

Is COVID-19 the Death Blow to the American Church?

Will COVID-19 be the death blow to the American church? It's anybody's guess.

My guess – no.

Someone said, “Crisis is an accelerator.” The virus in the United States sped up the low attendance problem that haunted many churches.

Pro Church Tools released these facts:

- Only 23–25% of Americans show up to church 3 out of 8 Sundays.

- Eight percent attend a church of 1,000 or more.

- Forty-six percent of churchgoers attend a church of 100 or fewer.

- Two in 10 Millennials believe church attendance is important.

- Fifty-nine percent of Millennials who grew up in church have dropped out.

- Forty percent of churches in America average between 100 and 350 in attendance.

- Ten percent of churches in America average over 350 in attendance.

- Fifty percent of all churches in America average less than 100 in attendance.

- The estimated attendance for 2050 is half of 1990s attendance.

Some say the virus accelerated what was coming – the end of congregations that have resisted live stream services, online giving and technological upgrades.

Bill Wilson predicts that up to one-third of U.S. churches could be out of business by 2025:

He points to LifeWay Research that says 5% of U.S. churches will close within the year because of the pandemic. That's five times the average closure rate for churches, according to The Christian Century magazine.

The virus was the impetus from a ventilator to life support for the American church. The virus forced churches to close for eight weeks or more. It also forced churches to alter their methods.

Some were not ready and have yet to make a positive pivot.

The larger churches are still closed. The mid-size and small churches are hosting 25% of their normal attendance. Some churches are taking temperatures at the doors and installing sanitation stations throughout their facilities.

The blow has been hardest on the small congregations. Some think the coronavirus could shift the country's smallest churches—forcing them to close their doors.

A Slow Reopening

The reopening has been slow for all churches.

A recent related poll of church leaders facilitated by Gloom revealed when people feel “safe” to gather again in public.

They asked which activity would indicate the proper time to open up worship at a church.

Responses included:

–The release of social distancing and stay-at-home guidelines:

17%.

–Local businesses are open: 14%.

–Local restaurant seating areas are open: 8%.

–They test more people: 6%.

–Schools are open: 4%.

–Vaccine available: 3%.

–10% admitted they were unsure.

–25% coming back for a long time.

–30% said they'd rather worship at home and return when they can be mask-free

The answers are all over the map. It is clear that Americans are not running back to the church. Many are running to shop, dine out and get to the beach. But not to church.

The return to church will not be the rush leaders hoped. As tempting as it will be to reopen the doors and believe everyone is coming back, the data (right now) shows that's not the case. --Carey Neiuwhof

Change Is Here

COVID-19 pandemic is a shoutout to the church. The bullhorn is loud. This is the time for the church to shift. COVID-19 is a wake-up call.

"The future of the church lies in our hands. All churches have to inspire people and offer actual solutions to life's everyday problems. Now is the time for the church to reintroduce itself as a place of care, connection and community."

What's First?

Do not look for a quick return to the old ways. Do we want more of what we have done for 50 years?

A common mantra of churches is “We’ve always done it this way.”

Not this time.

“There is nothing permanent except change.” —Heraclitus

“The measure of intelligence is the ability to change.” -- Albert Einstein

“To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often.”
—Winston Churchill

We must shift from sitting to serving. The last 10 weeks have been life changing for churches. We were unable to meet in our buildings. This was challenging and forced change.

The churches shifted to a service rather than having a service.

For even the Son of Man did not come to be *served*, but to *serve*, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

Many churches jumped into serving others. Multiple churches began serving first responders in their communities.

This is new for many churches.

Thousands of church members volunteered at food banks and other essential businesses. Congregants all across America made masks for hospitals, delivered food to the shut-ins and served their cities.

Go church! Maybe we found our niche.

We must invest in areas other than the church. Hundreds and thousands of churches adopted senior citizens. This adoption provided services, supplies – food and personal needs.

We read reports of churches buying gift cards for nurses and doctors. Church members loaded Facebook with pictures of food deliveries to entire shifts on specific floors of hospitals.

The virus unfolded fresh challenges and provided fresh opportunities for churches to reach people in a more meaningful way.

Will the church survive?

The church faces tons of criticism and backlash. And the future does not look bright for the church in America.

Other research (for example, this summary) shows that the U.S. population is undergoing major religious, social, demographic and digital change. The rise of digital life, including social media, the economic crisis, changing attitudes about social issues and the emergence of younger generations on the scene are some factors likely to form undercurrents recalibrating Americans' connection to faith and to Christianity."

Some people say that Christianity is in decline. Some say only the nominal Christians are fading away and this is increasing a more robust faith.

Several church experts are saying: What's going away is a nominalism, but the percentage of people who are devout Christians isn't shifting, which means there's still so much opportunity for the church to engage the mission field – our communities.

We have confused who and what the church is. The church is not a building, entity or organization.

It is an organism made up of believers. The church looks dead, and so did Jesus. God resurrected Jesus from the dead.

"For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: how Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, rose again the third day according to

the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3-4).

Yes, that’s real.

“And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18).

The church is God’s idea. Yes, people have messed it up. But God has a purpose for his church.

Who can stop it?

For the Lord of hosts has purposed, and who shall disannul it? And His hand is stretched out, and who shall turn it back?” (Isa. 14:27).

No one and nothing. The church in America will rise again.
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