

Churches Expected to See 25-35% Drop in Attendance as They Reopen

When asked if church attendance will go back to what it was before the pandemic, one-third of congregants recently surveyed by the Center for Bible Engagement (CBE) anticipate it will not. Pastors, on the other hand, remain a bit more optimistic. Only 1 out of 5 believe attendance will be lower. Yet looking ahead to when social distancing restrictions are lifted, the CBE predicts that churches could see a 25-35% decrease in attendance among the regular attenders (the core of their congregations) if they return simply to “business as usual.” Arnie Cole, CEO of Back to the Bible and director of research for the CBE, says churches must prepare now for radical change in the weeks and months ahead.

“The pandemic has ushered in new realities for us all—how we interact with each other, how we do business and especially how we do church,” Cole says. “But one thing is certain: It simply won’t be business as usual for pastors as they move forward. And that really isn’t such a bad thing. As church leaders navigate the global crisis, many are discovering that they must go beyond the church walls and disciple congregants in ways they never before considered.”

Why the decline in attendance? Cole says that number is drawn from the opinions expressed in the survey. “In our study, we identified *core members of congregations*,” he explains, “and a third of those individuals shared this concern. This is reliable information since these people are familiar with the culture and politics of their church, as well as the patterns of attendance.”

While some in this group predicted a revival, which accounts

for the low end of the range (25%), most of the core congregants Cole surveyed expect the percent who don't come back (or those who come less often) to outnumber regular attenders. In other words, those who have become comfortable with doing online church may choose to continue doing church this way. "We are creatures of habit," Cole points out, "and now many churchgoers have started new ones. Some have discovered they can be nurtured spiritually online. Livestreamed sermons are interactive ... and we like interactive."

Based on CBE's survey analysis, here are highlights of how pastors and regular church attenders are navigating the pandemic:

- Pastors and church leaders are pivoting quickly to connect with and minister to their communities.

- Many pastors say their faith is stronger and that online attendance is up, yet 40% say that giving is down.

- Meanwhile, regular church attenders are navigating the significant changes in their daily lives, while trying to stave off discouragement, anger and fear.

- The vast majority are participating in online worship services, though 42% of them had not done so before.

- The direction of change was mixed. Some thought that the social distancing restrictions would lead to a great spiritual awakening, with more people coming to church when the buildings opened again.

- More commonly, though, respondents talked about online options, making it easier for them to participate in worship, and felt that the availability of online options would lead to an overall decrease in attendance.

- When asked what would help them spiritually, congregants

strongly supported the idea of a daily or weekly spiritual challenge (66%). A significant minority expressed interest in an online adult Bible study (44%) and an online prayer service (25%).

For more information and graphs on the recent survey analysis, visit CBE.