

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?