Lutheran
Mission Matters

Articles

Ministry in the Midst of a Pandemic:
A Study of the Impact of COVID-19 on the
Congregations of the Michigan District

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Abstract

A multi-phase research project was conducted by the Michigan District to explore the impact and implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on congregational mission and ministry. Twenty-six percent of the congregations in the District and forty-three percent of clergy participated in the surveys. The pandemic provided a unique opportunity to explore the challenges facing parish ministry in a time when face-to-face relationships and on-site ministry activities were not possible. The study identified areas for further research and discussion to better prepare workers and ministries should their parish ministry need to move away from a building, large-group gathering model. The research findings highlighted the need for additional study in seven distinct areas of mission and ministry including:

1. Relationships Matter
2. The Rise of Consumerism
3. Divisiveness
4. Theological Foundations for "Online Ministry"
5. Finances
6. Mission Opportunities
7. Breaking Institutional Barriers

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Introduction

In April 2021 the congregations and members of the Michigan District were invited to participate in a multi-phase research project exploring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on parish ministry. The quantitative and qualitative data examined the impact of the pandemic on a congregations' worship modality, worship attendance, and congregational health factors including financial data. A second instrument utilized a qualitative survey to gather perspectives on the impact of the pandemic on ministry from the perspective of the church workers within the Michigan District. The research project was undertaken to better understand the impact of the pandemic on the health of parish ministries in the Michigan District as the State of Michigan eased out of its restrictions on in-person gathering.

This article will begin with a description of the sample pool and research methodology. An overview of the Pandemic experienced by the state of Michigan and the congregations' responses to the pandemic will follow. The bulk of this paper will focus on the responses provided by the church workers of the Michigan District based on their reflections of ministry during the pandemic. Finally, the paper will end with observations and suggestions for further research.

Historical View of the pandemic: A Look at Congregational Responses in Michigan

To best understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ministry, it is crucial to frame a congregation's response within the broader context of the government's response to COVID-19. The data collected in Illustration 1 provides a focused timeline of crucial actions taken by the government in response to the COVID-19 infection rates.

The Governor of the State of Michigan ordered a ban on gatherings larger than 50 people starting March 17, 2020. Religious institutions were not exempted from the mandate. Most congregations on the Michigan District honored the order by suspending in-person worship gatherings. On March 21, 2020, the Governor announced that the gathering limitations applied to churches, but they would not be prosecuted should they choose to disobey the executive order on public gatherings. By April 13, 2020, the Governor had issued a stay-at-home order banning all activity that was not essential. The stay-at-home order further reduced the number of congregations that held in-person worship. On October 12, 2020, the Michigan Supreme Court struck down the Governor's orders regarding public gatherings for places of worship.

The rate of infections and the Governor's restrictions on in-person gatherings formed the center of the data collection timeline. The data collected began with January 2020 and ended with April 2021. While the Delta Variant has extended the

COVID-19 pandemic longer than anticipated, this study's focus was ministry during the time of the ban on public gatherings and the stay-at-home orders.

Study Methodology

Qualitative and quantitative data was gathered using two survey instruments. One instrument was completed by representatives of congregations and included worship, attendance, and offering trends for each month from January 2020 to April 2021. A second instrument was a qualitative survey in which church workers and lay leaders shared their impressions and experiences in ministry during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The congregations' annual reports completed for Synod formed the third source of data analyzed in this report. The data was triangulated across the three instruments using the congregation's name and city as unique identifiers. Ninety-three congregations were represented in all three instruments. The sample represented 26% of the congregations in the District.

Study Findings

The findings from the data collections were organized using the themes of "COVID-19 and the Congregation" and "COVID-19 and the Members of the Michigan District." An analysis of the data for the theme "COVID-19 and the Congregation" focused on the following two questions:

1. How did congregation respond to the pandemic and government mandates?
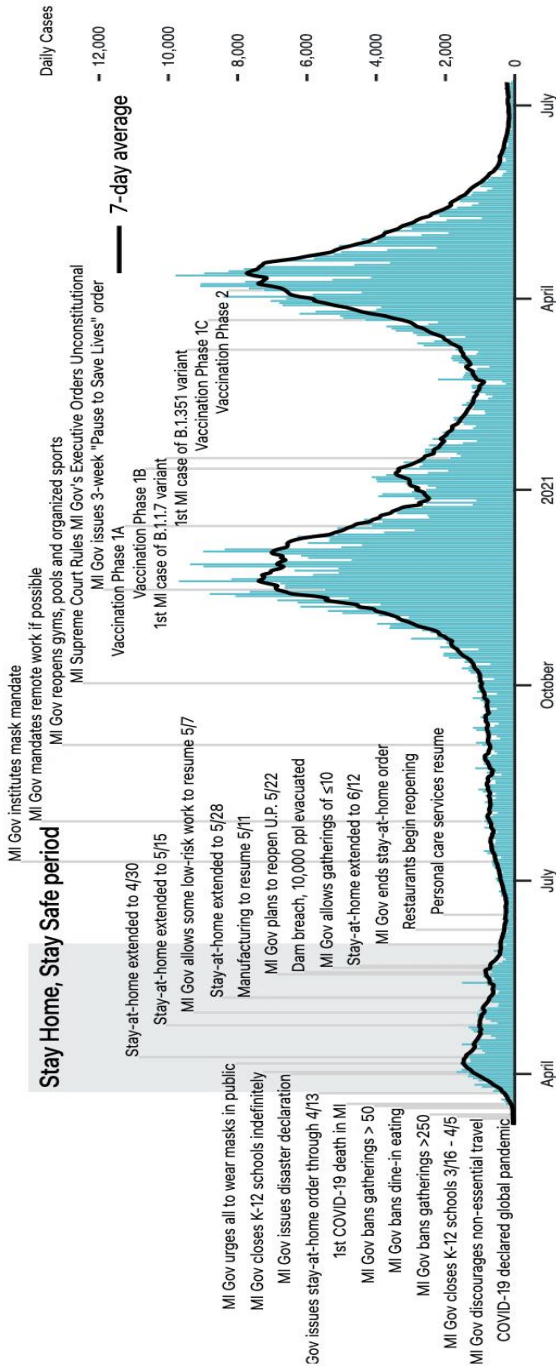2. What was the impact of the pandemic on their organizational health?

Illustration 1

**Section 1 – COVID-19 and the Congregation**

1.   How did congregation respond to the pandemic and government mandates?

The survey data indicated that congregations offering only in-person worship decreased to less than 20% attendance by March 2020, down significantly from 65% in-person worship attendance in January and February of that same year. The congregations offering only in-person worship reported less than 10% for the remainder of the research window. As would be expected, congregations offering only online worship expanded dramatically to 83% in April of 2020 but decreased rapidly to 64% in May, 12% in June, and remained around 2% for the remaining study window. The responses indicated that 44% of congregations were livestreaming their live services in January of 2020. By March of 2020, 70% of the congregations were livestreaming their live services. From July 2020 to April 2021, approximately 84% of congregations were offering worship in-person and online.

Graph 1 provides an overview of the increased use of online tools for worship and the increased reported cases of COVID-19 infections in Michigan. Of the congregations that provide online worship services and indicated the platform for video distribution, 37% used the Facebook live platform only, 12% used YouTube only, 47% used both platforms, and 4% used other platforms.

Generally, the congregation's context was not a factor on the decision to be exclusively online or in-person for worship. The one exception was the response rate of urban congregations. Congregations in an urban context moved to offering only online worship at a much more rapid rate than other ministry contexts. Urban congregations moved from 13% online-only worship in February 2020 to 38% in March 2020. By April of 2021, 4% of urban congregations were offering online worship only compared to less the .2 % of the other congregations of the District.

Graph 1: Worship Modalities
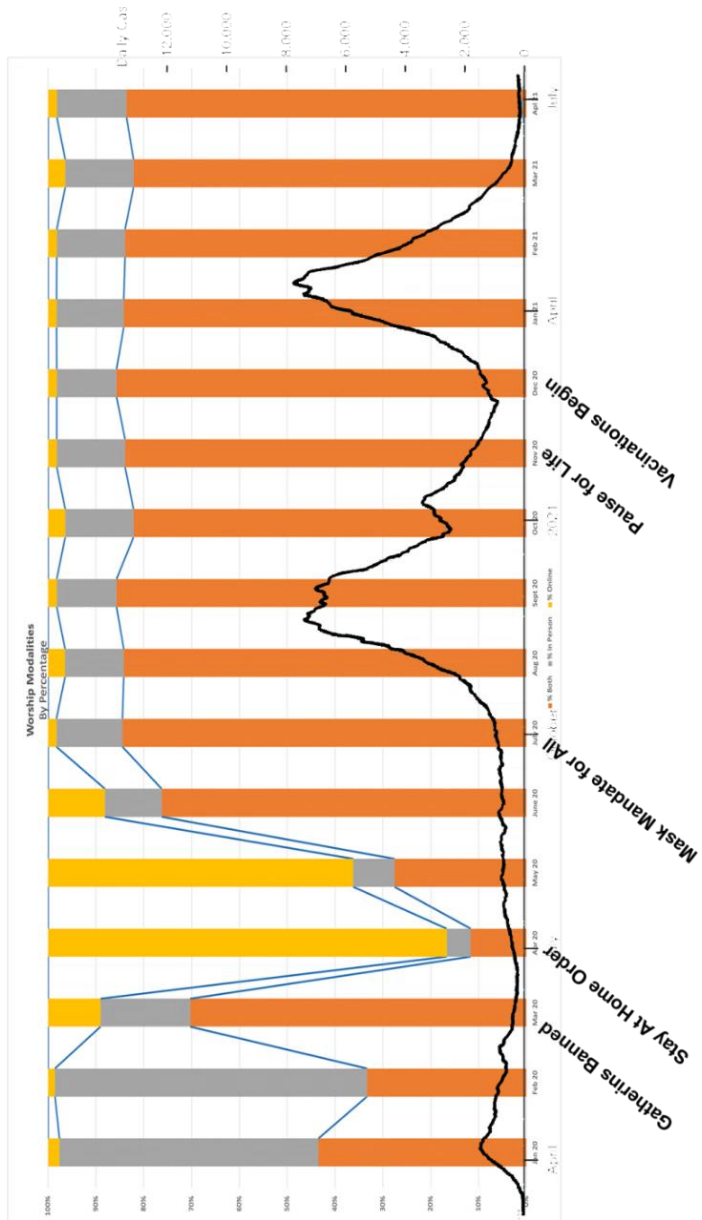
2. What was the impact of the pandemic on their organizational health?

The impact of the congregations' responses to the pandemic were analyzed using attendance and contribution trends. Seventy-six percent of the participants provided worship attendance statistics for each month during the 16-month study window of January 2020 to April 2021. The percentage enabled a statistically valid sample for comparison attendance trends across the District during the COVID-19 study period. However, in most cases, the sample became too small for valid results when using co-factors like worship style within specific organizational vitality or ministry context segments. Two factors impacted the quality of data collected for online worship. First, online platforms for streaming do not have a consistent method of measuring views.

Second, many congregations utilized multipliers in factoring worship attendance in the assumption that generally more than one person would be viewing the service online. Third, forty-eight of the participants provided information about their congregation's monthly offerings during the study period. While the number of responses was sufficient for general trends across the District, only the first five months received adequate data to make valid assertions about finances within context and organizational vitality categories. The survey asked the participants only to record offerings for each month in the study period. However, it could be possible that some congregations processed their PPP loans through their offerings resulting in skewed numbers.

Attendance Trends

Graph 2 displays the monthly total average attendance as a blue and orange bar combined to represent the total attendance average for the month. The blue bar is the average of the reported online worship attendance (OWA), and the orange bar is the average in-person worship attendance (IPW). While no data could explain the significantly higher combined attendance figures for March, it is most likely the result of the chaos of the transition during March, when people were more likely to be in both services. It is possible that people from congregations not offering livestreaming of worship services inflated attendance numbers for March and April by attended worship services at congregations that did offer online worship.

Online worship numbers continued to remain strong through April 2021. At that same time, in-person worship attendance showed a slow but steady recovery from the low-point of April and May. During November 2020 and December 2020, the state of Michigan experienced a significant increase in COVID-19 cases. During that time, in-person worship decreased slightly, while online worship remained unchanged.

Graph 2: Attendance Trends During the Study Period
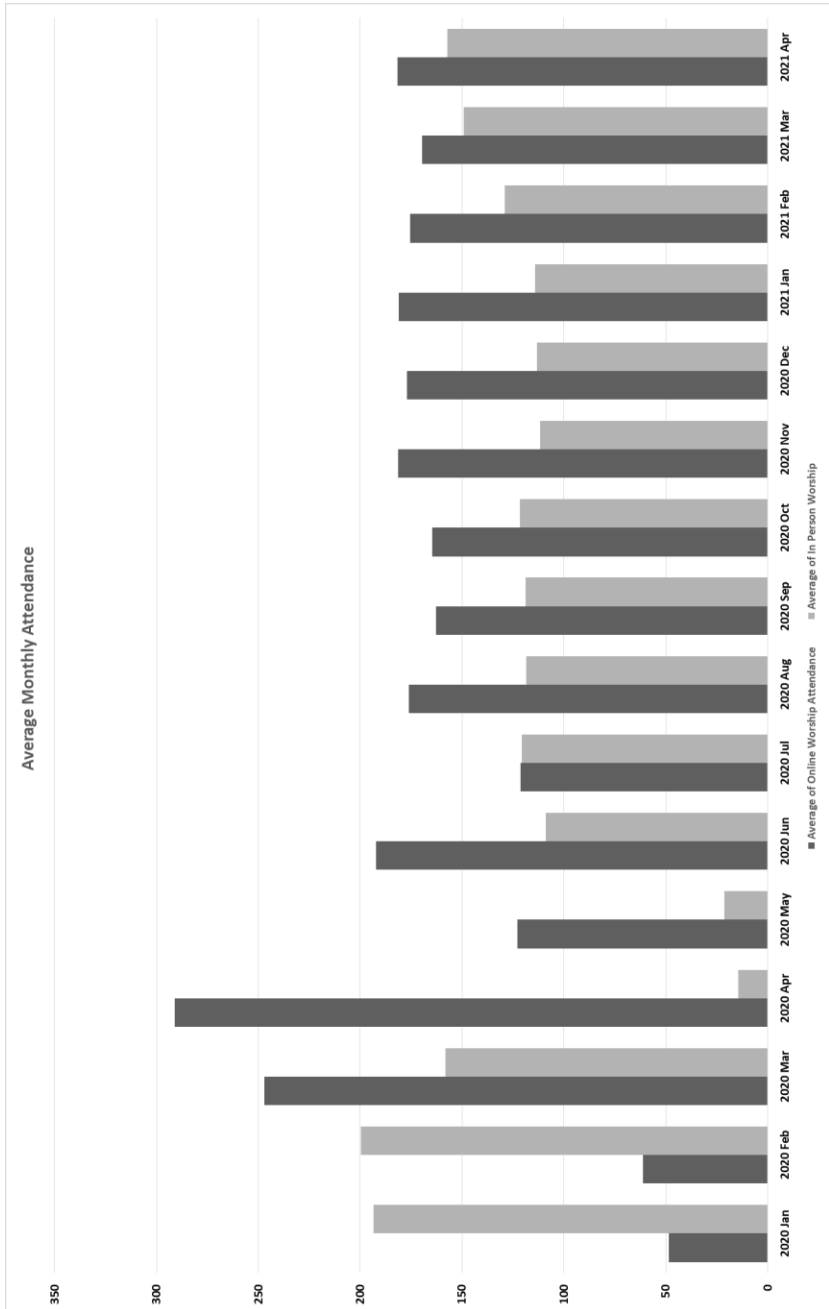
Financial Trends

Average Contribution Trends

The participants generally indicated that finances were not considered a significant concern. Many reported that their receipts exceeded expenses during the study period. The data provided by participants indicated that all participating congregations lost an average of 11% of their annual receipts. However, as noted in Graph 3, many ministries did well, while others suffered tremendously.

Graph 3 was developed using a year-over-year comparison of February, March, April 2020 and 2021. Congregations were placed in categories based on the difference between the two years. Each category represented one 10% difference in contributions between the two years. Category 1 had the most significant gain of a 71% increase in offerings. Category 9 represented a zero difference between contributions received in the three months between 2020 and 2021. Category 14 represented those congregations that had a negative difference between the three months in 2020 and 2021 of 40 to 49 percent. An examination of the graph reveals that 23% of congregations experienced a moderate increase of less than 10% in donations for the year-over-year comparisons on March, February, and April. In contrast, 15% of congregations experienced a 10% or minor decrease in offerings, and 15% experienced between 10% and 20% decrease in offerings.

Graph 3: Financial Trends
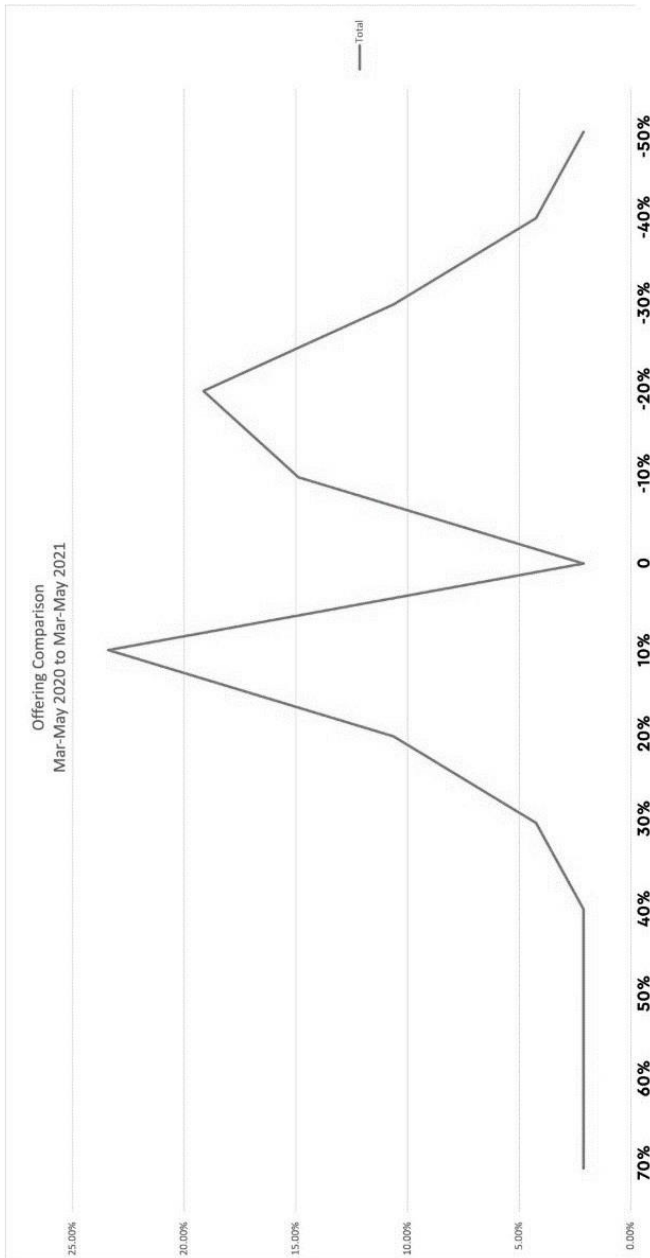
Offering Comparison
Mar-May 2020 to Mar-May 2021

Section 2 - COVID-19 Pandemic and the Members of the Michigan District

The second section of the report contains an analysis of the qualitative data collected from the survey responses completed by called workers, ministry staff, and lay leaders. Key themes related to the pandemic's impact on ministry leaders within the Michigan District were identified through the analysis of the data.

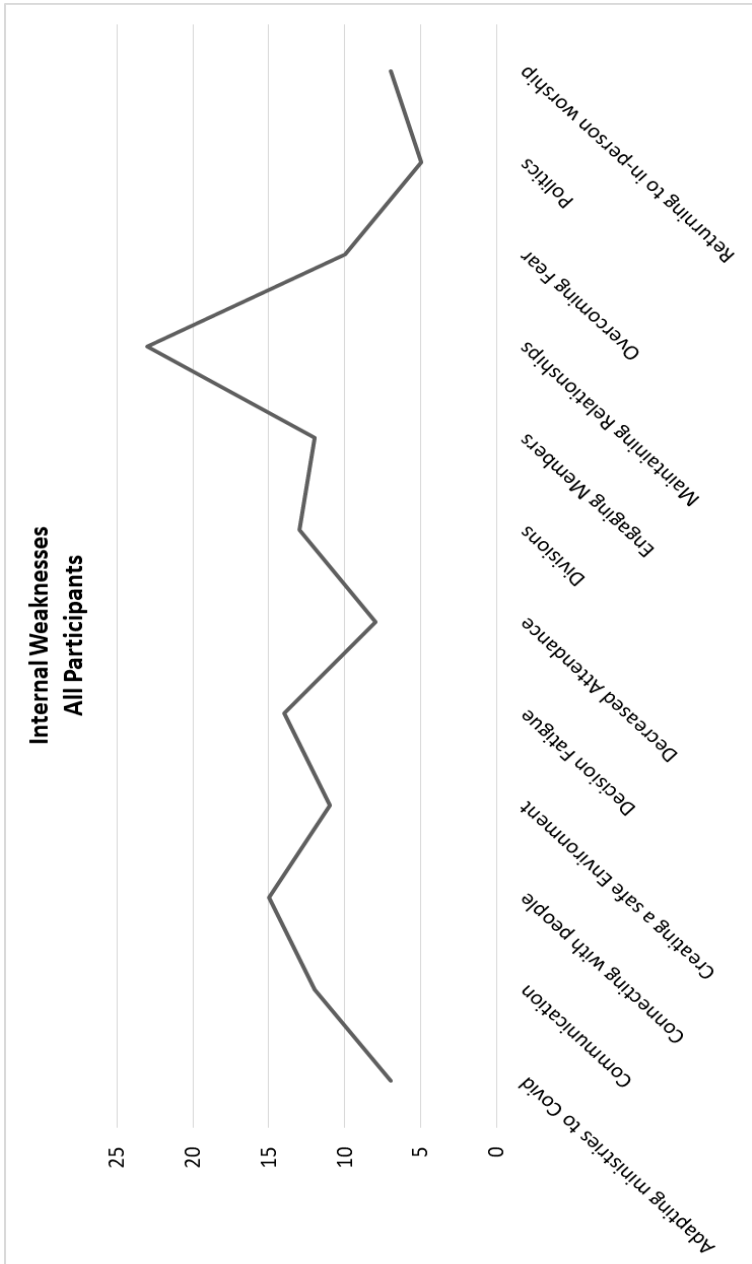### 1. Challenges Presented by the Pandemic

A. Personal Challenges

The participants were asked to identify challenges in their ministry which they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The responses were placed into two categories: internal weaknesses and external threats.

Internal Weaknesses

The most frequently mentioned internal weaknesses during the pandemic were "Maintaining Relationships" and "Connecting with People." Generally, the participants referenced the inability to have in-person worship or host fellowship events during the pandemic when they spoke of the difficulty of "Maintaining Relationships." Many expressed a sense of personal loss at not being able to have one-on-one conversations. While the increased use of technology such as Zoom helped, it wasn't the same. Some expressed the feeling of exhaustion from Zoom fatigue. One participant indicated the following paraphrased statement, "I am calling more people in a single week than perhaps any time before in my ministry yet feeling more disconnected than ever before."

Graph 4: Worker Response: Internal Weaknesses

Internal Weaknesses
All Participants

Returning to in-person worship
Politics
Overcoming Fear
Maintaining Relationships
Engaging Members
Divisions
Decreased Attendance
Decision Fatigue
Creating a safe Environment
Connecting with people
Communication
Adapting ministries to Covid

External Threats

The "T" in the SWOT analysis are the external threats to the organization. Certainly, the pandemic was the most significant external threat. However, the participants were asked to identify the challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the following was their top list of external threats to their ministry. Graph 5 contains a summary of coded responses.

The single item that caused the most significant concern was the government's restrictions on pastoral care during the height of the pandemic. Many pastors were denied access during their members' final hours of their life. Restrictions prevented pastors from visiting members in nursing homes. Many pastors felt restricted from visiting homebound members out of concern for the health of the member or the pastor's family. Several pastors indicated that they sought ways to minister to those in institutional settings while being sensitive to the individual's fears and obedient to the state mandates.

While pastors and lay leaders were united on their perception that restrictions on pastoral care were the most significant external threat, mask mandates was the second most common external threat to ministry. Thirty-eight percent of the participants expressed frustrations with the changing mandates; others pointed to the deep divisions created around masks. The divisions closely aligned with the political ideologies of our nation. Sadly, the division language is present in the survey responses themselves as one participant refers to the "other side" as people refer to those with whom they disagree as "the far right that resists the reality of COVID."

Another participant expressed disdain for congregations that require masks or suspended services as a compromise to the true Christian faith.

Graph 5: Worker Response External Threats
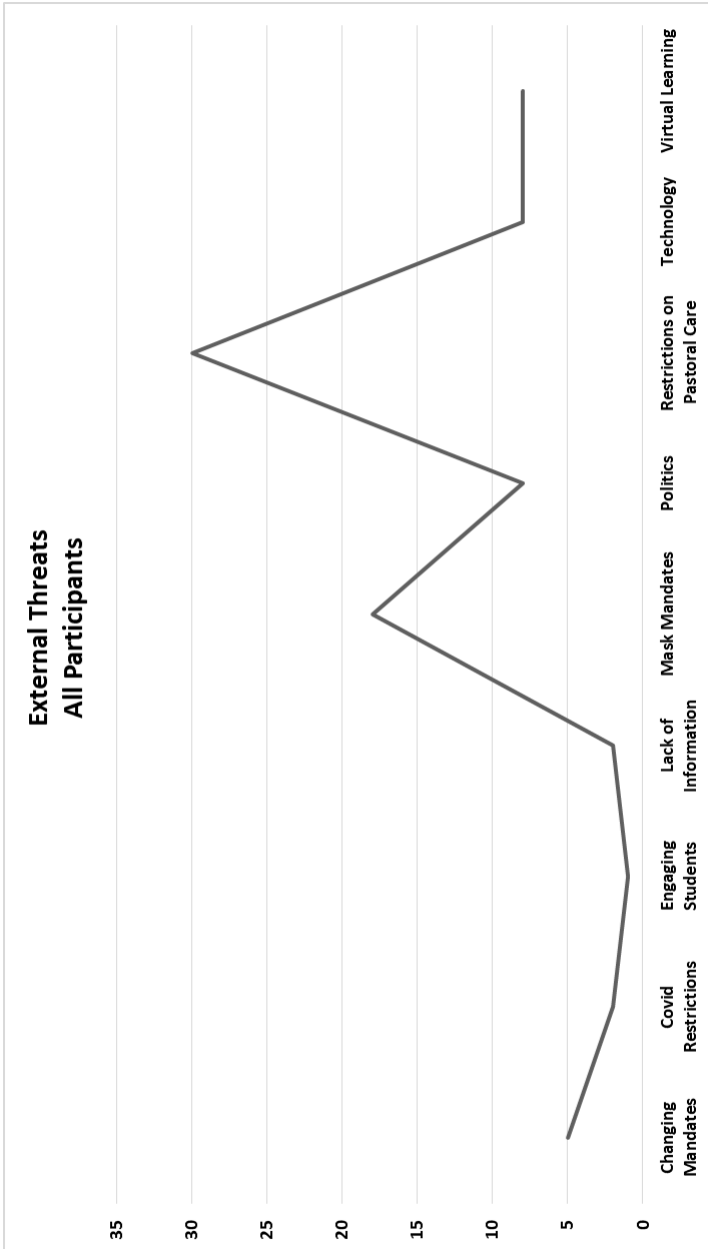

External Threats
All Participants

B. Ministry Impact

The participants were asked to share their impressions of the impact of COVID-19 on their ministry. The responses were placed into two impact categories, positive and negative. One hundred and twenty-six respondents shared a negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Graph 6 contains an overview of all the impacts that received two or more mentions from the respondents. Those topics that received only one mention were burnout, consumerism, fear, inward focus, loss of members, conflict between pastor and members, and lack of volunteers.

Division within the congregation was the item that was mentioned most frequently as a negative impact. Political divisions involving the mask mandate were most frequently cited as an impact. However, physical separation due to social distancing and fear of the virus were mentioned frequently. Less common, but expressed by more than one person, was a perceived division between those who maintained pure doctrine and did not suspend services or holy communion and those who were perceived to have chosen man's law over God's law. One individual suggested that the decline in attendance in many congregations indicated God's punishment for compromise.

Loss of community was the second most common response. The participants referenced the elimination or reduction of in-person worship during quarantine periods and the inability to gather for community dinners and events. Attendance was the third most significant concern shared by the participants. While most congregations that offered in-person worship also provided livestreaming of their worship service, most desired their membership to return to in-person worship as the pandemic threat diminished. The participants shared a vital concern that most people who had transitioned to in-home worship would not return to in-person worship. They believed that convenience, flexibility, and the lack of accountability were more powerful motivators for in-home worship than the benefits of in-person worship. Three participants expressed concern that perhaps the move to introduce in-home worship had been a mistake.

Graph 6: Worker Responses: Negative Impact of the Pandemic
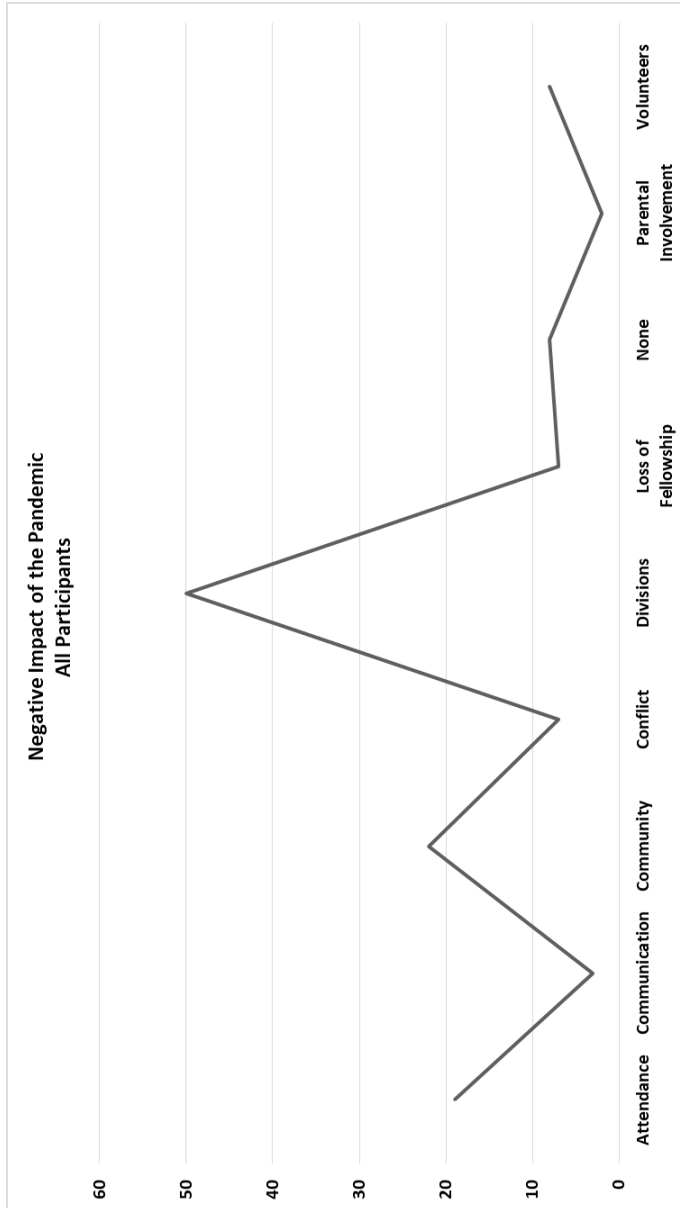
C. Mission Impact

The participants were asked to share their perceptions of the impact of the pandemic on the mission of their ministries. One hundred and twenty-one of the 218 responses received were classified as negative based on the participants' descriptions of the impact. Graph 7 contains an overview of the negative responses identified from the survey data.

As noted from the graph, most of the respondents believed that the pandemic reduced or eliminated outreach. Some shared that the reduction in outreach directly resulted from social distancing policies and shelter at home orders. Some shared that the reduction or elimination resulted from the congregation lacking the technology or skills to reach out to the community through social media or the internet. Others asserted that the elimination of outreach was the necessary result of reduced staff capacity and the elimination of in-person worship. Thirty-one of the responses reported that the pandemic did not have any impact on the mission of the local congregation.

Ninety-seven of the 218 responses were classified as positive based on the participants' descriptions of the impact. Graph 8 presents the positive impacts expressed in the survey and the impact's frequency.

As indicated in the graph, the most frequent response was that the pandemic did not positively impact the church's mission. The second most common response regarding the positive impact of the pandemic on the mission of the ministries was the addition of online tools for worship and community engagement. Several participants shared experiences of individuals from around the country and the world who became regular participants in worship and Bible study through technology. Some of the ministries with increased participation by geographically dispersed guests indicated that many contributed to community discussion and online financial contributions. While only mentioned by one person specifically in this question, two other participants in answering previous questions supported the assertion that the pandemic placed a greater emphasis on our schools as a potential outreach tool. Traditional "public school only" families enrolled their children in Lutheran schools to avoid virtual public education. The increase in non-church member enrollments provides excellent opportunities to share the Gospel and help new families connect to the church.

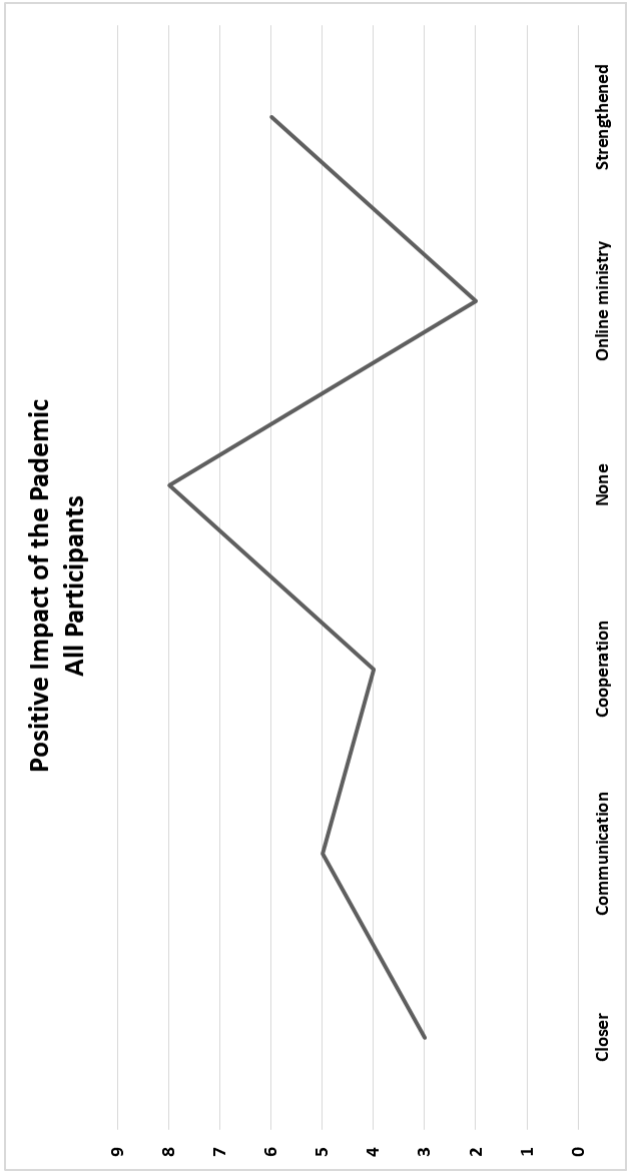Graph 7: Worker Responses: Pandemic's Negative Impact on Mission
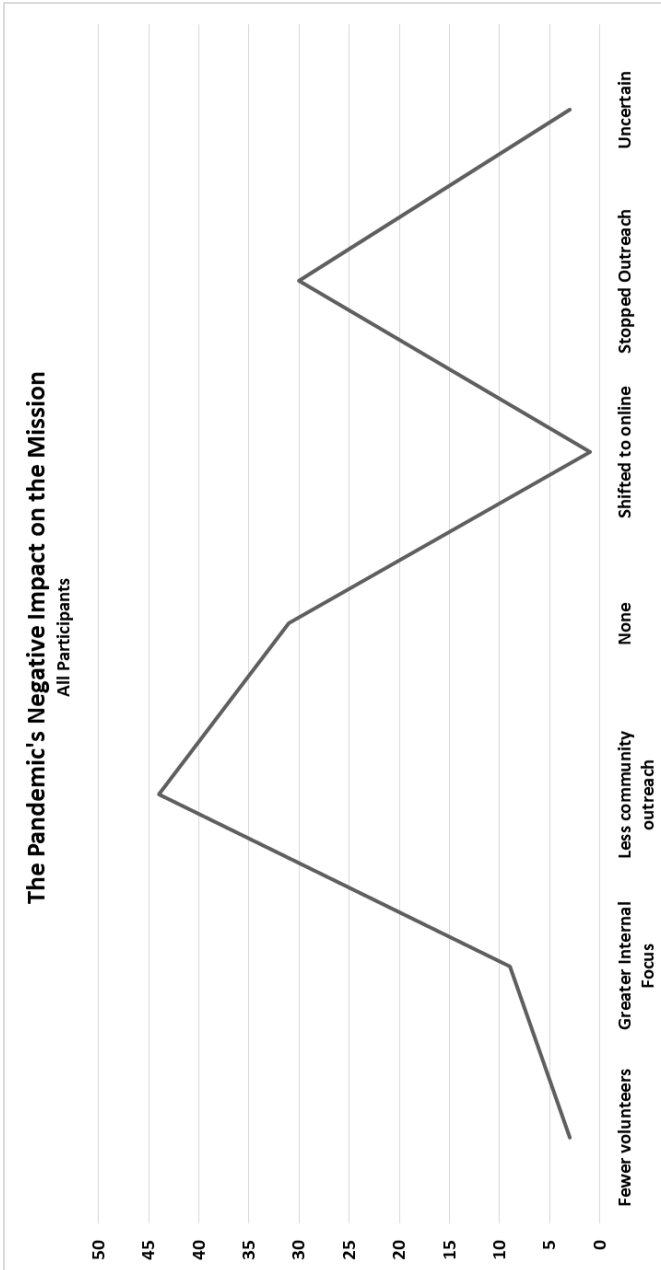
The Pandemic's Negative Impact on the Mission
All Participants

Graph 8: Worker Responses: Pandemic's Positive Impact on Mission

Section Three: General Discussion

One of the objectives of this study was to identify areas for further research and discussion so that our congregations might be better prepared should their parish ministry need to move away from a building, large-group gathering model. In the context of preparing for mission and ministry without a permanent location and building, four learning points could be identified.

1.   Relationships Matter

The church is strongest when the church is relational. God works through His people to strengthen, comfort, and encourage the members of His body. While there is a place for an evangelistic proclamation in a large gathering, much of the church's mission work happens one on one as God's people interact with those who still live in the world. Social distancing, the suspension of public gatherings, and the prohibition on pastoral care in the institutional setting have dramatically impacted the vitality of the congregation and the emotional well-being of God's people.

We can celebrate the hard work, the long hours, and the sacrifices made by congregational members, ministry staff, pastors, teachers, and administrators as they scrambled to develop new channels of communication so that God's work through the church and school could continue. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the relational aspects of technology-mediated interactions are not sufficient for the vibrant ministry. The steady decline of online worship in favor of in-person worship supports this claim. The number of workers and members that expressed an overwhelming sense of isolation and loneliness during the pandemic support the claim. Finally, the data collected from outside sources[1] found that at the height of the pandemic, the number of worshippers who participated in online worship decreased significantly[2] within the first 18 minutes. Further research and exploration may determine the factors that contribute to social connectedness in a technology-mediated community. A theological framework of pastoral ministry and community that is not centered on the building or institutional programs needs to be developed to guide the process of developing new, Biblically and Confessionally sound ministry models.

2.   Divisiveness

A strong thread of concern shared in the report was divisiveness. It has been said that a crisis will bring a family closer together or drive them apart. Such seems to be the case with the pandemic. Several workers expressed exhaustion from dealing with divisive individuals who have attempted to attribute political agendas to congregational decisions. While the thread is real and troubling, the more disturbing reality is the divisive language that the participants use to refer to others. For example, some participants spoke of the "radical right," and others referred to "woke-ism of the

left." Most troubling was the minority of the participants who expressed the belief that suspending in-person worship was compromising the faith to "please men." The pandemic has further eroded trust among ministries and those who serve in ministry. The issue of divisiveness is at its roots an attack on the body of Christ and a deterrent to healthy congregational life and effective outreach. The research of this study indicates that the divisiveness, in a large part, comes from the lack of preparation for a catastrophic event, such as the pandemic. The study data would further indicate that a portion of the body of Christ view all change as inherently bad, while the other views it as inherently good. A theological framework of the church that is not rooted in buildings and programs would help address the concerns of the former while providing a tool for effective evaluation of methods for the latter.

3.   Theological Foundations for "Online Ministry"

The lack of theological discussion and study related to "online ministry" or "online worship" has contributed to the divisive activity of the pandemic. As noted from the worker responses, some pastors believe a worship gathering is only valid when people and pastor physically gather in a shared space around the Word and Sacraments. Other pastors believe that a technology-mediated community is as valid as a physically gathered community. These pastors assert that the elevation of in-person worship over online worship is sacerdotalism. This second group of pastors often argue that in-home worship is the church of the future. The largest segment of our pastors have viewed online worship as a pragmatic decision and do not attribute theological intent with choice. Like many issues in our church, we believe that ignoring the differences will diminish their power to divide our churches. In reality, it is the lack of discussion that empowers the two extremes.

4.   Mission Opportunities

Most of the participants that expressed optimism for mission opportunities in the post-pandemic world believed that the opportunities would occur through online ministry or online activity. However, as mentioned earlier, our faith's strength has historically been in our relationships and person-to-person interactions. If congregations go down the path of online ministry, research needs to be conducted to determine if healthy relationships can be formed, sustain, and grow through technology-mediated social interactions. Models of successful online or in-home ministries need to be developed or identified.

A second option for mission would be the use of an asset-mapping process to determine how the local congregation could leverage its strength—relational ministry—to extend its mission reach in the community it serves. For example, a congregation could fill the void of safe in-person gatherings by hosting small

gatherings around a shared interest. A congregation could provide study pods and mentors for small groups of students to interact socially engaged in online learning.

5. Breaking Institutional Barriers

One of the greatest frustrations expressed by pastors in the survey was their frustration at not providing pastoral care to members in care facilities and hospitals. Institutions of health originated within the church. Valid studies have demonstrated that spiritual care positively impacts health care treatments. It was tragic that many people of faith perished without a pastoral visit due to policies developed contrary to those research studies. It would be easy to point the finger at the government or the institutions themselves. However, much of the blame might lie with our clergy who have neglected to form a collaborative partnership with hospitals and health care providers. The church historically has had many fruitful opportunities to share the Gospel through the health care system. In smaller locations, rebuilding the connection between patients' spiritual and physical care might be simply a matter of developing a relationship with the hospital administrator and offering to serve as a volunteer chaplain. In larger, corporate hospitals, it may require more formal work to identify and mitigate their concerns. We might gain credibility with larger institutions by developing a version of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), which has been abbreviated to focus on patient privacy issues, working in the hospital environment, and contagionmitigation procedures.

Conclusion

Some people might wonder at the value of a report on the pandemic. It would be easy to categorize the study as "interesting but useless." However, the pandemic has had an impact on our congregations and schools. Church leaders would do well to determine how to assist congregations and church leaders in a healthy response for the short-term future. More importantly, the pandemic may serve as a wake-up call for a future pandemic that could dwarf COVID-19. Congregations and schools would be more successful during the pandemic if resources and policies were put in place based on what has been learned through this study and subsequent studies.

Finally, a second pandemic may seem like a very remote possibility. However, the loss of in-person worship in our church buildings may not be so far off for many. A review of the financial condition of our congregations would indicate that many may not be able to retain their buildings ten years in the future. The idea of church without buildings is not new, but it largely has existed among the fringe of mission-focused churches or advocates of missional communities. However, a push by the state of Wisconsin in 2019 to remove the property tax exemption on religious institution serves as a reminder that a future in which congregations must pay property tax may not be far into the future. If congregations were to be asked to pay property taxes,

many congregations would no longer be able to afford their buildings and would be forced into ministry outside the building. [3.] The pandemic has given us a few potential paths and pitfalls to a future where many congregations are no longer able to meet in their buildings. Perhaps through greater analysis and more profound theological reflection, models of healthy ministries that are not dependent on the building-centric ministry typical of most of our congregations may be identified.

Endnotes

[1]The Barna Group, (2021). The New Sunday Morning, accessed at
https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning/
[2] MacDonald, A., Stetzer, E., and Wilson, T., (2020). How church leaders are responding to the challenges of COVID-19. Exponential Webinar, accessed at https://exponential.org/resource-ebooks/response-to-COVID-19/
[3] Miller, J. (2015). Is it time for nonprofits to pay property taxes. Badger Institute, accessed at https://www.badgerinstitute.org/Commentary/Is-it-time-for-nonprofits-to-pay-property-taxes.htm