# Ten Ways the Church Will be Changed by COVID-19

#### 1. ****Doing church online is here to stay.****

#### ****2. Church closures will accelerate.**** Scott Thuma, PhD, published an article highlighting the disturbing trend of declining weekend service attendance that shows a 20 point decrease in median attendance every five years. He goes on to say, “Our present 2020 survey effort will likely show a median size around 60 attenders. This means that 50% of US congregations have 60 or less in weekly services, with perhaps three-quarters of America’s faith communities with 100 or fewer attendees.”

#### 3. ****Giving in most churches will drop and then MIGHT rise again in some.**** Unemployment estimates to reach 32% with over 47 million jobs lost, those who depend on paychecks for their survival are being cautious about where their money goes.

#### 4. ****Churches need a new staff structure.**** “We need people/staff who know how to take church online. We no longer live in a world where we can have 1-2 services on a Sunday, and people are engaged.

#### 5. ****Younger generations can finally contribute more engaged leadership.****

#### 6. ****Because churches and their programs are now more accessible online, we will all church hop…and that’s a good thing for the movement.**** We are going to see the blurring of denominational brands. People will attend a service at a UMC, a UCC, a non-denom, and an Episcopal church and gain benefit from them all.

#### 7. ****We are creating new liturgies, prayers, and songs that will carry us forward.****

#### 8. ****We will renew our investment in our local communities.****

#### 9. ****We will see a continued rise in spiritual directors and pastoral counselors who work outside of traditional congregational settings.**** We will see a higher demand for theologically and psychologically trained people to work with leaders in every sector of society. (Changing HIPPA rules re: tele services for social/psychology services)

#### 10. ****We will create new partnerships between Evangelical, Mainline, Catholic and New Thought organizations and leaders as we all seek new skills and greater connection to communities.**** Our work today is to courageously name and own What is NOT WORKING, to ask What is MISSING in the face of these institutional break downs, and to go about creating a world that addresses WHAT is NEEDED with deeper integrity to a wholistic world.

**WHAT IS NOT WORKING - WHAT IS MISSING - WHAT IS NEEDED**

April 2, 2020

By Rev. Cameron Trimble, CEO of Convergence

We are now three weeks into a global shutdown because of the coronavirus. It’s become clear that we are in this for the long haul. This virus is fundamentally reshaping our institutions, economies, personal lives, and faith communities. I’ve heard a number of my colleagues talk about “getting back to normal.” What’s become clear to me: there will be no going back. We are now co-creating the new normal.

COVID-19 has changed the Church. Here is how:

#### 1. ****Doing church online is here to stay.****

Over the last three weeks, church leaders across the nation have discovered the power of technology to connect with people through worship services, small group studies, pastoral care conversations, council meetings, and meditation groups. We are seeing more people watching our services and engaging our group calls than ever before. We are not going back from this. The gift of COVID-19 is that it has catapulted the Church into the technological era, awakening us to ways that we can offer good, wise theology into a world that needs it.

We will still gather together. Some churches will go back to gathering every Sunday; others might just gather once a month or once a quarter. The shift is that we will ask the question, “Is it necessary that we gather in person for this celebration (or to do this work), or could this be done online?” We will have to calculate the risk of gathering over the safety of our people, especially our older members.

In our gathering, we will, in most settings, continue to see those getting smaller. But with the capacity now to invite people to be present online, we have an entirely new way of measuring impact and reach.

#### ****2. Church closures will accelerate.****

During every major economic disruption in US history, we have seen an acceleration in church closures. Rev. David Schoen, Minister for Church Legacy and Closure for the UCC Church Building and Loan Fund, reflects:

“The history of the previous impact of the 2008 recession as well as the current state of many churches, leads me to believe that the impact of the pandemic will hasten the closure of many fragile and vulnerable congregations (and more), increasing the number of closures that are already on the rise in mainstream denominations.

I’m particularly concerned about the loss of rural congregations as well as smaller urban congregations.  The impact of the financial loss of giving, savings and rentals as well as the inability to gather for worship without the technological capacity to do on-line worship/giving will increase the likelihood that some congregations may stop worshipping and not be able to return to doing so in the months ahead.  The loss of congregations will be a significant impact for the members as well as the communities of these congregations.”

Co-Chair, Faith Communities Today and Director, Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Scott Thuma, PhD, published an article just before the pandemic noting that another recent study [The Challenging Climate for US Congregations](https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/challenging-climate-us-congregations/) from the 2015 FACT survey highlighted the disturbing trend of declining weekend service attendance that shows a 20 point decrease in median attendance every five years. He goes on to say, “Our present 2020 survey effort will likely show a median size around 60 attenders. This means that 50% of US congregations have 60 or less in weekly services, with perhaps three-quarters of America’s faith communities with 100 or fewer attendees.”

Given these realities, we need to prepare to see a number of our smaller congregations close within the next year and mobilize the resources to help them through that transition.

Of course, churches closing has a profound impact on denominational structures at all levels. We should also anticipate seeing the accelerated closure of regional denominational offices, precipitated mainly by the sudden drop in giving to denominations by local churches. Regional offices will go entirely online and continue their consolidation into providing resources and oversight to larger geographic areas. Regions that remain financially solvent will be called upon to provide leadership and resources outside of their traditional geographic boundaries as we develop a more networked/agile workforce and approach to doing denominational work.

#### 3. ****Giving in most churches will drop and then MIGHT rise again in some.****

With unemployment estimated to reach 32% with over 47 million jobs lost, those who depend on paychecks for their survival are being cautious about where their money goes. Churches are already seeing a decrease in regular giving, a trend which will likely continue while we are in the thick of the crisis. Churches that do not have the capacity to accept giving online through services like [Paypal](https://www.paypal.com/us/non-profit/fundraising/fundraising-online), [Tithe.ly](https://get.tithe.ly/), [Vanco](https://www.vancopayments.com/egiving), and [Givelify](https://www.givelify.com/churches/) are facing an even harder challenge. I strongly encourage your congregation to set up an account with one of these services immediately if you don’t have one already.

We also have to factor in the reality that many churches are transitioning from an older generation that invested their charitable giving singularly into their church to a younger generation who gives to the church but also to many other causes. The size of the financial gifts has been shrinking over time, long before COVID-19, placing a new demand on church leaders to broaden the giving base if they want to sustain the same level of income. Now with COVID-19, we see a new possibility of gaining new online donors that could, with cultivation, address that need.

Many churches in North America are sustained from interest gained from their endowments. Some churches are now facing a “drawdown” crisis where they have to pull from principle in order to meet current monthly cash needs. Some churches also have crucial parts of their endowments in restricted funds that limit the amount that can be pulled without special permission from their state attorney general’s office. These churches face painful decisions as they navigate through this time. For most, they have two major expenses – their building and their staff. After making the “easy cuts” to building costs, church leaders are facing the awful decision of cutting staff salaries to keep the church solvent. If your church is facing that painful choice, Convergence [can help you in your discernment](https://convergenceus.org/consulting-inquiry/). We also recommend that you take advantage of the CARES Act. If you want to attend a webinar on this Act, [Church Law and Tax will be hosting one on April 2](https://zoom.us/webinar/register/3215853164914/WN_2x7BAEIlS7KhNETwg2UDBQ). The National Council of Nonprofits is also holding [a webinar on both the FFCRA and the CARES Act](https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/civicrm/event/register?reset=1&id=184). We highly recommend you attend.

So, where is the good news for churches? As we navigate into this new world, we will find that more and more people are encountering your ministry online, giving you the opportunity to **build a “grassroots” donor pool**. Some churches will be able to take advantage of this opportunity, likely because they have already been broadcasting into the online space for some time. Quality of broadcast and clarity of message will matter. In these early days, we can all get away with piecemealing our programs together online. In about one month, our viewers will not be as understanding.

#### 4. ****Churches need a new staff structure.****

While COVID-19 has catapulted us into a new online world, congregations should have and would have been going there anyway. When talking to leaders in larger churches about their staffing models recently, I noted that most growing churches were hiring “digital ministers” whose job was to put their content online and build an audience. As Plymouth Congregational Church Senior Pastor Jim Keck said in an interview with me recently, “I don’t need more traditionally trained associate ministers. I need people who know how to take church online. We no longer live in a world where we can have 1-2 services on a Sunday, and people are engaged. To continue to grow, we have to figure out how to create 25 different experiences that help people connect to God.” That can feel daunting, if not impossible if we only had an imagination for how to do that through in-person gatherings. But thanks to COVID-19, we can see a bigger world now.

Church staff structures will become leaner in the coming years, with more part-time people hired to provide specialized services for the congregation. We will need theologian facilitators, congregational care specialists, online community organizers, and digital evangelists.

#### 5. ****Younger generations can finally contribute more engaged leadership.****

For years, council, board and session members have lamented that they could not recruit younger adults to serve on these influential committees. Younger leaders tried to explain that they were working full-time, raising children, balancing friendships and simply didn’t have time to drive to church during the week to spend hours in meetings. Then they would whisper under their breath, “especially when those meetings could be handled in 15 minutes online or through email.”

Because we’ve all now been forced into the online meeting space in order to get basic business done, younger leaders can now contribute in the way more congruent with their lifestyle. They no longer have to face the question of sacrificing time with their family in service to the church, and the church benefits from there distinct wisdom and perspective, especially needed at this time.

#### 6. ****Because churches and their programs are now more accessible online, we will all church hop…and that’s a good thing for the movement.****

“I attended three different worship experiences online last Sunday,” my friend said as she told me about her day. “I didn’t even have to get out of my PJs to do it.” When I asked her which ones, she named a UMC church in the mid-west, a non-denominational church in Atlanta and a UCC church in New York.

“What did you like about them?” I asked her.

“They were all so different and each one touched me in a different way,” she said.

In the age of boutique, personalized experiences, creating a world where we can all access theological spaces that touch us in different ways is very, very good for our movement. We are generating good theology that more people can now access as their schedules allow. This content is shaping a new wisdom stream that is needed in this moment of human transformation.

More than that, though, we are going to see the blurring of denominational brands. People will attend a service at a UMC church, a UCC church, a non-denominational church, and an Episcopal church and gain benefit from them all. The significance of this cannot be overstated. People are looking for the gifts each tradition can bring to helping them connect to God. We need to support that movement.

#### 7. ****We are creating new liturgies, prayers, and songs that will carry us forward.****

In times of disruption and innovation, our poets, artists, and musicians are the ones who help us see the new world emerging around us. We have needed their contributions for some time, but COVID-19 now gives a new opening for their work to travel far and wide. Right now, much of their work is being distributed through Facebook groups and emails. In time, we will [gather them into a place we can all reference](https://www.convergencemp.com/) and see grow.

I am encouraged that over the next couple of weeks, congregational leaders will find ways to share communion online, wave palms (or houseplants) as we remember the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey and celebrate Easter through our computer screens. We have already found ways to pray together in call and response, sing together, dance together and study together in this new online age. We may find ourselves developing liturgies that bless our screens, our bandwidth, and our globally networked infrastructure that holds us together right now. All of this is good because it helps us shape a new imagination for a more just and generous world that we can create together. We need that imagination now more than ever.

#### 8. ****We will renew our investment in our local communities.****

Social distancing and “stay at home” orders have grounded us, quite literally, in our neighborhoods and communities. With time on our hands and, for most, still the ability to go outside for exercise, we are remembering the value of our parks, walking paths, hiking trails, public benches, lakes, rivers, and backyards. Many of us, however, live in areas that have neglected these investments, and now we are suffering for it.

We can anticipate a renewed interest in “quality of life” investments by people in every community across the world. We now recognize that we need these public spaces for our own health and wellbeing. We cannot be healthy people and live in unhealthy communities.

Congregations can lead the way in this call for community renewal. We are uniquely positioned to form collaborative partnerships with the government, businesses, and non-profits in our areas to raise the standard of life for people living around us.

#### 9. ****We will see a continued rise in spiritual directors and pastoral counselors who work outside of traditional congregational settings.****

With the recent [changes in HIPAA restrictions](https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/february-2020-hipaa-and-novel-coronavirus.pdf) that now allow counseling professionals to use video conferencing tools for work with patients, we will see a higher demand for theologically and psychologically trained people to work with leaders in every sector of society. Corporations are increasingly seeing the value of supporting the mental health of their employees. In more exciting news, they are also recognizing that a person’s mental health is often tied to their spiritual health, creating an opening for “tele-theology” to become more mainstream.

#### 10. ****We will create new partnerships between Evangelical, Mainline, Catholic and New Thought organizations and leaders as we all seek new skills and greater connection to communities.****

When we all realized that we needed to move our services online, we decided to [talk to people who already worked in that space](https://faithlead.org/p/howtodochurchonline) and had the experience and expertise we needed. One was [Dave Adamson who works with North Point Ministries](https://www.daveadamson.tv/), a large, multi-campus non-denominational ministry. Another was [Jeremey Tackett who works with the Episcopal Church](http://www.jeremytackett.com/) in digital media. Another was [Natalie Renee Perkins](https://twitter.com/divadoesdivinit?lang=en), the Digital Minister at Middle Collegiate Church. By sharing learnings and best practices, we also created new connections and possibilities for collaboration. Dave gave is all his cell number (which I’m sure he regrets). [Kevin Garcia](https://www.thekevingarcia.com/), another contributor, talked us through some new technologies.

Each of these connections would not have happened without the need to learn from one another. The typical silos that have separated us to this point became irrelevant. We have a distinctive sense that we are “all in this together.” Normally, these connections might be temporary, in service to a tactical need. But with the deep shifts we are now seeing, our need for connection and sharing of learnings may be sustained long enough for us to build meaningful relationships across the silos. We each have something the others need.

The breakdown of these silos and the building of trusted relationships across these networks open new possibilities for organizing ministry in the future. We have the option today to architect a new vision for Christian ministry that might move us beyond our binaries of “us” and “them.”

This changes everything.

We are waking in a new world. You are a leader shaping the kind of future we will create together. It’s important that we are thoughtful about our next steps as a movement. We have the opportunity to address many of the challenges and divisions that have plagued our communities and the world to this point. A better world is not guaranteed. Our work today is to courageously name and own what is NOT working, to ask what is missing in the face of these institutional breakdowns, and to go about creating a world that addresses what is needed with deeper integrity to a wholistic world.

We are in this together,