

A Streamlined Response to Ministry

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One of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on congregations has been a streamlined response to ministry practices. When the pandemic hit, life changed, and ministry changed. While there has been variation across our national denomination; almost every region, congregation and individual experienced some time in shut down, which meant no in-person worship, remote work, Zoom meetings, social distancing, and isolation. These realities in turn contributed to a more streamlined response to life, including the life of the church. The ABCUSA Covid-19 Task Force, charged with helping to interpret the impact of the pandemic on congregations, saw this reflected in a variety of responses from our recent survey.

Among the things participants reported benefitting from in a more streamlined approach were:

- More efficient meetings (often conducted over Zoom or another online forum)
- Streamlining of church communications (converting paper mediums to online E mediums; doing away with worship bulletins)
- Streamlining church governance to reflect congregation size and needs
- Letting go of building centric ministry (both out of necessity and sometimes by choice)
- Streamlining worship to meet online and hybrid formats (finding alternate ways to share communion, receive the offering, and adjusting the order of worship)
- Focusing more on relational ministries and less on programing (allowing the “sunsetting” of some less-effective programs)
- Pastoral leaders able to give more attention to self-care and finding less stress in a more streamlined set of ministry priorities and needs

Here, in their own words, are some of the comments that were shared:

- “We are more attuned to people’s needs.”
- “One significant change . . . has been in church communications, as we’ve moved towards a more streamlined e-newsletter”.
- “Instead of doing a lot of programs, we are focusing more on individuals and their relationships to one another and to God.”
- “We have done away with many of the programs that weren’t very successful, which allows us to focus more on programs that help people . . . it also allows us to go outside the four walls of the church.”
- (We have) more efficient meetings. . . . having most committee meetings via Zoom . . . has increased availability and participation, particularly for younger members.”
- “we have let go of the ‘performance’ in worship.”
- “We are less concerned about doing programs just to do programs.”
- “As a pastor, Covid helped me to slow down . . . my body and mind were tired, but did not know how to change. Covid forced me to spend time on myself.”
- “As a leader, I am less willing to pack my calendar with activities. . . . When we do something as a church, I am invested if it is congruent with our mission. If it isn’t, I really have no interest in doing it.”

One of the most common reactions to change, whether that change is welcomed or not, is the feeling of an individual or group that there are not enough resources to meet the change. This includes financial, human, skill and knowledge resources. In the case of the pandemic, an abrupt discontinuous change for us all, we generally discovered, over time, that we can adapt and find resources in creativity, energy and imagination to meet many of the changes. We also realized, as is evident by the responses received, that sometimes we've spent too many of our resources (time, energy, finances, etc.) doing things that were not all that effective or necessary.

Granted, not all streamlining experienced because of the pandemic has been welcome or desired. Yet, as we reflect on these responses and common themes that seem to speak to a more focused, simple yet intentional approach to ministry, one cannot wonder if in some way this opportunity to examine practices and priorities; and realign resources hasn't been something of a gift. The question, moving forward, is will congregations, and their leaders, continue with such reflection and purpose in a "less is more" framework. Or will we fall back into old patterns absent the evaluation of their impact?

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.