

changing church

AUTUMN SURVEY – DISCIPLESHIP, EVANGELISM
AND COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION

Introduction

Approaching the discipleship, evangelism and community transformation sections of the survey, one of the key areas identified was the possible links between church activities and individual Christian's discipleship and evangelism.

Encouragingly, church attendance is still very high during lockdown (including online and in-person services), but it was interesting to discover that 67% saw church attendance as a vital part of their discipleship while only 29% said they'd invited someone to an online service in the last three months. Looking at these statistics, it's worth considering how churches are aiming to use their gatherings within the discipleship and evangelism journeys of their members.

Alongside church services, the survey also looked at the variety of other tools and resources that individuals find helpful to their discipleship. It was encouraging to see the diversity of ways that individuals deepen their relationship with Jesus, and even some church leaders weren't aware of how useful individuals found tools such as podcasts, books and articles, and Christian music.

When asked what they felt was the biggest barrier to sharing their faith, the highest number of respondents selected a lack of significant relationships with non-Christians. There isn't further data to clarify why this is, but it might be important for churches to ensure they are giving their members both the time and support they need to form these relationships.

The results of the survey also suggest that when wanting to share an important message within our churches, whole-church services are still

the best place to do so, as 99.8% of respondents reported they had been to the main church service in the last month. This has implications not only for quickly disseminating practical information around church life, but also for how we communicate what we value and want to grow in as a church community. It's possible this was actually demonstrated in the survey when both leaders and individuals were asked how regularly they felt evangelism was enabled by their church. The majority of church leaders felt it was a semi-regular occurrence, but many individuals didn't agree.

Despite varying impressions of how regularly evangelism is facilitated, the survey results did suggest that church leaders are seeing a similar number of people come to faith as before COVID-19. Similarly, individuals reported that, on average, they have spoken to six people about their faith in the last three months. These are encouraging signs and worth holding in balance with other data.

The overall impression from the following data is that while there is cause for celebration that church attendance is high, emotional wellbeing is overall good, and churches are serving their local communities well, personal discipleship and evangelism are still key areas for improvement. When leaders were asked what they'd appreciate support with, evangelism and discipleship came out on top, above gathering church and leading well. It is unclear whether these areas have arisen purely due to the pandemic or whether the pandemic has catalysed their exposure, but either way it shows a crucial aspect of our church life that needs far better understanding and attention for the good of our churches' health and ongoing growth.

Be blessed,

Peter Lynas, UK Director

10 key points

Discipleship

1. Church attendance is at 99.8% in the last month but research suggests evangelical Christians are also pursuing multiple other avenues for personal discipleship at home.

Church service attendance, both online and in person, is very high, but weekly small group involvement is at 42% – although this hasn't differed much from pre-lockdown (46%). When asked what individuals found beneficial to their discipleship, 67% said church services and 59% said small groups, alongside several other options. Based on attendance data, it appears that 32.8% of people are regularly attending church despite not identifying it as a key factor in their discipleship.

We then asked what else evangelical Christians are finding useful in their discipleship.

2. 33% of church leaders have potentially underestimated the value of books, articles and podcasts in their congregation's discipleship.

Resources that leaders and individuals find helpful for discipleship



86% of church leaders believed that church services and small groups were helpful for their congregation's discipleship, with the next highest resource at 44%. In three out of nine areas – webinars, prayer guides, Bible reading notes – church leaders' assumptions were within 10% of the importance our individuals gave each item. But in key areas such as services, small groups, podcasts, books and articles, and Christian music, there was a 15 to 33% gap between individuals and church leaders.

This suggests that higher emphasis is put on events and gatherings than on written resources, and individuals, while still attending gatherings, have a much more diverse way of deepening their relationship with Jesus.

3. 62% of church leaders and 67% of individuals identify their emotional wellbeing as 'good' to 'very good'.

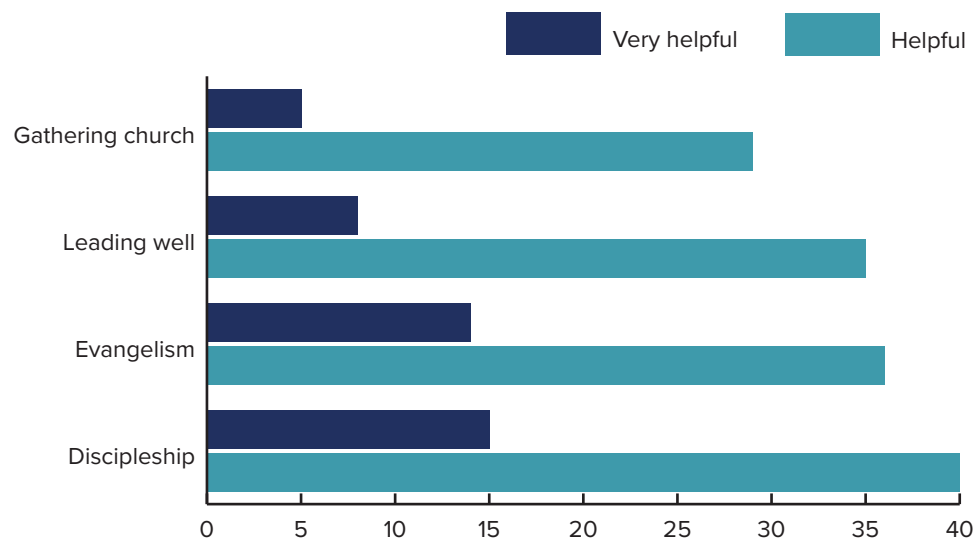
The highest proportion of individual respondents (42%) said that their emotional wellbeing was 'good', and similarly 46% of leaders said the same. 16% of church leaders and 25% of individuals identified as having 'very good' emotional wellbeing. Unfortunately, however, 33% of individuals and 38.2% of leaders said that their emotional wellbeing was average to very poor.

Whilst a direct comparison cannot be made to the respondents' emotional wellbeing before lockdown, there was a 10% drop for leaders since our May 2020 survey, with significantly more church leaders now selecting 'average' wellbeing over 'very good'.

Evangelism

4. More than half of church leaders who responded would find resources on discipleship and evangelism either helpful or very helpful.

Where would leaders find training and online resources helpful?



When considering the areas in which leaders might like support, 34% of church leaders said they would appreciate further training and online resources around gathering church, while 50% and 55% said they would value resourcing on evangelism and discipleship respectively.

It initially appears encouraging that church leaders would like resources on discipleship and evangelism, however our website statistics show that more people have still accessed resources on gathering church than these other areas in recent months. This could be due to a need to remain responsive to immediate restriction changes, despite a broader desire to grow in evangelism and discipleship in the longer term.

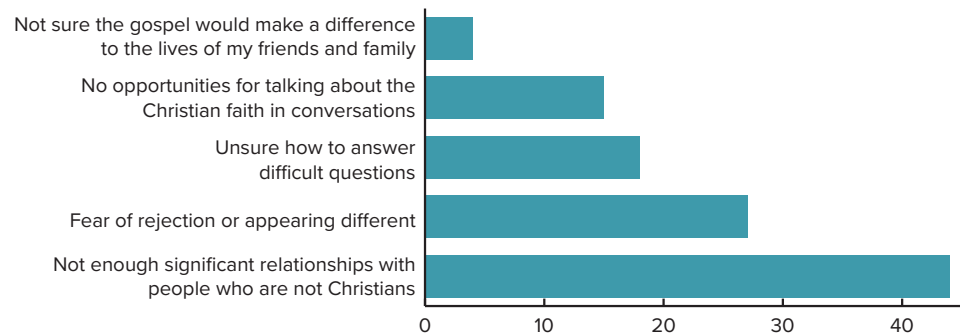
5. A third of individuals (34%) said their church wasn't helping them with evangelism at all, and only 13% of individuals said their church regularly helped with evangelism.

One interesting finding is the differing impressions of how much churches help with evangelism. For example, 12% of church leaders, when asked how much their church helps people share their faith, said 'not at all', whereas almost three times as many (34%) individuals answered the same. This was the highest percentage for individuals, with 27% answering 'somewhat informally', 29% answering 'occasional teaching or activity', and only 13% answering 'regular teaching or activity'.

Whilst a direct comparison cannot be made, this suggests that while the majority of leaders (87%) believe that they are encouraging evangelism 'somewhat' to 'regularly', this effort has not been recognised by individuals.

6. 44% of evangelical Christians claim their main barrier to sharing their faith is a lack of significant relationships with people who aren't Christians.

Barriers to sharing faith



The suggestion from this survey is that the greatest barrier to people sharing their faith is a lack of significant relationships. It's unclear how much this is due to COVID as survey respondents commented more than 200 times that they had limited contact with other people in the last three months. It could also be that casual friendships with non-Christians, based on hobbies or social activities, are harder to maintain through less face-to-face contact.

It also dispels the idea that the biggest barrier to evangelism is a lack of confidence in answering difficult questions as only 18% of individuals selected this as their biggest concern.

7. 29% of individuals invited someone to an online service and 12% invited someone to Alpha or a similar course, but church leaders are reporting similar numbers of people making commitments to follow Jesus to pre-COVID.

In the past three months, 29% of individuals invited non-Christians to online church services. For other church ministries, such as Alpha, quiz nights, and toddler groups, 12% or less said they invited non-Christians, and 57% said they didn't invite non-Christians to any of the above.

Despite low levels of invitations from individuals, church leaders are reporting a minimal attendance drop-off for courses exploring Christianity and similar numbers to pre-lockdown of people coming to faith in Jesus.

8. On average, respondents who have invited someone to an online church event in the last three months have also spoken to more people about faith in the last three months.

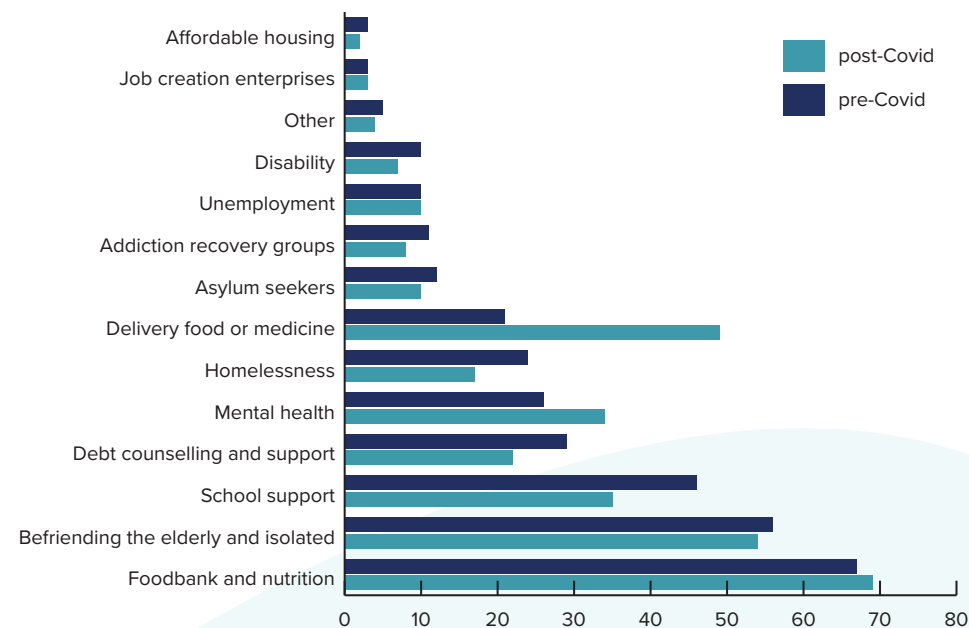
There was a correlation between invitation and conversation; however, those who hadn't invited anyone spoke to an average of 5.2 people about faith, while those who had invited someone spoke to 7.6 people. This suggests that a minority of people are responsible for the majority of invitations and evangelistic activity in our churches.

Invitations to church-run events may be low, but individuals suggested that they have spoken, on average, to six people about their Christian faith in the last three months. This was an encouraging number and demonstrates that individuals are still finding opportunities to talk about Jesus.

Community transformation

9. Leaders report a 28% increase in food or medicine delivery with more than twice as many evangelical churches in the UK now offering this support to their communities than before the COVID-19 crisis.

Activities that churches were involved with, pre- and post- Covid



Alongside an increase in food provision, local churches have greatly increased their mental health support, especially in churches in the North East. 88% of leaders said that they occasionally and/or regularly taught on mental health in their main weekly services, and 70% said the same about teaching on the economy and finance. Both internally and externally, financial and emotional wellbeing appear to be priorities for local churches.

While several areas of support have decreased, presumably due to practical limitations, it's encouraging to see churches stepping up to serve their communities in other areas.

10. 86% of individuals offered to support their church's COVID-response, with 58% having offered ongoing prayer and over 30% having offered finance, time and/or a specific skill set.

When individuals were asked how they helped their church serve the local community, only 14% said they were currently unable to help, meaning that 86% had offered support. Respondents could select more than one option, so 58% said they offered ongoing prayer, 33% offered support for the vulnerable and elderly, 32% offered volunteer time and the same offered financial donations. Then 31% offered help with a specific skill set, and the same amount offered coordination and leadership to help their church's response to COVID-19.

All of this has allowed local churches to offer their communities vital support throughout the pandemic.

Questions for reflection

1. What patterns can you identify in your church culture that imply gathering together facilitates discipleship better than a diversity of resources?
2. What form of evangelism training do you think people are hoping their churches will provide, and how can leaders feel equipped to deliver this?





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