

Post COVID Survey of Free Will Baptist Churches

NAFWB Committee on Denominational Research

July 2023

Executive Summary

Introduction

This survey was designed to focus on the churches of the National Association of Free Will Baptists. The goal of this survey was to collect information related to the impact of COVID-19 on church attendance, ministries, offerings, and technology. The Executive Office sent a message from the committee and a link to the survey via email to 755 pastors, state promotional directors, and moderators in the National Association's database.* The pastors were asked to follow a link to complete the survey. The state promotional directors and moderators were asked to encourage pastors in their state to complete the survey. Survey responses were collected in the spring of 2023.**

Demographics

Pastors from 24 states participated in the survey, with the highest number of responses from Tennessee (18%), Missouri (11%), and North Carolina (10%).

Church Attendance

Many church leaders indicated that attendance was majorly impacted during the pandemic. However, at the time this survey was completed, the majority of respondents (60%) indicated that their Sunday morning worship attendance was at 90% or greater compared to their pre-COVID numbers. Only 26% reported a 90% or greater attendance in their Sunday evening services; however, half of the respondents indicated that their churches do not have a Sunday evening worship service. (This is an increase from a 2020 survey when only 33% of FWB churches reported that they did not have Sunday evening services). Mid-week service attendance was reported to be at 90% or greater for over half of the participating churches.

Church Demographics

The survey asked church leaders to consider the age groups of their churches today (post-COVID) and to indicate which groups are represented less, the same, or more in their congregations compared to their church prior to the pandemic. Many church leaders indicated that the age groups of their denominations have not changed much since COVID, but some pastors responded that there were fewer children (33%), teens (36%), and congregants 70 or older (42%).

Church Services

Church leaders were asked to examine their church's various services (Sunday morning worship, Sunday evening worship, mid-week services, Sunday school, life groups, Sunday morning children's church, and teen services) and report on which services a) had never stopped, b) stopped and had started back, c) stopped with no current plans to bring them back, d) new services that didn't exist prior to COVID, but do exist now, and e) services that did not exist in the church prior to COVID with no plans to start those services.

Many of the responses indicated that most of the ministries stopped for a time but had restarted. For example, 58% of respondents indicated that Sunday morning worship services had stopped but have started back again. The case is similar with mid-week services (62%), Sunday school services (66%), and children's church (58%). Some church leaders reported that some of their services never stopped during the pandemic, with 42% of the respondents indicating that Sunday morning worship never stopped. Of the seven types of services surveyed, Sunday evening worship had the largest response from church leaders (19%) of having stopped with no plans to start it back. Most of the surveyed church leaders (81%) indicated that there are no plans to start up new services that were not already in place prior to COVID-19, however, 8% of the respondents have started new life groups.

Tithes and Offerings

The survey also asked church leaders to examine the possible effect of the pandemic on their church's tithes and offerings. The first question examined the initial impact (during the Fall of 2020). About a third of the respondents (34%) indicated that their offerings had decreased, 29% reported that they had remained about the same, while 37% noted an increase. The next question addressed the church's offerings after one year of the pandemic (Fall of 2021). For this question, 28% reported a decrease in offerings, 29% reported the same amount, and 43% indicated an increase in tithes and offerings.

The survey also assessed the way that churches received their offerings prior to, during, and after the pandemic. Respondents could indicate (check the box) as many of the services that applied to their church. Prior to COVID-19, most church leaders (94%) indicated that they received offerings using ushers during their services. During the pandemic, only 27% of the churches used ushers, 74% had a box where offerings could be deposited, and 48% reported using an online service. Today, these church leaders report that 64% are using ushers, 46% have a box where offerings can be deposited, and 46% use an online service.

Technology

The research committee also wanted to explore the differences in the churches' use of technology and social media pre- and post-COVID-19. Prior to COVID, most churches (52%) did not livestream or record any of their church services. During COVID, when church services were canceled, 84% livestreamed or recorded their Sunday morning worship services. At the time of this survey, that number decreased slightly to 76%. Many of the surveyed church leaders indicated that their use of social media has increased both during the pandemic (81%) and after (68%).

Discussion

When pastors were asked to rate the severity of the controversial issues surrounding COVID-19 (masks, vaccine, and COVID in general), many of the church leaders (35-42%) noted that these issues presented some controversy within their congregations, with 16-19% indicating that it was a serious controversy and 8-14% reporting that it was one of the worst controversies they had ever faced as a pastor. However, 31-35% selected that COVID-19 presented little to no controversy in their congregations.

Considerations and Conclusion

The survey asked four optional open-ended questions for participants which included:

- What would you say is the most negative result of the COVID-19 pandemic on your ministry?
- What would you say is the most positive result of the COVID-19 pandemic on your ministry?
- What do you wish you would have done differently during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Other than the COVID-19 pandemic, what event or events happened during 2020-2021 that would account for the changes reflected in this survey?

While many participants indicated that "low attendance," "loss of members," and "isolation" were negative results of the pandemic, the positives included "technology improvements," a chance to "reevaluate ministries," and it "brought people closer." When asked what these church leaders would have done differently, many responded that they wished they had never stopped meeting ("I wish we would have kept our doors open"). Other responses included "more outreach through social media" and "started back sooner" while several responded that they would not have done anything differently. Lastly, it is important to take into consideration that other events could account for the changes reflected in this survey. Of the 185 pastors surveyed, 44 responded with such events. These included church splits, families moving away, and changes in church leadership.

*We deeply apologize if you are a pastor and did not receive an opportunity to fill out one of the surveys. The committee encourages you to check with the National Offices to confirm your contact information is correct.

**Responses have been rounded to the nearest whole percent.

The Committee on Denominational Research was appointed by Moderator Tim York at the National Association of Free Will Baptists in Little Rock, Arkansas, in July 2018. The committee initially consisted of Dr. Danny Baer (Chair), Dr. Eddie Moody, Dr. Ron Hunter, Dr. Tim Eaton, and Mr. Mark McPeak. In 2019, Dr. Sarah Bracey and Mr. Eric Thompson were added to the committee. The committee was initially funded by a \$5,000 grant supplied by the Free Will Baptist Foundation in 2018 and continues to operate on those funds.