

# New Normal Survey Review Part 2: Pastoral Care in the New Normal

A survey by the Synod, September 2020

## Survey Overview

On 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2020, the Synod launched a survey for both church members and pastors, to find out more about the challenges and issues that have risen during this difficult period of pandemic – for the churches, so as to understand and better administer to the concerns of church members; for the pastors, to discuss and reflect on the current efforts and how to steward the church in this “New Normal” way of life.

Up till 26<sup>th</sup> July 2020 when the first round of results was collated, we received a total of 940 responses from church members of 28 different member churches (for the Church Members Survey), and 54 responses for the Pastors Survey.

In the second part of the Survey Results Review, we focus on pastors and their challenges to reach out to their congregation at this time when physical gatherings are still discouraged, as well as their concerns on going digital.

*\*Do note that these survey results do not fully represent the sentiments of all Presbyterian church members, and should only be taken as a reference and not absolute conclusion nor stand of any church or the Presbyterian church in Singapore in general.*

## The Demographics

Out of the 54 responses we received, 72.2% were male and 27.8% female, and there were almost an equal number from both the Chinese and English Presbytery respectively.

## Going Digital

### Importance of going digital and its challenges

With preventive measures in place that discourage gatherings and meetings in person, church ministers find themselves turning to online and digital means to connect with the congregation. From a heavier focus on communicating via phone calls, messenger and video-conferencing apps to producing online video worship services, it was a sharp learning curve for many churches that never needed to use such methods before.

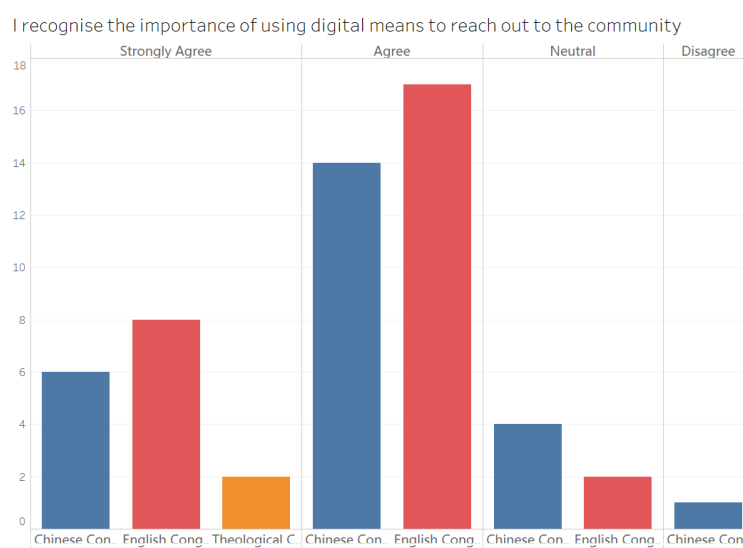


Figure 1: I recognise the importance of using digital means to reach out to the community

Most pastors agree that it is important to use digital means to reach out to the community, and one of the biggest learnings for the church during this period of time is the usage of digital means and technology.

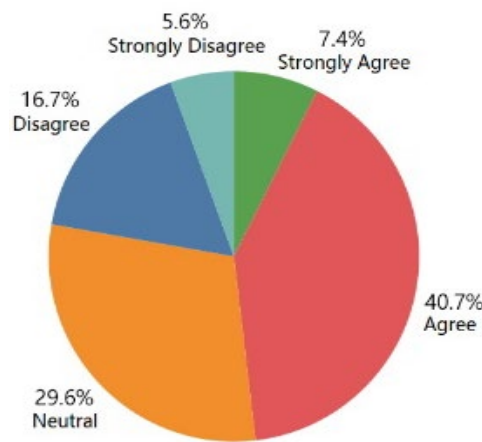


Figure 2: You feel stressed by the production of online sermons

But this does not come easy, as nearly half of them agreed that they feel stressed by the production of online sermons, due to lack of time and manpower (especially people who are skilled in this area).

When asked in which aspect do they need more support in, nearly 60% chose Production of online AV material (including online sermons, recordings, etc.), followed closely by Digital/technological help for the elderly (57.4%), and having spiritual resources that they can share with their members (50%).

I believe it will be more effective if I receive more support in:

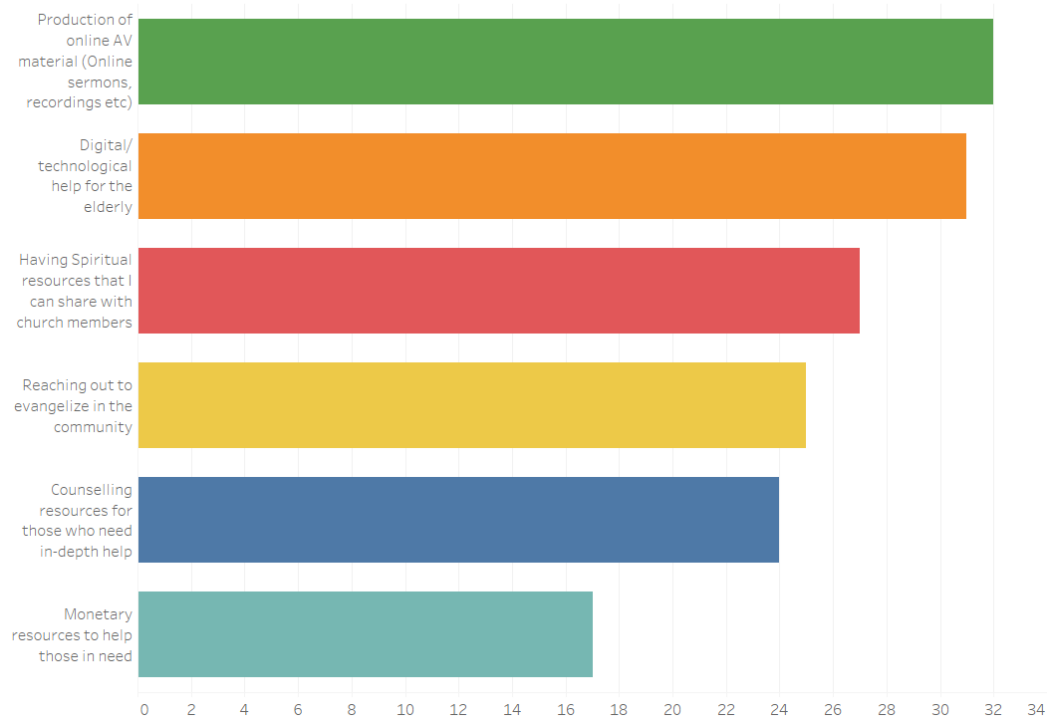


Figure 3: I believe it will be more effective if I receive support in these areas

## Challenges of Online Church: Attendance and Participation

### Online Worship Service

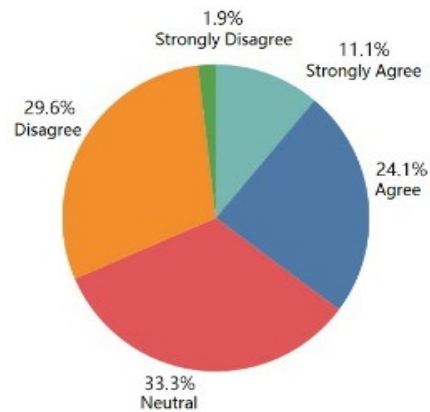


Figure 4: The attendance for online worship service (or viewership) are better than physical service

It was encouraging to hear that at least one-third of pastors strongly agreed or agree that their congregations' attendance for online worship service (or viewership) were positive, and seemingly even better than physical service.

While it is unsure if most of the viewership were from their church members, but the availability of sermons online for the public to access has definitely opened up more options for non-members to also 'attend' these services, from wherever they are, at their own convenience. In the responses collated from a related question in the Church Members Survey asking if members are participating in their own church and/or other churches' online services, about one-fifth of the 940 responses said that they participate in not just their own church's, but also in other churches' online service(s).

Another one-third of the pastors responded 'neutral' in terms of attendance, while the remaining one-third felt that attendance was not as good as compared to their physical services before.

In our [Church Member Survey](#), we also found out a few reasons that deter them from participating in online service, including distractions at home, quality and duration of the streaming and sermon, etc.

### Online Cell Group Meetings

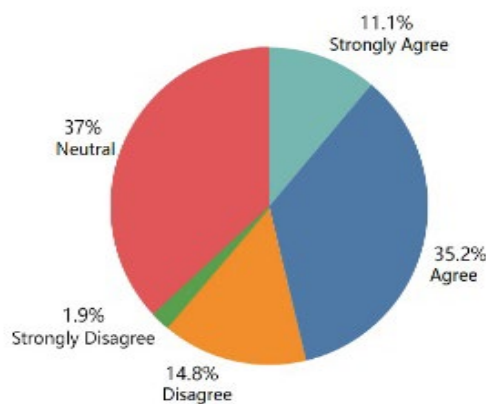


Figure 5: Participation rates for online cell group meetings have improved from before

Most pastors responded that the participation rates for online cell group meetings have either improved or stayed the same, as compared to the minority of 15% who disagreed or strongly disagreed.

## Worry about church members' spiritual life

What are the dangers of the pandemic?

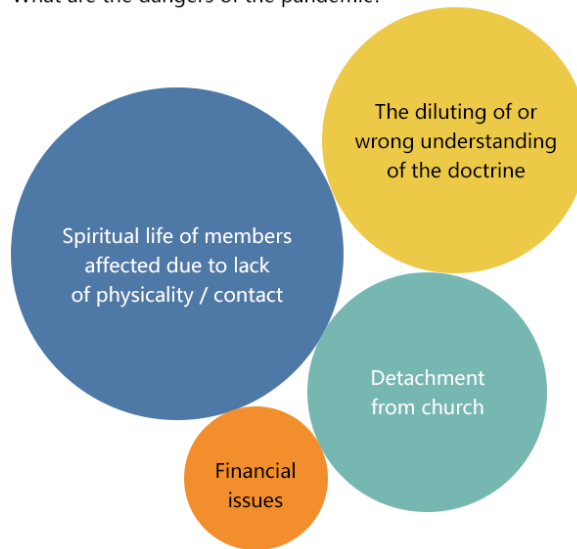


Figure 6: What are the dangers of the pandemic?

The lack of physicality and going digital introduced a few worries:

### For the Elderly who are not digitally-savvy

Not just the pastors but [church members also agree](#) that the elderly is a group that needs extra care for, especially for those who are not equipped with digital knowledge, as they may find difficulty communicating their needs, and/or feel left out when everyone else is connected online. In fact, this is a current issue for the Singapore society, and the government has introduced various efforts to help the elderly to pick up digital skills during this period of pandemic.

### The diluting or the wrong understanding of the doctrine

I am worried that church members may be misguided due to the variety of resources available online

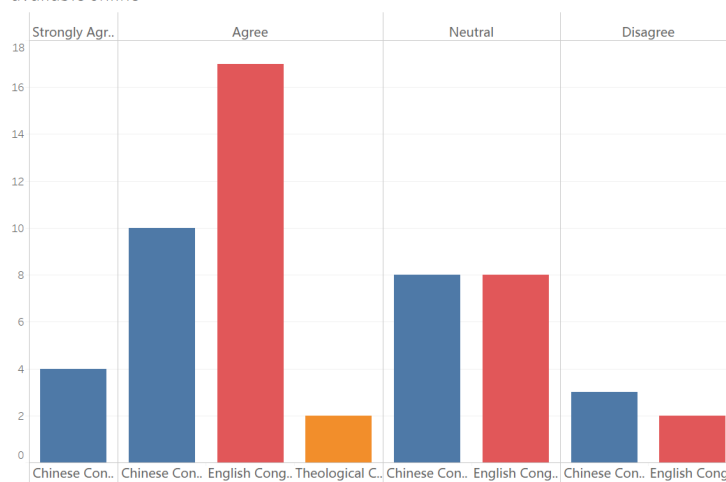


Figure 7: I am worried that church members may be misguided due to the variety of resources available online

A few other concerns were that since church members are not physically present in church, it is not easy to know if they are really actively participating in the online church service and/or activities. Since online services are “on-demand” and available to be watched at the members’ own convenience, it

may introduce complacency and a lack of discipline. Thus, members may slowly grow distant in their relationship with God, and may even eventually fall away.

There are also a variety of resources available online. While the congregation may be “spoilt for choice” as they now can choose what sermons to watch and what spiritual resources to partake in, this freedom also comes with the danger of being misguided by untrue or twisted teachings on the Internet.

To combat these worries, digital training for the elderly, providing of relevant practical resources (e.g. Wi-Fi subscription, devices) and self-study spiritual resources, as well as training for a better understanding of the Word (e.g. online Bible classes and webinars) and more communication are some of the solutions that the pastors have also suggested in a follow-up question.

### **Reaching out to the church congregation and community**

Communication is now more important than ever as people are unable to connect on a more personal basis in person. To reach out to the various segments of the congregation to ensure that they are taken care of in their spiritual lives, the churches are trying different methods.

For the elderly, the most common mode of communication is via phone calls, as the elderly may not be digitally savvy enough to use a smartphone. Some churches have also started sending volunteers to teach them how to get connected, providing devices and connection for the poor and needy. *(Seeing this need, the Synod has launched the [Synod Solidarity Initiative \(SSI\)](#) to help churches with families facing financial difficulties to purchase a smart device and/or Wi-Fi connection.)* Another way to reach out to this group that some churches have tried is via hard-copy snail mail, sent directly to their houses.

For the youth, online communication is an obvious answer which most pastors brought up. This includes the usage of messaging apps like WhatsApp and video-conferencing platforms like Zoom. Online activities that some churches are doing include sharing online Bible study materials/resources to encourage the youth to maintain a healthy spiritual life, to holding fellowship/cell group sessions, game sessions and hosting webinars on Zoom. However, it was interesting to note that there was only one specific mention of using social media, amongst the answers.

For the general masses, while most pastors agree on using online means to connect with them, another important factor for some churches is communicating/caring through fellowship/cell groups. A handful of pastors shared how their cell group leaders are taking up the frontline communication role to reach out to their group members, leading cell group sessions and checking up on members.

On the missions front, for the local and overseas community, churches are taking more of a practical approach to help those affected through financial and physical means (such as opening up church premises as a shelter for the homeless), along with sending encouragements and providing relevant online training and resources as needed.

### **Keeping in contact with church members**

When asked how confident they are in reaching out to their church members, nearly two-third of the pastors responded that they are confident or very confident, with the remaining 31.5% staying neutral and 9.3% who are not confident. While it seems positive that pastors feel confident, we see that [church members may not feel the same way](#), as one of the most mentioned points that the congregation would like the church to do more on was more care for and communication with the members.

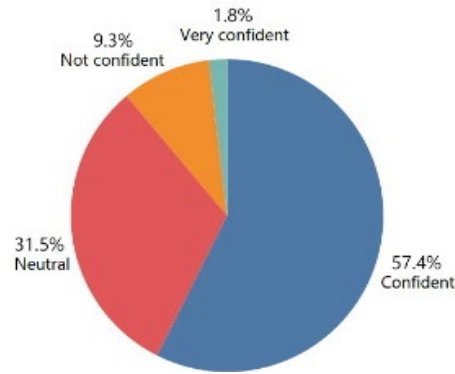


Figure 8: How confident are you in reaching out to church members?

### Blessings of the Pandemic

While there are worries due to the challenges brought about by the pandemic, there are also various positive things that came along with it.

What are the blessings of the pandemic?



Figure 9: What are the blessings of the pandemic?

With more time spent at home during this period, many responded that their relationships with their families have improved, and it was a chance for them to slow down and reflect on themselves, as well as on the church level. The pandemic has also reminded them to seek and rely more on God in all situations. 65% of the pastors strongly agreed or agreed that their walk with God has become closer, while the remaining 35% remained neutral.

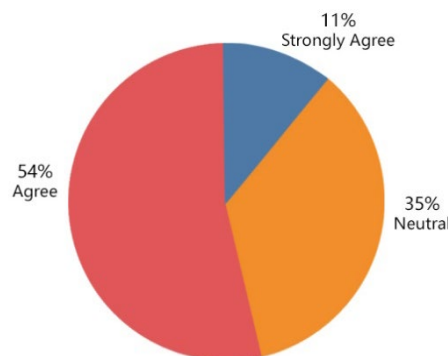


Figure 10: Your walk with God has grown closer

## What else can the church and Presbytery do?

When asked how the church can improve from current efforts, the top three points raised were: learning and making use of digital means & technology, more communication and care for the congregation, as well as an adapting mind-set, to be flexible to the changes brought by the new normal.

How else do you think can be improved (for the church)?

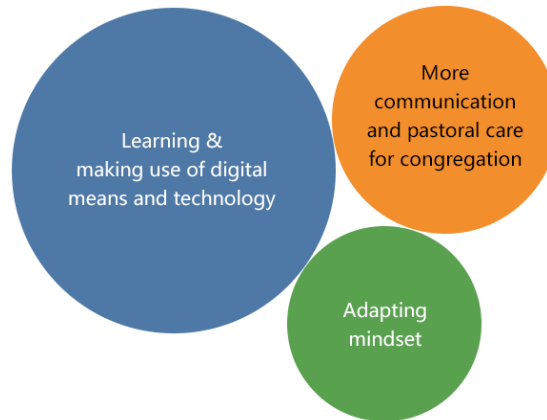


Figure 11: How else do you think can be improved (for the church)?

However, it is notable that going digital is still one of the biggest hurdles to overcome, as the area of improvement for the church and the support that pastors feel they need the most in are both in the digital and technology aspect. Pastors are also seeking for resources and guidance from the Presbytery, to navigate in this new normal environment.

How can the Presbytery support local churches during this period?



Figure 12: How can the Presbytery support local churches during this period?

## A short conclusion...

Facing the new normal, churches are forced to stop, reflect and adapt to new ways of reaching out to their congregation. While digitalization brings its own set of challenges and issues, church ministers recognise the importance of going digital; however, picking up an unfamiliar method also requires guidance, training and also an adaptable mind-set.

While things may seem not so positive, pastors recognise this as a chance to strengthen relationships, rethink what the church has done/is doing, and to grow closer in their walk with God. May the Lord bless all church leaders with wisdom and courage, to administer to His people with love.