Local Church Response to the COVID19 Pandemic – Phase 2 Report

Introduction:

United Methodist Communications has conducted two studies related to local church responses to the COVID19 pandemic. The first study involved 961 churches with the survey open from March 25 through March 29. Phase Two included responses from 972 churches collected April 20 through April 24. A third phase will begin once the crisis is over.

Survey invitations from the UMCom database went to the same 11,000 randomly selected churches. Please note, however, that this represents a "convenience" sample with limitations on how well it represents the church as a whole.

Survey Respondents:

Respondent profiles are very similar between the two samples. The survey asked pastors of multi-church charges to respond for the larger or largest church they served. Consequently, smaller churches appear to have been slightly under-represented and larger churches over-represented. As expected, most churches respondents came from rural and small towns.

Average worship Attendance	Phase One	Phase Two
Under 50	34%	34%
50 to 99	29	28
100 to 249	23	24
250 to 499	8	8
500 or larger	6	5

Area Description		
Rural	31%	30%
Small Town	35	34
Suburban	22	25
Urban	11	10

Responses by UMC jurisdiction show an over-representation of the Western region with 11%. The Southeastern jurisdiction, at 31%, is significantly under-represented.

Jurisdictions	Survey	GCFA Statistics
North Central	20%	21%
Northeastern	21	21
South Central	16	17
Southeastern	31	35
Western	11	5

Overview:

Responses in Phase Two indicate that pastors have a significantly more positive attitude toward the state of their church than a month ago. Similarly, their descriptions of their own mental conditions show more confidence at their ability to respond to adverse circumstances.

Positive
Hopeful, 43%
Calm, 34%
Resilient, 28%
Encouraged, 26%
Inspired, 17%

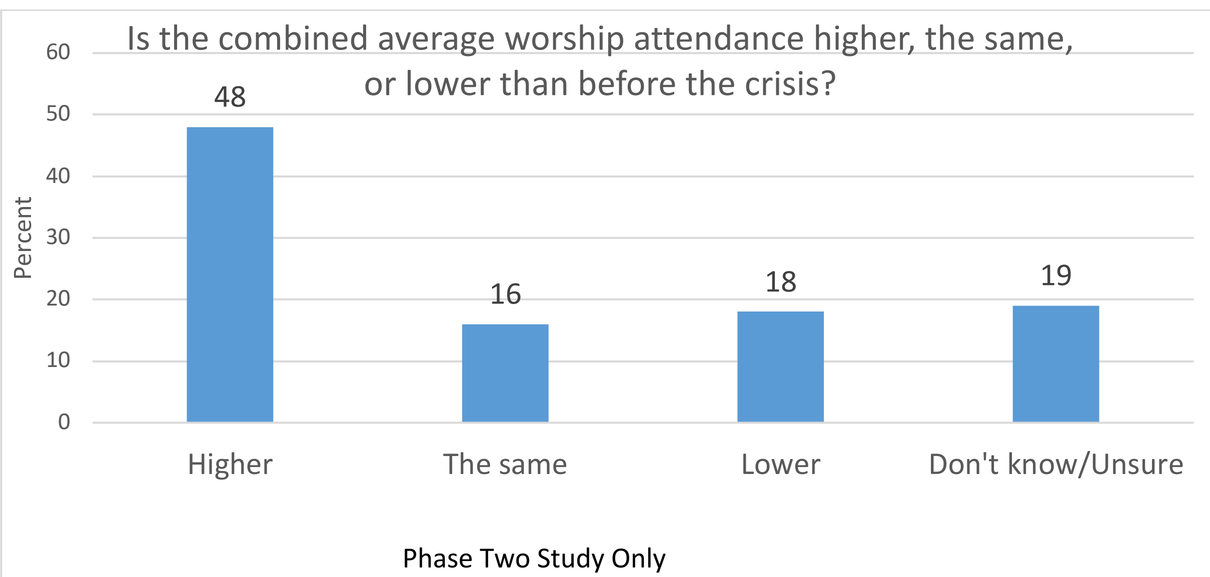
Negative
Uncertain, 22%
Exhausted, 20%
Stressed, 13%

Survey participants point to a higher average worship attendance compared to before the crisis and improved financials since the advent of the pandemic. Their responses suggest that churches will exit the pandemic with more assurance that they can adapt to problems and be more viable.

This performance comes despite 40% of the pastors indicating they feel oversaturated with the level of content currently available for church leaders.

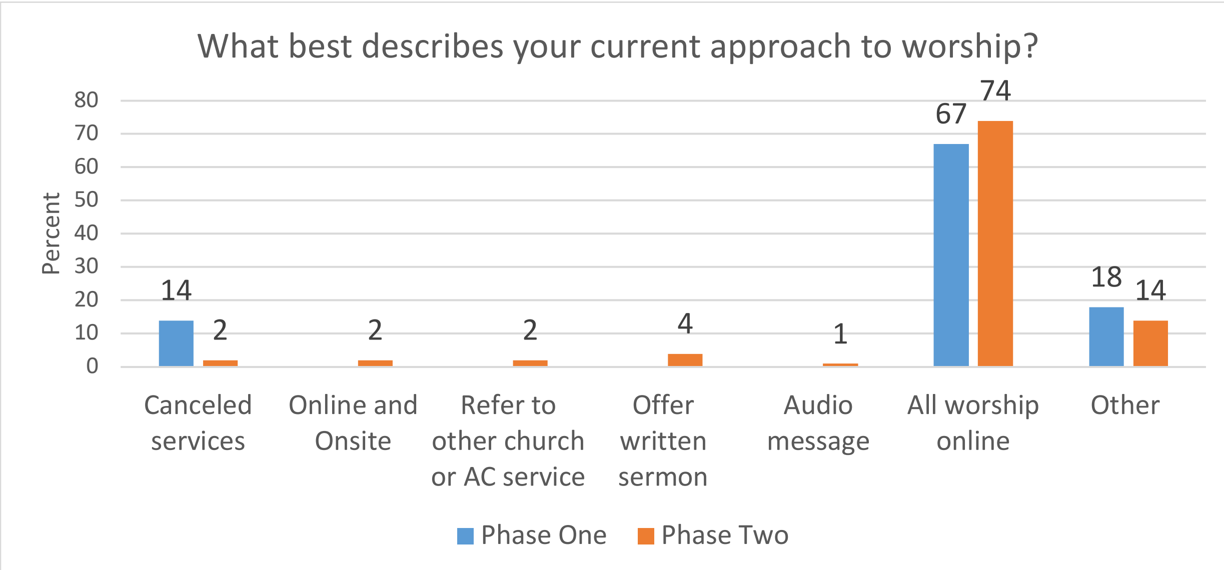
Average Worship Attendance

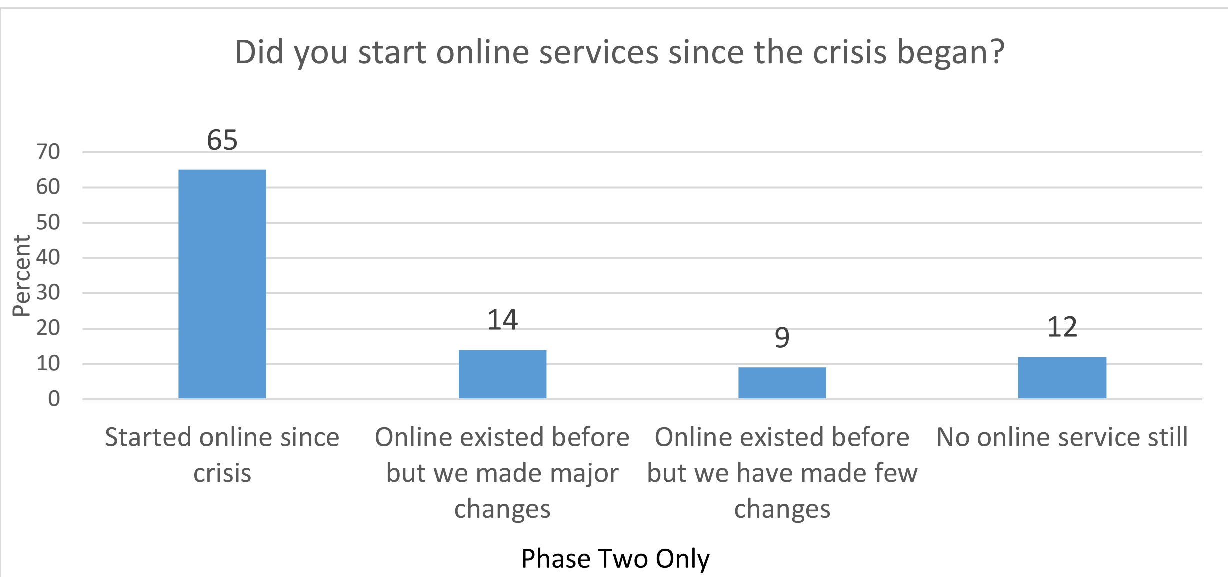
While not asked during the Phase One study, the trend for average worship attendance indicates that the combined online and onsite worship attendance exceeds pre-crisis levels for almost half the churches. Only 18% indicate that the known attendance levels are behind those before the crisis.



Performance on average attendance is not uniform. Churches over 100 in average attendance are more likely than smaller churches to say they have increased attendance.

Churches have boosted attendance by aggressive transitioning to digital and online worship formats. Now almost three out of four churches use online worship with almost 2/3's having launched online worship since the crisis. Only 2%, mainly those under 50 in attendance, say their church has canceled all services vs. 14% previously.



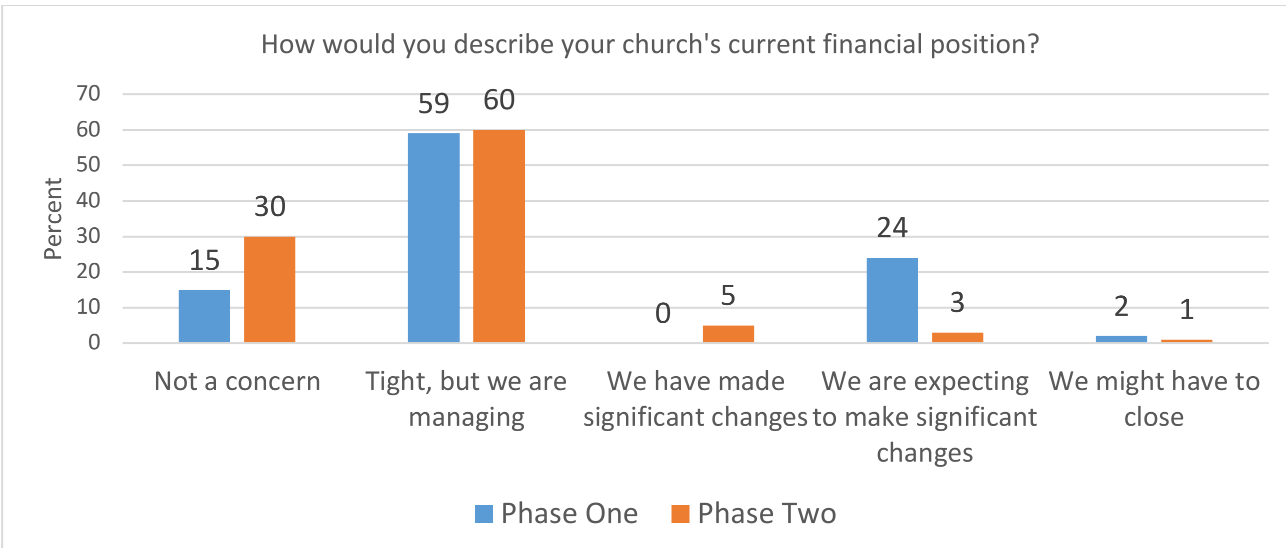


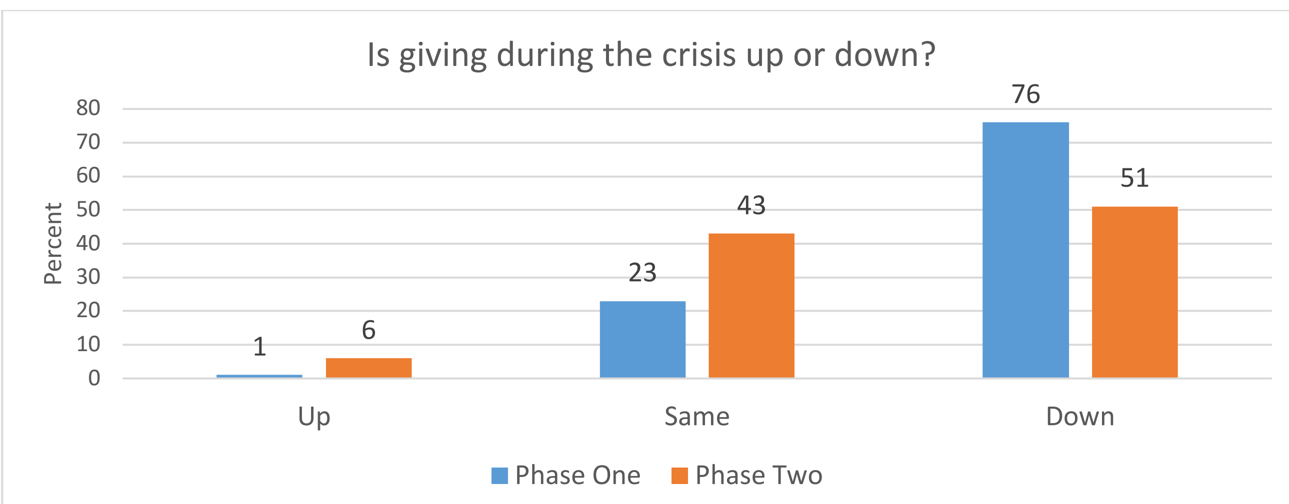
Church Financial Conditions:

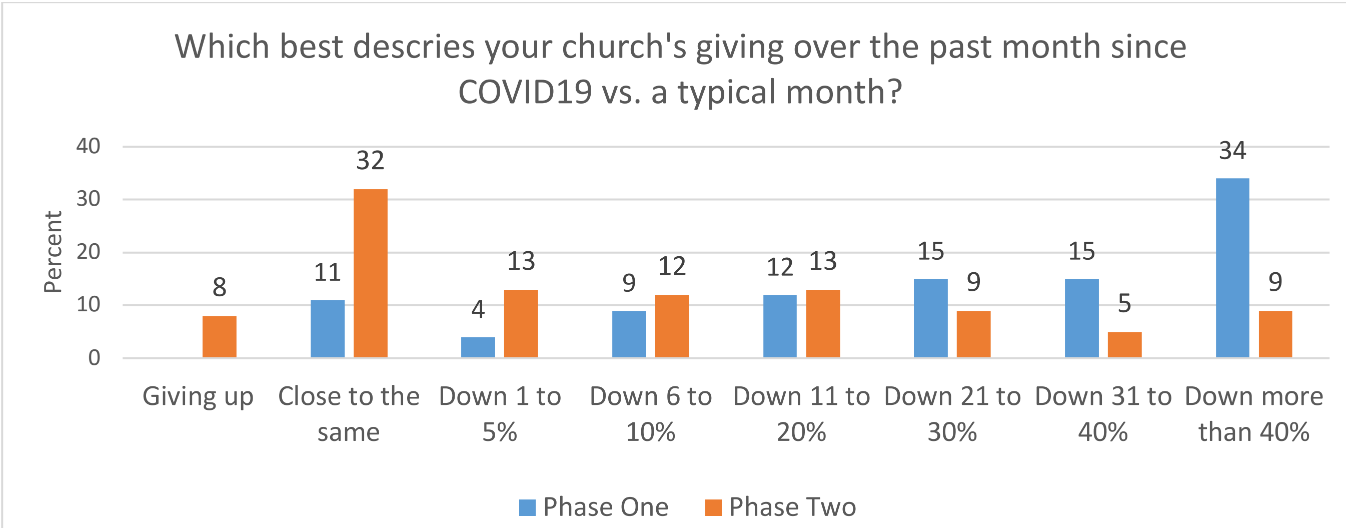
Local churches are much more optimistic about their financial conditions. The number of churches that state that finances are "not a concern" has doubled to 30% in the past month and the number expecting to make drastic cuts has dropped from 24% to 3%. Even adding churches which already have made cuts would only raise that number to 8%.

This optimism stems from improvement in giving. In Phase One, 76% of churches reported lower levels of giving versus 51% in the most recent study. Even more important, churches saying that giving has dropped indicate that the percentage of decline is much less than before. Only 23% report giving down more than 20% compared to 64% in March.

Still, declines are more likely among churches under 250 in attendance. This may reflect that smaller churches, particularly those under 100 are significantly less likely to offer ACH, credit card and online giving.

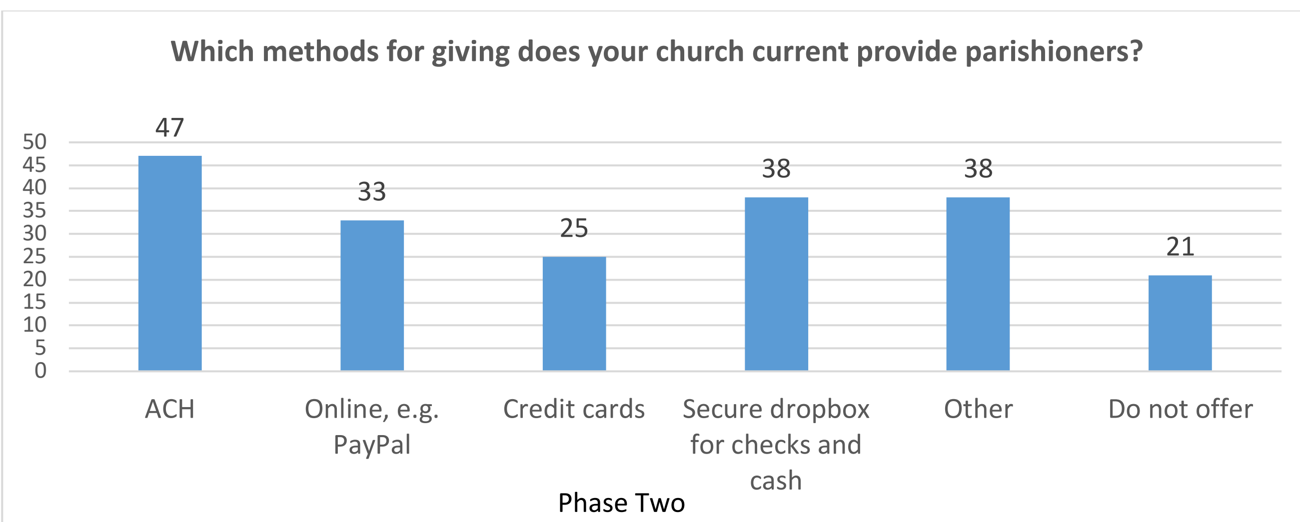


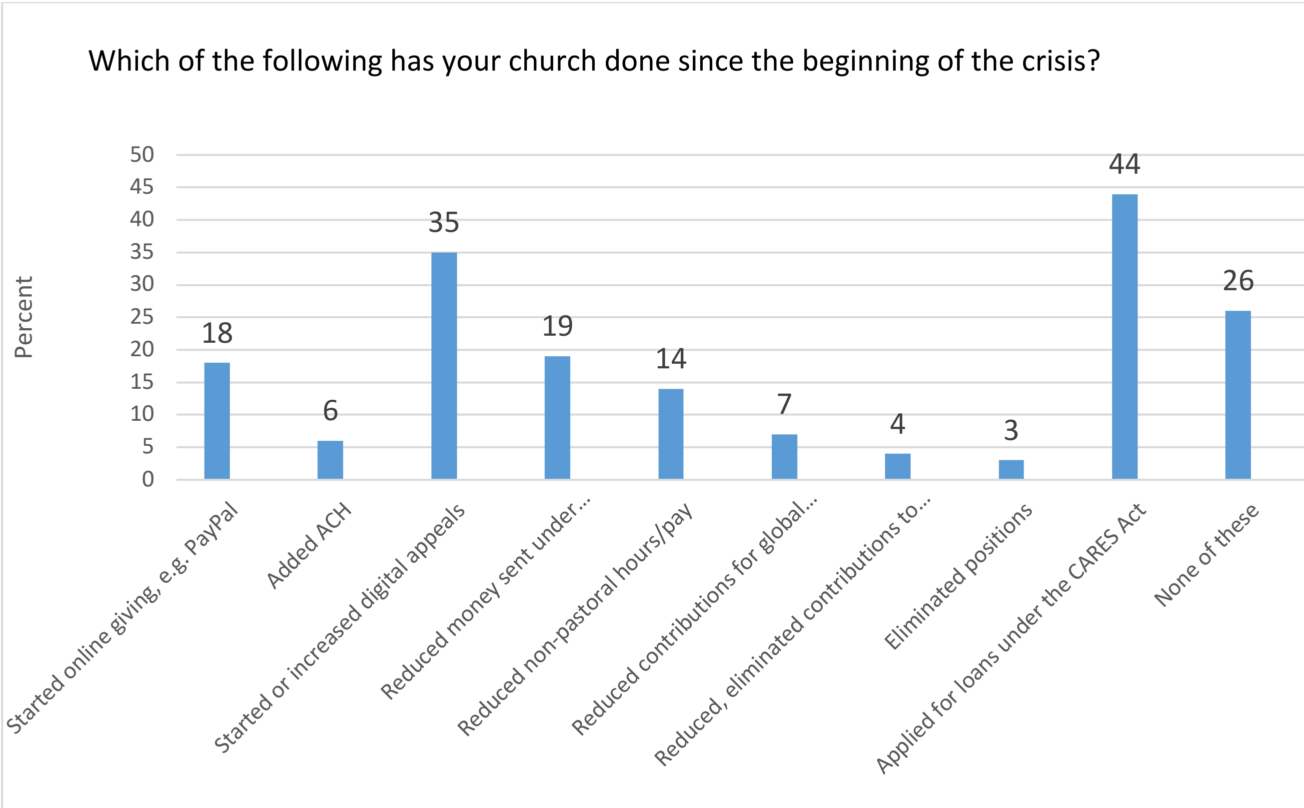




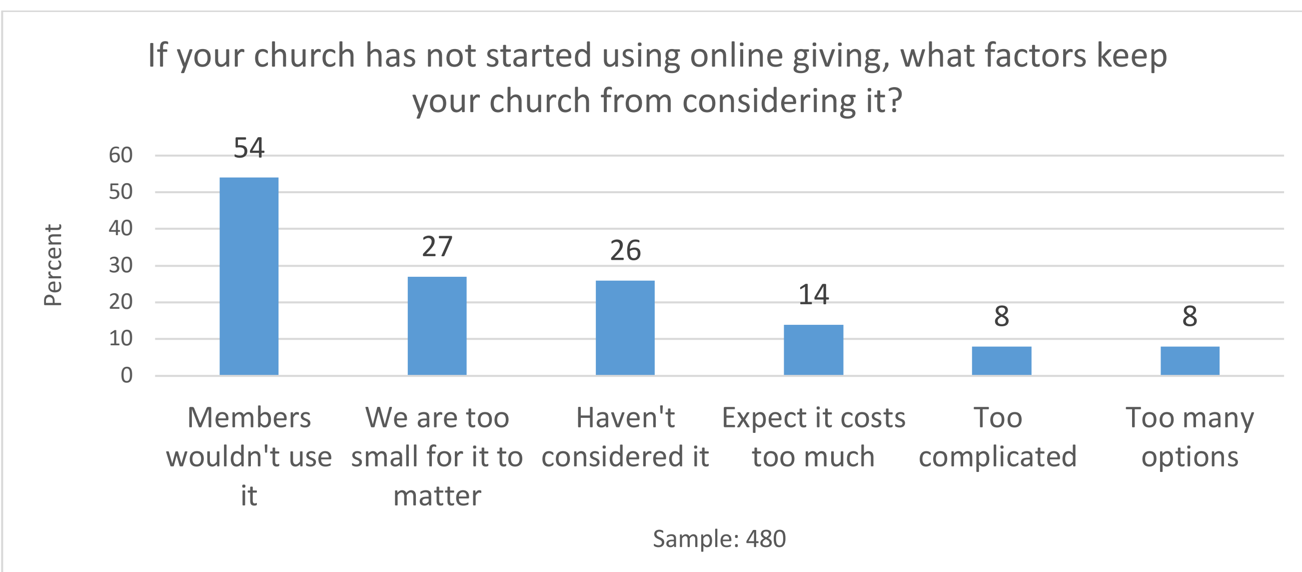
This performance comes as churches have aggressively promoted digital giving. While some have added ACH, 6%, and online giving, 18%, most churches have benefitted from aggressively communicating the need for giving to their parishioners, 35%. Also, many churches have followed through with applying for funds through the CARES Act, 44%. The percentage of larger churches applying for CARES support grows substantially for larger churches, 89% of churches with attendance over 500 have applied for government support as well as 72% of those 250 to 499.

A critical aspect for the Connection shows that a number of churches have reduced contributions to global ministries, 7%, local ministries, 4%, and payments of apportionments, 19%. Decisions to delay or reduce apportionments appear fairly standard regardless of church size.



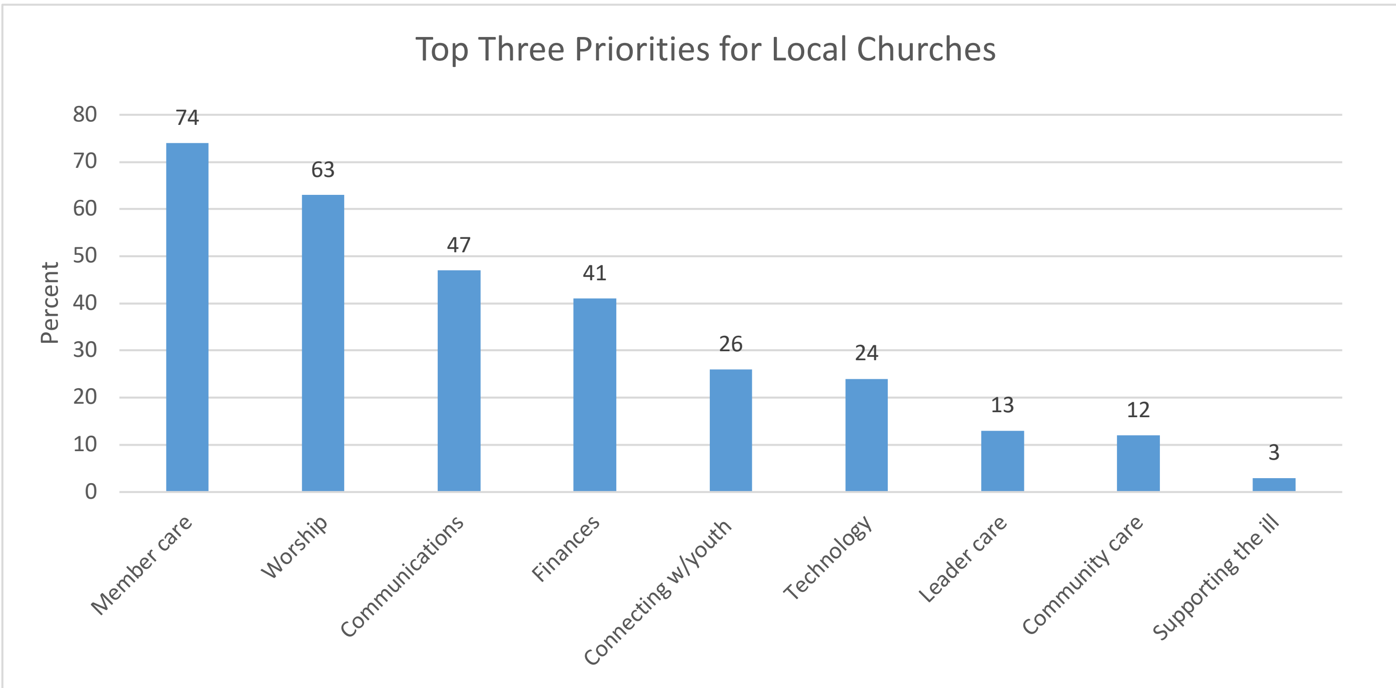


Reasons for not using ACH or online giving may reflect an unwillingness to consider technology oriented giving. The primary reason is the perception that members would not use the service or that it is too costly or complicated. GCFA and UMCom should develop case studies of smaller churches and their success in increasing giving through technology.



Church Priorities

The top priorities of local churches focus on members and member services. Finances, though important, are not the driving force for church activities. Interestingly, only 3% of respondents included supporting the ill as one of their top three priorities. This likely reflects the fact that only 18% know that someone in their congregation has or has had COVID.



Resources Needed:

The areas in which churches are seeking support centers on tech training, the management of online small groups, devotional support for members, and resources on giving.

Resources Needed by Local Churches

	Phase One	Phase Two
Technology training	NA	43%
Practical ways to be in mission in the community	36%	33%
How to lead online small groups	NA	28%
Devotional support for members	34%	25%
Resources on giving	NA	21%
Content for websites	18%	16%
Leadership training on managing during crises	15%	13%
Information on the CARES Act	NA	9%
Content for preaching	14%	8%

Best Sources of Support:

Respondents indicate that annual conference staff, websites and newsletters were the most helpful source of information during the crisis, followed by UMCom and members of pastor groups.