

The Challenge of Change

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I recently read the following quote on Facebook concerning the life and heart attitude of C.S. Lewis:

Jack (C.S. Lewis) was someone who would accept interruptions every ten minutes (if necessary) while he was working very hard on a book (or something) without the slightest degree of irritation. He was able to believe and to behave as if our own personal work is nowhere near as important as the interruptions to it. The interruptions are the real substance of God's job for us.
- Douglas Gresham, Stepson of C.S. Lewis

With that perspective as a backdrop, what is it that we are to make of this ‘interruption’ known as the pandemic? What are some of the learnings that have come for us as people and for the wider ministry of the Lord’s Church?

The results of the survey are mixed on this question.

For some congregations and leaders, the pandemic forced them to make changes to continue ministry, and in the process opened them up to a whole new world of possibilities:

- *We’ve essentially resumed all of our pre-pandemic ministries (and successfully let a few die that didn’t need to be resurrected) and begun new initiatives. Leadership has grown tremendously, as they learned how to navigate conflict over COVID response and do so winsomely and well.*
- *Fighting the natural drift to go back to ‘normal’. We’ve GROWN in every way since the pandemic. The last thing we need to do is go back to where we were prior to it. That means constant refinement of our vision and working toward new ways of living into it in our changing culture.*
- *We’ve let go of some tangential ministries that were dying or stagnant and have not been brought back—no one seems to miss them! There is a continued need to examine and discard or reinvigorate other ministries. New treasures have included a rediscovery of the importance of relationship.*
- *Necessity is the mother of invention, it has been said. We have evaluated our practices, revamping, substituting, or deleting where practical and possible. We still face the same challenge we had before Covid—attracting young families and children, evangelizing, and engaging all who attend. But we are energized by the passing of the pandemic and God’s continued provisions.*
- *There has been a constant awareness that God is doing a new thing among us in the church. We have come to realize that the old ways may no longer be as useful for ministry as before. We have broadened our view of what is possible and found meaningful resources online to guide us and to develop our worship services, in*

particular. Because of live-stream and Zoom, we also have been able to participate in the lives of other congregations for worship and special events. I think the pandemic has helped us open our eyes to the broadness, the vastness of God's Kingdom.

For others, rather than being a 'sail' to a future filled with potential, the impacts of the pandemic served as an 'anchor' entrenching them even more in their traditions and tendencies of the past:

- *We are going through a pastoral transition now, for good reasons, but that forces us to reconsider how our systems operate and how we maintain community. Our service in the community at large has remained stable, but at the risk of burning out the regular leading lay members of the congregation. We seem to be falling back into the normalcy of a pre-pandemic mindset wherein the pastoral leadership is tasked with innovation and forward momentum.*
- *The fear of change and the avoidance of difficult conversations have been challenges for our congregations for the last two decades. There is a tendency by some members to disregard the thoughts and ideas brought up in congregational meetings by young adults and individuals who were not raised in the congregation. We have become a congregation stuck in 'tradition' and doing things the same way they have always been done.*
- *While I love my home congregation it is disheartening to see how stuck and dug-in they are about any change. I have seen other congregations that found ways to become more supportive of each other during the pandemic, even while going online for ministry. I realize now how much I want to be a part of a congregation that wants to do more and be more than a dying congregation. I thought by staying with my home church that I could be an agent of healthy change. I realized over the pandemic that this is not the case and that their unwillingness to do and be is having a negative impact on my spiritual and emotional health.... The search team only reflects the side of the congregation that does not want to move forward so I doubt the minister they bring in will be one that I will connect with.*
- *It's difficult to return to a declined ministry. I am a retired pastor and the church is not meeting my spiritual needs. The church worships like nothing happened rather than using it as an opportunity to reinvent its worship style. If the current trend continues the church will close in five years.*
- *...I have grown much more aware of how to keep older populations healthy—even though it's at the detriment of beloved activities. Grieving those losses continues to be a challenge. On a larger scope, general flexibility, and willingness to try new things has become necessary but remains a challenge as far as how much change is permissible. We only have so much patience it seems.*

While some churches discovered an avenue to renewal and new life through the *interruption* of the pandemic, other congregations have simply found the pandemic to be a *disruption* that has kept them from being the same as they were in the past.

Oh Lord, please give us eyes to see, ears to hear and hearts to trust as you lead us in these challenging days, for the sake of your Glory. Amen

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.