

WISCONSIN CLERGY SURVEY
COVID-19 & MINISTRY STRESSORS
July 2020



WISCONSIN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

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Executive Summary

The Wisconsin Council of Churches conducted a survey of Christian leaders in July 2020. 434 people responded from 17 traditions, predominantly mainline clergy.

Church Activities

The first set of questions was oriented around how church activities were currently being conducted.

- For worship, 90% offered online options. 50% were exclusively online. Only 6% were meeting exclusively in a physical location – indoors or outdoors.
- When asked how the church was gathering for other activities such as Christian education and fellowship, 18% said the church was not gathering at all. 27% were meeting outdoors. 75% were online. Those meeting indoors said they had only recently begun and were only doing so with small numbers of people, physical distancing, and face masks.
- 55% of respondents said their church building was currently in use for a human needs ministry. The largest proportion of these were hunger-related ministries, followed by day care for vulnerable people (children, elders, people with disabilities), 12-step programs, and health care ministries.

Reopening Influences

There was a disparity between numerically ranked answers and short answers when it came to influences on reopening. Respondents ranked public health as the highest influence, and neighboring churches' decisions as the lowest influence. Parishioner pressure ranked only slightly higher than neighboring churches. However, statements in the short answers tell a different story, with perceived pressure from lay leaders and influential people in the congregation being stated numerous times. Care for the most vulnerable in the church was also frequently mentioned.

COVID-19 Awareness

- 60% knew someone engaged in COVID-19 response (medical personnel, public health, etc)
- 24% knew someone who had been hospitalized, 11% knew someone who had died.
- 2% had contracted COVID-19 themselves

Precarious Employment & Vocation

- 10% of all clergy surveyed had their employment threatened due to COVID-related ministry decisions
- 25% had seriously considered retiring or resigning due to the stresses of ministry during COVID-19 times.
- An abundance of personal stories offered – most anonymously - illustrated the strain on clergy personally, on their family relationships, and on the relationship between pastor and parish.

Some Questions and Conclusions

If we do not attend to changes in our ministry models, we risk a profound leadership crisis. How can we best: (1) support local churches in focusing ministries to meet the deepest need, rather than replicating the church's worship and program online (2) foster regular collaboration between parish clergy so they are less isolated (3) offer clergy and their families generous community-wide care so rest and respite is not seen as a deficiency (4) open up permission-giving ministry space in partnership with the Holy Spirit, and (5) further develop ecumenical networks to strengthen us all for ministry in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous time?

About the Wisconsin Council of Churches

The Wisconsin Council of Churches (WCC) is a network of Christian churches and faith-based organizations committed to working together across our many differences. Exercising holy imagination, we help each other make courageous choices that lead toward peace with justice, the vitality of the church, and the well-being of our neighbors. The Council connects 20 Christian traditions – Mainline, Historically Black, Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Evangelical – which have approximately 2,000 congregations and over one million church members in Wisconsin. For over seventy years, we have prayed and worked together for the unity and renewal of the church and the healing and reconciliation of the world.

Introduction & Methods

WCC staff has been in regular contact with Christian clergy from our member jurisdictions since the early days of the pandemic making itself known in this state. We gather information, provide resources and support through informational webinars, weekly Zoom drop-in hours, individual consultations, and visits to judicatory gatherings.ⁱ In response to a growing body of anecdotes regarding pressure on clergy to resume worship in church buildings, frustration with the politicization of the pandemic, family strains, and deteriorating mental and spiritual health, we developed a survey to compare perceptions with some of the reality of COVID-19 ministries.

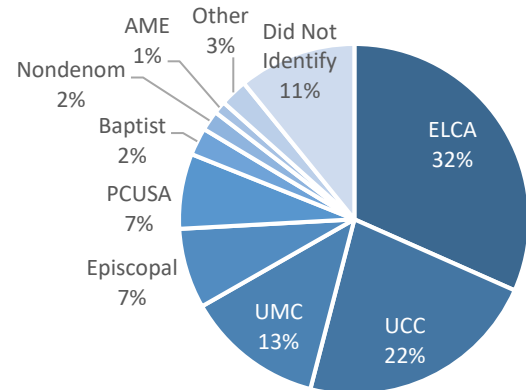
Pairing survey results with the knowledge Council staff is privy to through their wide-ranging conversations with judicatory leaders, public health experts, and lay and ordained local church leaders around the state, a more accurate portrait of Christian ministry in Wisconsin begins to appear. The story these more comprehensive results tell is no less unsettling than the anecdotes which led us to conduct the survey, but it does contain some bright spots, and urges serious reflection toward behavior which will be able to sustain clergy and local churches through the rest of the pandemic, and beyond it.

The survey was conducted using Google Forms. Links were made available via Facebook (through the Council's official Facebook page, and from there shared by staff, jurisdictions, and other friends of the Council), the Council's email newsletter, and through judicatory partners who shared it with their rostered ministers. The survey was open for responses from July 9, 2020 through August 1, 2020.

Eligible respondents were Wisconsin Christian leaders meeting the following criteria (1) clergy actively serving in parish ministry or another setting in which they are responsible for gathering the faith community in a physical place or (2) laypersons serving communities that are currently entirely lay-led. Those who did not self-certify with one of those responses were not allowed to complete the survey. Respondents did not need to be affiliated with one of the member bodies of the Council.

Who responded?

- 434 Respondents from 17 Christian denominations or traditions
- 427 Clergy / 7 Leaders from entirely lay-led communities
- Identifying geography was optional. 5% said they were based in Madison, 8% in Greater Milwaukee. 72% of respondents listed a location elsewhere in the state.



At these churches, worship is

- Offered online 90%
- Offered online ONLY 50%
- Offered indoors 24%
- Offered at a physical site ONLY 6%
(indoors and/or outdoors but not online)

These statistics align fairly well with nationwide statistics in a recent Pew survey on coronavirus-related restrictions and churches.ⁱⁱ Outdoor worship included both drive-in and church lawn/church yard. The frequently expressed sense of “everyone else” going back to worship indoors is not actually the most common practice, at least by respondents to this survey. We also know from conversations with ecumenical representatives that among some other jurisdictions that are “open for worship,” it is a “may” rather than a “must” and there are numerous exceptions based on the age of the officiant, risk level to parishioners and other factors. Numbers attending worship in a number of these situations are known to be fairly low due to a combination of physical distancing requirements and parishioner interest. Wisconsin clergy in our survey also mentioned using US Mail for notes and printed sermons, emailed bulletins, radio broadcasts, and CD recordings as tools to extend their reach to lower-tech congregants.

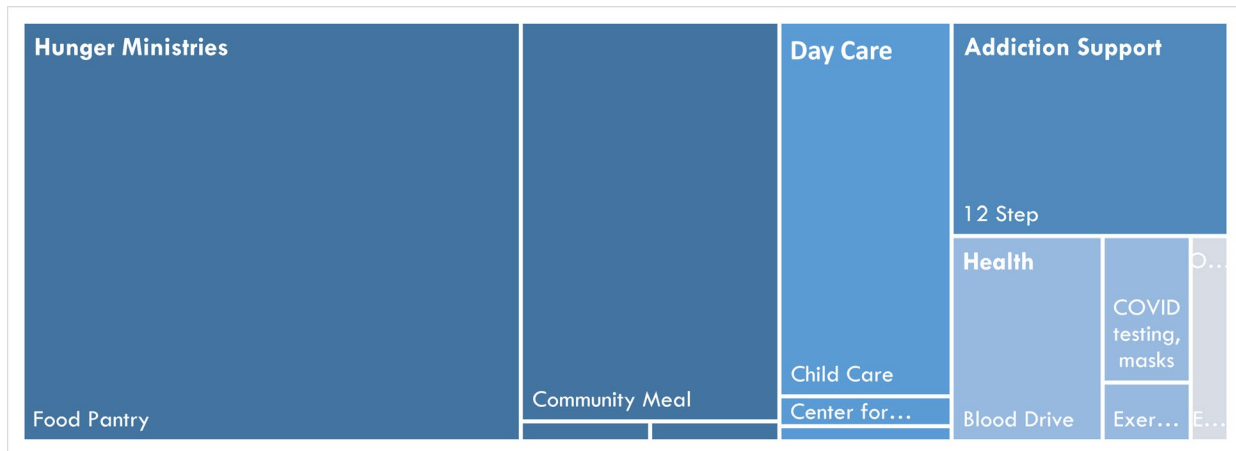
The church is still gathering for other activities (meetings, fellowship, Christian education), but the numbers are notably lower than worship opportunities:

- Online 72%
- Outdoors 27%
- Indoors 17%
- Not At All 18%

Multiple answers were allowed. Commenters on indoor gatherings frequently cited minimal or “just began permitting,” with masks required and less than 10 in number gathered as characteristics of their events.

With the exception of not being able to physically gather, we have sought to be as normal as possible through the offerings of Zoom and Conference Call Worship Services, Bible Study Classes, Sunday School Classes and other fellowship gatherings. Additionally, our ministries were charged to find ways to continue to fulfill their ministry callings considering the necessary physical distancing restrictions. – Baptist pastor in Milwaukee

55% of respondents said church facilities were currently open to meet community needs; among these, the following ministries were most common:



- Hunger-Related Ministries (food pantries, community meals to-go, assembly of backpack programs and meal drop-offs);
- Day Care (child care, elder care, care for persons with disabilities);
- Addiction Support (12 Step Programs);
- Health-Related Ministries (blood drives, COVID testing, COVID mask making, exercise groups);
- Election activities (serving as a polling place).

58% of all respondents responded positively when asked if the church would support opening the building to address critical community needs if called upon. Only 6% strongly disagreed.

Influences and Decisions about Reopening

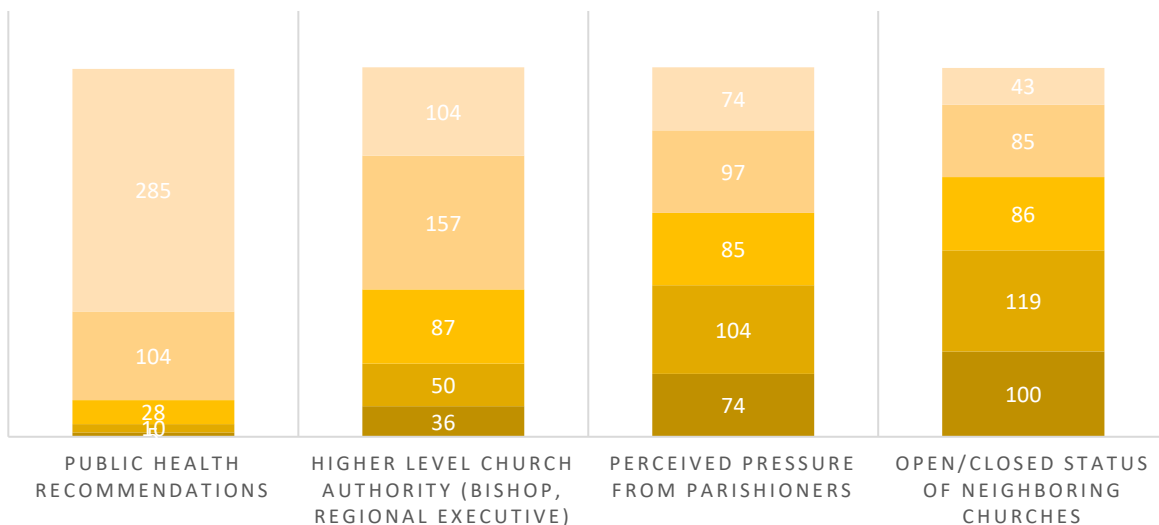
Most frequently, it is a church council, or task force operating in cooperation with the pastor or priest, which has the ultimate responsibility of making the decision of whether to reopen church facilities. These typically consult public health recommendations, medical professionals in the congregation, state and local data, and other sources as they formulate their plans.

We have a council work group and pastors in team ministry who are working together to proceed and make decisions based on as much solid, scientific, medical, and professional data as we can. We are committed to proceeding very, very cautiously and so far have not had dramatic pushback from our congregation at large. As other churches begin to open up more around us and take greater risks, we are beginning to feel just a bit more pressure from our laity. We are trying to both listen to our people in ways that they feel heard, but at the same time hold that line of caution including our commitment to not fully reopen or reopen too fast before conditions are conducive to doing so. It's exceedingly frustrating to not have clear mandates from our local and state governments for widespread mask wearing and other measures that will limit/stop the spread of COVID. Oftentimes, I feel like the burden to model such prudent behavior to our community is unfairly falling on churches/church leadership and business leaders who are working so hard to follow best practices from medical/scientific experts to combat COVID while our government is failing us by a lack of clear leadership in guiding the community at large to do their part. – A Pastor in Central Wisconsin

Episcopalians, African Methodist Episcopal, and Roman Catholics all have bishops who in this area have established clear policies or made a statement about when and how churches are permitted to gather for worship/reopen their buildings. These represented a relatively low percentage of respondents, compared to other polities in which regional executives have less authority.

When asked to rank the perceived level of pressure or influence of various factors on their decisionmaking, 66% said public health recommendations were “very influential” (5 on a 1-5 scale). Directives or recommendations of higher level church authorities were rated 4 or 5 by 60%. Responses to our question on parishioner pressure were more evenly spread. The open/closed status of neighboring churches ranked the lowest, on average, at a 2.7 (the most common answer was 2.)

On the chart below, 1 is represented by the deepest golden color, and 5 by the lightest:



Additional significant influences on leadership decisions which came up in short responses to this question, are concerns for the wellbeing and needs of the group, including those at high risk of medical complications, and connections to the church community for those with low access to technology or low technological literacy.

Last night, the church council and I spent four hours in a meeting to respond to a significant change in the DHS activity level by county data. They had not had a formalized plan to reenter before I arrived at this call one month ago. So, due to the change in activity level, we needed to finalize our reentry plan. This meant regressing to a safer at home, fully online phase after a month of gathering in-person outdoors. This was a difficult conversation filled with much grief. It was a painful decision to have to make. To lead in this time, to make these difficult decisions, without the established trust and relationships is overwhelming and daunting.

This data should be considered in light of the many narrative illustrations we received at the end of the survey which indicate lay leader, parishioner and community pressure is a significant strain on clergy at this time. It may be the case that the data above is as much of an indicator of what clergy believe *should* be guiding decisions as what actually does guide decisions.

COVID-19 Awareness

We asked a series of questions to gauge how closely the COVID-19 pandemic has come to the life of the religious leaders responding to the survey. It might be the leader themselves, or someone they know well, such as a household member, parishioner, close friend or colleague.

- 2% of respondents had contracted COVID-19 themselves
- 41% knew someone who had recovered from COVID at home; 24% knew someone who had been hospitalized.
- 24% knew someone who was experiencing a long recovery, with symptoms not resolving after the typical window.
- 11% - 49 respondents – knew someone who had died from COVID-19.
- 60% of respondents knew someone working in COVID response, such as a medical or public health professional.

This represents a reservoir of personal knowledge regarding the impact and seriousness of this disease, and the importance of taking protective measures. One question we might ask is how to access this knowledge to assist the faith community and the community at large in understanding the gravity of the situation. Another is how these leaders might share with their colleagues who do not yet have this knowledge, best practices and learnings from ministry to this population of impacted individuals. Yet another question we might ask is the impact of this knowledge upon the leaders themselves, and how they have been able to debrief from their experiences.

Precarious Employment and Sense of Vocation

When asked whether their employment had been threatened for reasons related to COVID-19 ministry decisions, 6% of respondents said YES. An additional 4% offered a short answer which indicated an indirect threat to continuing with their congregation.

10% of clergy experienced a threat to their employment related to COVID-19 ministry decisions

While clergy are concerned enough about the stability of their employment that they are uncomfortable being quoted, a general read-through of these concerns shows that threats to withhold giving, and to begin gathering for worship and other church activities without the pastor, are frequently being used as levers. Pastors have felt pressure to give up pay and contracted benefits (such as paid time off) in order to retain employment when fiscal concerns are expressed. Congregants who do not see church staff in action in the building, and are not engaged online are questioning how productive they are.

25% have seriously considered retiring or resigning due to ministry stressors in the time of COVID-19

Clergy from first call to retirement age and beyond have been brought to the edge of their willingness to serve by the conditions of ministry during the COVID pandemic. One quarter of all respondents to this survey answered “yes” or with a short answer that implied “yes” when asked whether they had seriously considered retiring or resigning due to stressors of ministry in this time. Very few short answers indicated a sense of being energized by the challenges at hand.

In their comments, these leaders told us that it is hard to stay healthy right now, even with the support of close friends and colleagues in ministry. Intense pressure from the congregation, community and culture is deeply felt. They indicate a sense of vulnerability, and wonder how to do church differently. Those who have not seriously considered it yet indicate that if their congregation pushed for an imminent decision, they would be forced to consult with family and resignation or retirement could be an outcome. If a decision to reopen buildings or gather in person endangers the health of those who would attend, multiple respondents said they would consider resignation. We are unable to include some of the most illustrative comments as respondents asked us to reserve them for the Council’s internal use only, but invite you to consider the precarity of situations that lead clergy to guard their responses so closely.

Personal Illustrations

The personal stories offered by respondents offer compelling illustrations of how Christian leaders are innovating, struggling, and coping with ministry during COVID-19. These are only a fraction of the responses received. Some of the anecdotes shared below have been slightly modified at the request of the respondent in order to remove personally identifying information.

Adapting

- Our church's prayer chain makes 2 calls a week to make sure that each member of the church has been contacted twice a week. We are ready to help with any immediate needs they may have. Because broadband isn't great in our rural setting, and because many of our 80+ year old members do not have computers, we've started broadcasting the weekly sermon on a local FM station. This helps with our outreach, and with reaching our members that do not have the technology. Keeping up the communication and connection between members eases some of the frustration with not being able to meet face to face.
- It now takes twice as long to do half as much in parish ministry. We have to change our expectations or we will all be exhausted.
- I think that the anxiety that I feel related to the pandemic has made me a workaholic. I feel a great responsibility to provide all sorts of high quality resources to our congregation when we cannot be together. I have worked harder than I ever have before and I am getting burned out. While the congregation has been appreciative and thoughtful, I know that I am "crispy".
- Accessing denominational emergency financial support as well as the federal government's loan program, I raised over 20k for my church. Even so, my people seem to resent paying my salary during these difficult times.
- I am totally struggling to serve Pastoral Care, telephone visits are very hard for me. I feel like I am disconnected with my flock, I feel I am making decisions based more on my intuitions than on actual knowledge of the wants and needs of the congregation!
- I try to meet people where they are at during the pandemic: small baptisms, funerals, small weddings, Masses AND respecting social distancing, masks, etc. Listening to what they need at that moment is key. People are genuinely grateful for us to do what can be done at the time of the celebration. They want to connect to the larger community and the Church.

Safety Choices

- I feel damned if I do and damned if I don't mask, open, and respond to the needs of our community members. One elderly member has been self distancing since March. She also suffers from depression. When she has had needs, I bring her things to her garage and leave them and she gets them after I go. But one day, she came out and stood there...open armed and said "I really need a hug". What was I to do? I hugged her, prayed neither of us were contagious and felt so sad that I can't offer the presence people need at this time.

- I have been gratified by the wisdom, care, and thought my congregation has put into whether to open. Ultimately the health and safety of members, neighbors, and staff was the guide used to continue online streaming service with minimal participants.
- I did a funeral at a funeral home and even though I had requested EVERYONE to wear masks and that there must be 6 feet of distance, they did not keep the distancing requirement. I felt completely unsafe and shared with leadership that I will not do another funeral at a funeral home until this is over. A family decided to postpone a funeral since we could only host 10--- even though we offer livestream.
- I am aware because of Facebook of members of the congregation who are not practicing social distancing or wearing masks and are going to areas of highest virus transmission, (i.e. bars). And several of these folks are also the most vocal about wanting to have in-person worship. For me, the challenge is discerning what I am able to live with. If I choose to preside at worship, thus enabling that worship to happen, and someone gets sick or dies, can I live with that decision?
- I wish that pastors could have some sort of an organization modeled on a union. Such an organization could have individuals who would be advocates for pastors and resources for help in difficult situations. Or perhaps there needs to be a clear policy on work environment safety and health that churches agree to provide for their members and their staff.

Politicization, Leadership and Lack of Consistency

- It is a very difficult time to be a pastor in such a divided society. Preaching and teaching compassion, care and concern, observing safety and health protocols are so politicized. Treating each other decently and with respect is often met with vitriol.
- Several area churches have resumed services - most are making masks optional. The politicization of mask usage has not been very helpful. People REALLY feel strongly about their viewpoint and sometimes have trouble understanding a different view.
- Directives given by our denominational leaders were to be followed uniformly. This has not happened, and to be frank, we have a royal mess. Every church and pastor is doing something different. The leaders continually change their own plan to accommodate more and more people. My parishioners are constantly telling me about the practices they see in neighboring churches of our denomination and want to know why we can't do the same at ours. I have been trying to follow the plan strictly to keep people safe. I do not feel any support from the denominational leaders in doing so, nor do I feel that many other pastors are taking this seriously. All that seems to matter is the attempt to get back to "normal." I am exhausted and more than frustrated. Have I thought about resigning or retiring? Everyday.
- We have very little actual direction being given by our denominational authorities, which is throwing many of my colleagues under the bus with their parishioners.

- Without clear guidance from local/state authorities on gathering for worship, I have had to spend far too much time learning about metrics, searching for data, figuring out how to interpret them, and trying to have a context/basis for making decisions. I am uncomfortable being an epidemiologist for my congregation, whose lives I care about deeply. The time it takes away from being able to provide direct pastoral care, leadership, staff care, and the like is significant.
- A parishioner worshiped at another church and commented on all the things that church is allowing (singing, sitting next to each other, shaking hands) that we are not. There is no consistency on how and when churches are reopening and that makes it hard as some believe people will switch churches or not ever come back.

Caring for Family, Caring for Parish, Caring for Self

- The pandemic has highlighted my spouse's isolation in our current location. It definitely inhibits my ability to be physically and emotionally available with my parishioners.
- Two of our three children are adopted, we have a multi-racial family that have experienced prejudice. One daughter is actively working in the Black Lives Matter movement in our community. COVID is only one of the pandemics in our country and world. The other two are the economy and racial divides / prejudice.
- I have a toddler. While safer at home it primarily fell on me to take care of her while my husband worked in his home office, only emerging for meals. He's a consultant and people pay months in advance for his time. All day long, I cared for her, cooked meals, cleaned after meals, and somehow fit meetings and work into nap times. Every day I debated resigning because the pressure of caring for my child and pastoring was too much. Eventually my daughter got so active we had to make the hard decision to send her back to daycare. We were potentially exposed to COVID, which meant we've had to keep our daughter home until test results come back. I've realized this may be a continual thing: we send her to daycare, we get exposed, we retreat/get tested, we send her again, repeat. If that's the case, I'm better off just keeping her at home and not working so we can maintain some kind of consistent way of life, and avoid repeated exposure. I know a LOT of moms who are facing similar decisions as the fall gets closer. Do we cut to part time? Or do we let ourselves get run out of the workforce/ministry completely?
- We lack feedback for the work we are doing--the sermons, the online work, the pastoral care. I think now more than ever, clergy are hungry for supportive appreciative feedback, and time off--respite care. Fortunately I have had time off recently. This is my 2nd week back and the stress level is immediately really high.

Equity Analysis

We focused on keeping the number of questions to this survey low to encourage responses. Of necessity, this meant we had to leave some interesting areas for exploration out. Geography was optional, but we were able to determine from narrative responses that we had a fairly good balance between rural, urban and suburban churches, and between various regions of the state.

We did not ask about part-time vs. full time status but this did come up in some narrative responses – one clergy member mentioned being moved from full time to part time. Another named that they were bivocational and their other job has been lost due to COVID.

Gender was also not one of our survey questions – but came up in the narrative responses multiple times when it came to family care and on matters of pastoral authority.

Regarding race and ethnicity, requiring a response could have compromised confidentiality in some cases. We were able to identify 7 clergy members of color serving Historically Black churches and Latinx congregations. Of note is that none of them cited a threat to their employment or serious consideration of resigning call. This is most certainly an undercount of clergy of color in our sample, as we know of a number of clergy of color serving predominantly white congregations among our member jurisdictions, but they chose not to identify themselves, and we honor their choice of confidentiality. We also note a clergy member who mentioned the challenging reality of parenting a multiracial family in Wisconsin.

Some Thoughts for the Church

The psychological strength and physical fortitude needed to provide balanced leadership when it comes to shouldering the burden of ministry tasks, public health information, the ethical/ moral spectrum of beliefs, gospel vs economic values, unsolicited political pressure from the legislature and president, and providing regular risk assessment based on literal life and death decisions has been hard to sustain. Daily I ponder my calling to serve the church. In the last three months I have applied to academic programs and looked at job listings. I am thankful to be in a faith community that was healthy and supportive pre-Covid and yet we are still feeling this pull us apart. Maybe this is what it feels like to be “the body of Christ... broken.” – A Central Wisconsin Pastor

While much of the public discussion has been focused on the question of public health restrictions, government authority to circumscribe the activity of faith communities, and whether and how we return to worship or reopen churches, we believe this is not the most urgent or long-lived issue which needs to be addressed in this time. It is possible to work effectively in cooperation with public health experts to address crisis, and to include them in the church’s planning. Science and faith can co-exist. The church can speak to and with government bodies on behalf of the common good. That discussion is beyond the scope of this survey.

Indeed, many deeper – and more critical issues – have been uncovered in the responses to this survey. The time of COVID-19 has not necessarily created unique situations for the church, but brought longstanding inequities and unaddressed situations into clearer view.

What follow are some broad themes and key questions we propose for consideration by local church communities, para-church organizations, and judicatories to consider in response to these results. Indicated changes should not be left to the clergy to discern and advocate for themselves; changing an unhealthy system in a time of crisis will require the engagement of all parties – including those with both formal and informal authority.

Activity Levels and Strategic Decisions: 18% of respondents said their churches were engaged in no activities beyond worship. We mused about whether that was the case before COVID-19 as well; if these represented low- or no-program churches. Reflecting on the 27% gathering for activities outdoors, we wondered at what point the Wisconsin winter would alter their plans, pushing them online, indoors, or halting additional activities altogether. In a society in which more and more people are “Zoomed-out”, adding more online programming is not necessarily the answer; and yet, the church has gifts to offer God’s weary and fearful people.

We need not overdo it: Anecdotally, rather than use this as a time and opportunity for reinvention, to this point many churches seem to be using this as an opportunity to map their usual patterns onto a new technological medium. We see a real dilemma for the church at either end of the spectrum: relying fully on worship as its only community activity during the week, or over-programming based on screen time so that pastoral staff and participants grow weary and there is an impulse to withdraw.

A recent survey by the Barna Group offered an intriguing glimpse into what the faithful are seeking at this time: their respondents indicated a deeper interest in prayer and emotional support than a Bible message or community connection.ⁱⁱⁱ If those results hold in Wisconsin, it may be the case that we might be better served by deepening tools for spiritual and emotional resilience than by perfecting our online simulations of offline experiences.

- Which activities are most important to keep the church community engaged and spiritually nourished as COVID-19 continues to affect us and those around us?
- How might we encourage innovative thinking about activities which bring the church together safely and responsibly during this time; ones which make use of the advantages of technology but don’t over-rely on it? What platforms are best?

We can’t do it all alone: The pressure to create high-quality resources is significant, although the time commitment to do so is greater than when ministry was primarily conducted in physical place. Clergy also express a sense of isolation, anxiety, and pressure to get back to “normal.” In too many cases, though, “normal” is based on an individualistic, atomistic ethic that is more characteristic of the predominant culture of the United States than Christian values.

As long as each parish feels the obligation to create and present weekly resources alone regardless of the size and technological aptitude of church staff and key volunteers, the isolation and overwork being experienced by most clergy will not abate.

The response imagined below is clergy-centered, based on collaboration by rostered ministry leaders. It is not beyond imagination that lay leaders could step forward to offer leadership within their own community; and yet, we caution that this may not fully address the peer-to-peer needs and leadership obligations of clergy, nor address the issue of isolation of individual parishes.

Models for shared ministry are not absent from the faith-based ecosystem. Some polities offer more collegial ministry models such as cooperative ministries. Larger churches offer the opportunity of multiple peers to share the joys and burdens of ministry. However, solo ministry is the norm for many, meaning alternatives must be imagined and lived into.

There are local denominational and ecumenical networks available which could provide a forum for more than occasional ministry support. We are aware of pastors who have rotated worship among small groups of peers to allow for vacations; others who swap sermons, plan dialogues or record liturgy for one another. Some judicatories provide regular sermons from the bishop or entire packaged worship services to offer respite.

By making collegial practices such as these – and perhaps even more extensive than these – more normative, we might deconstruct the isolation of ministry somewhat. These options are available at no financial cost. The most notable cost is disruptive change. For this to become a reality, churches, pastors and judicatory leaders would need to come to peace with alternative models of day to day leadership.

- How might we foster a pattern of collaboration between pastors and networks of churches so each individual church need not generate a full week's or season's worth of resources and pastors don't need to lead alone?

Clergy and Community Care: If not tended, the multiplicity of pressures on clergy in this time will lead to a crisis in leadership, as pastors on the edge make the choice to leave congregational ministry. The moral and ethical weight of each decision; the costs to family; the counterweights of congregant pressures and perceived lack of support from judicatory leadership – all of this taking place in one of the most polarized states in the nation - are tearing at the fabric of their vocation.

Trust is eroding between clergy and congregations, such that even time spent in ministry is sometimes not perceived as working. Many (accurately or not) do not perceive an ability to take time off – even their regular weekly sabbath, contracted vacations or study leave. In some of these cases, churches are operating more according to the brick-making economy of Pharaoh than an economy of grace.

While we do not have data on clergy seeking access to spiritual and mental health resources, including spiritual directors, counseling, psychotherapy and/or medication, we are aware of a quiet culture of shame and secrecy in some areas regarding the need for such support. While there seems to be little safe space for a clergymember to admit directly that they are struggling and need assistance, articles about COVID-related ministry stresses and mental health are widely shared on social media, circulating rapidly among clergy networks.

- How might we place clergy and their families within a matrix of community care that allows time and space for healing, creativity, and spiritual growth – even when opportunities to travel are limited?
- How do we communicate and structure generous care for the clergy and sabbath/restorative leave as not a matter of pastoral deficiency or weakness, but an indicator of community wellness?
- How can we normalize the regular use of mental health resources and spiritual direction?

Long-Term Implications: The social distancing, face coverings and cautions of COVID-19 will not last forever. Yet, 12-18 or more months of changed behavior *will* fundamentally change the church. We are already seeing it accelerate trends that had been visible, and it is beginning to reveal others. Some churches will not survive this time; others will be nearly unrecognizable in their practice. Some clergy will leave, battered and drained – and some will be energized by the questions at hand, even as they are challenged by the realities of ministry in this time. Beyond practical ministry concerns, all of our -ologies are being pushed on: ecclesiology, sacramental theology, missiology, and more.

Pushing on Traditional Practices: One question at hand is whether we insist on mapping our traditional practices and norms onto the COVID ministry space more or less unchanged; attempt to modify them for a time but revert to prior practices as/when we return to our buildings, or whether we allow this exile to reshape us, reflecting and moving forward with the changes the Spirit reveals to be life-giving.

- Can the local church, middle judicatories and wider church bodies envision this as an exploratory and permission-giving ministry space in partnership with the Holy Spirit? To what extent do their varied traditions, polities and personalities permit it?

Curating New Resources: Another question before us is what resources need to be provided by the wider church, para-church organizations and ecumenical bodies in order to equip pastors and local church communities for resilience in the time to come.

If the statistics on precarious employment and consideration of resignation we saw in this survey are any indicator, the tools we have all been providing the local church for years, in good faith, have left a gap. That gap has been filled with anxiety, fear, and atomistic values which work contrary to the message and movement of Jesus Christ. The mindset of shrinking budgets has left us with a too-frequent lament of “we don’t have that resource anymore.”

Clergy spend significant amounts of energy looking for support for key questions of ministry in this moment, while systems and structures are built for tracking and providing dwindling support for less and less likely “ordinary” times. We do not hear parish clergy looking for a box of made-for-all resources to apply as-is in their settings, so much as the opportunity to have rapid-response support in times of rapidly changing conditions. We observe them seeking help in learning new skills, making connections, and navigating parish tensions and current events faithfully.

- Can the wider church, parachurch and ecumenical bodies work together to envision a sustainable ecosystem of resources to support clergy and churches for a new world of ministry?

Conclusion and Call to Action

Ministry conditions in the era of COVID-19 are accelerating and intensifying many inequities and tensions which already existed within the church. *If the Church does not attend urgently to changes in her ministry models, we risk a profound leadership crisis.*

We believe the most hopeful paths would

- (1) support local churches in focusing ministries to meet the deepest need,
- (2) foster regular collaboration between parish clergy,
- (3) offer clergy and their families generous community-wide care,
- (4) open up permission-giving ministry space in partnership with the Holy Spirit, and
- (5) further develop ecumenical networks to strengthen us all for ministry in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous time.

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ⁱ <https://www.wichurches.org/2020/03/11/coronavirus/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.pewforum.org/2020/08/07/americans-oppose-religious-exemptions-from-coronavirus-related-restrictions/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning-part-2/>