

# changing church

AUTUMN 2021 SURVEY: RESEARCH REPORT



# Introduction

**Our third survey of the UK church during the Covid-19 pandemic suggests that the pandemic is impacting people's habits in relation to church attendance, yet despite these fluctuations churches continue to share the good news of Jesus and serve their local communities.**

Most churches are back to in-person services (95%) and a majority of churches are continuing to offer online services too (61%). Average in-person attendance at church services has dropped by 32% but this is largely due to people attending less regularly and is potentially offset by a rise in people attending online. Almost 60% of church leaders have perceived a decrease in volunteering and 24% of churches who offered youth ministry before the Covid-19 pandemic are not currently offering youth ministry. There seems to be a downward trend in relation to congregational giving, despite a noticeable disconnect between church leaders' and church members' responses about giving.

The survey was open between 14 and 24 October and people self-selected to take part in the survey. Therefore, the results cannot be assumed to be representative of the UK church. However, the large number of respondents, the even spread of responses from throughout the UK and across different denominations, and the quality and variety of answers to the open questions, allow us to trust that this data is a

valuable source of information on the state of the UK evangelical church at this time.

We received:

- 552 valid responses from church leaders; and
- 1,676 valid responses from church members.

About 58% of the church leaders represent churches who are members of the Evangelical Alliance and 39% of the individual respondents were members of the Evangelical Alliance. 86% of church members and 94% of church leaders described themselves as an evangelical Christian.

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

This survey paints one version of the picture of what is happening across the UK church. It's not definitive but our hope is that something of what you read here resonates with your own experience and you gain insight to be able to plan for the future. The church is continuing to navigate a changing and challenging landscape, but it is still committed to making Jesus known.

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,

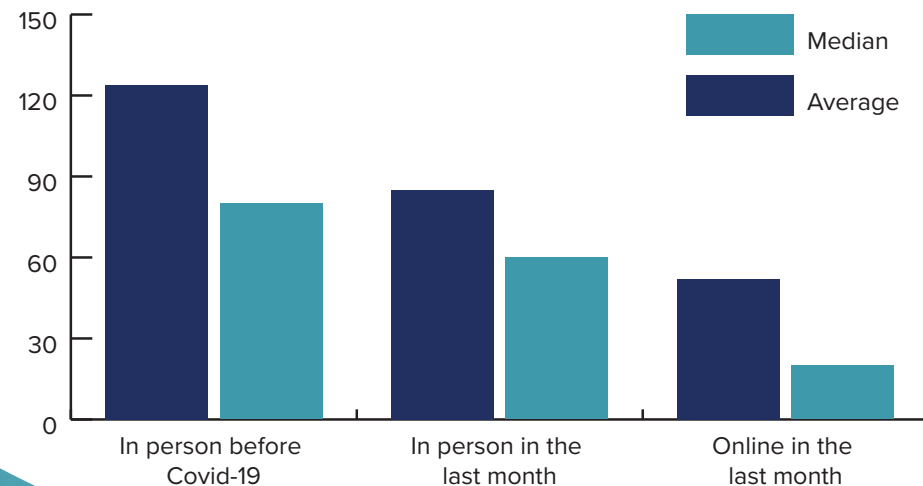
**Peter Lynas**, UK Director

## 1. Changing habits in church attendance

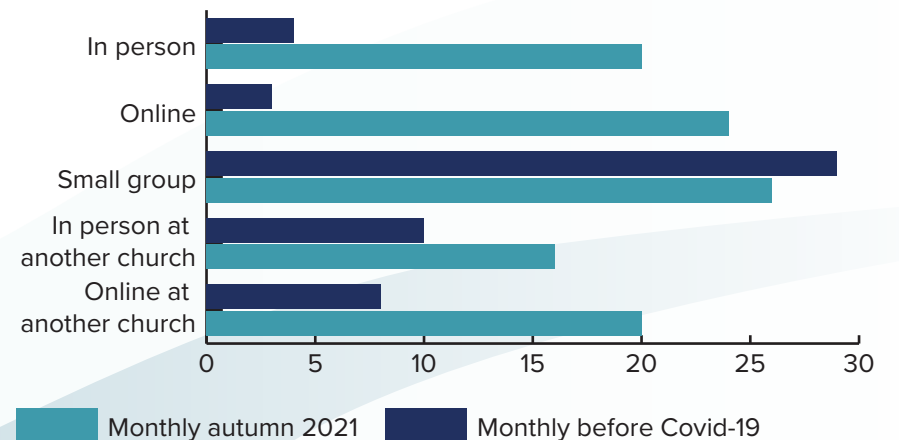
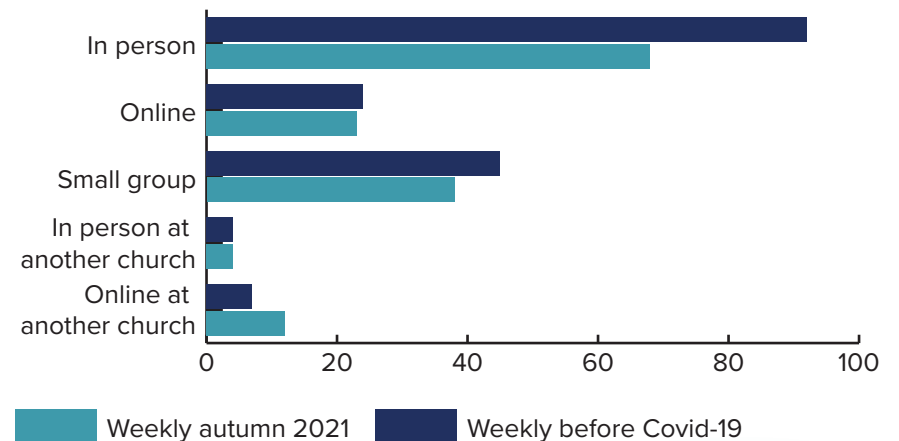
The majority of churches have returned to weekly in-person services. 95% of church leaders said they are back meeting together in person on a weekly basis; this is up from 60% in autumn 2020. Alongside this, 61% of leaders said they're meeting in some form of online service at least monthly; this is down from 84% in autumn 2020.

According to church leaders, in-person attendance has dropped. We asked church leaders to estimate the typical number of people at a church service in person before Covid and over the last month. In-person attendance has dropped from an average of 124 attendees before Covid to 85 in autumn 2021. The median in-person attendance before Covid was 80 attendees according to our sample of church leaders, dropping to a median of 60 in autumn 2021. All of which suggests that in-person attendance has dropped from pre-Covid levels.

### The typical number of people attending a church service



The church members surveyed help us see that people have changed their habits in church attendance. 92% of individual respondents reported attending church services in person on a weekly basis before Covid-19. In contrast, 68% reported attending church services in person on a weekly basis in the last month. Fortnightly and monthly in-person church attendance has increased by 16%, with 24% of our church member sample saying they attended an in-person church service at least once in the last month. Therefore, according to our sample of church members, a large proportion have reduced the regularity of their in-person church attendance from weekly to once or twice a month.



The change in regularity of attendance is further supported by the online attendance figures. Here we see that weekly online church attendance has not significantly changed from before Covid-19. Out of church members, 24% reported attending an online service on a weekly basis before Covid-19 and 23% reported attending an online service on a weekly basis in the last month. When you look at the fortnightly and monthly attendance numbers, we see a similar change to the in-person data, in that there is a 19% increase in those attending an online service at least once a month compared to pre Covid-19 (from 3% to 24%).

What does all of this tell us? The combination of church leaders reporting a reduction in attendance numbers and church members saying they're attending either in-person or online services less frequently, suggests a large proportion of church members have reduced the regularity of their church attendance. As we will see, this has implications, particularly in relation to volunteering and giving.

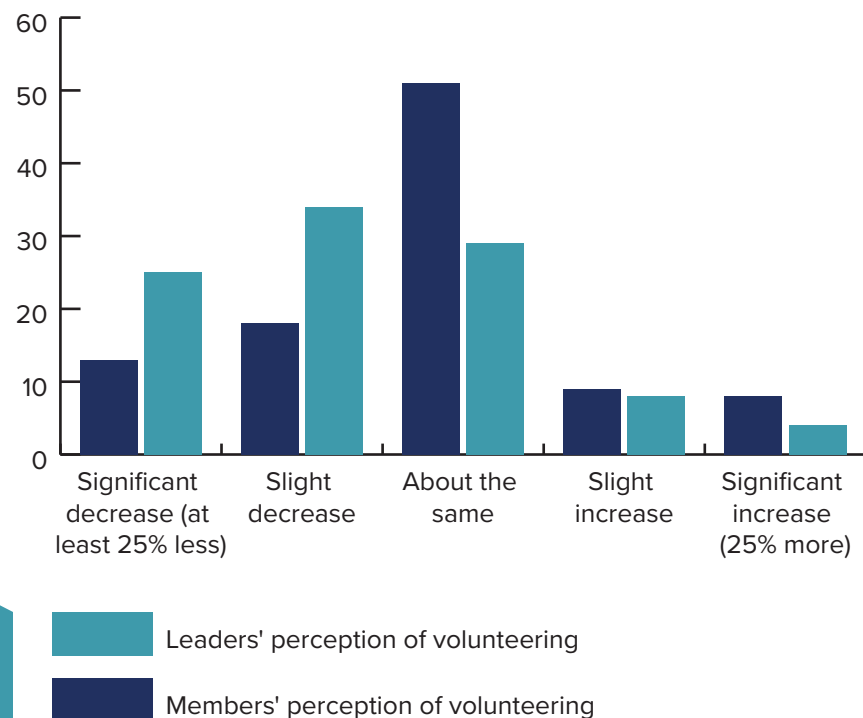
Finally, 13% of church members said they're no longer attending the church that they attended before the pandemic. 9% are attending a different church in person, 2% are attending a different church online and 3% are not attending any church at all.



## 2. A quarter of church leaders perceive a significant decrease in volunteers

We asked church leaders an open response question about their most pressing needs. 35% of church leaders sampled said they needed more volunteers to serve and contribute to the ministry of the church.

Almost two-thirds (59%) of church leaders perceived a decrease in volunteering at their church in comparison to before the Covid-19 pandemic, with 25% describing a significant decrease (at least 25% fewer volunteers). Church members paint a similar, although less dramatic picture: 31% have decreased their levels of volunteering at church, 51% have stayed the same and 17% have increased their volunteering at church.



Whilst we cannot be certain, it's likely that there is a correlation between completing this survey and volunteering for church activities, leading to the slightly more positive picture on volunteering from the church members surveyed.

We asked all respondents their reasons for their changes in their volunteering at church. Here are some of the main explanations from church leaders who reported a decrease:

- volunteers seeing Covid-19 as an opportunity to “retire”;
- former volunteers enjoying having fewer church commitments;
- volunteers having lost the habit of church attendance, and other habits have replaced it; and
- volunteers have reassessed priorities and are no longer convinced they should continue prioritising church.

We found that church members who reported decreasing their volunteering offered similar reasons.

One area of church ministry that is being impacted by the reduction of volunteers is youth and children's ministry.

### 3. In-person youth and children's ministry less likely to be up and running in churches

24% of churches who offered youth ministry before the Covid-19 pandemic, are not currently offering youth ministry.

A third of churches are offering youth ministry in person at least monthly and 77% of churches are offering children's ministry in person at least once a month. 17% of churches who offered children's ministry before the Covid-19 pandemic, are not currently offering children's ministry.

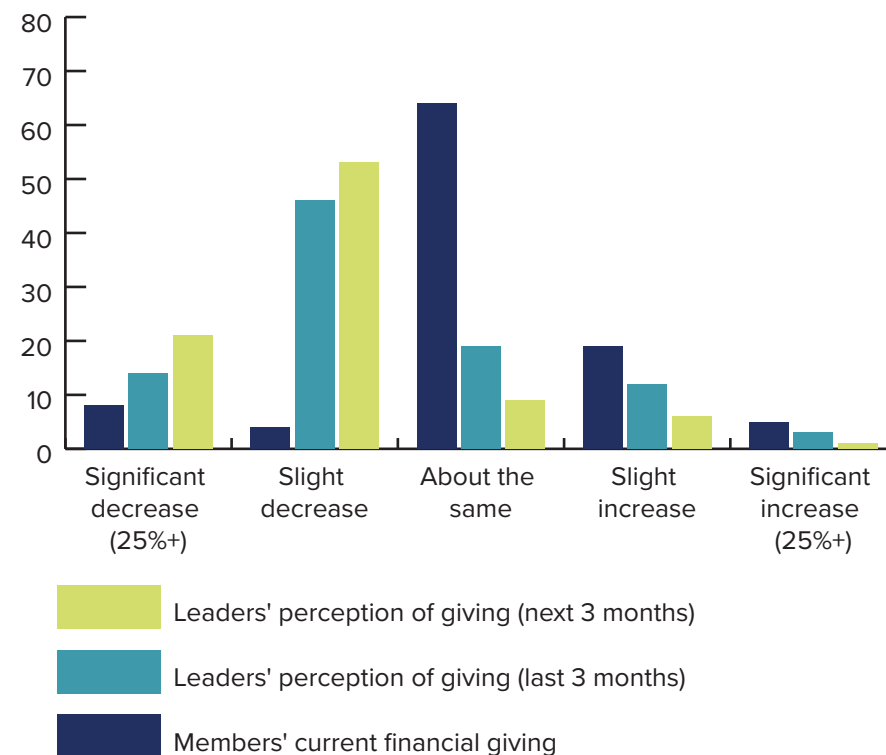
### 4. 60% of church leaders report a decrease in congregational giving

Church leaders were asked to describe how their congregational giving over the last three months has differed compared to before Covid-19.

15% reported an increase, 19% said it had stayed the same and 60% described a decrease in congregational giving. This description from church leaders didn't match the responses from the church members sampled. The majority (64%) said their giving had stayed the same and 24% reported an increase in their financial donations to their church.

Like attendance figures, this mismatch can be explained by this study potentially showing some bias towards committed church members, who are more likely to complete this survey and more likely to continue giving.

The majority of church leaders in our sample (74%) anticipate a decrease in congregational giving in the next three months, whereas in autumn 2020 only 32% of church leaders were anticipating a decrease.



**“The committed core of those who give to the church regularly have largely maintained or increased their giving through the pandemic, with some even moving their strong commitment to cash giving online. However, cash collections and event fundraising, by necessity, stopped for a season, so like other areas of ministry these need to be actively restarted to become a habit again. Falls in attendance have brought a financial toll as well, but the solution here is not financial but evangelistic.”**  
– Stewart McCulloch, CEO of Stewardship



## 5. Majority of respondents described their emotional wellbeing as very good or good

Despite the challenging circumstances we continue to face, 68% of church leaders and 69% of church members surveyed felt their emotional wellbeing was either good or very good. We were surprised with this finding as it doesn't match up with stories we are hearing from church leaders and individuals we know. Although 9% of church leaders are reporting poor or very poor emotional wellbeing which is a significant number. We were encouraged that over two thirds of our respondents' report being in a good place with their emotional wellbeing.

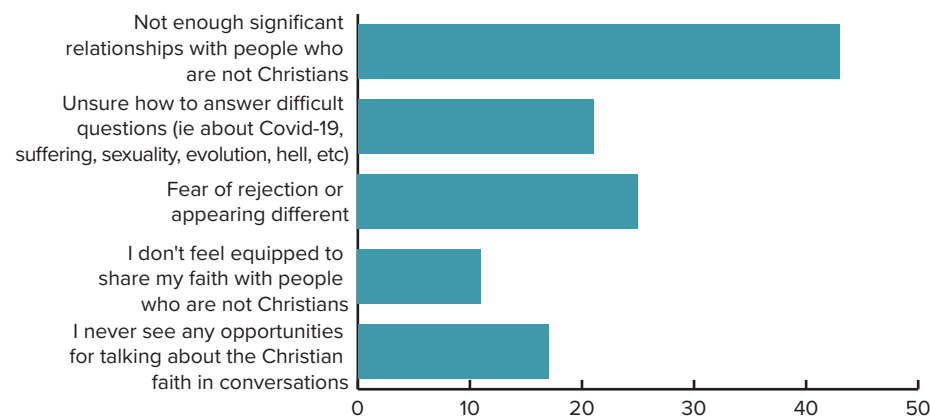
Emotional wellbeing	All leaders		All members	
	Autumn 2020	Autumn 2021	Autumn 2020	Autumn 2021
Very good	16%	22%	25%	29%
Good	46%	46%	42%	40%
Average	31%	24%	24%	23%
Poor	7%	8%	8%	6%
Very poor	0%	1%	1%	0%



## 6. Lack of significant relationships with people who are not Christians is the main barrier to people sharing their faith

Church members were asked to choose what they felt were the main barriers to sharing their faith from a set of possible options. The most common answers are broadly unchanged from autumn 2020, with the lack of significant relationships with people who are not Christians being the most common barrier. The next two most common barriers were fear of rejection or appearing different (25%) and people being unsure how to answer difficult questions (21%).

### Main barriers to sharing faith



Church leaders were also asked about their needs for training and online resources at this time. It is interesting to note that 55% said that training and online resources around evangelism would be helpful or very helpful. The continued theme of a lack of significant relationships as a main barrier to evangelism suggests that encouraging people to develop friendships with those who are not Christians would be a good place to start.

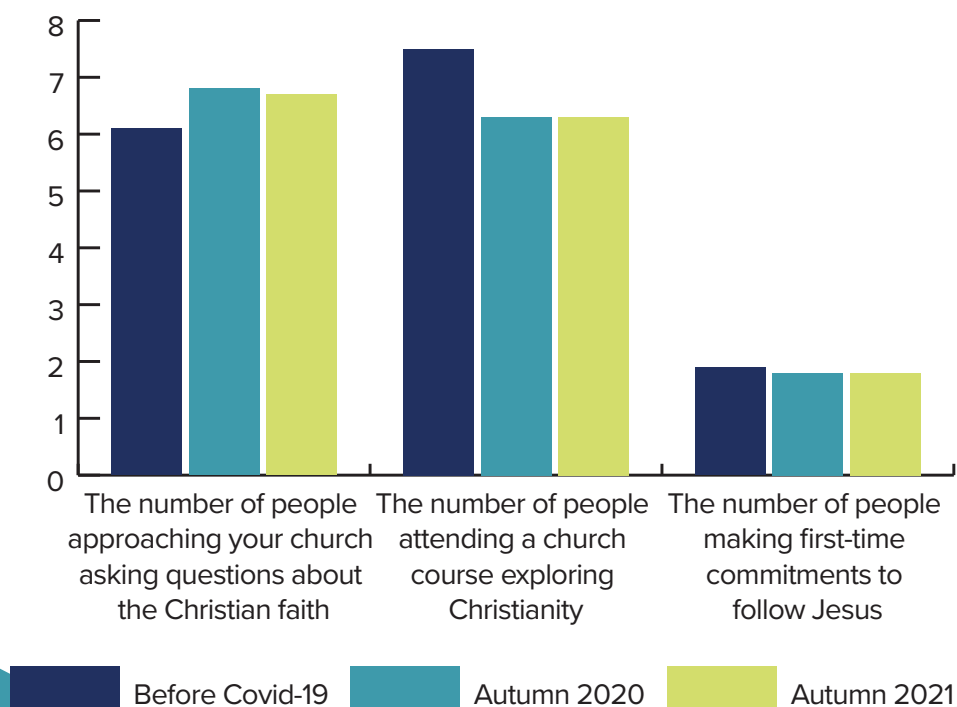
**“We know from other pieces of research that there is an openness to the gospel at this time and the most common pathway to faith is through a Christian friend. This research highlights the need for every church to prioritise inspiring every member to be a great friend and equipping them to be able to share their faith.” – Phil Knox, Head of mission to young adults, Evangelical Alliance**



## 7. On average, individuals had spoken to six people who are not Christians about their faith in the last three months

Despite church members saying they lack enough significant relationships to have conversations about faith, respondents reported that they are still sharing their faith. On average, church leaders are seeing 6.3 people attend a course exploring Christianity and 1.8 people make first-time commitments to follow Jesus.

### Church leader estimations on people exploring faith in a typical 3-month period



There is significant regional variation around evangelism. Scotland and Wales are more likely to be seeing people become Christians. Also, Wales has changed from being one of the lowest to one of the highest regions when it comes to people attending a course exploring Christianity. Also, younger church leaders are seeing more people come to faith than they did before the Covid-19 pandemic, increasing from an average of 1.4 people before the pandemic to 2.6 people in the last three months.

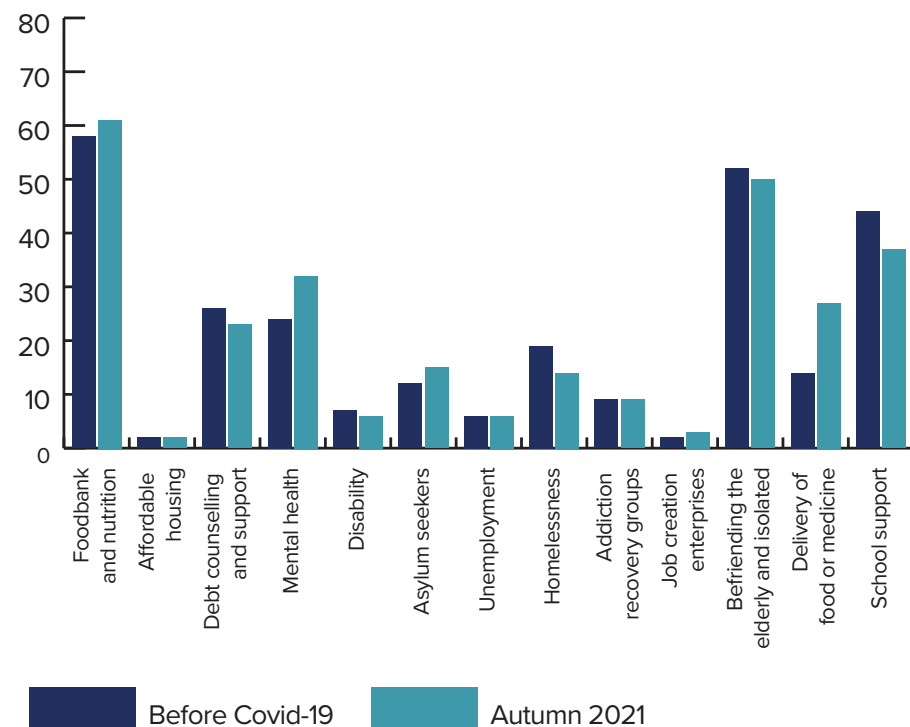
We asked individual respondents if they had invited someone who is not a Christian to a church-related activity or meeting in the last three months and found that 58% of individual respondents had not invited anyone. This response is almost exactly the same as we got in autumn 2020 when we asked this question of individual respondents.



## 8. Churches continue to serve their communities across a range of social activities

We asked church leaders to indicate what community engagement activities they've been doing over the past three months. Church leaders reported a whole range of activities: 61% are involved in foodbank and nutrition work, 50% are befriending the elderly and isolated, 37% are supporting their local schools and 32% are involved in mental health work.

**Percentage of churches engaged in social activities, by type of activity**



## Conclusion

This report has provided a picture of what is happening across the UK church. One of the major changes this survey has revealed is a change in people's habits of attending church, with a reduction in weekly in-person attendance and an increase in fortnightly or monthly in-person and online attendance. This change in attendance habits seems to be having an impact on volunteering numbers and congregational giving, as church leaders are also perceiving a reduction in congregational giving.

One of the main questions for all of us to reflect on from this survey is the relationship we all have between serving in our church community and being engaged with people in and around the places we live. As we've seen, the pandemic has provided an opportunity for many people to re-assess their commitments. At the same time, people report lacking significant relationships to share their faith. We all need to reflect on the balance between playing our part to serve and contribute to the ministry of the church while not getting so busy with church activities that we are not investing in relationships with people who are not Christians.

The church continues to face a changing, and at times challenging, landscape. Yet this is also an opportunity to reflect and reset, to ask strategic conversations and hold formative conversations as we learn some lessons from lockdown. As we do this, let's pray that we all remain committed to making Jesus known through our words and actions.

The Evangelical Alliance has created a resource to help leaders reflect on lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic. You can find out more by going to: <https://www.eauk.org/what-we-do/initiatives/changing-church/changing-church-re-entry/reflect-and-reset>

