

How Covid Changed Relationships and Community

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The ABCUSA Covid-19 Task Force is charged with helping congregations understand and interpret the impact of the pandemic on congregations. One of the ways it chose to learn more about the impact of the pandemic was through a survey conducted in 2022.

One of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on congregations has been an awareness of the importance of community and interpersonal relationships. The Covid-19 pandemic shifted our relational dynamics. Relying on new media technologies like Zoom, social media, FaceTime, and streaming platforms to nourish our interpersonal and communal relationships continues to impact how we interact with one another. Prior to the pandemic for huge portions of the population these resources functioned primarily as flourishes in our everyday lived experiences. They became primary once social distancing, masking, and other safety measures went into practice. Every aspect of the human experience was impacted by the need to prevent the further spread of Covid-19.

One of the ways we adjusted was to leverage new media technologies in ways and at levels previously unrealized. Yet even though we have found new, helpful, and often creative ways to interact, the lasting impression is that our relationships and our ability to engage in meaningful relationships have altered.

When asked “What was the most challenging concern your congregation faced during the pandemic?” of the 141 responses recurring theme centered around the inability to gather and engage in community activity. Here are a few sample responses:

- Not being together
- Staying connected. We did our best with this one.
- Finding ways to gather
- Figuring out how to keep people included.
- Lack of attendance.
- Lack of community. Isolation.
- Maintaining a fellowship without in person gathering.
- Keeping engaged with each other and ministry programs.
- Getting people to the Lords Table and to be together as a community.

These types of responses are evidence of what we remember to be true anecdotally. The social distancing and isolation associated with Covid-19 created a season of great discomfort for us relationally and communally. The most remembered stated challenge of the height of the Covid-19 experience was the inability to experience familiar community and relational dynamics.

When asked “What is the most challenging concern that your congregation is facing currently?” The theme of relationship and church community again surfaced. Many of the comments centered around building and maintaining community with the new shift of mix media approaches of online and in person community elements. Of the 141 responses to this question here are a few examples:

- Outreach to young, digitally-oriented families.

- No togetherness.
- Church attendance.
- Trying to build a sense of community.
- Reconnecting members, reaching out to community.
- Attracting more people of all ages.
- Getting people to come back to worship instead of viewing online.

Many of the concerns lifted up by respondents indicate a desire to experience community and relationships in familiar ways, while others are attempting to embrace the opportunities provided through new media platforms discovered during the Covid-19 pandemic. What the respondents have in common, regardless of perspective in how community is best experienced (ie online or in person or a hybrid mix), is that building community post-Covid-19's peak impact, continues to be a challenge.

Additionally, like all things related to Covid-19, the development of relationships and nurturing of community are...complicated. The pandemic and its effects have been marked by division on many topics and at many levels. When asked "As you think about your own life, what have been the impacts of the pandemic on your relationships, both within and outside the church?" Some respondents stated their relational and communal ties were damaged or severed.

- Lost some friends and gained others. This has given me a stronger understanding of what a relationship should be like.
- I have experienced a distancing and alienation from family and friends.
- I have a strained relationship with virtual members.
- With only a few exceptions I would say that my relationships have grown more distant.
- I am slower to connect with new people.
- I've had a few relationships grow closer. Others are more remote. A few are quite strained.

Relationships and community during the peak of Covid-19 were challenged. But a thread of hope emerged from the data to indicate that not all is lost, and all relationships are permanently broken. Many people experienced a season of strengthened relationships for having experienced a shared reality. Because of the restructuring of our relationships and community experience, some felt a new satisfaction and rekindling of relationships. Here are a few examples:

- I highly value face-to-face encounters with everyone.
- It has strengthened relationships in the church as we struggled to serve side by side. I think in some ways I have new connections because of the pandemic, while it has shut the door on others.
- I drew closer to my church family.
- My relationships with people outside of my congregation have been strengthened.
- Circles of fellowship have grown smaller, but more intimate.
- Most of my relationships have become stronger as we appreciate one another more than before.
- I truly believe that impact on my life is that I have grown closer with people.
- I am more focused and intentional about all of my relationships...I am better able to see God working in my life and my impact upon the lives of others.

- I have come to place a higher value on relationships since the pandemic, because I more fully understand tomorrow is not promised to us.
- I am more supportive and less critical of others.
- The pandemic solidified my relationship with the church.
- The pandemic had brought us more together as family in the church.
- I appreciate being with people more.
- Greater awareness of the depth of community care and resources.
- I see where the pandemic has affected my relationships in and outside the church.

As we see from these sample responses, many found that the Covid-19 pandemic actually increased their appreciation of community and relationships. Some even thrived and strengthened their relationships with family members and fellow congregants.

In this early season of moving beyond the peak, we continue to live with the ramifications of our experiences. Some grew closer to family, friends, neighbors, and our church communities. Others did not experience the same level of relational renaissance instead being more deeply impacted by a painful season of separation and broken relationships.

Multiple studies from around the world, including our internal ABCUSA survey, confirm a pervasive change to our social interactions because of the pandemic, both encouraging and discouraging. Going forward, the ABCUSA data suggests we will lean more into our relationships. Respondents indicated a great desire to build, nourish, and extend their relationships and community elements. But we will each begin our journeys from different starting points and it will continue to be a complex and slow process of learning to be in community and healthy relationships with others requiring us to leverage many different avenues of relational connections including online and in person interactive spaces.

In response to the interest of ABC congregations to continue to explore the impact of the global pandemic on congregational life, the ABCUSA Office of the General Secretary and Board of General Ministries established the “Interpreting the Impact of COVID-19 on Congregations.” Meeting since early 2022, the task force shared a survey with all ABCUSA regions and congregations in September 2022. The above article highlights and interprets some of what the survey revealed.