



UNseminary

PANDEMIC TO ENDEMIC:

**5 QUESTIONS
YOUR CHURCH MAY
STILL NEED TO ANSWER
ABOUT COVID-19**

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The cultural and economic impact of COVID-19 is one of the greatest influences on the local church in at least a generation

Over the last year, **we've seen COVID-19 impact our ministries in innumerable ways.**

In some respects, COVID-19 has accelerated positive change in the local church. The shift to equipping the majority of churches with the means to minister online will no doubt pay dividends for years. People who wouldn't normally darken the door of a church will have access to the good things that happen there, not to mention we'll extend our churches' abilities to serve people outside of the traditional boxes we inhabit. We've also seen an incredible push in the last year of churches working in their local communities by partnering with social service agencies and other local organizations to distribute food and care for those in need, which has made a tangible difference on an unprecedented scale!

However, we've also seen some negative impacts from COVID-19. There is evidence that **20% of the people that were attending our churches before the pandemic haven't returned in any form, whether that be in person or online.** [ref] It may take us years to figure out how to reengage the people who were with us just over 12 months ago. There's no doubt that kids' ministries within most churches across the country have also taken a serious hit during this time. This is particularly troubling when we know that the majority of people who make a decision to follow Jesus do so before the age of 18.

However, on the horizon is **a new set of questions** that many churches are going to need to face as the COVID-19 pandemic shifts into a new mode of what scientists call an **endemic**.

In epidemiology, an infection is said to be endemic in a population when that **infection is constantly maintained at a baseline level in a geographic area without external inputs**. For example, chickenpox is endemic in the United States, but malaria is not.

While we are encouraged by the vaccine rollout that's happening across the U.S. and in many other countries around the world, there is increasing evidence that COVID-19 will shift from being something that we can potentially put in the rear view mirror to **something that we're going to have to live with** in the coming years.

I'm not a scientist, nor do I play one on the internet, but I would encourage you to read up on and explore this topic for yourself. We're going to wrestle with a few questions that I believe our churches may have to face as we shift from pandemic to endemic. First, here are a few articles from reputable sources to begin your journey of learning about COVID-19's potential pivot from pandemic to endemic:

- **Health.com:** "[What Is an Endemic Virus? WHO Warns COVID-19 'May Never Go Away'](#)" // This article covers a recent press conference with the World Health Organization's Dr. Michael Ryan, the Executive Director of the Health Emergencies program, where he said, *"It's important for us to put this on the table. This virus may become just like another endemic virus in our communities and this virus may never go away. Based on the shifting variants of concern and vaccine rollout, many communities across the world may simply just need to deal with the impact of COVID-19 for years, if not decades, to come."*
- **Nature | Journal of Science:** "[The coronavirus is here to stay—here's what that means](#)" // This study features a recent survey of scientists on the front line, 60% of which said, *"It's very likely that COVID-19 will become an endemic virus, that is one that continues to circulate in pockets of the global population."* It then expands on exactly how it may become endemic. It also discusses pediatric vaccines and how COVID-19 may become similar to chickenpox or other diseases of the young and will continue to flare up across the world.
- **Reuters:** "[When will it end?: How a changing virus is reshaping scientists' views on COVID-19](#)" // This article explains clearly, in a non-alarmist way, how the disease continues to shift. It talks about how the U.S. government's predictions about a return to normal lifestyle repeatedly get pushed back. They've been moved back from late summer to Christmas, and then, most recently, to March 2022. It also explores the global reality of how we're seeing vaccine passports rolled out and what that could potentially mean for travel, as well as other realities that are being foisted upon us thanks to COVID-19.

The conclusion that I'm left with as a leader is that there's a very real potential that, although we will definitely return to some sort of "next normal" later this year, the idea of "snapping back" to what life was like in early 2020 is unlikely, as COVID-19 continues to make its way through our communities in different forms in the coming years.

That leaves us with a series of questions that we may need to wrestle with in the coming years, as we think about our churches' responses to this persistent disease and its impact on them.

Here are five potential questions that you may need to face in the coming years. Gather your leadership team together, tackle these questions, and think about how it is that you might be able to respond, even if just for your building, reopening, recall, and reengagement plans for the coming months.

HOW WILL YOUR KIDS' MINISTRY RESPOND TO PERSISTENT SURGES?

One of the clear realities of an endemic is that, at least for the coming year, we're going to deal with surges of COVID-19 amongst the young.

It's also highly likely that for the coming months, even beyond vaccination of adults, we're going to see school districts closing and moving back to online learning.

The good work that has been put in with school boards across the country to figure out how to do instruction at scale online will be employed once again. **What difference does that make to your church as you look at your weekend services and the way that you think about doing kids' ministry?**

Many churches have used the "online or in person" statuses of their local school board to indicate what they should be doing with kids' ministry. What does this mean, then, if a school decides to do two weeks of online learning to slow the spread of the disease through its population? How will you respond? Will you move everything on your kids' ministry online too?

Think back to a year ago. With hindsight, what would you have done differently in your kids' ministry to prepare for that? Now project that into the future. What different decisions would you make today if, over the coming years, your kids' ministry were required to move back and forth between in-person and online formats because of how COVID-19 were moving through the underage population in your community?

IS YOUR CHURCH READY TO RE-IMPLEMENT RESTRICTIONS PERIODICALLY?

The idea that the social distancing measures that we've seen in place for the last year will just simply go away in the summer is highly unlikely.

It would appear that we are heading to a reality where the requirement to keep a distance from other people, wash our hands, do contact tracing, and other **nonmedical interventions will likely be the last of the restrictions to be fully lifted.**

As the pandemic shifts to an endemic and swells in various regions, the continuous changes within these nonmedical interventions could require your church to also be constantly shifting what it's required to do.

What will social distancing look like in the future?

How do you continue to do contact tracing for the percentage of people in any given auditorium? Rather than hoping to shed those requirements, it would be better for us to develop plans now for how to reengage these in the coming weeks and months.

If you travelled regularly before 9/11, you might remember life before such strict airport restrictions. Did you think at the time that we'd still be taking our shoes off for airport security all these years later? Our ability to adapt to a new restriction like that is really high. Some of these new restrictions will be with us for a long time, so what needs to change today in light of that?

WILL YOU TAKE A PRO-VACCINE STANCE ON BOOSTER SHOTS?

Look carefully at the research predicting what will happen as the pandemic shifts to an endemic and you'll realize that we're likely in for years of booster shots for vaccines.

In fact, there are already plans afoot to distribute booster shots as soon as fall of 2021. As community leaders, we have to think carefully about how we communicate around vaccines. How can we encourage our people to get vaccinated? What difference does it make to our staff? **How do we encourage them and leaders within our community to get the original vaccines and boosters that may be coming?**

Your church may be called upon, as we've seen across the country, to be a vaccine distribution center because we have larger parking lots and better ability to move people through at scale than your local pharmacy or grocery store.

The science and history of vaccines is really clear (clear enough for [Penn and Teller](#) or [Bill Nye the Science Guy](#) to explain it, anyway.) We can't let the fringe elements of our churches present this as a "two-sided issue" where various opinions should be considered. **Vaccines are saving lives.** We need to be on the right side of history and encourage our people to get vaccinated.

HOW WILL YOU ENGAGE YOUR PEOPLE IN THE WORLDWIDE FAMILY OF GOD

WITHOUT MISSION TRIPS FOR FIVE YEARS?

It's likely that robust international travel will be among the very last things to return to normal.

It seems like a bygone era when we could go to the nearest international airport, jump on a plane, and, within hours, engage with our brothers and sisters in various countries around the world.

You'll notice how dramatically this has shifted if you talk to international mission organizations, who were used to undertaking international leadership junkets that took donors and leaders to meet with on-the-ground professionals making a difference in their community for the message of Jesus.

The same will be true for your church. For years, many churches have relied on taking people on international mission trips to do good work while they're on the ground. **The greatest impact was on the people who were doing the travelling, as the posture of their hearts when they returned changed within a much larger vision of what it means to be a part of the worldwide family of God.**

While the focus on helping locally has been incredible in so many churches around the country, this has sometimes meant taking a lesser focus on developing or helping other parts of the world.

How, then, can we think creatively about engaging the average people that attend our church when we won't be able to travel with them, whether that's by government fiat or people's hesitation to go to developing countries around the world?

WHAT WOULD IT LOOK LIKE SHIFTING TO SMALLER GATHERINGS FOR YEARS TO COME?

One of the fascinating outcomes of the pandemic will be its psychological impact on people gathering in large crowds.

It looks like it will be at least a year, potentially more like 18 months, before anyone in the country will be able to gather in groups much larger than their families or what we would typically see at a Thanksgiving meal.

What impact will that have on us when so many of our ministries depend on packing hundreds, if not thousands, of people into a single ventilated space to hear Jesus' message that you're engaged with the body of Christ?

Has there been a shift in your people's attitudes where they're now more likely to come to smaller local gatherings than find themselves back in larger ones? **Should we be looking at redesigning our campuses to have multiple rooms to accommodate smaller groups?**

Multi-site churches are particularly well equipped for this, as we've been used to figuring out how to rescale our ministries for different sized locations if, in the future, people want multiple smaller ones.

If you knew today that you weren't going to be able to gather more than 250 people in a room for the next five years, what differences would it make to the way you're currently thinking about your reopening plans?

Rather than continuing to figure out how to fit 30% of people at six feet apart in your buildings, should we just be repositioning all of those spaces to look for smaller ones, rather than trying to drive back towards larger groups?

PANDEMIC TO ENDEMIC—WHAT QUESTIONS DOES YOUR TEAM HAVE?

I encourage you to gather your leadership team together, talk through these five questions, and wrestle with any other issues that are pertinent to your particular church. I'd love to hear from you, either by email or in the comments below, on what questions you are tackling as you think about this shift from pandemic to endemic.

I'm cheering for you; this is an incredible season to be a part of the kingdom of God.