

LIFEWAY RESEARCH: Survey offers snapshot of church life during pandemic

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (Special and local reports) – Protestant churchgoers expressed satisfaction overall with how their church has responded to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic since the outbreak began nearly a year ago, according to a study by LifeWay Research, a division of LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention in Nashville that specializes in surveys about faith in culture and matters that affect churches.

Eighty-six percent of survey respondents said they were “proud” of how their church has responded, with 58% strongly agreeing. Only nine percent disagreed. Twelve percent said they are ashamed of how their church has responded to the crisis.

“Pastors have heard their share of second-guessing for how they have handled their church’s response to COVID-19,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research, “but a large majority of churchgoers agree with their church’s various responses and few are critical overall.”

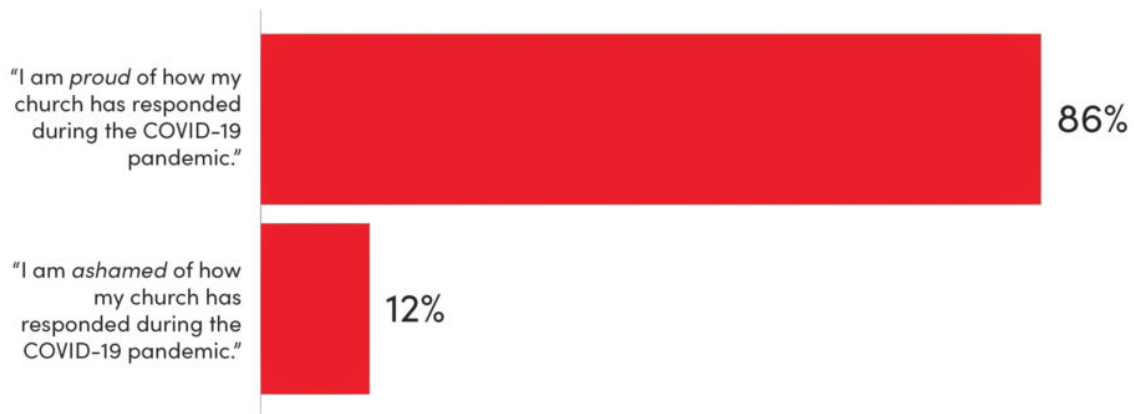
In-person services

In January 2021, half of Protestant churchgoers didn’t attend any in-person church services. For some, that was because their congregation didn’t gather in person during the pandemic. In late March and April of 2020, fewer than one in 10 Protestant churches held in-person services in a given week, according to a previous Lifeway Research study among pastors. By June, however, the majority of churches were gathering in-person again. In September, 87% of churches held in-person services but that fell to 76% of churches in January

2021.

Churchgoers pleased with their church's handling of COVID-19

Among U.S. Protestant churchgoers



Lifeway research

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In the latest study, Lifeway Research found attending in person has not been an option recently for almost 22% of Protestant churchgoers. One in five said their church stopped in-person services months ago and have not resumed, while two percent said services stopped for the first time recently and have not resumed.

Most churchgoers experienced some type of back-and-forth on the availability of in-person services. For 31%, in-person services stopped at their church for a short period of time and have since resumed. Another 22% said in-person services were halted for much of the year but have resumed. Seventeen percent said in-person services at their church have stopped and started more than once. Only five percent said their congregation continued to gather in person throughout the pandemic.

"The experiences of churchgoers have varied greatly, because their churches have responded differently to the impact of the pandemic on their church and local community," said McConnell.

“A large minority of churchgoers attend a church that did not offer in-person services for much of 2020. As January illustrates, just because a church offered in-person services does not mean every churchgoer was willing to participate in that way with the coronavirus still actively circulating.”

Mississippi Governor Tate Reeves lifted the last of his executive orders curtailing gatherings and other activities on March 3, but included cautions to be followed in that latest executive order reopening the state.

African American churchgoers were most likely to say their church stopped in-person services many months ago and have not resumed (40%). That matches the responses of African American pastors during the pandemic, who have been among the most likely to say their churches were not gathering in person and have been suffering during COVID-19.

Going around COVID-19

As regulations and guidelines caused churches to cancel traditional gatherings, many got creative with the types of services they offered during the pandemic. Eighty-five percent of churchgoers said their church offered livestreaming of the worship service. Of those who said their church livestreamed services, 83% participated in it. Only 12% of churchgoers said their church didn't offer livestreaming worship services.

Most of those who said their church offered livestreaming reported the church placed the video on the church website (55%). Fifty-one percent said the church used Facebook Live. Thirty-four said service was on YouTube. Twenty-two percent it was on a video conferencing tool like Zoom.

Seventy-six percent said their church posted videos of worship services that could be watched at any time. Among those who said their church provided that option, 80% watched a worship service in this way. Fifteen percent said their church did not offer that option.

Bible studies, outdoor worship

Fifty-two percent of respondents said their church offered online Bible studies for adults. Most of those who said their church offered it (59%) participated in the studies. Twenty-nine percent said their church didn't offer that. Adult churchgoers under age 50 were more likely to say their church offered online Bible studies and they participated in them, than churchgoers age 50 and older.

Thirty-five percent said their church had outdoor worship services. Most of those who said their church offered it (58%) participated in the outdoor services. Fifty-four percent said their church didn't offer worship services outside during the pandemic.

Thirty percent said their church had drive-in worship services where attendees remained in their cars. Fifty-six percent of churchgoers whose church offered drive-in services participated. Sixty-two percent said their church did not offer those types of services. Younger churchgoers, those age 18-29, were more likely to say their church offered drive-in services in which they participated, than churchgoers over age 50.

Most churchgoers said they participated in some alternative worship services specifically in January 2021. Fifty-three percent said they participated in an online worship service from their church. A quarter said they took part in a worship service on TV. Sixteen percent said they were part of an online worship service at another church, or listened to a worship service on the radio (nine percent).

Majority participated

"Much like the old children's song, churches have been inside, outside, upside, and downside during this pandemic," observed McConnell. "It would be a stretch to say churchgoers have been 'happy all the time,' but amid the variety of approaches and

technology used, a majority of churchgoers participated at some point in what their church offered.”

For more information, view the complete report at <https://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Churchgoers-Feb-2021-3.23.2021-Report.pdf>.

Methodology

The online survey of 1,000 American Protestant churchgoers was conducted Feb. 5-18, 2021 using a national, pre-recruited panel. Respondents were screened to include those who identified as Protestant/non-denominational and attended religious services at least once a month in 2019. Quotas and slight weights were used to balance gender, age, region, ethnicity, and education to more accurately reflect the population.

The completed sample is 1,000 surveys. The sample provides 95% confidence that the sampling error from the panel does not exceed plus or minus 3.2%. This margin of error accounts for the effect of weight. Margins of error are higher in subgroups. Comparisons are made to a Lifeway Research survey of Protestant churchgoers Sept. 20-27, 2019 using the same methodology.

Evangelical beliefs are defined using the NAE Lifeway Research evangelical beliefs research definition based on respondent beliefs. Respondents are asked their level of agreement with four separate statements using a four-point, forced-choice scale (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree).

Those who strongly agree with all four of the following statements are categorized as having evangelical beliefs:

- The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
- It is very important for me personally to encourage non-

Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.

- Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.
- Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation.