

# CONVERGENCE

## Study Findings: Church Life During Covid-19

Anna Mitchell Hall

From 5/21/20 to 6/20/20, Convergence conducted a survey among our client base which spans multiple denominations and geographies within North America, to assess the impact of Covid-19 on churches, specifically during the month of May 2020. The non-scientific sample of 70 North American Protestant church leaders responded to the survey after seeing it through email or social media communications from Convergence.

Among those 44 respondents who chose to answer the personal information questions, denominations represented included, in descending order of prevalence:

- the United Church of Christ,
- the United Church of Canada,
- the United Methodist Church,
- the Presbyterian Church - USA,
- the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America,
- the Alliance of Baptists,
- the Disciples of Christ, and
- the Unitarian Universalist Association.

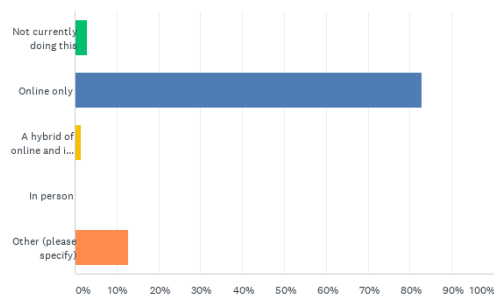
The survey reached urban, suburban and rural church leaders. Almost 35% of respondents were serving in a congregation in a suburban area, with the remainder of respondents distributed somewhat equally between rural, small town, small city and large city congregations.

The sample lacked racial diversity, with almost 96% of respondents reporting that the majority of their church members would identify as White or Caucasian. However, one congregation reported being majority American Indian or Alaska Native, and one other reported that their congregation contained a mixture of white, Hispanic, and African-American members.

### **Worship Life**

Of the 69 survey respondents who lead congregations, 83% were holding online worship only in May 2020, 1% were using a hybrid of online and in person, 3% were not holding worship at all, and none were conducting in person worship only.

Q1 How are you holding worship during May 2020?



This broad embrace of online technology to stream or broadcast worship aligns with research from Barna and other church research organizations which reported that “The majority of pastors (96%) reports their churches were streaming worship services online during the pandemic” (Barna, *What Research Has Revealed About the New Sunday Morning*, <https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning/>) No respondents to our survey, even those taking it in the second half of July, indicated that their churches were worshipping in person.

Yet other national surveys show evidence of a greater return to physical worship in some church traditions. In mid-June, a survey by The Billy Graham Center’s Send Institute, Exponential, and ARC found that 67% of respondents reported that their churches were not gathering physically. However, by late July, Barna found that over half of churches were open for normal use (Barna, COVID-19 Conversations: Nona Jones on Digital and Social Ministry, <https://www.barna.com/research/digital-social-ministry/>). Likewise, Lifeway Research found that by July, more than 7 in 10 churches in their research pool had begun meeting physically (Lifeway Research, Most churches cautiously holding services again, <https://blog.lifeway.com/newsroom/2020/07/24/most-churches-cautiously-holding-service-again/>)

This discrepancy may indicate a greater conservatism toward re-opening physical church spaces by our Convergence client base, which tends toward the mainline denominations, and tends to be more progressive theologically and politically than the largely evangelical samples of Barna and Lifeway. Such progressive values tend to place greater emphasis on science, which could account for greater caution in response to the pandemic. Bolstering this theory, the American Enterprise Institute found in late May and early June that only 36% of mainline Protestants were very or somewhat comfortable with returning to in person services, compared to 61% of White Evangelical Protestants.

The greatest variation among demographics in our own study was that 50% of church leaders in rural areas indicated that they are using other means of reaching their constituencies rather than online only, likely due to the technological difficulties mentioned in the below comments.

This contrasts with less than 20% in any other geographical category choosing “Other.” Another insight from this question is that 100% of suburban respondents were using “Online only” formats for their May worship services. Themes among the comments shared by those who selected “Other,” included adaptations to low tech geography or members:

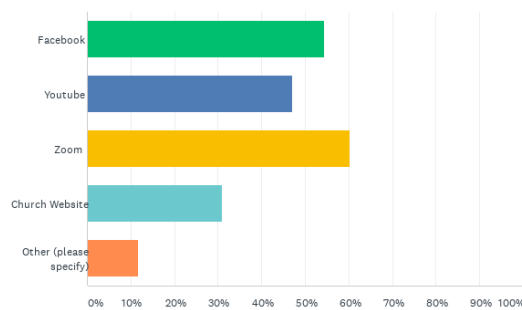
*“Where we live people either have poor internet - slow DSL or dialup - or no internet at all, so we use my day job’s telephone conference call feature which is free.”*

*“Home prayer and worship emailed weekly to those with email and ability to open attachments, snail-mailed every couple weeks to the rest.”*

*“I am sending out a “daily” word everyday to members and friends and on Sunday mornings I send out a longer one. I also ask for them to respond to me. One of the places that I send to is a nursing home where my mom is and they use it everyday for an activity.”*

Of those using online technologies for worship, 60% were using Zoom, 54% were using Facebook, 47% were using Youtube, and 31% were using their church website.

Q2 If using online technologies for worship, which of the following do you use:



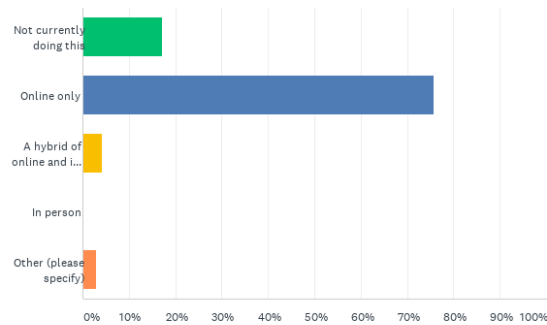
12% selected Other and shared additional ways of worshipping, such as:

- Radio transmission tower
- Daily reflections emailed and posted to our Facebook page
- Vimeo
- Livestream.com

### **Adult Learning and Fellowship**

When asked about adult learning and fellowship activities during May 2020, the majority, or 76% indicated they were holding them online only. Just over 17% were not currently holding adult learning and fellowship activities, and 4% were using a hybrid of online and in person. None were exclusively using face to face activities.

Q3 How are you holding adult learning/fellowship activities during May 2020?

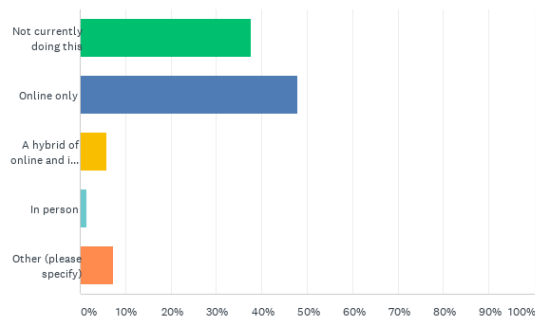


Of those using online technologies for adult activities, 92% were using Zoom, 17% were using Facebook, 8% were using Youtube, and 7% were using the church website. Other options mentioned included podcasts, email, and telephone.

## Children and Youth

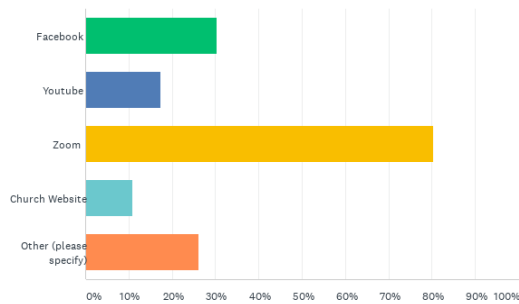
When asked about children and youth activities during May 2020, 48% indicated they were holding them online only. About 38% were not currently holding children and youth activities, and 6% were using a hybrid of online and in person. Only 1% were holding these activities in person.

Q6 How are you holding children and youth activities during May 2020?



Of those using online technologies for children and youth activities, 80% were using Zoom, 30% were using Facebook, 17% were using Youtube, and 11% were using the church website. Barna similarly reports that 1 in 3 churches are offering digital resources for children to use at home, and that around a quarter of churches are offering online events for children and/or youth (Barna, *COVID-19 Conversations: 5 Things to Consider About the Future of Kids' Ministry*, <https://www.barna.com/research/future-kids-ministry/>).

Q7 If using online technologies for children and youth activities, which of the following do you use:



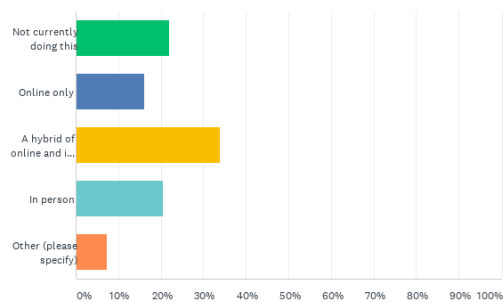
Just over 7% selected “Other” in the question about online vs face to face children and youth programming, and over 26% selected Other in the question about which technologies they were using. Comments illustrated how leaders are using a wide variety of platforms to meet the educational needs of their members:

- Online for youth (zoom). Emailing out at-home curriculum for parents/families with PreK - 5th graders
- Children’s time during service.
- Snail mail weekly activities which are used/shared in Zoom sessions.
- Google hangouts for Minecraft
- Instagram, emails, texts
- Google Meet
- Netflix
- Activities - movie streaming and gaming.
- Email only

## Missions and Justice

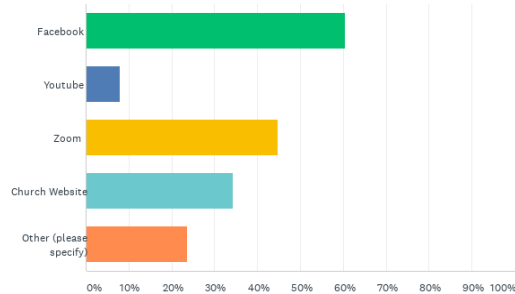
When asked about missions and justice work during May 2020, 34% were using a hybrid of online and in person activities, 21% were holding in person activities only, and 16% indicated they were holding them online only. 22% were not currently doing missions and justice work.

Q8 How are you doing missions and justice work during May 2020?



Of those using online technologies for missions and justice work, 92% were using Zoom, 17% were using Facebook, 8% were using Youtube, and 7% were using the church website.

Q9 If using online technologies for missions and justice work, which of the following do you use:



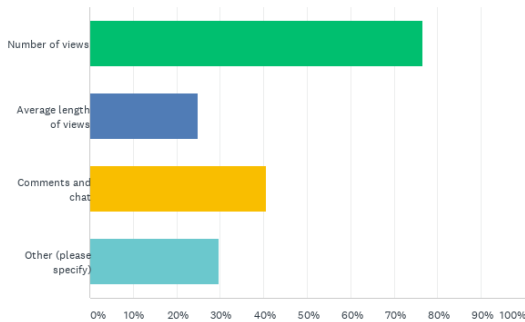
Almost 3% selected “Other” in the question about online vs face to face missions and justice work, and over 26% selected “Other” in the question about which technologies they were using. Comments in this area mentioned approaches such as:

- Serving take out community meals
- sending out daily readings encouraging readers to do this
- Email calls to advocacy
- Meals and food ... distributed from [the] church doorway along with "credit" cards for groceries.
- instagram

### Measuring Engagement

In terms of measuring online engagement, 77% were using the number of views, 41% were using comments and chat, 25% were using average length of views, and 30% selected Other.

Q10 How are you measuring engagement in online church activities, including worship?



However, comments in this area reflected a wide variety of approaches to measuring engagement during this season of distanced worship and fellowship.

- Survey
- Feedback received in emails

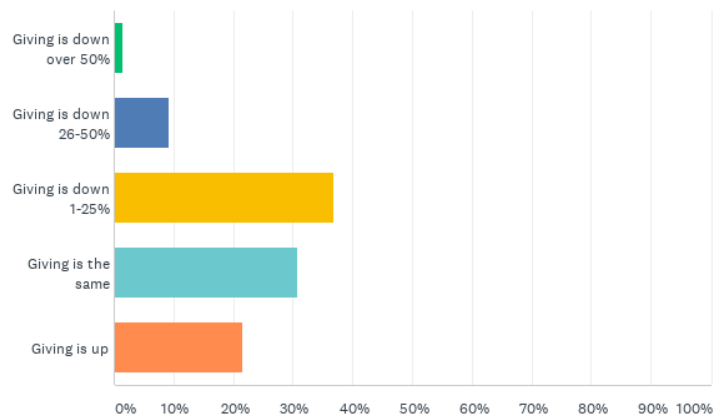
- No one is keeping track
- Counting Zoom participants
- Church survey
- Occasionally someone tells someone who tells me they've been using what I send.
- Inviting people who listen on the radio and other means to drop a note to the church office.
- I look at views, but really don't know what the options listed there mean.
- Email responses from congregants
- A variety of all of these, as well as feedback and new subscribers to our email list
- Number of people on a Zoom call for worship
- We aren't measuring yet
- Number and who shows up in Zoom
- Taking "attendance" by zoom id!
- Written comments in my response to emails
- All correspondence the church is experiencing
- Attendance on zoom
- We are looking at all of these and keeping tabs on trends up or down.

This variety has the potential to broaden church ideas about what constitutes engagement, even in the future when many church events have returned to occurring face to face.

### Finances during Covid-19

For a little less than half of our respondents, giving in their congregations was down in May 2020 when compared to January and February of this year. 37% said giving was down 1-25%, 9% said giving was down 26-50%, and 2% said giving was down over 50%. However 31% said their giving was the same in May as in January and February, and 22% said giving was actually up over the early months of 2020.

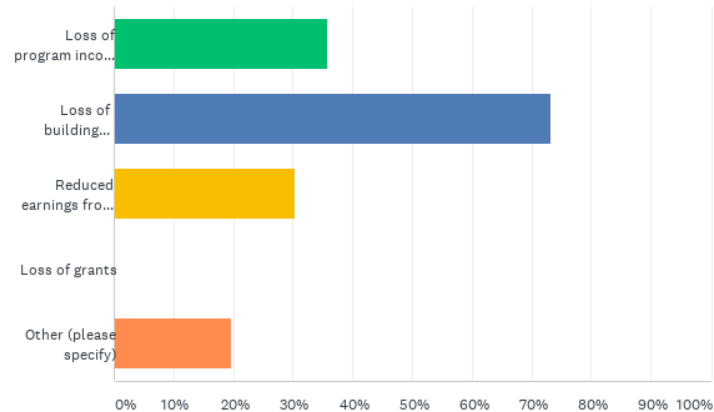
Q11 How is your giving, when compared with January and February 2020?



Respondents reported that church finances were also impacted by loss of building rental/space sharing income (73%), loss of program income from preschool, camps, etc. (36%), and reduced

earnings from reserves/investment funds (30%).

### Q12 What other factors are impacting your church finances currently?



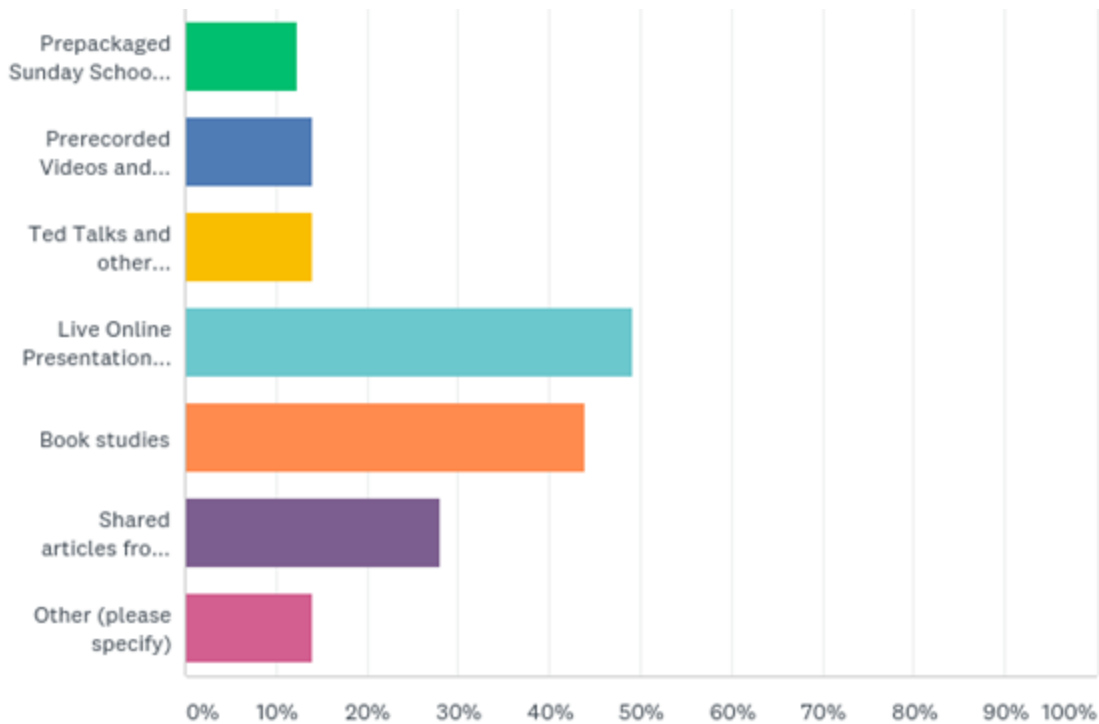
Additionally, 20% responded Other and comments in this area included varied concerns and issues relating to church finances:

- Lots of financial giving, redirection of recovery rebates, building use by partner ministry, education and meetings online
- Loss of garage sale (still a big thing at our church)
- PPP loan/Grant has saved our stability.
- Cancelled fundraisers- rummage sale, dinner, auction, bazaar...
- Loss of in-person donations
- Annual rummage/soup/bake sale was cancelled
- Received a Payroll Protection Act loan
- Loss of loose plate offering, many of our regular attendees don't pledge
- Pledge income is the same. In-person offering income is down (we have an online option, but it's not popular for this.)
- Nothing right now as the offerings are still being sent in by the "faithful"
- Our main factor is the giving of our members. They have been extremely generous at this time, many of them stating they don't need the stimulus check from the government and giving it to our Covid-19 response fund that supports 6 of our partner ministries who are in dire need of help right now.

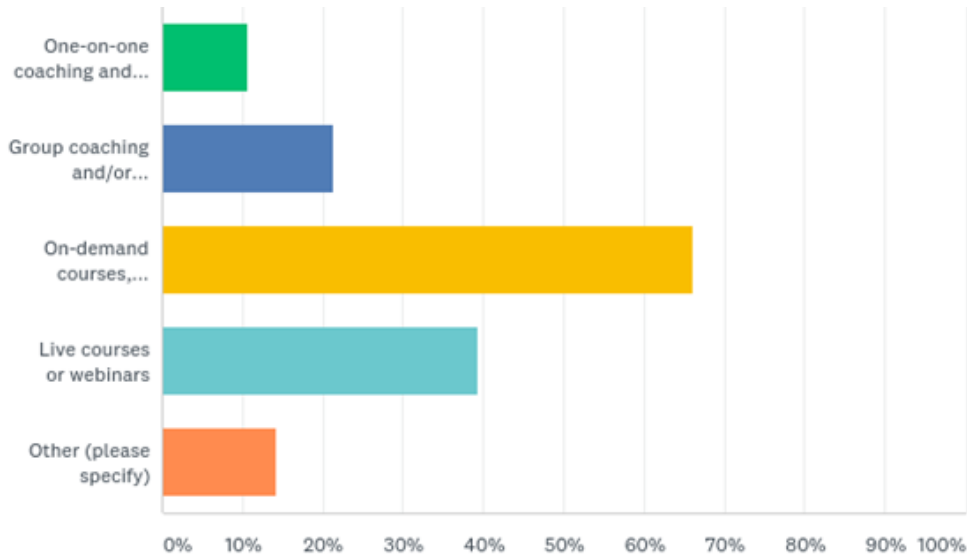
### Needs and Resources during Covid-19

When asked what resources have been most helpful for education ministries during May 2020, about 49% of respondents found live online presentations or events the most helpful. Book studies were also seen as helpful for nearly 44%, while prerecorded and prepackaged resources were only seen as helpful by only 12-14% of respondents.





Respondents also indicated that for their work as congregational leaders, over 66% said that on-demand courses and webinars would be most helpful, followed by live courses or webinars (almost 40% would find these helpful), and group coaching and/or consulting (just over 21% would find this helpful). Only around 11% said that one on one coaching and/or consulting would be most helpful right now.



Comments in this area included:

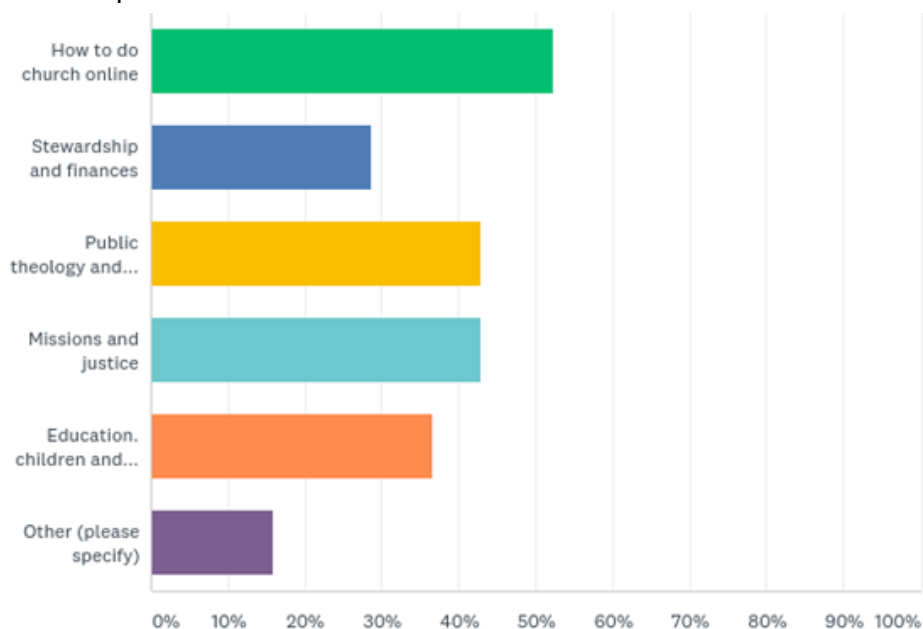
- I have no idea. I've given hope.

- Against everything I presented & the governor..., [our leadership voted for] returning to worship in the sanctuary. We still need a way to service many who will not return, and who don't have computer or internet access.
- Our denominational resources (United Church of Canada) have been most helpful
- Need to get back to in-person events
- Our biggest challenge is helping our congregants use the technology, especially those without computers or devices without camera or microphone. But we are getting better and better each week and I'd say that about 90% of our congregants have attended at least one service successfully in the last 2 months. The majority are over age 70 and some are in their 90s.
- Resources about Grief work in on-line contexts; guidelines, content, series, sessions, on-line resources for individuals to follow up on and explore...
- Our denominational leadership and networks are good, and seminaries are helpful.

Topics of most interest to survey respondents were:

1. How to do church online (52%)
2. Public theology and preaching (43%)
3. Missions and Justice (43%)

Education, children and youth (37%) and stewardship and finances (29%) were also of interest to some respondents.



Comments by respondents in this area reflected the many challenges of quick adaptation to church life that is socially distanced and primarily online, as well as next steps when some may be able to physically gather but others are still distant for their safety.

- How to pastor while physically distancing when your tradition has been one of presence.

- The changing dynamic of preaching by zoom -- it seems to move us more to a "chat" presentation than a formal "sermon" pedagogy.
- It is exciting and challenging to change 50+ years of practice -- all our services are "inter-generational, and blend our own video productions, music teams in virtual space/time, and live reflections with a zoom "Breakout Room" chat time at the end of the service.
- We are a new church birthed from multiple congregations who gave up their congregational lives this past November. We need help in learning ways to get to know each other and in becoming a program sized church overnight.
- Time available is short these days. Courses should be about PRACTICAL APPLICATION, not theoretical/theology. Everyone already knows that online is needed for today. We need practical tools & guidance to get us going faster!
- How to integrate Zoom into an in-person gathering
- Using videos on Zoom in our worship service; how to train co-hosts to help monitor, etc. We have been pretty successful using Powerpoint as a tool to move us through the service. The music is pretty poor and not a good experience and we are concerned with copyright compliance.
- We are learning as we go and the congregants see this learning and problem solving each Sunday and have praised the calm work-arounds and expressed appreciation for our efforts. I just love this church!
- We've had technical problems throughout getting everyone connected
- Adult learning about the new church emerging and the changes which have to be made now.
- Collaborating for improving commitments to social justice and anti-racism work for faith groups.
- Suggestions for continuing ed for clergy going forward in this strange new world.
- How to leverage/create/maximize a social media presence. Much that is available about social media presence is from a business perspective and church is very different. I appreciate the offering you have currently and would love to see one with an eye to social media in a pandemic (ie: do strategies change now? More frequent contact? Less frequent? Hope-driven, etc).

## **Conclusions**

It is clear that in the face of the forced adaptations and myriad pastoral dilemmas of the Covid-19 pandemic, churches are finding ways to gather and reach their members through technology, both new (Zoom, Facebook) and old (mail, phone calls). The greatest needs of our survey respondents are not so different from those heard in "ordinary time":

1. help with discernment, mission focus, and change in their congregation,
2. practical tools for adapting preaching, worship, education and missions/justice work to new technologies, and
3. collaboration/support to increase mission and justice impact.

In order to meet those needs, it is crucial that organizations like ours and the churches, middle judicatories and national settings we serve likewise practice adaptation and change, so that we

might continue to provide on-demand training, supportive cohorts for collaboration and learning, and programs for discernment, mission focus and change. If we are open to this adaptation and change, we can provide excellent supports to congregations that are responsive to the ever-changing limitations and opportunities of the Covid-19 pandemic.