

Changing church

Responding to the coronavirus crisis



Churches and organisations have had to make significant changes in how they operate due to the lockdown. However, our survey of nearly 900 churches and organisations shows they remain committed to their mission and have found creative ways to serve the needs of others.

Church buildings have been shut since March, but churches are definitely open. In fact, many have never been busier. Churches have moved online for Sunday services and have moved their church-based activities and projects into neighbourhoods to meet the needs of the vulnerable. There will be further challenges ahead but this report presents a hopeful future as the church looks at life after lockdown.

We are encouraged that the results show people are interested in finding out more about Jesus and the Christian faith, and those churches that prioritise ministering to people who are curious and questioning are most likely to see people commit to following Jesus.

Generosity and compassion have always been hallmarks of the Christian faith, and this has been evident throughout this crisis. The openhanded nature of the church to work in partnership and care for those in need has been demonstrated in recent months. It is also encouraging to hear that most churches have reserves to meet the situations they are facing.

Christian organisations have had to radically adjust during this pandemic, with 84% changing how they operate. The majority of organisations have seen demand for their services increase or stay at the same levels as before the lockdown. While there are financial pressures and funding is a key concern, most have sufficient reserves or don't anticipate needing to use them.

To enable the Evangelical Alliance to better understand the challenges facing churches and Christian organisations we ran the survey between 14 and 20 May, and promoted it through a variety of channels and church networks to solicit the widest response.

We received:

- **694 valid responses** submitted by or on behalf of church leaders.
- **196 valid responses** submitted by or on behalf of organisation leaders.

More than two thirds of church responses and approximately half of the organisations that responded are members of the Evangelical Alliance.

Responses came from a wide range of church denominations and streams, including Anglican, Baptist, Elim, AOG, RCCG, Methodist, New Frontiers, Presbyterian, and independents.

There was a wide geographical spread of responses, with approximately 15% of responses from London and proportional representation from the North East, Midlands, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland.

The research was conducted by Evangelical Alliance in collaboration with Stewardship and in partnership with Eido Research.

We hope this report tells a story of what is currently happening, but more importantly, that it helps our members and others to plan for the future. The church has changed how it operates, but not what it does.

We at the Evangelical Alliance will use the results to continue to resource you and raise your voice to the government and media.

Be blessed,

Peter Lynas

UK director

Ten key points

1. **Most churches are seeing a surge in interest.** 59% of church leaders saw an increase in people interested in finding out more about Jesus and the Christian faith. **More than 1 in 10** church leaders saw an increase in people making first-time commitments to follow Christ.
2. **Prioritising ministry to non-Christians makes a difference.** Churches that focus on providing a place for people who are not Christians to encounter Jesus are three times more likely to see people express an interest in Jesus and make a decision to become a Christian.
3. **Almost all churches are working to help the vulnerable.** 88% of church leaders said their churches are working to meet the needs of vulnerable people. Of these churches, 72% are working in partnership with either local authorities, other churches or charities.
4. **Churches are unable to plan sufficiently for the future.** Although most churches and organisations (around 70%) are happy with the government advice that has been offered hitherto, most (around 60%) say they have not received sufficiently clear advice to allow them to plan for the future.
5. **Churches and organisations have made use of government economic schemes.** 31% of churches have used the government's furlough scheme for some or all of their staff, rising to 43% for organisations.
6. **In the long term churches are most concerned about economic and mental health consequences.** Looking forward churches are most concerned about the long-term economic consequences of this crisis (97%) and the increase in mental health problems (78%).
7. **Coronavirus has forced organisations to change.** 57% of organisations have seen demand for their services stay the same or increase since lockdown, and 84% have had to make changes to how they operate.
8. **Lost income is a concern for churches but one they can navigate.** Two thirds of churches are concerned about the loss of offering income, with over a quarter concerned about paying staff, but most churches carry enough reserves to cover their loss of income for at least six months.
9. **More than a quarter of organisations are at risk due to a lack of reserves.** 28% of organisations say they do not have sufficient reserves to cover a projected loss of income. 49% of organisations have reserves that will cover projected losses for the next 6 months, and a further 20% say they do not anticipate needing to use their reserves.
10. **Churches in Northern Ireland lead the way in supporting those on the frontline.** In Northern Ireland 70% of churches are providing support for those on the front line. This is significantly higher than across the rest of the UK, where it is just over a third. Presbyterian (69%) and Elim (61%) are the denominations in the UK most likely to provide support for frontline workers.

1. Mission

Churches are seeing an increase in people finding out more about Jesus and making a commitment to follow Him.

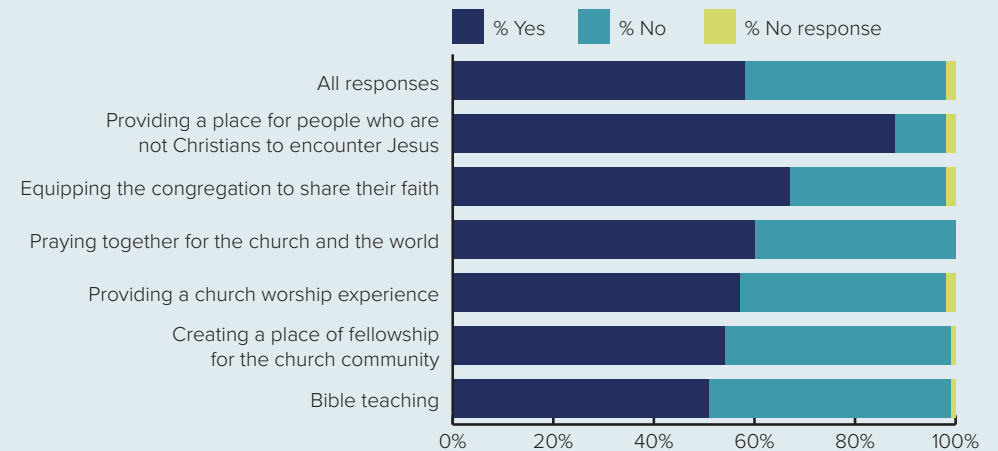
Out of nearly 700 church responses to the survey, 59% said they have seen an increase in people interested in finding out more about Jesus and the Christian faith.

This is great news and confirms the stories we've been hearing and the increase in people searching on Google for topics such as prayer and Jesus.

We were interested in finding out if there was any correlation between the focus of a during a Sunday service and people exploring faith. Across all church respondents, 31% stated that providing a place for people who are not Christians to encounter Jesus was an important aspect of Sunday services. However, whilst only 7% of churches stated that **“providing a place for people who are not Christians to encounter Jesus”** was the **most important** aspect of their Sunday services, 88% of those churches told us they were seeing an increase in people interested in finding out about Jesus and the Christian faith.

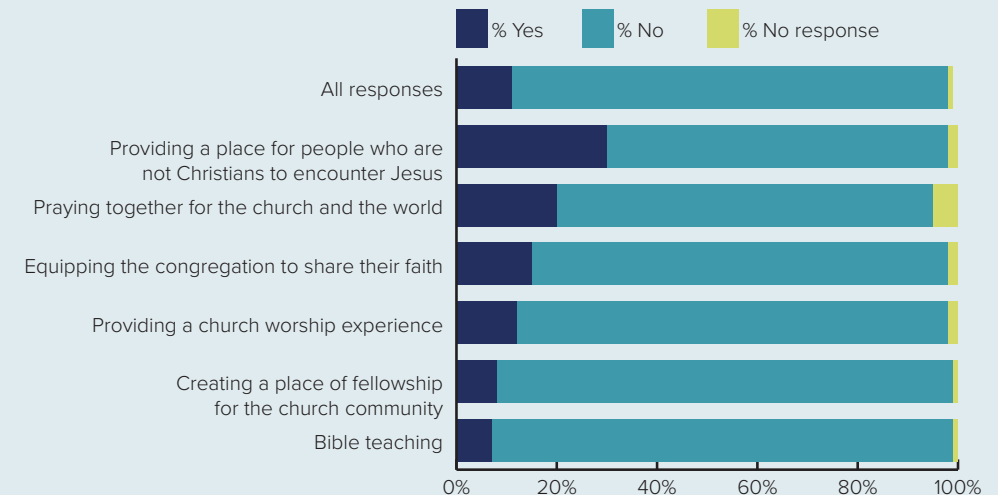
We were encouraged to hear that 70% of church leaders say that people who would not normally attend church are attending. This was consistent across all denominations. Churches have a great opportunity to welcome newcomers in this season and invite them to find out more about Jesus.

Responses to, **“Since the start of the lockdown have you seen an increase in people interested in finding out more about Jesus and the Christian faith?”** by categories of response to, “As a church which one of the following is the most important aspect of Sunday services?”



Alongside this, those same churches are almost three times as likely to see people make first-time commitments to follow Christ:

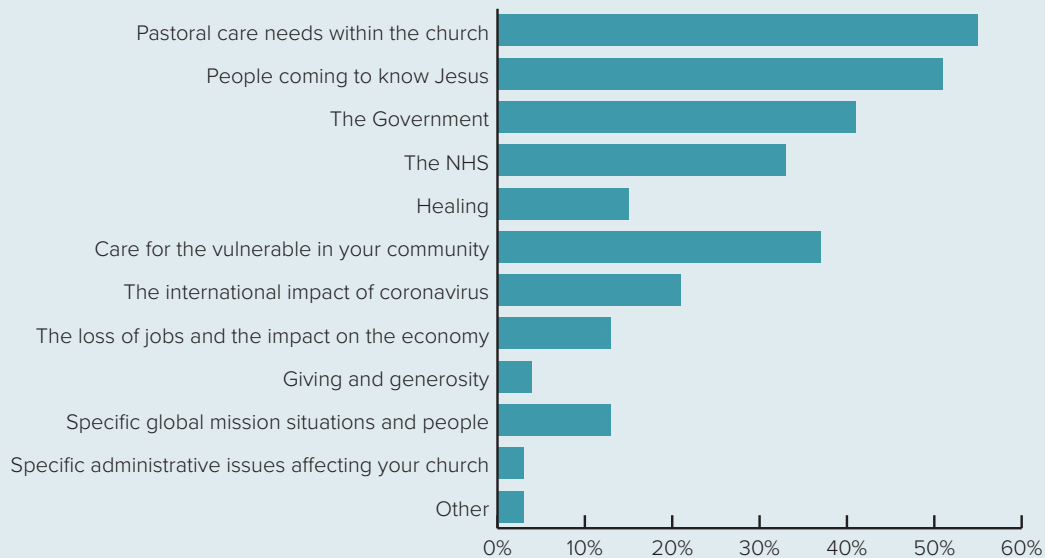
Responses to, **“Since the start of the lockdown have you seen an increase in people making first time commitments to follow Christ?”** by categories of response to, “As a church which one of the following is the most important aspect of Sunday services?”



We wanted to know how churches have been praying during the pandemic. Pastoral care needs within the church, people coming to know Jesus, and the Government were the most common prayer themes. Churches that said praying for people to come to know Jesus was one of their top three prayer priorities during lockdown were more likely to see people express an interest in Jesus (67% as opposed to 58%) and make a decision to become a Christian (16% as opposed to 11%).

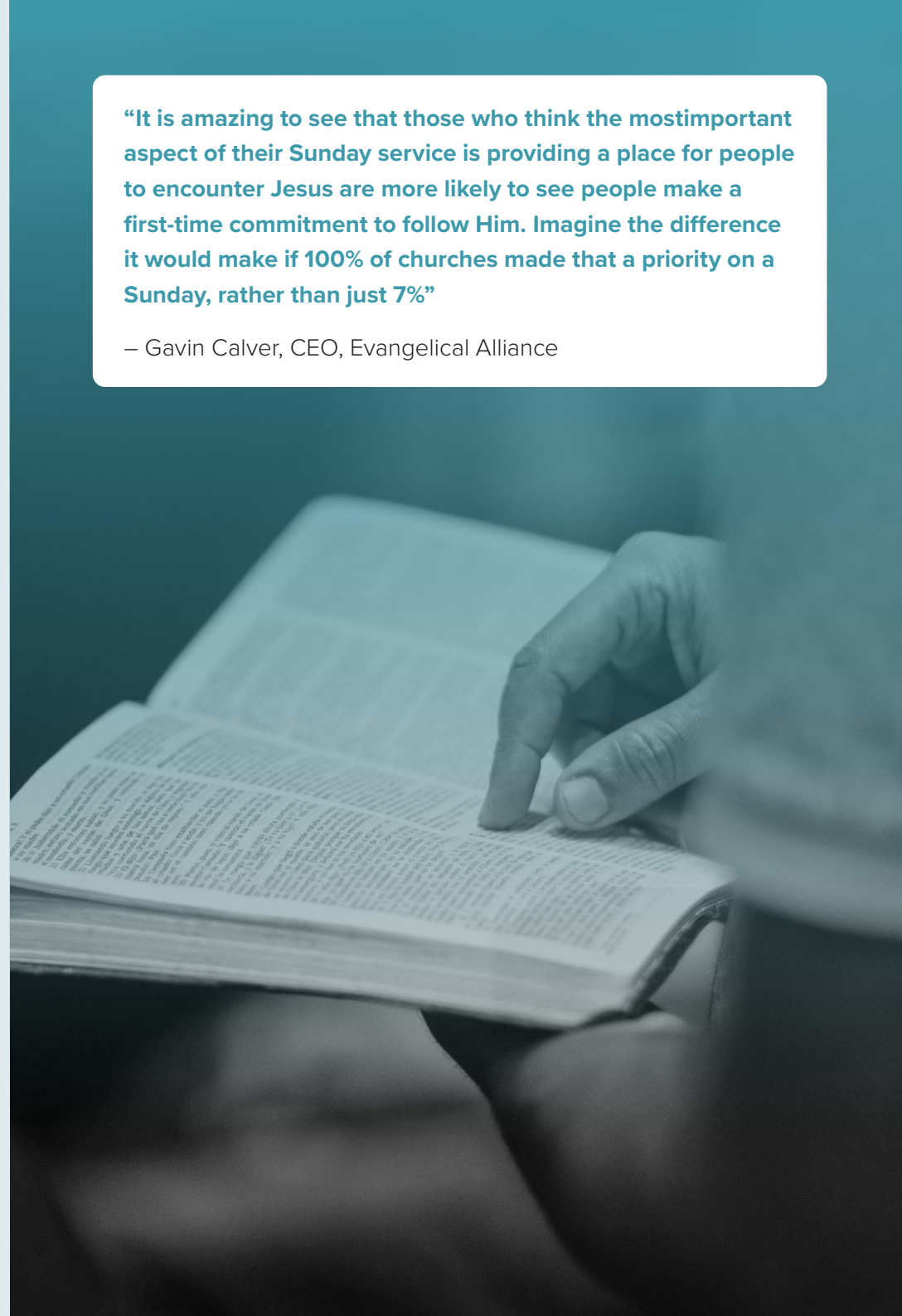
What are the major themes that you have been praying for as a church?

Please select 3.



“It is amazing to see that those who think the most important aspect of their Sunday service is providing a place for people to encounter Jesus are more likely to see people make a first-time commitment to follow Him. Imagine the difference it would make if 100% of churches made that a priority on a Sunday, rather than just 7%”

– Gavin Calver, CEO, Evangelical Alliance



2. Helping the vulnerable and partnerships

Almost all churches are working to help the vulnerable with Evangelical Alliance members more likely to work in partnership with local authorities, other churches or charities.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the restrictions imposed during lockdown, churches are increasing the support they offer to the most vulnerable.

Only 12% of churches were not engaged in activities that meet the needs of vulnerable people. Of the 88% of church leaders who said their churches are working to meet the needs of vulnerable people, 72% are working in partnership with either local authorities, other churches or charities. Over a third (35%) of all churches that responded were working with the local authority or statutory services.

“The GATHER network has been a key part of the Evangelical Alliance for the past few years, to help churches work with each other, partner with charities, and work with local authorities and statutory services. We are really encouraged to see that the vast majority of churches have been able to maintain and grow these partnerships through this pandemic. Unity is crucial in this moment.”

– Roger Sutton, director, GATHER

Are you as a church working to meet the needs of vulnerable people in any of the following ways?



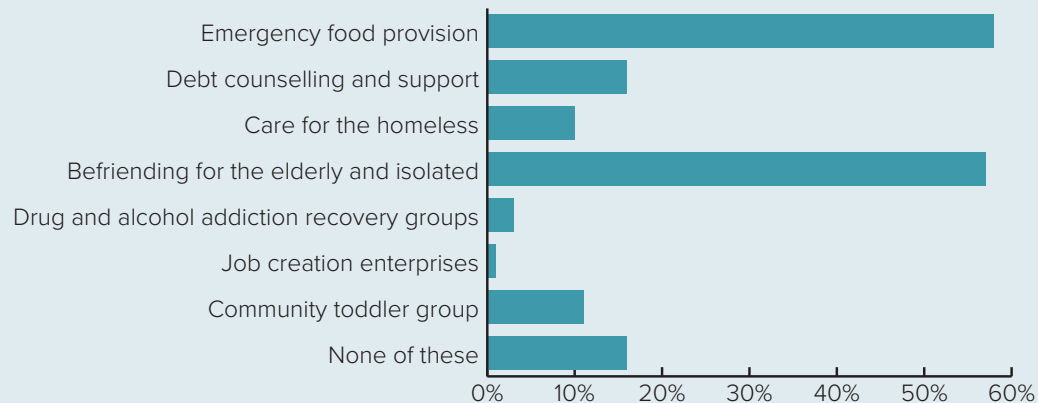
When it comes to partnership the data shows:

- Evangelical Alliance members are more likely to partner than non-members.
- Larger churches are more likely to partner than smaller churches.
- Vineyard, URC and the charismatic churches are more likely to work with local charities or non-statutory services.
- Elim, Vineyard and Pioneer churches are more likely to work in partnerships with other churches in the local area.
- Vineyard, Elim and AOG churches are more likely to work with the local authority or statutory services.

Almost half of churches that responded (48%) have started a new community engagement initiative since the coronavirus outbreak began.

Most have either started emergency food provision or befriending for the elderly and isolated. The most likely ministry to have stopped during the pandemic is community toddler groups. The chart below shows the services churches continue to run.

Thinking about your engagement in your local community, which of the following are you continuing to do?



“It is so encouraging that the church is continuing to serve the most vulnerable through this crisis despite the obvious challenges. Our society will look very different in the future, and there may be tough times ahead, but good times will return and the church has a critical role to play through the journey ahead.”

– Dr Tani Omidéyi, senior pastor, Temple of Praise



3. Relationship with government

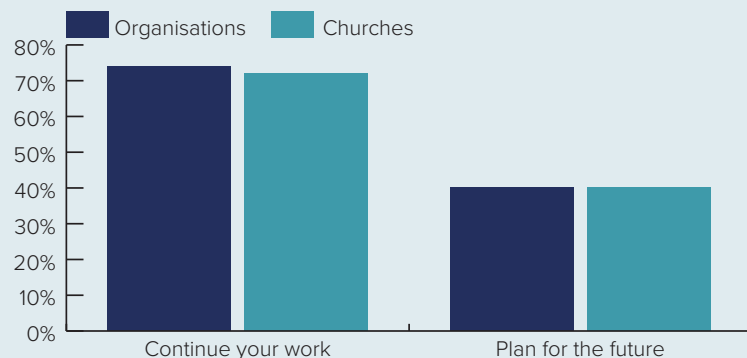
Churches and organisations have accessed the government furlough scheme, and the majority of respondents to the survey felt they had received clear advice hitherto from the Government, but there was less clarity about the future, which is affecting planning.

Government advice

Over 70% of church and organisation leaders felt they received clear advice from the Government and/or the devolved administrations to allow them to continue to work during lockdown.

However, at the time of the survey only 40% of each group felt they had received clear advice from the Government and/or devolved administrations to allow them to plan for the future.

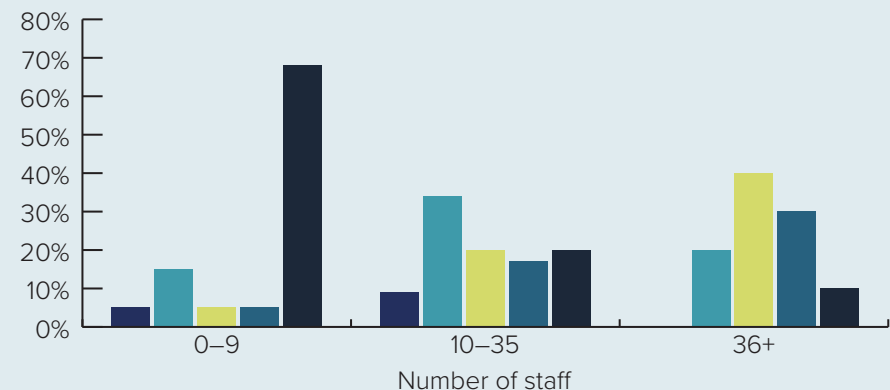
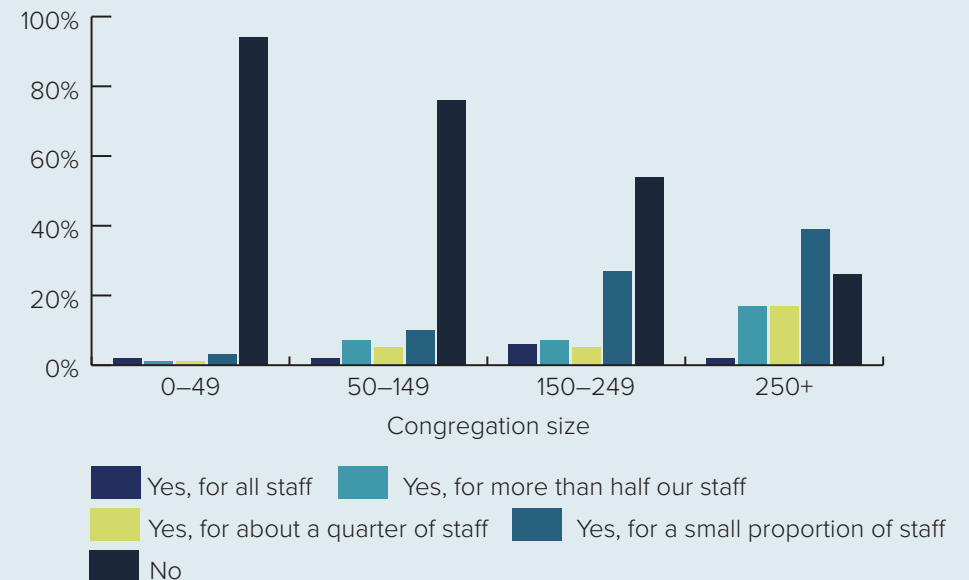
Do you feel that you have received sufficiently clear guidance from the Government and/or devolved administrations about how you can continue your work during lock down and plan for the future?



Furlough

When the Government launched its Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, allowing workers to be furloughed, churches and organisations were able to apply to the scheme. We found that:

- 31% of churches have furloughed some or all of their staff.
- 43% of organisations have furloughed some or all of their staff.
- The larger the church or organisation, the more likely they were to furlough staff.



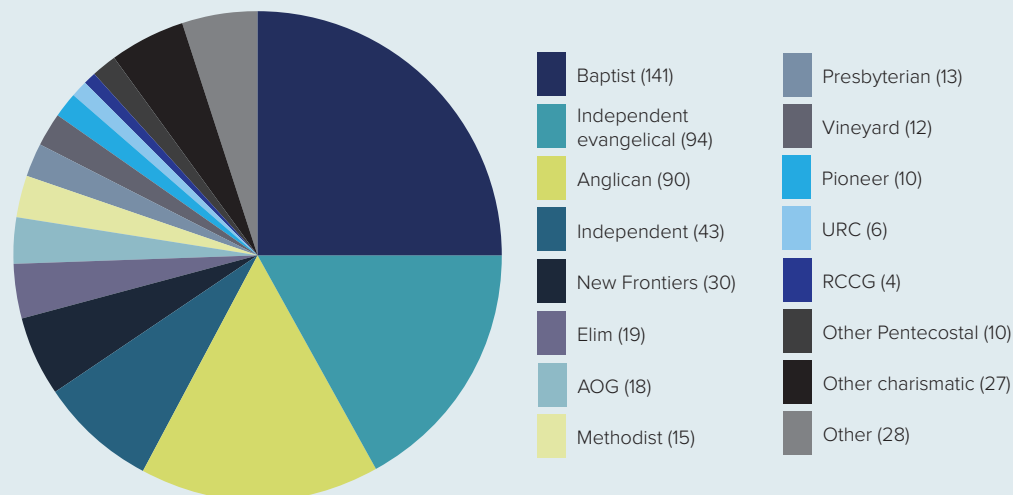
4. The church never closed

The church remains deeply concerned that this crisis will increase poverty, debt and mental health problems for those in their community.

We had respondents from across the UK and a range of denominations.



Denominational spread of church respondents



Key concerns of churches

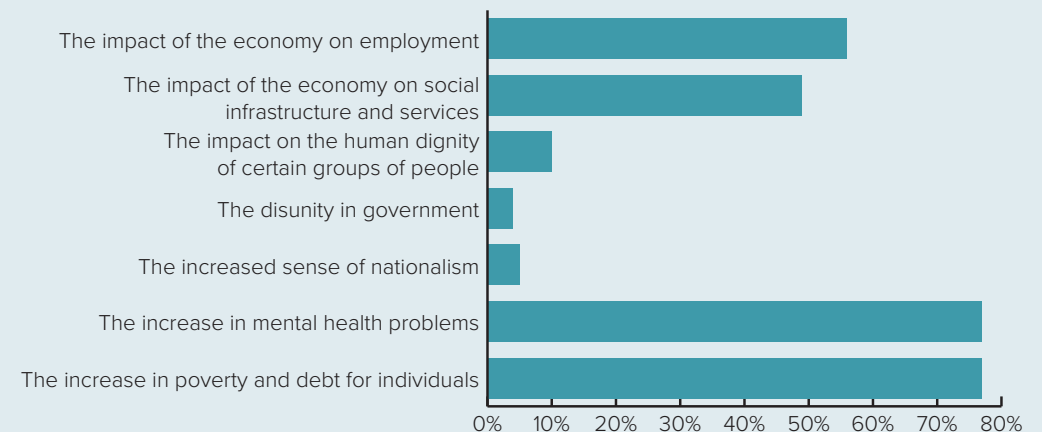
Throughout the UK, the church is serving the vulnerable through this epidemic and consequently the church is well placed to comment on which long-term effects of this pandemic on our society and communities are most concerning.

The survey highlighted a number of areas of concern:

- 77% about the increase in mental health problems.
- 77% about the increase in poverty and debt for individuals.
- 56% about the impact of the economy on employment.
- 49% about the impact of the economy on social infrastructure and services.

While few of these concerns may be a surprise, the results will help churches to prepare to address mental health problems and the long-term economic consequences and injustice of the pandemic. Overall, 97% of churches are concerned about the long-term economic consequences of this crisis. Churches have shown great agility and are already beginning to respond to these needs.

What long-term effects of this pandemic on society and communities concern you most? Please select up to 3.



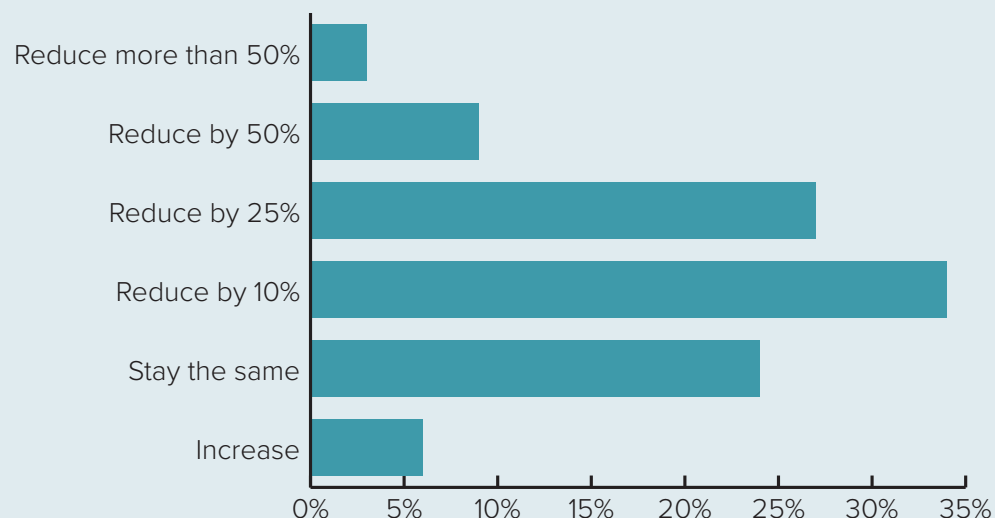
Church finances

Impact on overall income

Given the challenging economic climate, we wanted to find out about the financial circumstances of churches. The overall headline is encouraging: 61% of churches think their income over the next 6 months will drop by 10%, stay the same or increase. Evangelical Alliance member churches are notably more optimistic about the future.

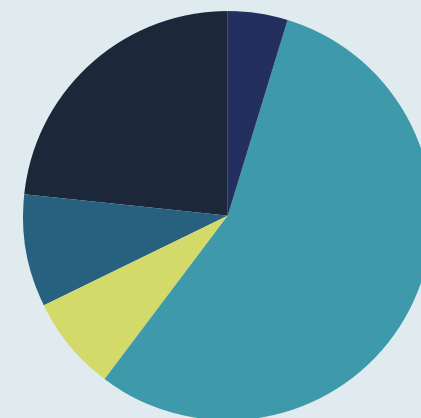
Furthermore, even with potentially challenging economic times ahead, 56% of churches think they have got enough reserves to continue through a period of reduced income, and 23% have reserves but do not anticipate needing to use them.

As a church what do you project will be the impact on your overall income in the next 6 months?



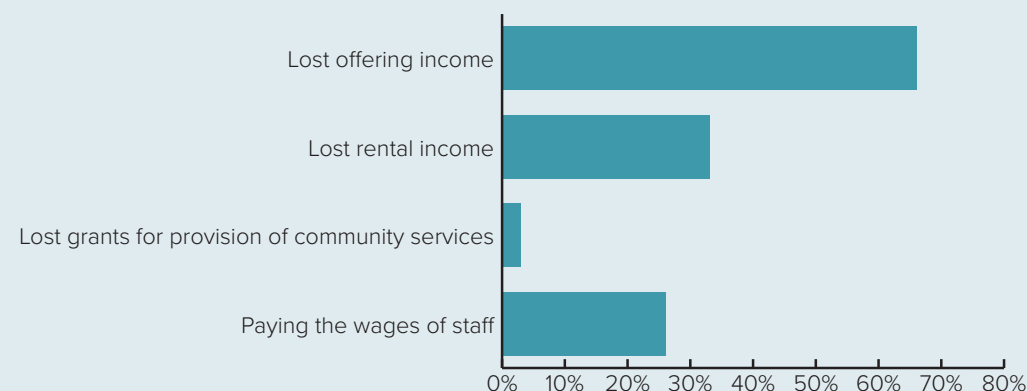
Has your church got reserves that will enable you to continue through a period of reduced income?

- We do not have reserves and but are not anticipating needing to cover reduced income (5%).
- We have reserves that will cover any projected loss of income over the next 6 months (56%).
- We do not have reserves and we anticipate reduced income (8%).
- We have reserves but they will not cover the projected loss of income over the next 6 months (9%).
- We have reserves but do not anticipate needing to use them (23%).



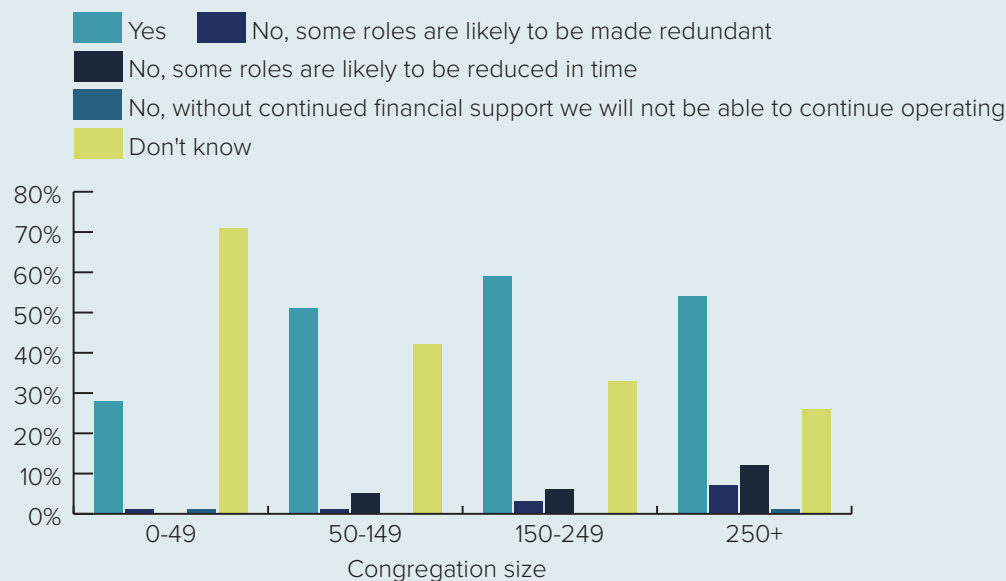
We were encouraged by the responses from churches on their finances and reserves, which demonstrate a mix of good stewardship and trust in God's provision. However, the church is still facing an uncertain financial future and it is important to note that 66% of churches are concerned about the lost offering income during the pandemic. This concern was stressed by respondents throughout the UK but was most pronounced in Northern Ireland.

What are the main points of financial concern for your church?



Earlier in the report we shared that only 31% of churches have used the government furlough scheme. We asked those who had used the scheme if all staff would be brought back into their roles. The response to this question varied depending on the size of the church. 71% of churches with congregations between 0-49 don't know if furloughed staff will be brought back into their roles, whilst over half of churches with congregations of more than 150 said furloughed staff would be brought back into their roles.

When the Job Retention Scheme closes will all the staff currently furloughed be brought back into their roles?



Sunday services, time commitments, wellbeing, busyness, and planning ahead

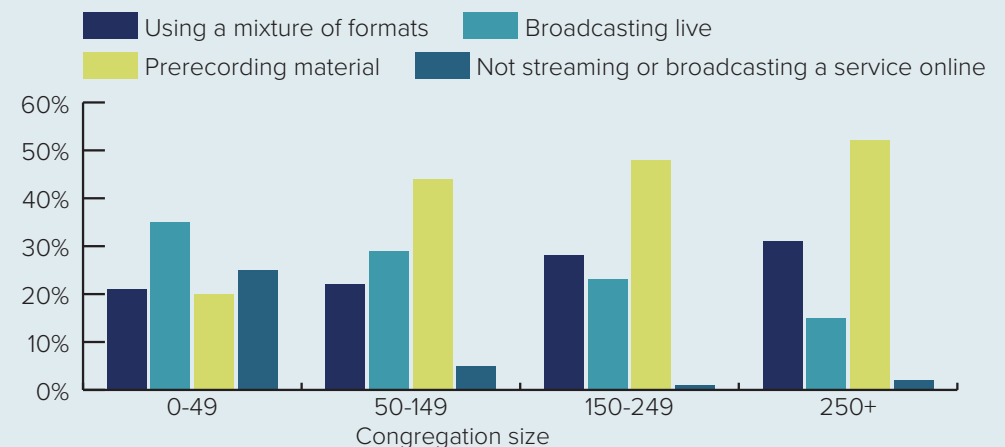
Churches across the UK have done a great job of bringing their Sunday services online, and 70% of churches say that people who would not normally attend church are engaging. A range of tools are being used, with 28% of churches broadcasting live on Sunday and 39% prerecording their material.

Interestingly, churches with larger congregations are far more likely to prerecord their Sunday service and those with smaller congregations seem to prefer to broadcast live.

“It is encouraging to hear that the majority of churches think they have got the financial reserves to cope with the reduction of income resulting from this crisis. However, there is significant financial uncertainty ahead that must be a concern especially amongst smaller congregations or churches in more economically challenged areas. At the same time, this is a moment where each and every church is being a gift to their local community by rising to meet a huge set of needs for practical help and gospel hope. These needs are set to grow and so our churches need the resources to sustain and expand this outreach to aid our nations recovery. Therefore, now is the time for us all to reaffirm our generosity and redouble our commitment to our local churches.”

– Stewart McCulloch, CEO, Stewardship

For your Sunday services are you...



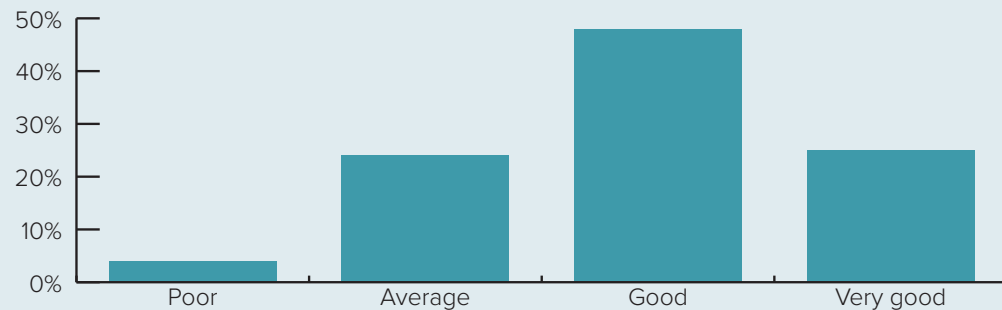
We've all had to adjust to the new ways of operating online. That fact is demonstrated in the activities that are taking up churches' time. 45% of church leaders reported that preparing and delivering material for Sunday services is currently taking up most of their time.

Please indicate which one of the following activities is taking up the most time for you at the moment?



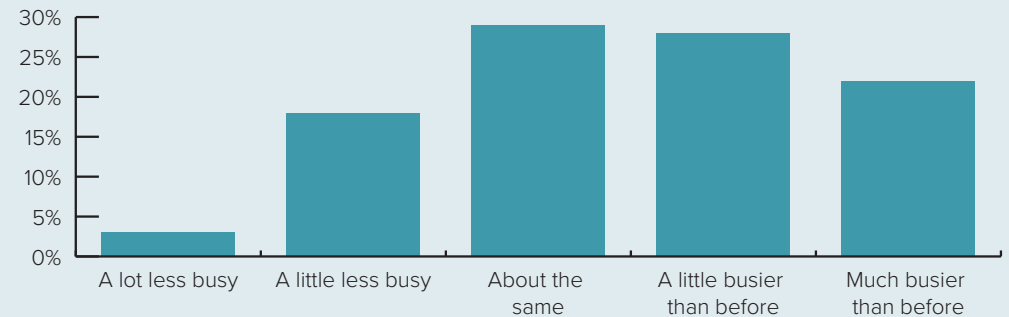
We have all experienced changes in how we go about our normal lives and that has an impact on how we cope with everyday life. We asked respondents to share how they would describe their current emotional wellbeing. Encouragingly, 73% of respondents described their emotional wellbeing as good or very good, and this trend was replicated across the different regions of the UK.

How would you describe your current emotional wellbeing?



Everyone's experience of the pandemic is unique, including levels of busyness. The diversity of experience is represented in churches experience of the COVID-19 crisis: 50% shared that they are busier than before the crisis and 50% felt their busyness levels were either the same or less busy than before the crisis.

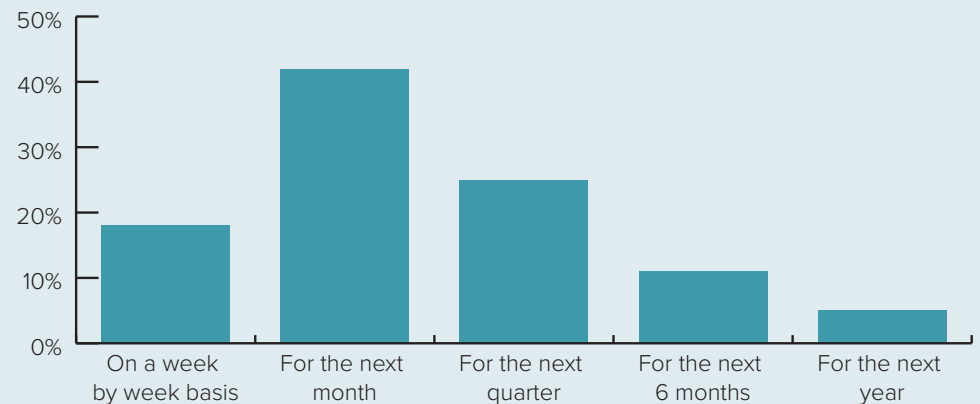
Compared to before the COVID-19 crisis, would you say you are currently:



Interestingly, the majority of Vineyard and Elim churches are finding themselves much busier than before.

During times of crisis it can be hard to think much further ahead than the immediate needs. We wanted to find out how far ahead the church in the UK is currently planning. 67% of churches shared that they are planning either for the next month or for the next quarter.

As a church how far ahead are you currently planning?

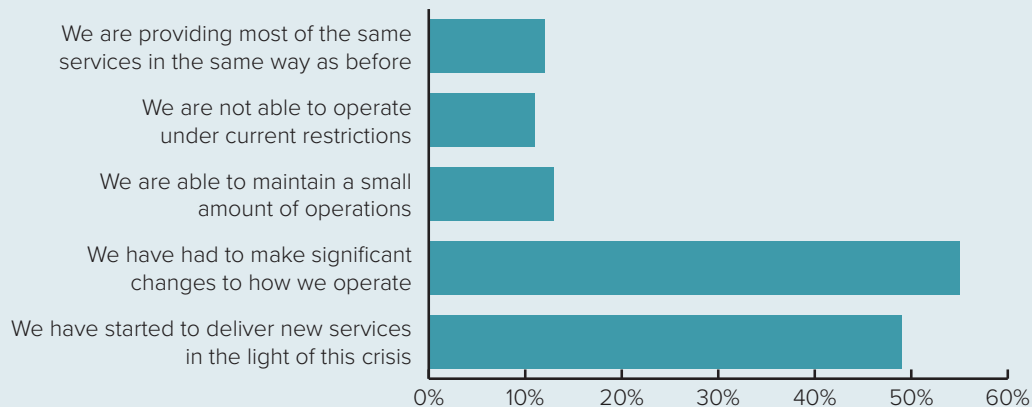


We have all seen the UK come together to clap for our key workers during the pandemic. We asked if churches had been providing specific support and resources for people involved in the frontline response. 40% of churches said they had specifically supported or created content for key workers. We think this is an important space for churches to further engage in, by supporting, encouraging and equipping those in positions of public leadership during this pandemic.

5. Changing organisations

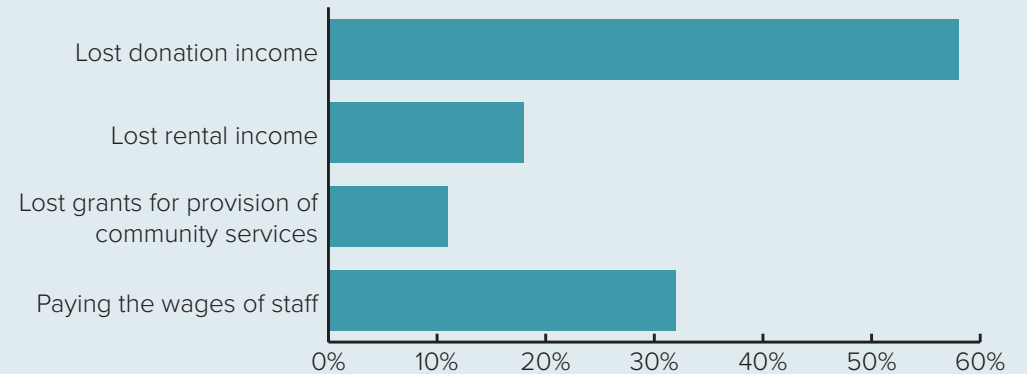
Only 12% of organisations are providing the same services in the same way as before, **84% have had to make changes to how they operate, have been unable to operate, or have started new services.** The largest organisations have had their delivery impacted the most with 10% not operating and 90% making significant changes.

How has COVID-19 affected the delivery of your services?



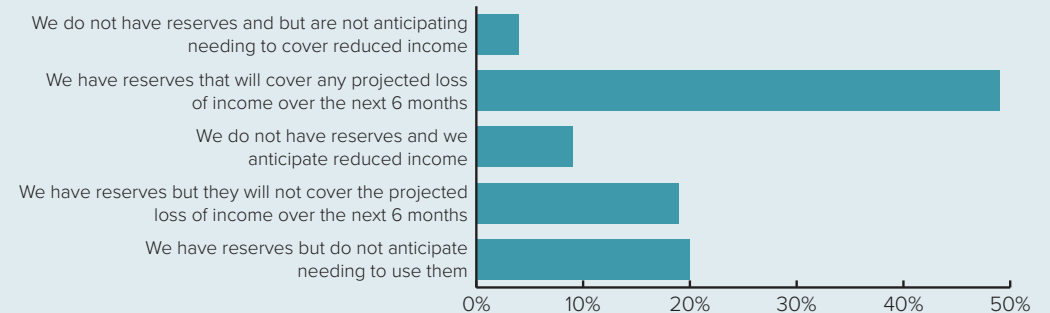
Given that the majority of organisations have had to change the way they are operating, we wanted to find out about their financial circumstances. 58% of Christian organisations are concerned about lost donation income in the coming months and 32% are concerned about being able to pay the wages of their staff.

What are the main points of financial concern for your organisation?



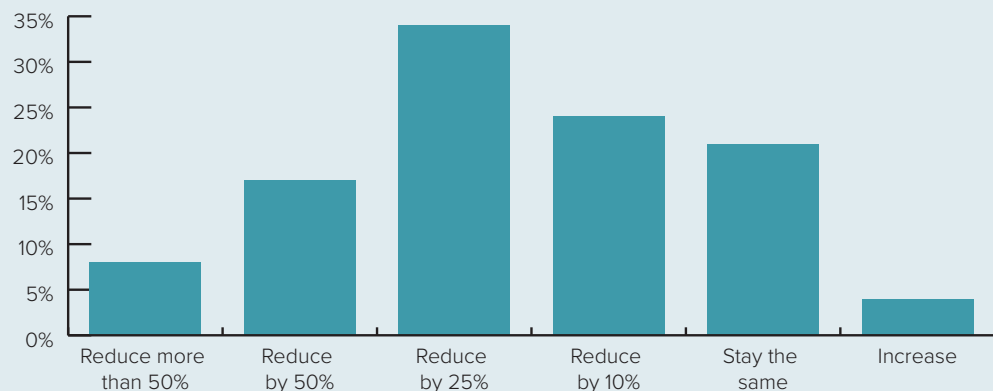
Despite their financial concerns, organisations reported a financial robustness in their responses with 49% saying they have reserves that will cover any projected loss of income over the next 6 months and 20% telling us they have reserves but do not anticipate needing to use them.

As an organisation have you got reserves that will enable you to continue through a period of reduced income?



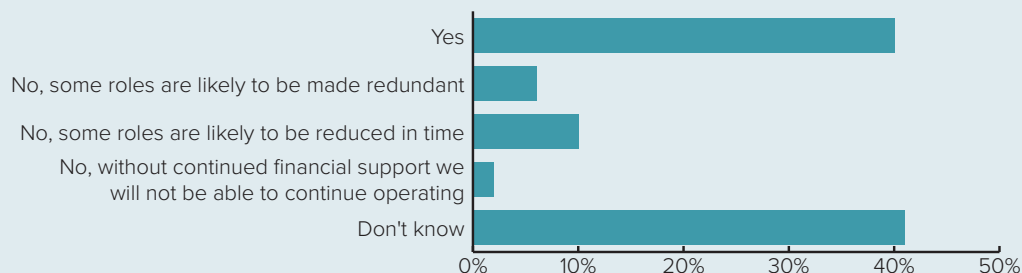
The concern about loss of donation income is reflected in how organisations are projecting the financial impact on their overall income in the next 6 months. 59% of Christian organisations project that their income will reduce by 25% or more. In particular, children and youth organisations are facing the biggest loss in income over the next 6 months.

As an organisation what do you project will be the impact on your overall income in the next 6 months?



Earlier in the report we noted that 43% of Christian organisations had utilised the Government's furlough scheme. We asked those organisations if all the staff currently furloughed would be brought back into their previous roles. There was a mixed response: 41% don't know the answer to the question at this time, but encouragingly 40% said yes, all staff would be brought back into their previous roles.

When the Job Retention Scheme closes will all the staff currently furloughed be brought back into their previous roles?



It is important to note that 57% of Christian organisations have seen demand for their services increase or stay at the same levels as before the lockdown, yet they are facing reduced income levels. How can we stand with these organisations to ensure they can continue to be salt and light across the UK?



“It has been a really challenging time for organisations, particularly those working with children and young people. Like many others, our school and community work had to stop overnight. We are grateful for the assistance of the furlough scheme and have had to re-imagine what our work will look like. We are thankful that many of our supporters have journeyed with us and we are working hard to prepare for the ‘new normal’ in the months ahead.”

– Judith Cairns, chief executive, Love for Life

Churches are changing

It is clear that churches and organisations have changed how they operate while maintaining their core mission and vision. While these changes have been forced by lockdown, the church has shown great agility and creativity.

For Christians, the heart of our mission is to help people come to know Jesus and this should be at the core of our activities in normal times and in crisis. People are interested in Jesus, they are checking out church, and the churches that prioritise helping people who are not Christians encounter Jesus see response. The survey results also show that proclaiming the good news of Jesus can and should go hand in hand with caring for the vulnerable.

More than 90% of Evangelical Alliance member churches surveyed are providing support for vulnerable people, and around three quarters of these are working collaboratively with either other churches, charities

or local authorities. Many churches have had to stop some activities, but it is great to hear that nearly half of churches have started new activities especially around emergency food provision. Looking ahead almost all churches see economic problems along with the mental health consequences of this crisis as the primary challenges which will need to be addressed.

At the Evangelical Alliance we are already responding to these findings in our activities and our representations to government. We will continue to hear from and help the church navigate this changing landscape, and we hope to revisit some of these questions soon.

We are encouraged by the passion to make Jesus known in churches across the UK and heartened by the depth of compassion that is worked out through practical concern for the most vulnerable. Through the Spirit, Jesus is continuing to build His church.

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