

New Barna Survey: Most Churches Won't Open in May

Barna Group, a research firm at the cross-section between faith and culture, today released new survey results showing how churches have been impacted by coronavirus shelter-in-place policies and how many are planning to reopen.

Barna launched ChurchPulse Weekly in March in order to arm church leaders with the data and insights they need to thrive through the pandemic. Every week Barna has surveyed hundreds of church leaders to learn more about the state of the church throughout COVID-19.

"This season has really put the role pastors play in our communities into a fresh light," said David Kinnaman, president of Barna Group. "As spiritual guides, they have innovated in order to bring hope and encouragement to their congregation. As community leaders, they have been great and agile adaptors in order to meet needs—spiritual and material—throughout this crisis. I think there's no doubt that the positive impact of the church on its community is being recognized afresh."

Now, with six weeks of surveys complete, Barna data show a picture of how churches have adapted and what they expect moving forward. Over time the data show that:

—Most church leaders (48% of week one respondents) were initially hopeful that they would be able to meet again in April. As of this week, nearly a majority (46% of week six respondents) anticipate they will be able to meet in person in June. Despite some states lifting regulations for sheltering in place, fewer (37%) anticipate reopening in May.

—Financial giving to churches took a significant hit in the first few weeks of COVID-19 shutdowns in March, but now in

late April, it appears to be stabilizing. In week one, 37% reported their giving was “significantly down” versus only 11% in week six.

—At first, many churches did not have a plan for addressing the material and financial needs of their community through this season, and leaders first focused on sharing needed hope and encouragement with their congregants. Over time, in addition to continuing to spread a message of hope in Jesus, more churches have been able to organize to meet the material and financial needs of their communities.

Church leaders surveyed have an optimistic and pragmatic view of the next several months of ministry in their communities. When it comes to reopening, most churches are preparing to put significant precautions in place. The most common precautions included asking people to avoid touching (77% of pastors who plan on taking precautions), asking people to sit farther apart (75%) and not passing an offering plate (53%). Most of these pastors (84%) confirm that they will request people who are feeling sick to stay home after social distancing requirements are lifted.

About one-third (32%) of leaders who are taking precautions will require congregants to wear a mask for any in-person services or church gatherings. Similarly, one-third (33%) report they will not offer food and drink (such as coffee and doughnuts) when they return to in-person gatherings. Additionally, 87% of church leaders canceled any short-term mission trips for the duration of the year.

“As a nation, we’re looking at a situation from which there’s ‘no going back.’ As a society, we will feel the impacts of the virus for a long, long time, whether it’s simply a heightened awareness of sanitation practices or a new sense of gratitude toward our community,” continued Kinnaman. “When it comes to the church, nearly every single pastor has had to adapt and to bring on new digital tools and resources for their

congregation. I don't see those going away anytime soon. We've had this amazing opportunity to grow and evolve, and I think it's created stronger church ministries, restructured how we think about discipleship and forever changed how we're measuring organizational impact."

While all of the survey insights demonstrate some of the initial ways churches will continue to be impacted by COVID-19, there's a lot more under the surface. Barna data from week six show that this season has led to a lot of innovation in the church, and it looks like that innovation will stick: 80% of churches will continue to offer an online worship service and more than half of all leaders (55%) are rethinking their strategies for encouraging connectedness within their church community.

[Click here](#) for all of the ChurchPulse data collected over the past six weeks.