

FIRST-PERSON: Five types of church members who won't return after the quarantine

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It is one of the most common questions we get from church leaders: When will all the church members return to in-person services? Leaders do not like my response: Never. It is a reality church leaders and members are hesitant to accept. For most churches, not all the church members who were attending before the pandemic will return. In fact, our anecdotal conversations with church members and church leaders indicate somewhere between 20-30% of the members will not return to your church.

From an attendance perspective, if 20% of a church with a pre-pandemic attendance of 200 do not return, the new reality attendance will be 160 in attendance after everyone feels safe to return. You can do the math for your own church.

So, who are these non-returning church members? Why are they not returning? Here are the five most common dropout groups. The groups are not mutually exclusive; there could be significant overlap.

– The decreasing attendance members. These were your members

who, at one time, attended church almost four times a month. Before the pandemic, their frequency of attendance declined to twice a month or even once a month. COVID-19 accelerated their trends. They are now attending zero times a month.

– The disconnected church members. If a church member is in a small group, his or her likelihood of returning is high. If they attend worship only, their likelihood of attendance is much lower. Please let this reality be a strong motivation to emphasize in-person small groups once everyone feels safe to return.

– The church-is-another-activity church members. These church members see gathered attendance as yet another activity on par, or lower, than other activities. They were the church members who let inclement weather keep them from church but not their children's Sunday soccer games. Commitment to the church was a low priority before the pandemic. They have no commitment in the post-quarantine era.

– The constant-critic church members. These church members always had some complaints for the pastor. In fact, your pastor may be dying a death by a thousand cuts. They are likely still be complaining even though they have not returned to in-person services. Many of them will not return at all.

– The cultural Christian church members. They were part of a declining group well before the pandemic. They were those church members who likely were not Christians but came to church to be accepted culturally. Today, there are few cultural expectations for people to attend church. These cultural Christians learned during the pandemic that it was no big deal to miss church. It will be no big deal for them never to return.

Church leaders and church members, however, should not fret about these losses. Your local church has the opportunity to write its future on a blank slate, and these church members

really had no plans to be a part of that future anyway.

You may feel the pain of the losses. That is normal, but God has a plan for your church to embrace the new reality to which you are headed. Head into His future with confidence. God's got your church – and He's got you. It's cliché, but the best days are likely just ahead.

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