CHURCHES OF CHRIST**  
in the Age of COVID



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# Executive Summary

On Jan. 19, 2020, a 35-year-old Washington man who had returned home after a family visit to Wuhan, China, [reported to an emergency room](#) with a persistent cough and fever. The next day, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention confirmed the man had the first known case of coronavirus disease in the United States.

No one fully appreciated the potential ramifications for organized religion at the time, but within two months, the spread of the disease, [known by the shorthand COVID-19](#), had upended worship practices across the United States, including within churches of Christ. The federal government officially declared COVID-19 a [public health emergency](#) on Jan. 31, 2020, and by March, governing authorities started imposing strict limits on the number of people who could gather inside church buildings and other public facilities. [Stay-at-home orders](#) quickly followed in most states, forcing churches to decide whether to assemble in defiance of the law.

Led by autonomous elderships or by collective membership decisions, churches of Christ adapted to the realities of a 21st-century pandemic. Before the lockdowns, Christians implemented health precautions inside their buildings. As statewide bans against indoor meetings took root, some churches in warmer climates moved their Bible classes and worship services outside. Others transitioned their services online or referred their members to churches of Christ with livestreams. By late spring, churches started resuming in-person worship, albeit with extensive rules designed to deter the spread of COVID-19. Other churches still met virtually, either to protect vulnerable members or because of ongoing lockdowns in their states. All of this upheaval, along with strong opinions over the health merits of lockdowns, face masks and vaccines, created angst among Christians that continues to this day.

**“In all the steps we took,  
everything was done with  
mutual love, care and  
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– Alabama evangelist

Eighteen months into the pandemic, Bible Study Page conducted an informal survey to gauge how much impact COVID-19 has had within non-institutional churches of Christ and for how long. The survey consisted of 35 questions that explored the following topics:

- The traditional practices and membership of each participant’s congregation;
- How churches changed their practices in response to pandemic lockdowns;
- How churches used audio/video technology before, during and after the pandemic;
- And how many Christians in those churches contracted and/or died of COVID-19.

While the survey showed some variety among churches in their responses to the pandemic, clear commonalities emerged. Among the congregations that canceled in-person services, most of them made that decision during a two-week period in March and stopped meeting for 10 weeks or less. Their thinking tended to be motivated primarily by a combination of the health concerns of members and government mandates.

Upon returning to in-person worship, congregations took similar precautions to lower the risks of spreading the coronavirus, such as leaving pews empty, seating immediate or extended family together, and limiting face-to-face conversations indoors. Most survey respondents said face masks were either voluntary in their congregations or mandated only if the government required them. Mask use during congregational singing was a popular compromise. Prepackaged, self-serve communion and dedicated points in the buildings for collecting donations became commonplace during the pandemic, and some churches adopted those practices long term.

On the technology front, survey participants said their churches were more likely to livestream and/or record sermons than Bible classes. While a majority offered only audio recordings, more congregations did add video, including livestreams of full worship services, as an online option during pandemic lockdowns and even after in-person worship resumed. Zoom was the most popular video tool during lockdowns, followed by Facebook and YouTube, but congregations were more likely to keep using Facebook and YouTube after the lockdowns.

The impact of the pandemic on the overall spiritual health of Christians varied from group to group. “The experience has brought the congregation closer in terms of communicating with each other outside of the church building,” one Alabama preacher said. “In all the steps we took, everything was done with mutual love, care and concern for each other. While we did discuss how to deal with COVID-19, those discussions were done with Christian love and grace. No one felt that things should be done ‘their way or the highway.’”

But in other places, tensions flared amid discussions about pandemic precautions. Some brethren started attending elsewhere when their personal views conflicted with the decisions of their congregations. Multiple people voiced concerns about the effects of well-intended changes in assembly practices. “The real damage came from the very policies intended to keep us safe,” one preacher in Indiana said. “They were successful in the physical realm, but they allowed a few people to drift away nonchalantly or use COVID as an excuse for everything. They also kept us from maintaining our relationships with each other, with the result that minor disagreements about unrelated things were more easily able to grow into major conflicts.”

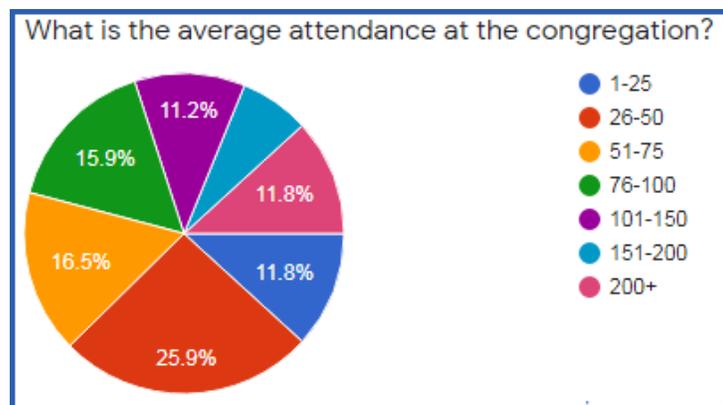
All of these topics are discussed thoroughly in this report.

# The Survey Audience

Bible Study Page conducted this survey over a three-week period in July 2021. With nearly 160 million Americans [fully vaccinated](#) and [more than 34 million](#) having natural immunity from COVID-19 infections by July 2021, the pandemic appeared to be waning when the survey was distributed. However, the [Delta variant](#) started spreading rapidly that month. As a result of that outbreak and the subsequent [Omicron variant](#), the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths reported by our survey participants are outdated and likely undercounted by a large margin. Other topics that the survey explored were not as driven by pandemic surges.

To gain insight into how COVID-19 affected churches of Christ, Bible Study Page shared the survey directly with evangelists, elders, deacons and church members via social media and email. The survey also was sent to email addresses found on [church websites](#).

Nearly 170 people from non-institutional churches in 31 states completed the survey. Most participants predictably were from the [Bible Belt](#) and its bordering states, with Texas (27), Florida (16), Alabama (14), Tennessee (13) and Ohio (12) generating the most responses. The regions with the fewest responses were the Midwest minus Ohio (20), the West (13) and the Northeast (8). No one from these states took the survey: Alaska, Arizona, Connecticut, Hawaii, Idaho, Kansas, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Dakota, Montana, Oklahoma, Oregon, Utah, Wisconsin and Wyoming.



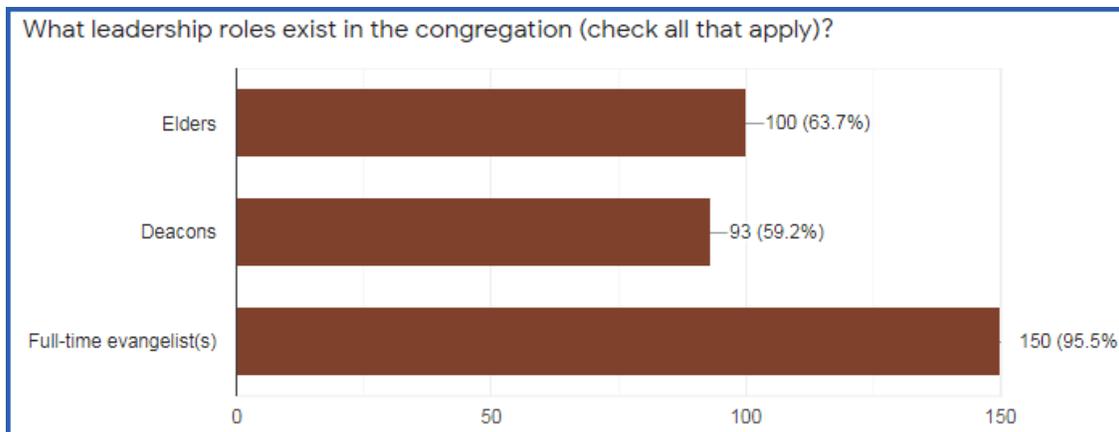
A majority of the survey respondents identified themselves as either evangelists (67) or elders (58). Among the elders, 24 also serve as evangelists in their congregations. Bible class teachers (26), church members (26) and deacons (7) also provided feedback. One teacher who responded is an elder's wife, and another one self-identified as a song leader. One member of a local church who took the survey also is an occasional guest speaker at a nearby congregation.

These Christians worship at churches of varying sizes, but the majority belong to congregations where attendance is less than 100. The survey breakdown by average attendance was 26 percent for groups of 26-50, 17 percent for churches of 51-75, 16 percent for assemblies of 76-100, and 12 percent for the smallest congregations of 1-25. Churches with average attendance of 101-150 and more than 200 combined for another 23 percent of the total, with the rest of survey respondents worshipping with groups of 151-200.

Ninety-three percent of survey takers worship at churches that own buildings. The remaining 7 percent assemble with their brethren in rental spaces. No one reported meeting in homes or at indoor or outdoor public facilities.

Congregation sizes and locations shaped some COVID-19 responses. "Being a small group in a rural area, we continued to meet throughout the pandemic," a preacher in Mississippi said. "As we were meeting outside in the summertime, myself and another member set up a way for us to put out tarps for shady areas for members to sit in."

Most people who completed the Bible Study Page survey said their churches have elders (64 percent) and deacons (59 percent), while 95 percent have one or more full-time evangelists. Churches with elders relied on their leadership for guidance, especially to find common ground amid differences of opinion about lockdowns, masks and other issues. "Our elders guided the congregation with devotion, wisdom and prayerful patience," an evangelist in Ohio said. "I'm very thankful for that. I'm also thankful that our members — though possessing various opinions about everything COVID-related — showed the same devotion to the Lord while using wisdom and patience with each other."

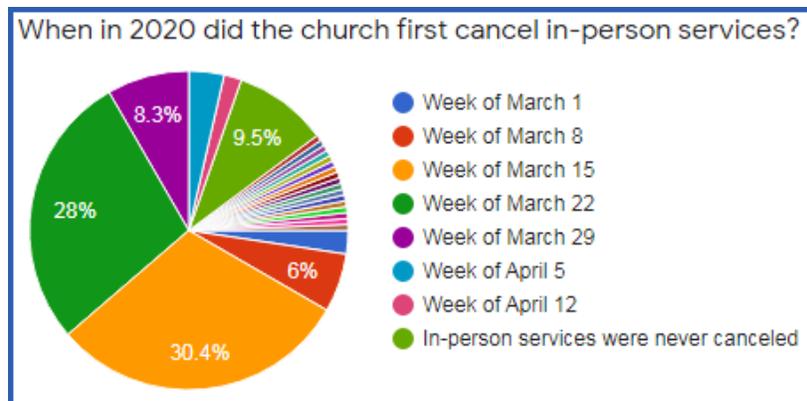


# To Meet or Not to Meet

The idea that American churches, either by choice or by force, might cancel in-person assemblies to contain an airborne-driven pandemic had [historical precedent](#) in the 1918 Spanish flu, including [within churches of Christ](#). But Christians were so many generations removed from that situation that canceling Bible classes never occurred to them in the early weeks of COVID-19. Developments from mid-February 2020 into March gradually awakened saints to the possibility that guidelines and rules might be warranted to “[slow the spread](#).”

First came the [COVID-19 outbreaks at sea](#), starting with a forced quarantine on the cruise ship [Diamond Princess](#) in Japan. Next was the evidence of [community spread](#), including inside a Washington senior care facility, which elevated concerns about the disease [spreading in nursing homes](#) and other indoor group settings. The early days of March revealed the aggressive and durable nature of COVID-19, as states across the country reported cases. [Event cancellations](#) and [crowd limitations](#) followed. Over a matter of days, suggested or mandatory caps on mass gatherings rapidly dropped from 1,000 people to 500, 250, 100, 50, 25 and eventually 10.

Non-institutional churches of Christ did not react hastily as these events unfolded, according to the Bible Study Page survey. While many groups took precautions to mitigate the risk of spreading COVID-19 within their assemblies, only 8.4 percent of survey respondents said their congregations canceled in-person services the first two weeks of March.



That started to change on Sunday, March 15, when the CDC recommended canceling gatherings of 50 or more people. Nearly 70 percent of the churches represented in the survey canceled in-person services over the next three weeks – more than 30 percent of them the week of March 15. A much-criticized incident of [COVID-19 transmission within a church of Christ in Kentucky](#) that met against the recommendation of Gov. Andy Beshear highlighted the risks of meeting in person. "We believed it was wise to take some time, educate ourselves and then devise a plan moving forward," said an elder/evangelist in West Virginia, one of the states to exempt religious entities from its [stay-at-home order](#).

Despite the health threat posed by COVID-19 and government restrictions on meeting sizes, some churches of Christ remained reluctant to stop assembling. "We met in the parking lot for the first six weeks of lockdown, then transitioned back to being inside the building." A church in

Beckley, West Virginia, placed a pulpit and speaker system under their building's carport for worship services, which consisted of opening and closing prayers, three songs, a sermon, the Lord's Supper and contributions. "Each family was given songbooks to keep in their cars and were given communion emblems, which were pre-packaged," an elder said. The average attendance was 55 people, including some from other nearby congregations. The church held Bible classes via Zoom on Sunday and Wednesday evenings.

A Bible class teacher in Fort Worth, Texas, said the church he attends abided by a county judge's limits on mass gatherings by meeting outside or at suggested safe distances inside. "While some were brave enough to conduct worship inside of the provided loophole, the majority fled the assembly in fear, while some simply felt the government could tell them not to worship," the teacher said. An evangelist for a church in Kentucky said the shepherds of that flock only relented about meeting at their building when the local mayor and police chief threatened penalties. "We met outside city limits at a local member's property, in our cars, for Sunday a.m. worship, only for six weeks, before returning to our building," the preacher said.

An evangelist in Nebraska said the consensus among the small congregation he serves was to adhere to government rules "so long as they did not interfere with following the scriptures." For a brief time, they divided their meeting place to satisfy maximum assembly limits, but the brethren also were mindful of the toll the pandemic could take on the church long term if members avoided being together in person. "We were determined not to allow the government to isolate us from each other," he said, "so we continued to have people over to each other's homes."

Commemorating the Lord's Supper proved to be the most challenging aspect of worship during the lockdown phase of the pandemic. As instituted in the New Testament, the Lord's Supper is to be conducted when Christians gather in person. "Some churches strayed from the pattern of

**"We believed it was wise to take some time, educate ourselves and then devise a plan moving forward."**

***-- West Virginia elder***

'coming together' by using video conferencing in lieu of coming together in one place to partake," one Texas preacher responded to the survey. The experience of a congregation in Florida illustrated the dilemma. "I didn't feel comfortable doing the Lord's Supper over Zoom (essentially a phone call) because I was convicted that the

Lord's Supper is a group activity when we all are together," the evangelist there said. But after a month, the church decided to facilitate communion virtually for people equally convicted that they needed to remember Christ's sacrifice for sin on a weekly basis.

Ten percent of those who took the survey said their churches continued in-person services throughout the pandemic. This tended to happen more often in smaller groups.

In at least one instance, a church that continued to meet became a temporary haven for Christians from another state in search of in-person spiritual nourishment. This happened near the Tennessee-Kentucky state line because Kentucky took a harder line on gatherings. An Ohio

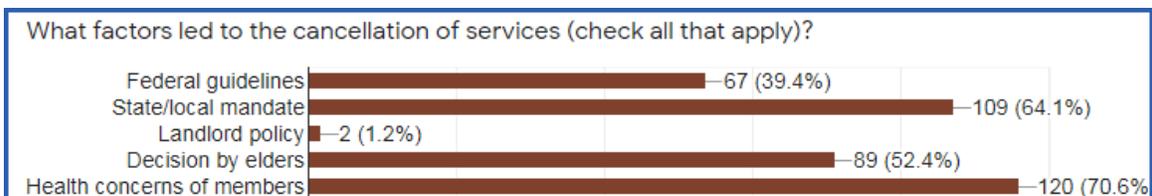
congregation of 26-50 people also benefited by offering Sunday morning Bible class and worship during the height of the lockdown. “We were blessed with visitors who wanted to worship with us, with opportunities to encourage Christians from other congregations who were not meeting at all, and with a highly unified membership,” the preacher said. “Disagreements were minor and consisted mostly of questions of how many extra precautions to take.”

A small group in Washington State did not change its practices much in response to the virus. “I told them very early I would be at the building if they wanted to come,” the preacher said. “It took a little time, but within a couple of months, most members had returned.” An evangelist said the church where he works in Marietta, Pennsylvania, never stopped worshipping in person and only canceled classes for a few weeks. “We determined that God wants us to come together, and Zoom is not coming together,” he said. Survey takers in California, Tennessee and West Virginia bemoaned the depth of COVID-related anxiety that was apparent in some Christians. They criticized government officials and the media for fueling such fear.

Some respondents were adamant that canceling services was never an option. “While we respect the decision of any individual to quarantine on an as-needed basis, we absolutely reject the notion that a church should cease assembling, as commanded in Scripture, for any reason whatsoever,” said an evangelist at a Nevada congregation of 26-50 people. “We have, and will, defy any governing authority that says otherwise.” The evangelist for an even smaller congregation in West Virginia answered: “We serve at the Master’s will. I am sure there were diseases and events Satan turned on the first-century church to try and stop it.”

One deacon in Arkansas made his view on the merits of canceling in-person assemblies abundantly clear with repetitive, emphatic survey responses like these:

- "Never! The elders do not have the authority to cancel worship."
- "We never went against the Lord and canceled."
- "We NEVER disobeyed the Lord!"
- "We lived by faith! Never stopped obeying!"
- "We refused to enable sinners [with livestreaming]!"
- "We didn't lock down. We continued to obey like the first-century Christians."



Churches of Christ that canceled services did so for various reasons, according to the survey. Nearly 71 percent were concerned about the health of their members, particularly the elderly and those with conditions that put them at greater risk of hospitalization or death from COVID-19. “We have a small congregation, with most of the members being in their 60s and 70s, some older,” a Bible class teacher in Texas said. “We were very careful with our old folks.” A young Christian in West Virginia added: “I appreciate that the health of the members was

prioritized over church tradition. I also appreciate how our meeting times and length of services were adapted for the health and safety of the members."

A desire to obey state and/or local government mandates was a factor in 64 percent of cancellations, while federal guidelines were cited as a reason by 39 percent of respondents. Elders drove the decisions about in-person services in 52 percent of the churches represented in the survey. Most survey respondents reported that a mix of factors influenced the decision-making, with health concerns and state/local mandates being cited together frequently. Two groups that meet in rental spaces had to cancel because of landlord policies.

More than a third of congregations that stopped meeting in person did so for 6-10 weeks, according to the survey. The other most common time periods for cancellations were 1-5 weeks (23.5 percent) and 11-15 weeks (21.5 percent). Nearly 13 percent of survey respondents reported not assembling with their brethren for more than 20 weeks. The cancellations encompassed Bible classes (89 percent), worship services (78 percent), gospel meetings in the spring (48 percent) and/or fall (45 percent), song services (37 percent), vacation Bible schools (29 percent), and seminars for teenagers, women or other select audiences (20 percent).

Many churches of Christ moved their "assemblies" online as a result of COVID-19 lockdowns. The survey showed that 83 percent of respondents were able to join one or more aspects of their churches' services via the Internet. This included sermons (77 percent), Bible studies (65 percent), prayer (61 percent), the Lord's Supper (51 percent) and singing (49 percent). Some congregations just expanded their existing online offerings. "We were livestreaming all of our services anyway [before COVID-19]," one North Carolina evangelist said. "No real change. We did Zoom Wednesday night Bible class for three months." One group in South Carolina met in person in small groups so the brethren could sing, pray and take the Lord's Supper together.

The early response to COVID was definitely a live-and-learn experience in churches. "The uncertainty was the hardest part," said an evangelist in California. "It was much harder to keep people together and engaged." An evangelist in Indiana said the church where he preaches met several times via Zoom to discuss COVID-19 protocols, with brethren falling into camps of consistently strict, consistently unconcerned and a "middle half" whose views changed depending on the day. "Many of the protocols became security blankets, and it was a challenge to break through with data and reason, let alone God's expectations," he said, "but with perseverance we were successful."

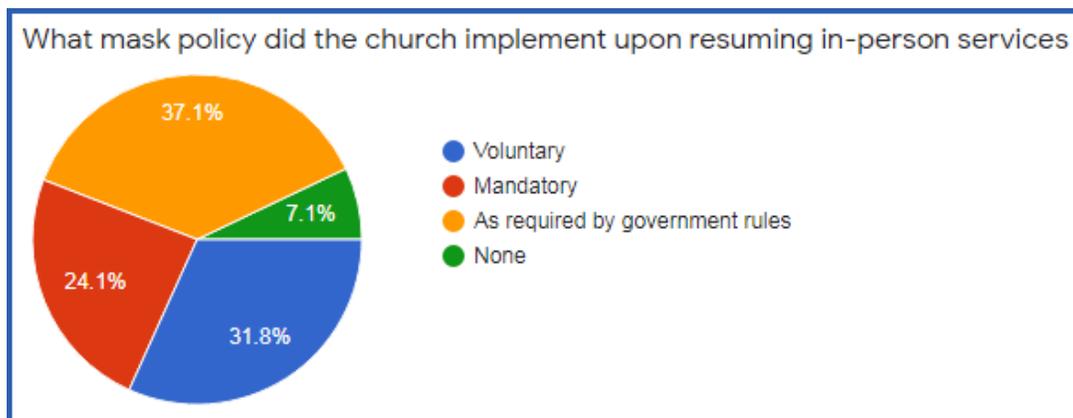
A Bible class teacher in Alabama added: "[We] felt like we were building our wings after jumping off a cliff. Now [we] feel better equipped to handle similar crises that might occur."

# Worship Life after the Lockdowns

As churches resumed in-person services, their leaders or congregations as a whole had to decide what precautions, if any, to take to lower the risks of spreading COVID-19 among brethren. The issues included how to separate people within auditoriums, whether to conduct separate Bible classes, and how to alter their traditional practices for singing, serving the Lord's Supper and collecting donations to support scripturally approved works of the church.

According to the Bible Study Page survey, the most common approaches to physically separating people inside auditoriums were: seating families together, either immediate family (61 percent) or extended family (29 percent), because they are regularly in close proximity; leaving every other pew empty (62 percent); and seating family groups or individuals 6 feet apart (58 percent). "We have the connecting pew chairs, so to spread out in the building, we disconnected some of those and rearranged them," a Christian in Indiana said. Twenty-eight percent of churches asked people to use designated entry and exit points to their buildings, and 50 percent limited face-to-face conversations while people were inside.

A church in New Martinsville, West Virginia, decided to meet in two groups because the size of their building made it difficult to ensure recommended social distance among members. "Each group met for approximately 30-45 minutes, with 30 minutes between services to sanitize," the evangelist said. "We met only on Sunday mornings. As restrictions eased, we gradually added to the length of the service." They started meeting as one group in May 2021. Another congregation in the Mountain State reserved seating for older, at-risk members in the back of the building so they could leave first after worship.



When it came to face masks, most congregations employed them to some extent as a tactic to contain germs – but not always by choice. Only 24 percent of survey respondents said masks were mandatory in their assemblies. Thirty-seven percent reported that masks were only required because of government rules, and they were optional in 32 percent of the local churches represented in the survey. Seven percent of the churches had no mask policy.

Masks were a popular way to accommodate indoor singing when brethren returned to church buildings. Sixty-three percent of congregations required masks for singing, according to the survey. Other changes included reducing the number of songs (31 percent), singing outside (14 percent) or not singing at all (4 percent). A church in Ohio sang only two verses per song. Twenty-nine percent of survey respondents reported no changes to traditional singing practices.

Pre-packaged wafers and communion cups became commonplace during the pandemic, with 51 percent of churches adopting them for self-service and another 11 percent distributing the packages to pews as part of a more traditional Lord's Supper remembrance. Other changes to the Lord's Supper included using plastic gloves to prepare the emblems separately (14 percent) and self-service by family groups at designated tables in the building (4 percent). One congregation served older, at-risk members first. Seven percent of survey takers reported no changes in Lord's Supper practices.

As for collecting contributions during worship, 62 percent of the congregations represented in the survey provided dedicated donation points in lieu of passing trays through the pews.

Thirty-nine percent encouraged donations by mail, and 27 percent either continued or added online options. "We set up a mailbox on a ladder in the driveway," a preacher in Kentucky said. A handful of churches set up multiple ways to donate.

**"The collection is no longer a part of worship. There is simply a box in the foyer."  
-- Alabama evangelist**

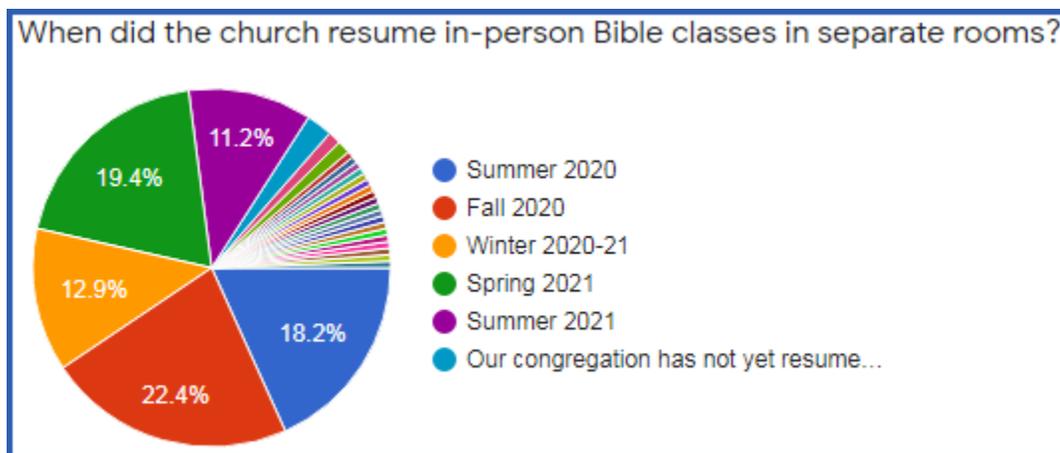
A fourth of them continued pew-to-pew collections, albeit with mitigations such as the attendants wearing plastic gloves and walking through empty pews so they were the only people touching the trays.

Few of the changes to worship practices implemented during COVID-19 lockdowns became permanent, according to the Bible Study Page survey. The most common permanent changes (32 percent) involved distribution of the Lord's Supper, especially the implementation of pre-packaged emblems, and the collection of donations. "The collection is no longer a part of worship," one evangelist in Alabama said. "There is simply a box in the foyer." Only 7 percent of the churches accepted online donations before the pandemic. Of the churches that added the option during COVID-19 lockdowns, one-third continued taking them afterward, according to the survey. Other expediencies that became permanent included:

- Changing the order of worship (15 percent);
- Reducing the number of assemblies (12 percent);
- Revising the times the church meets (12 percent);
- Adding variety in services, such as devotionals and prayer services (3 percent);
- And reversing the order of Sunday morning worship and Bible class (3 percent).

One church permanently expanded its in-person opportunities for worship and/or Bible classes, while a congregation in Gainesville, Florida, decided to continue Bible classes, special studies and singing services on its YouTube channel. A group of brethren in Arlington, Texas, moved their Sunday Bible class to the evening and expanded the length of the morning worship to

dedicate more time toward contemplating the Lord's Supper. "We have modified our Sunday assembly and now have two 'sermons,' with the second focused on Lord's Supper and thoughts pertaining to the theme," an elder in Vermont added. A church in Tampa, Florida, meanwhile, permanently moved its commemoration of the Lord's Supper to the end of worship.



The Bible Study Page survey found that although most churches started worshipping as a whole within 15 weeks of their first cancellations, they did not immediately separate into smaller rooms for Bible classes by age groups. The first wave returned to separate classes in summer 2020 (18 percent), followed by 22 percent in fall 2020, 13 percent in winter 2020-21, 19 percent in spring 2021, and 11 percent in summer 2021. About 2 percent of the churches still hadn't resumed separate classes by July 2021. One church in West Virginia that did so in fall 2020 suspended them again after a case of COVID-19 and didn't restart until spring 2021. Vaccines were more readily available by then. On the other hand, an evangelist in Wyoming said the small group he serves never stopped meeting in classes but instead "just used our heads."

"If we had it to do over again, we would continue our Bible classes," an evangelist in North Carolina said. "I personally feel some weaker may have seized on the change to presume that the only service that is important is Sunday worship. We are having some cleanup on that issue. Present distresses are not ongoing."

A slightly different pattern in timing emerged when survey takers answered a question about the return to all traditional in-person worship practices in their churches. An initial wave of 17 percent in summer 2020 was followed by only 15 percent combined in the subsequent two quarters. Then 24 percent of the congregations "returned to normal" in spring 2021 – after those most at risk of serious illness or death from COVID-19 had time to be vaccinated, if they chose to do so. Another 16 percent resumed their traditional practices in summer 2021. As of July 2021, 15 percent of the congregations still had some COVID-related precautions in place.

# The Politics of Church COVID-19 Policies

Several survey respondents reported differences of opinion about COVID-19 policies within their churches. The ability of congregations to work through them depended in part on leadership but also on the willingness of individual members to try to accommodate each other.

A Bible class teacher in Alabama, for instance, said the church there resolved differences of opinion about the most appropriate health precautions by providing designated seating for members who preferred a stricter approach. A Bible class teacher in Texas said some members of that church who worked with the public or in hospitals didn't want to put brethren in their assemblies at risk, "so they stayed home and watched services online with another congregation that offered that." A church in Maryland even tried to strike a balance where the government rules were concerned, complying where they felt they could in good conscience but ignoring dictates that they believed conflicted with biblical commands to worship.

"I was really proud of the way our church didn't fight about stupid things, like whether or not we were gonna wear masks," said a preacher who works with a congregation of 101-150 in Texas. "Even those who didn't think it was necessary still wore them because they knew it made others more comfortable. ... Everyone's still friends today, despite having to forgo a few 'personal liberties' for the sake of their brethren." An evangelist in Illinois added: "We had little if any pushback on masking or social distancing, and most of the congregation are vaccinated. We experienced none of the turmoil we have heard of in other places over such issues."

An elder at a church of Christ in Taylor, South Carolina, emphasized the importance of flexibility. "We tried to make sure people were able to make decisions for their families and that they were reasonably accommodated wherever they were on the range of COVID-concerned," he said. The congregation experienced 6-10 cases of COVID-19 by July 2021, including hospitalizations and episodes of "[long COVID](#)," and suspended assemblies as necessary to manage outbreaks. An evangelist/elder in Centreville, Virginia<sup>1</sup>, noted the willingness of the saints to follow the lead of their shepherds. "Those who held views contrary to the decisions of the elders moderated them and/or suppressed them in favor of the unity of the congregation," he said.

By contrast, a Bible class teacher in Colorado voiced concern that the church there eased COVID-19 policies when they "became inconvenient." "Masks initially [were] required, but when some members demurred, the elders relented," the teacher said. "Initially, assemblies were to be suspended if COVID cases appeared, but when cases began to appear, there was no suspension. The church did everything allowed by local authorities as soon as it was allowed. There were no steps taken with the intention of protecting the health or lives of the members."

A teacher in Ohio reported significant resistance to government guidelines throughout the pandemic, to the point of not quarantining after potential COVID-19 exposures. Some members visited elsewhere when Wednesday studies were moved online because of multiple illnesses in

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<sup>1</sup> The author of the Bible Study Page survey and this report is a deacon in Centreville, Virginia.

their church. "There were some concerns that our members were spreading [COVID] to neighboring congregations," the teacher said.

Although outright splits of churches over COVID-19 policies have been rare, according to the survey, respondents described tensions that were serious and ongoing. A Christian in Charlotte, North Carolina, reported that although the church adapted well by making decisions based on legal requirements rather than personal preferences, some brethren appear to be seething in silence. "It has driven a wedge between people that believe it is not a big deal and those who believe it's a big deal or have severe health issues," the survey participant said.

The wedge within select churches occasionally became wide enough to push brethren toward congregations where more people share their views on the pandemic. "Some left to attend congregations that were more strict, and some left to attend congregations that were less strict," a Bible class teacher for a church in Kentucky reported. Members from two congregations in Alabama reported similar experiences. Without elaborating, an evangelist in Florida who took the survey said the congregation where he works "lost our eldership" because of COVID-19. And a Bible class teacher in Virginia said multiple families left their congregation because of a dispute over when to return to in-person worship. Contributions also declined.

**"Some left to attend congregations that were more strict, and some left to attend congregations that were less strict."  
– Kentucky class teacher**

Comments in the Bible Study Page survey revealed that masks were the biggest point of disagreement, and sometimes contention, within churches of Christ. A class teacher in Alabama reported that brethren in their group "worked to accommodate those with low risk tolerance but provide freedom for those accepting more risk." A church in California offered three worship options to reduce strife – inside the building with masks, outside the building without masks, and online. And a congregation in Pasadena, Texas, had mask-only and mask-optional sections. A deacon in North Carolina said, "Our leadership was good about emphasizing that wearing masks and getting vaccinated are as much about neighbor-love as about self-preservation."

But some survey respondents reported splits over the issue. An evangelist in Tennessee said the congregation where he works "lost 17 members due to politics." Average attendance at that church is now 26-50 people. A Bible class teacher who worships with more than 200 people in Texas reported "lots of angst" over masks, adding that "several members left because they felt their voices were not being heard." The spiritual challenge created by pieces of fabric was evident in this comment by a Christian in Tennessee, whose congregation periodically revised its masking policy: "I do not envy the elders because they had to make extremely hard decisions that someone would be mad at no matter what the decision was."

## The Good News Goes Livestream

Audio technology has been a mainstay in churches of Christ for generations, from the radio programs and cassette tapes of old to the website sermons and podcasts of the present. Gospel outreach by video also has been around at least since the invention of local cable-access television channels, and many churches have been offering either live or recorded video online for years. But the COVID-19 pandemic awakened many more churches to the possibilities of adding audio-visual technology to their teaching toolboxes.

"The pandemic forced the congregation to expand its outreach through the Internet," said a Tennessee evangelist who typically preaches to 76-100 people in person. "Even in all of the awfulness, this was a blessing and good for our congregation." Another preacher in the Volunteer State added, "Livestream has been beneficial for shut-ins, the number of which increased" because of the risks of COVID-19 to the elderly and immunocompromised people.

Before the pandemic, according to the survey, non-institutional churches of Christ were far more likely to provide recorded audio content than either recorded video content or livestream access to in-person worship services. On the audio front, 60 percent of the churches represented in the survey recorded their sermons, and 25 percent recorded Bible classes. By comparison, 27 percent of the churches captured video of their sermons, and 14 percent recorded Bible classes in video format. Only 20 percent streamed their worship services live. Other video options mentioned by survey participants included short weekly messages and livestreaming of youth lectures. Twenty-four percent of congregations did not offer any audio or video content before the pandemic, according to the survey. ***(Photo: Pandemic livestream set-up at the Paden City church of Christ)***



The use of audio and video technology, particularly streaming services, increased significantly as churches canceled in-person services to obey governing authorities and reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19 among brethren. Among the churches represented in the Bible Study Page survey, 51 percent added livestream worship capability. This typically featured preachers recording from their homes or to largely empty auditoriums with the help of audio-video crews. Some groups also started offering recorded video sermons (39 percent), recorded video classes (31 percent), recorded audio sermons (15 percent) and recorded audio classes (11 percent) during the pandemic. One church supplemented its traditional content with video devotionals. Groups that opted to meet outside used FM transmitters to reach listeners in their cars.

As a result of so many churches expanding their online presences during the pandemic, brethren at higher risk of contracting COVID-19 still had worship options if they decided to shelter at home. “Most of the members that would not come to services did online services with congregations that offered it,” noted a class teacher at a congregation of 26-50 people in Texas. In March 2020, Bible Study Page compiled [a list of churches offering livestream and recorded content](#). Separate web pages provided links to [sermons](#) and [articles](#) inspired by the pandemic.

The Bible Study Page survey showed that churches were more likely to livestream Sunday morning sermons or full worship (65 percent) than other services. The numbers dropped to 54 percent for mid-week Bible study, 45 percent for Sunday Bible study and 27 percent for Sunday evening worship. Fourteen percent of survey participants said their churches streamed gospel meetings, and 3 percent streamed vacation Bible school. One church took its youth lectures virtual. Twenty-seven percent of churches did not use streaming services during the lockdowns.

The Paden City church of Christ in West Virginia, where Bible Study Page creator Jack Glover<sup>2</sup> served as an elder, held a [virtual hymn-singing service](#) during the pandemic. The preacher and his family were the only in-person participants, with others in the congregation and the church’s larger YouTube audience welcome to join from their homes. “It is the most-viewed service during the time of the pandemic,” the evangelist said. “It received more comments from those outside churches of Christ than anything else we did.”

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**Paradise Valley** 688

1. As I trav - el thru life,  
with its trou - ble and strife,

*Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs Ephesians 5:19*

*Please join us as we sing praises to our Creator*

(Image: Screenshot from a Paden City church of Christ virtual hymn-singing)

Another noteworthy tech development within churches of Christ during the lockdown period of the pandemic was the deployment of video-conferencing tools for online classes geared toward specific age groups. According to the survey, 41 percent of the churches organized online classes for adults, and 27 percent offered them for children. The church in Paden City, which has been [broadcasting sermons via YouTube](#) since 2013, used Google Meet creatively to give

<sup>2</sup> The author of the Bible Study Page survey and this report is a son of Jack Glover.

brethren without Internet service access to its services. "We had a guy that would use Google Meet to call those members, and he would broadcast the YouTube audio from our livestream," the preacher said. "We continue the Google Meet phone calls."

While some churches deployed new AV technology only as a stopgap alternative, the Bible Study Page survey indicated greater interest in such tools post-lockdown. Participants reported that 55 percent kept streaming their worship services live. Other audio and video options that continue include recorded video sermons (39 percent) and classes (29 percent), recorded audio sermons (42 percent) and classes (21 percent), and videoconference classes for adults (19 percent) and children (6 percent). The number of churches covered by the survey that still do not provide audio or video content was down from nearly 24 percent before the pandemic to less than 17 percent by summer 2021.

During the pandemic, Zoom was the most popular online video tool among churches of Christ represented in the survey. Sixty percent of the congregations used Zoom. The other video tools of choice were Facebook (51 percent), YouTube (39 percent), Vimeo (6 percent), Google Meet (4 percent) and GoToMeeting (1 percent). A few churches used lesser-known technologies like Boxcast, Jitsi Meet, StreamingChurch.tv, Uber Conference and Webex. Among churches that continued their online video offerings after lockdowns ended, the biggest number of them opted for Facebook (44 percent), followed by YouTube (34 percent) and Zoom (28 percent).

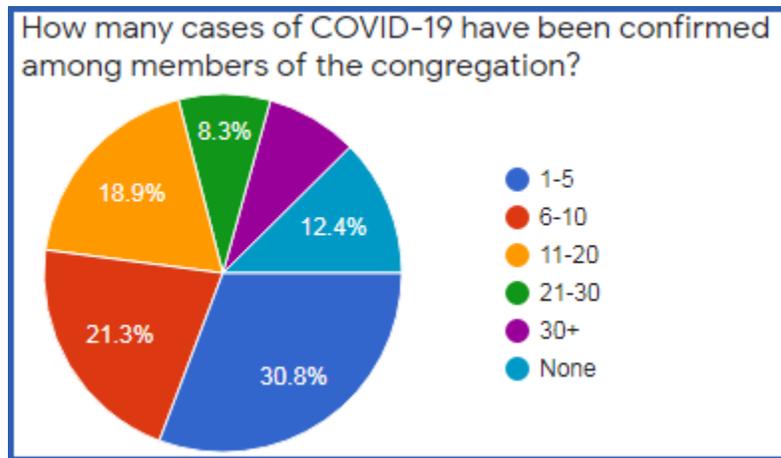
Numerous people who took the survey expressed appreciation for the Internet, both as a medium that helped churches get through the disruptive early months of the pandemic and as a potential tool for ongoing evangelism and edification. A preacher for a large congregation in Florida noted that tech experts within the group were quick to respond to the sudden need for tech expertise. "I don't know if/when we would have gained their service without this testing," he said, adding that "these skills and technologies have opened new avenues of evangelism for us, which we intend to continue moving forward. Good things came to our congregation through this difficult season." One good thing that came from the Internet to a church in Valparaiso, Indiana, is new (and renewed) connections. "We have had a number of previous members and individuals from the community start worshiping with us because of our Facebook and YouTube live streams," said a deacon who took the Bible Study Page survey.

But downsides to the adoption of Internet technology also became apparent during the pandemic. While the preacher in Paden City touted the ability to reach people far beyond the borders of that small town, he also voiced concern that some Christians may decide that virtual worship suits them just fine going forward. "Though I feel comfortable that we offered a temporary solution to an unforeseen problem, brethren everywhere need to return to their congregations and begin to worship and serve the Creator in more personal ways," he said. The challenge is how do you encourage that without shutting down all virtual offerings. There are many shut-ins, folks in nursing homes, those facing chronic health challenges, etc., that still benefit from our virtual offerings."

# COVID-19 within the Church

The last series of questions in Bible Study Page's COVID-19 survey focused on the disease itself. The survey was created and distributed as the spread of the disease appeared to be waning, but as this pandemic has reminded everyone, not even the world's best scientists are good at anticipating the course of a virus that mutates regularly to survive. With that in mind, the data that Bible Study Page collected about COVID-19 illnesses and deaths is outdated, but it still provides a worthwhile snapshot in time of the damage the virus has wrought. It has affected the church directly by attacking the physical health of Christians and indirectly by testing the spiritual health of congregations that have lost leaders and members to the disease. The impact is even greater after the Delta and Omicron waves of the pandemic.

Back in July 2021, when the Bible Study Page completed its survey, COVID-19 had not yet spread widely within non-institutional churches of Christ. Nearly two-thirds of the churches represented in the survey had experienced 10 or fewer cases of COVID among their members, including 12 percent of those with zero infections. The remaining churches reported COVID-19



infections in the range of 11-20 cases (19 percent), 21-30 cases (9 percent) or more than 30 cases (9 percent). The virus hit a small congregation in Rapid City, South Dakota, all at once. "The entire congregation caught COVID at the same time [and] closed two weeks," the evangelist said. It was the only time the group canceled in-person worship.

That outbreak was one of the few to hit churches of Christ as of July 2021, according to the survey. Only 15 percent of the respondents said their churches had seen the virus spread within their membership. By contrast, 47 percent of the churches reported that some members had been hospitalized for COVID-19, and 41 percent of them reported cases of long COVID. The number of congregations who reported deaths to COVID-19 was 20 percent. The survey only tallied these figures at the congregational level, not by individual members.

# Conclusion

Two years into the pandemic, medical experts are anxiously anticipating the time when COVID-19 will reach the [endemic stage](#) of being perpetual yet also [relatively stable, predictable and manageable](#). Brethren in churches of Christ may be wondering the same thing about the virus but in a spiritual context. Although the Bible Study Page survey showed that congregations by and large adapted well to COVID-19 in the short term, it also showed that the disease wreaked more than physical havoc within some churches in America. The open question is just how longlasting the impact will be.

The outlook is not all bad. Evidence abounded in the survey that many brethren in churches of Christ rightly perceived COVID-19 as a test of faith and responded accordingly: “Consider it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (James 1:2-4).

A deacon in Georgia said his fellow saints are “more zealous than pre-COVID.” An evangelist in Indiana reported church growth “both spiritually and numerically.” A preacher in Virginia who also serves as an elder said the group there “safely and peacefully navigated this plague.” An elder in Ohio added: “If anything, I believe one result was an even stronger bond among the membership. From an elder’s perspective, I couldn’t have asked for better cooperation and unity from the membership.” In one Louisiana congregation, an elder noted that the brethren stayed in touch each week when they couldn’t meet in the early days of the pandemic, and they returned to services at the first opportunity.

By the time of the Bible Study Page survey, a congregation of more than 200 people in Florida had experienced 11-20 cases of COVID-19, including some that resulted in hospitalizations and long COVID. But an elder there shared encouraging comments through it all. “We were united in peace and love,” he said. “Our contribution remained the same and attendance/participation grew during the pandemic. We were able to reach more people via technology and [maintain] loving relationships. It has been a challenging year, but it has reaped many blessings.”

The evangelist for another similar-sized church in Florida that experienced even more cases was equally grateful for how brethren weathered the pandemic. Strong elders and patient members were key to that result. “The congregation came together to support those affected physically and economically,” the preacher said. “Special efforts were made to show love to elderly and shut-in members, as well as celebrate the graduations and weddings of the young people, though not by traditional means. ... The consistent attitude among the brethren has been love and preferring others as much as possible so we can support and encourage each other during this difficult time.”

Unfortunately, brethren in some churches did not respond as well to the test of faith posed by the pandemic. This included congregations in Florida. One elder reported that at the church he

helps shepherd, average attendance dropped from more than 100 on Sunday mornings to 75. An evangelist for another group in the Sunshine State made a demographic observation that surprised him: "The older the brothers and sisters, the more likely they were to gather in person," he said. "I was genuinely surprised that most of those who did not return once for in-person worship were all in the 30-40 years of age."

Two evangelists in the Tampa area voiced concerns that the pandemic weakened some people's faith. "It has created an environment where some people think that Zoom is an acceptable form of 'worship' and taking the Lord's Supper," one of them said. He added that the assumption that everyone who opts not to assemble in person does so for health reasons "has created a shroud to give cover to some people to fall away, people weak in their faith to begin with. This is heartbreaking to me." The other Tampa-area evangelist said the elders for the church where he preaches are still seeking to resolve misunderstandings about what it means to be a church and what it means to assemble.

An elder in Massachusetts also lamented the divisiveness wrought by COVID-19. "The need to adapt caused two polarizing reactions of 'will not assemble in person due to risk factors XYZ until the country achieves ABC,' to 'we should only assemble in person, and no exceptions are acceptable in the eyes of God,'" he said. "The spiritually weak got weaker, and the judgmental got more judgmental. These reactions have caused the biggest, most persistent and difficult impact to the saints that I have seen since the great split over the institutional debate." COVID-related tensions also led to such splits, according to the survey. "The congregation became two partly because of it," one elder in North Carolina said.

The elder in Massachusetts added that COVID-19 dogmatism "has caused us to spend a lot of time on teaching and discussion about 'loving your brother as yourself' and 'do not judge your brother.' I expect we will spend many more months and possibly years on this basic theme as we strive to plead with those that left to come back."

May saints everywhere keep growing in faith so the tensions that materialized during our pandemic distress don't become the spiritual equivalent of long COVID in the church of Christ.