

How are churches in Australia handling self-isolation?

Churches across Australia have not been meeting since Sunday March 22nd, 2020. Since then it seems most churches:

- worked furiously to work out how to 'do church online';
- and then kept up enormous efforts to 'get through to Easter'.

Partners in Ministry waited until a week after Easter to survey church leaders to assist them in reflecting on their last 6 weeks so that we might share their experience and learn from each other.

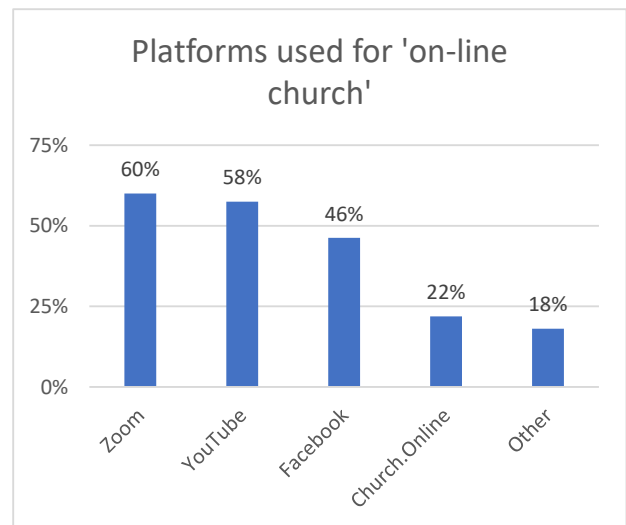
The following is our collation of this feedback from 179 churches from various denominations across Australia.

What are churches doing for corporate meetings?

Approximately nine in ten churches are providing a version of an online service – with 18% creating something that mirrors their previous in-person gathering and 74% of churches meeting online in a modified format. Of those who are not providing an online format most are working hard to connect with 'the saints' in their church and a number encourage them to join online services provided by a neighbouring church or their denominational leadership.

There is an even mix between online churches using **live formats** and those using **pre-recorded formats**. It seems that there is now a level of comfort with the platform and approach used – most are now at a stage of trying to tweak or add to their current offering. The most common addition being explored is from those who are comfortable with pre-recorded formats exploring how to add more live elements to build community amongst congregations.

By far the most common platforms used are Zoom, YouTube, Facebook and church.online. When it came to **live connectivity** and **small groups** Zoom was significantly more often referred to than any other platform. A significant number of churches are using multiple formats to reach different groups.



Priority needs to move to community and reaching out

If the focus for the first 4 weeks has been on 'getting online' and 'connectivity' it would seem the focus for the next few months will be on **building the church community** and **reaching our broader community with the love of Christ**.

Building church community

From comments in the surveys, it is clear that **building community** has been one of the key issues that church leaders are wrestling with. This has led to a significant focus on how to engage the congregation.

It is easy to create larger scale communication however most churches have recognised that encouraging personal communication between members is far superior for maintaining community. It is very pleasing to hear of churches who have activated (and trusted) personal networks to phone and support each other rather than try to control relationships at a central level. We believe this delegated leadership will stand out as an important element of successful church community engagement.

Conferencing tools (mostly Zoom) have provided the backbone for organising community across networks. For example:

- Small groups
 - Many leaders commented that people who have not previously been members of small groups have either joined new groups, moved into a different form of small group or been 'adopted by groups' for pastoral care.
 - Some churches indicated that they have provided resources or training to help leaders move onto an online format.
- Children's and youth groups – many churches have acknowledged the need for additional preparation and thinking to ensure any groups are aligned with safe ministry practices.
 - NB it is interesting to see some feedback that, for some, youth has been a more difficult group to meet in a live online format. They found that with school, studies or work being online already youth were resistant to 'another meeting' online.
- Morning tea, supper etc for meeting after or before church meetings
 - there has been some very clever use of Zoom rooms to break people into smaller groups for a short period (eg seven minutes) to meet people and then meet with another group for another short period.
 - A couple of churches used this method to allocate people to rooms and allocate visitors to another 'room' for a formal welcome and introduction
 - NB some churches made note that consideration of safe ministry practice is important when allocating people into smaller less controlled groups online.
- Seniors groups – it is fascinating to learn that some churches have had success with seniors online, whilst others have found technology a barrier for this demographic.
- Dinners and suppers, drinks etc

It is clear that there is a segment of the church community who are not accessible by the internet – eg in older people or less affluent communities. In these situations, it is wonderful to learn that:

- Active connection by telephone is occurring. (Many churches recognise that the apps they are utilising are often accessible by telephone)
- Members have been visiting older brothers and sisters to equip them to use the available technology. It is wonderful to hear from a church that they had purchased tablets to be used by elderly members to access churches from within aged care facilities.
- Services are being provided in writing, or on DVD, or via socially distanced personal visitation.
- Many leaders are clearly trusting their lay leaders to care for the flock.

Visitors

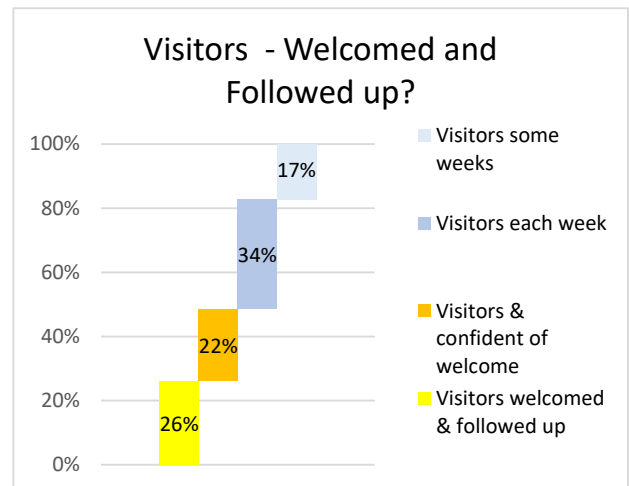
Many leaders have indicated how pleased they have been to have visitors to online church services. Indeed, nine in ten who answered the survey indicated they knew visitors were joining them. Arguably, it is considerably easier to invite friends and family simply by sending a link to the service or advertising the church link. Such visitors include:

- People invited by members;
- Family members who do not usually come to church;
- People in the community who have chosen to check church out;
- People in other geographies etc

Clearly this presents an extraordinary opportunity for the kingdom.

We discovered that '**welcoming visitors**' is a significant area for possible improvement:

- Generally, churches have found it very difficult to identify and genuinely engage with visitors. Many churches have a "contact us" button or link on their platform or website but very few visitors took the step to complete it (not unlike normal church) – making contact difficult.
- Only half (51%) of leaders with visitors were confident visitors were **welcomed**. Surely this is a simple aspect to rectify.
- Only a quarter (25%) of pastors were confident visitors were also being **followed up**.
- A few seemed to get better traction with some creativity, for example:
 - Taking the time to specifically (ie visually) demonstrate **where to click** on the website / platform
 - Making registration the very first thing a person sees as they access the website (see <https://www.villagechurch.sydney/online/> for a good example of an online landing page)
 - Setting aside time in the 'service' for everyone to fill in the contact card – and inviting all people including regulars to provide feedback as well as details (eg how many are watching, simple polls, simple question) so that completion of a card is normal for all.
 - Appointing facilitators in the chat section of the website to scan for people who are not regulars and introducing themselves.
 - The use of allocated Zoom rooms for post service community in which 'visitors' are streamed into the same Zoom room facilitated by people with the singular intent of welcoming.



We believe leaders are going to need to be more explicit with welcoming visitors and requests to make contact if we are to realistically connect with people visiting online.

Mission and Outreach

Almost all church leaders recognised that this period represents a significant opportunity for mission and outreach and there are a wide range of approaches which include:

- Organising for ‘viral kindness’ cards to be delivered to neighbours
- Provision of food and other support to our community – distribution, food hampers, food vouchers care packages, blood donation - Easter eggs!
 - Partnering with police, ambulance, RSLs, civic leaders etc to identify people who need support
- About half of churches are conducting or planning to conduct an online ‘Christianity course’ – of which the most popular are Alpha online, Christianity Explored / Life Explored, Christianity Explained and home-grown programs.
- Prompting members to invite friends to church by providing social media and email links.
- Advertising church online, evangelism courses, missional projects etc with banners, letter box drops and social media campaigns (we acknowledge the terrific work of <https://www.virtualchurchassist.com/online-church-resources> in supporting churches with this)
- Prayer walks
- Helping, supporting or praying for health workers and school teachers.

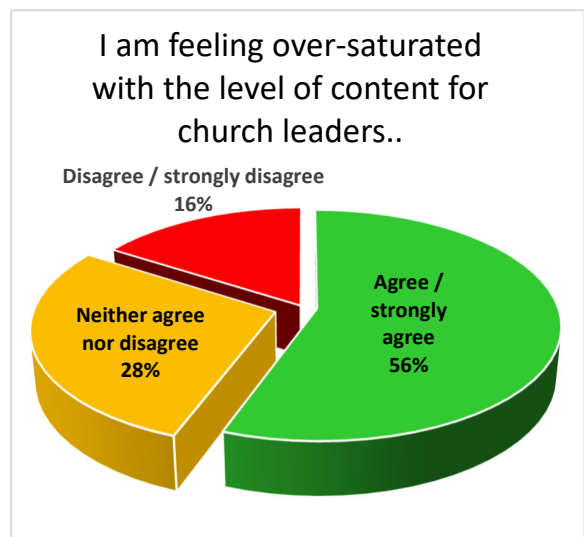
It was interesting to note that some churches tended to answer a question about mission and outreach with the introduction of Gospel explaining programs. Some other churches answered the same question with loving their community. It was encouraging to hear that some churches emphasised both seeking to love their community and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

We want to encourage church leaders to continue to consider how they can encourage and equip the saints to be doing the work of the Gospel at this time so that longer term habits might be developed or reinforced. We would also encourage church leaders to think more about people than programs during this period (even when they are coordinating programs). We believe it will help us to be more authentic as we reach out to our communities.

Leaders are tired and saturated

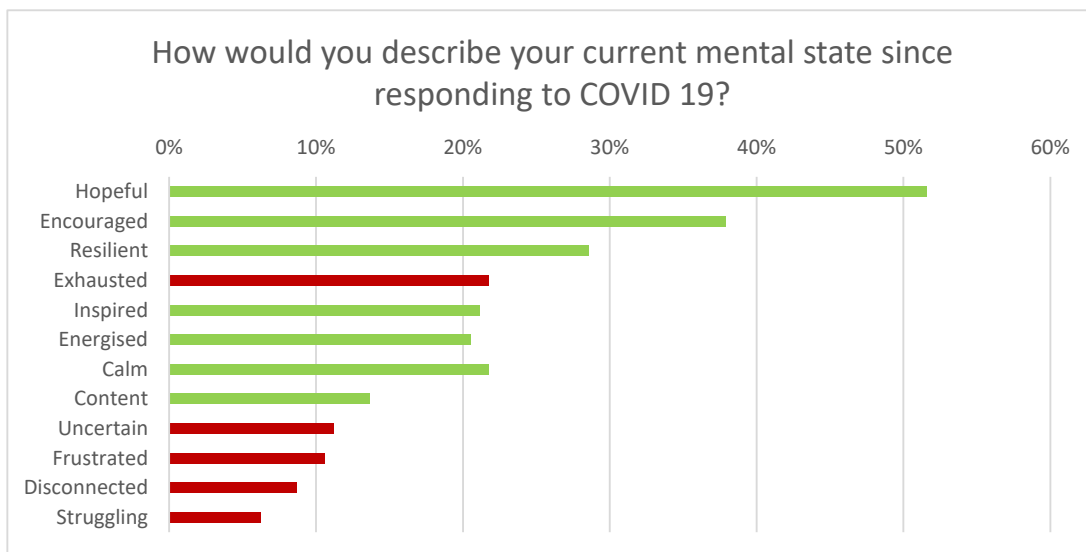
We used this survey to ask questions regarding how church leaders are feeling. We found:

- Un-surprisingly church leaders are tired. The previous 6 weeks had been an enormous drive to adapt and get through to Easter – for some fueled by adrenaline.
 - 63% of leaders indicated they were exhausted or tired
- Church leaders have been receiving large quantities of information. Over half (56%) of leaders agree that they are saturated by this amount of information. We acknowledge that many pastors wish to talk and ‘check in’ more than they wish to receive ‘another resource to read or watch’.



- NB – if you would like to chat to one of the Partners in Ministry consultants please don't hesitate to contact us on the email below.
- We are mindful that our colleague Kirsty Bucknell is conducting pioneering research into Ministry Resilience. If you are interested in hearing more about Kirsty's research cohorts on resilience you can register interest at <https://tinyurl.com/RiM-Registration>.

When asked to describe their current mental state since dealing with COVID19 most leaders have a sense of hopefulness and encouragement. They are clearly tired (63%) however can see real optimism. Given a selection of positive and negative indicators leaders largely chose more positive indicators (hopeful, encouraged, resilient) rather than negative.



Team Leadership and Communication

Partners in Ministry recognises that good Christian leadership is required through this difficult time. This means leadership right through the church starting with the senior pastor through ministry leaders and lay leaders. We believe that all levels of leadership are essential (especially now) and need to be communicating to a higher level and with alignment.

We asked church leaders how they felt they were leading / managing their staff or lay leaders. It is pleasing to see that 71% were comfortable with what they are doing or believe this is a terrific opportunity for leading / managing. We heartily agree and encourage all church leaders to consider how they build further trust, capability, and alignment in their overall leadership network.



With this in mind, we are surprised that only 36% of leaders were able to indicate that lay leaders were involved in communicating the current situation and mission / plans. And of these only 56% were confident of complete alignment. This suggests an opportunity for greater communication between pastors and their lay leaders.

We believe that church leaders need to fully appreciate the leadership and influence of lay leaders and the priority of alignment. We encourage churches to establish a process of 'town hall' briefings with all lay leaders to explain to them:

- What we are doing;
- What we are saying;
- What we are planning; and
- What we are praying for.

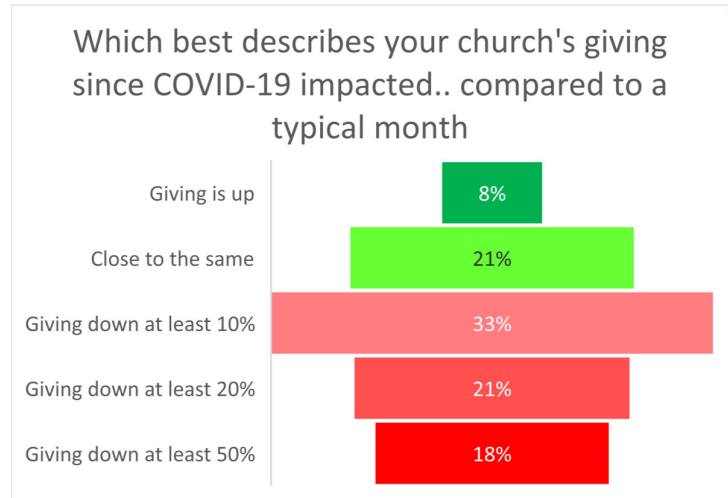
Leaders who are not confident of the message will either 'make up the missing pieces' or avoid communication – neither is helpful. We believe church leaders should make lay leaders feel they have been trusted with the whole message and picture and encouraged to communicate to their networks (formal and informal). We believe this is an easy activity to achieve. If you would like help thinking about how you might implement this, please do not hesitate to contact Partners in Ministry.

Of course, no one channel of communication is adequate or definitive and so effective church leaders indicated that they are using multiple channels of communication.

Financial impact of COVID-19

At the time of completing the survey the Federal government's 'jobkeeper' program had not been completely explained and it was not until halfway through the survey period that it was expanded to include 'ministers of religion'. Bearing this in mind, we surveyed church leaders about the financial giving of the church and learned:

- Approximately seven in ten churches have experienced at least a 10% reduction in giving with:
 - 36% of churches experiencing a drop of more than 25%;
 - 17% experiencing a reduction of more than 50%.
- One in four churches are experiencing giving at a similar level to before COVID 19; and
- 5% have experienced giving above the usual level.



Clearly this means that the Federal government's program to support employment will be greatly appreciated by churches. At the time of the survey:

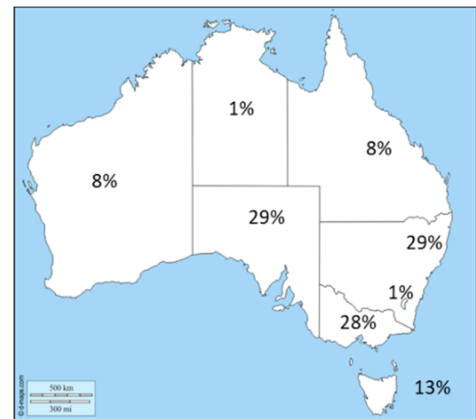
- Seven in ten (72%) indicated that they will apply for jobkeeper with about half of these unsure of whether they would succeed; and
- Three in ten indicated they would not apply for jobkeeper.

These responses may change now that the job-keeper package is clearer. We are mindful of what will happen for churches after this period when the government reduces financial support.

Who participated in this survey?

We are very grateful to the community of church leaders who participated in this survey. It included leaders from a wide range of church sizes across multiple denominations as indicated below:

- 49% of churches had regular Sunday adult attendance prior to COVID 19 of under 100;
- One in seven had an attendance between 200 and 400; and
- One in eight had attendance over 400.
- Participating denominations included: ACC, ACTS Global, Anglican, Baptist, C3, Churches of Christ, CRC, 'Other Pentecostal', 'Other Independent', Presbyterian, Salvation Army and Uniting churches.
- Churches from every state in Australia participated in the survey as represented in the map to the right.



Discussion

As we collate this feedback, there are a range of key issues that we think are worth considering. We hope our thoughts below are helpful to you as you lead your church.

- **Leadership** – people will look for clear leadership at this time. Rather than being reactive, leaders will need to be on the front foot and make it clear that our mission hasn't changed, even as our method does. Leaders will also need to strongly focus on equipping and trusting other leaders.
 - Leaders will need to communicate regularly and ensure that there is strong alignment i.e. alignment with legislation and alignment across all leaders in the church. Leaders should strive for authenticity and honesty in their communication – whether communicating the scriptures, prayers, sharing hopes, ideas or plans, explaining finances etc. Of course, this should be par for the course, however leaders must recognise that any 'window dressing' or positive 'spin' at this time may serve to undermine the credibility of the message.
 - Leaders must recognise how disenfranchising it is as a 'second in charge' or a lay leader when you do not know what to say or behave. Strong leaders will enable other leaders to act and prioritise communication to equip these people to be able to talk to others with confidence. We strongly recommend church leaders include **all leaders** to ensure and enable communications are shared by all influencers across the church.
 - We believe that in a post-COVID environment churches will need to lean more on lay leaders and funded roles will need to focus much more on teaching, leading, equipping and oversight. In this next phase we encourage churches to engage in this transition by prioritising:
 - Intentionally engaging lay leadership more in ministry; and
 - Training and equipping paid ministry leaders to step into these higher organisational roles.
 - (NB Shameless plug - you might like to follow up with PIM for training in building your leadership pipeline, multiplication of ministry (delegation), coaching people in ministry, leading staff, leading staff, leading teams etc..)
 - Leaders should also be mindful of keeping 'the main game the main game'. We suggest leaders keep a strong focus on discipleship over this period and ask themselves "how will this method reinforce or equip people to grow as disciples or make disciples both now and into the future". Doing this well will lead to a legacy in the church culture in the long term.
 - We acknowledge that the shift in approach has enabled some churches to sincerely question what church meetings are about. We encourage leaders to seek authenticity with the church body in our worship and in our community.
 - We also suggest that leaders start evaluating ministry through this period to check for effectiveness and with an eye towards the future – recognising that some of the practices we are exploring at this time may well be advantageous in a post-COVID world. It may helpful to ask during this period:
 - What have you **stopped** doing during this period that you might not go back to doing?
 - What have you **changed or adjusted** during this time that you might continue with?
 - What have you **started** during this time that you might continue?

- **Sustainability** – enormous effort has been made to achieve an online based method. Leaders are already tired, and we know that we may not be able to meet face to face for some months. Leaders will need to consider how sustainable this approach and other efforts are. A couple of questions to ask might be:
 - How can our lay leaders or members do this? We strongly suggest you begin involving members in the effort.
 - If ministry staff become diverted by the need for serious pastoral care due to the human impact of COVID-19 (eg financial problems, serious health issues or even deaths) how will the programs you have instituted be sustained / implemented?
 - How do you stay strong and resilient – self-care?
- **Community** – beyond running a church service a key risk for the church is **community** of the church. Some people will love meeting online. Some will tire of meeting online. In both cases people may drift from church community unless engaged. We must ensure that we maintain our focus on people rather than the programs – as we work to build a discipleship culture in the church.
 - How will we utilise the many resources and communication vehicles we have, even as social distancing persists, to encourage people to come together and share life?
 - How will we create an environment and equip or encourage our lay leaders to build community and care for those who are isolated?
 - How might this differ for different demographic groups (eg young, older, culture etc..)?
- **Mission / Outreach** – this is clearly an opportunity for the church to embrace new people and to demonstrate the love of Christ to our community.
 - How will you identify, welcome and embrace new people? This is an area where clearly subtlety is wasted! We encourage church leaders to be more explicit in their authentic desire and intent to see visitors welcomed and followed up. NB - this may require some experimentation to find a method that will work for your church!
 - How will you equip and encourage the saints to serve their community and share the good news and love of Christ?
- **Financial** – We encourage churches to be watching for the financial consequences of lost employment, rental income, or giving and looking for early warning signs. We are very grateful to see churches and ministers of religion included in the jobkeeper program; however we must be prepared for this to cease (in September?). With this in mind we recommend you be prepared for challenges by doing some scenario planning. We recognise that this may sound extremely negative, however we believe this type of scenario planning will be helpful. We also encourage church leaders to consider how they authentically communicate this to the congregation. We believe that members are aware that church funding is likely to be impacted by COVID-19 and are worth trusting with honest and careful communication.

Friends we are very grateful for the feedback we have received. We hope that you find these survey findings helpful.

Please know that all of us at the Partners in Ministry are thankful for you and your role and we are praying for you as you serve our Lord Jesus and His church. We are praying for your safety and your faith, and that the work of our Lord with flourish even as our nation faces a very tough period.

If we can help you at all; be it a chat or a prayer for you, or specific consultancy or coaching, please don't hesitate to contact us by email info@partnersinministry.com or through our website at www.partnersinministry.com.