



“Faith and Giving in the Time of Covid-19”

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic and economic shutdown, congregations and other religious nonprofit and philanthropic organizations have had to adapt rapidly to changing conditions for doing their work. Lake Institute on Faith & Giving, always seeking to be a learning organization, surveyed its extensive network of constituents in late April and early May 2020 in order to better understand the concerns and hopes of those who serve in these organizations and to learn how we, and our many partners, might best resource them. This brief report summarizes the survey results, based on the 595 complete responses we received within that survey window. We are profoundly grateful for the time respondents took to fill out the survey, for their open-hearted answers, and for the trust they expressed in sharing their experiences, challenges, hopes, and needs with us in a season that continues to bring new challenges on a daily basis. Lake Institute is eager to dive deeper into the data to explore the meaning of these findings in consultation with colleagues and constituents in the days to come, as we strive to craft additional resources in response to congregational and organizational needs in these unprecedented times.

Top Line Findings Summary

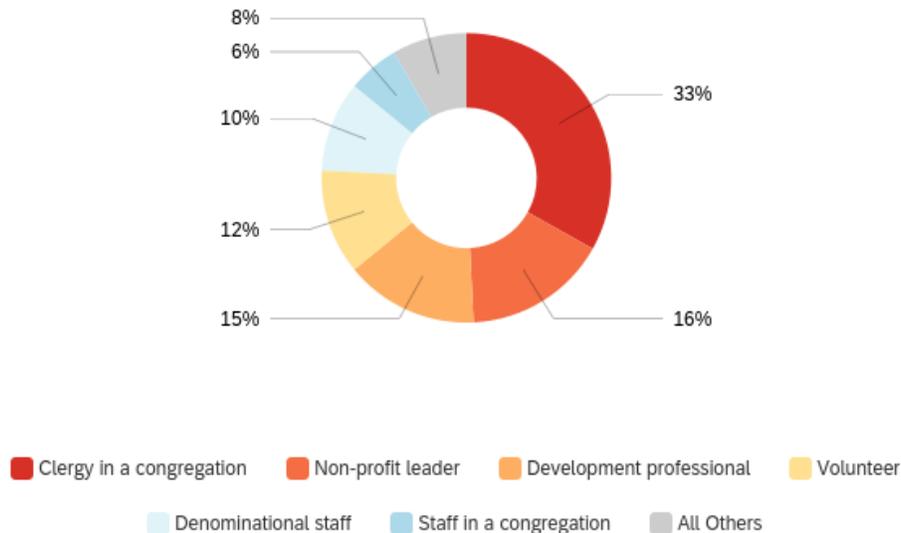
The “Faith and Giving in the Time of Covid-19” survey was sent to the full Lake Institute mailing list, with 595 completed responses between April 23 and May 5, 2020. Just over half of the respondents were clergy, staff, or volunteer leaders in congregations. Other significant groups included denominational staff leaders as well as fundraisers and faith-based nonprofit leaders.

- When asked about immediate challenges, respondents repeatedly mentioned isolation, anxiety and uncertainty, problems of focus and motivation, and concerns about organizational and personal finances.
- When asked to imagine their greatest challenge six months from now, nearly half focused on issues of stewarding organizational finances and doing effective fundraising. Around 20 percent anticipated a need to refocus on organizational vision, mission, and purpose. Slightly smaller percentages anticipated that they would most need to attend to how to gather in person or continue to find ways to engage constituents without face-to-face contact.
- When asked to look ahead a year, nearly 30 percent of these leaders said they hope to have achieved enough stability to survive organizationally and/or return to known patterns and continue their work. However, the majority said that they are hoping for some kind of lasting change—either a reset, significant growth, or meaningful innovation. In other words, despite immediate challenges most of these leaders are hopeful that positive new possibilities and directions will emerge from the crisis.

- Aligned with this emphasis on long term change, respondents noted that the most urgent topics for consideration are: help with reimagining the use of current resources, serving their community, innovating in money and ministry, and managing organizational change. A much smaller percentage highlighted digital giving, suggesting that most respondents had made that adjustment swiftly, if they had not done so before the pandemic began.

Survey Respondents

Among the 595 completed responses, the wide swath of Lake Institute course alumni, partners, *Insights* readers, and public program participants were well-represented, and their answers reflect a variety of organizational roles and perspectives. Just over half of the survey participants were responding from a congregational perspective as clergy (33%) or staff (6%), or through “volunteer” congregational leadership roles (12%). 10% of the respondents serve in denominational/judicatory leadership. The remaining respondents were roughly evenly divided between nonprofit organizational leaders and development professionals.



The respondents were largely confident, knowledgeable, and experienced in working with issues of religious fundraising and the practice of teaching and encouraging generosity, but somewhat less confident in their knowledge and experience of trends in charitable giving.

Immediate Challenges, Individually and Organizationally

One adage stemming from this present crisis notes, “We are not all in the same boat, but we are all in the same storm,” and the respondents to the survey reflected a wide variety of experiences in sharing their most significant individual and organizational challenges.

The most common *individual* challenges in the present moment centered around issues of isolation; anxiety and uncertainty; as well as focus and motivation. Additionally, a significant number of responses noted practical work challenges: the strangeness and difficulty of working



In looking ahead six months, nearly half of the respondents anticipated that **issues of stewardship**—fundraising and financial management—would be their most significant challenge, with concerns touching on budget-setting, decreases in giving, and how to ask for gifts in such a time. About 20% of responses focused on **questions of organizational vision, mission, and purpose** while another 20% questioned whether or how they would be able to **return to in-person worship, gatherings, and events** or continue to engage their constituents (including new people who had joined online worship or organizational events) after such a sustained time of online/distance gatherings. Additionally, a number of congregations and organizations were in (or

expected to begin) **leadership transition** or they expected questions of staff and volunteer management to be important factors. A smaller but sobering number of responses observed that **layoffs or even closure of the organization** would be important questions in the next six months (67 responses) or that **burnout or exhaustion** would be a threat to their staff or volunteers (20 responses). Some responses highlighted concern for their organization’s surrounding communities or economic justice as their most significant issue in the coming six months, and others lifted up specifically spiritual questions of meaning and/or grief.

Twelve Months from Now: Hopes and Next Steps

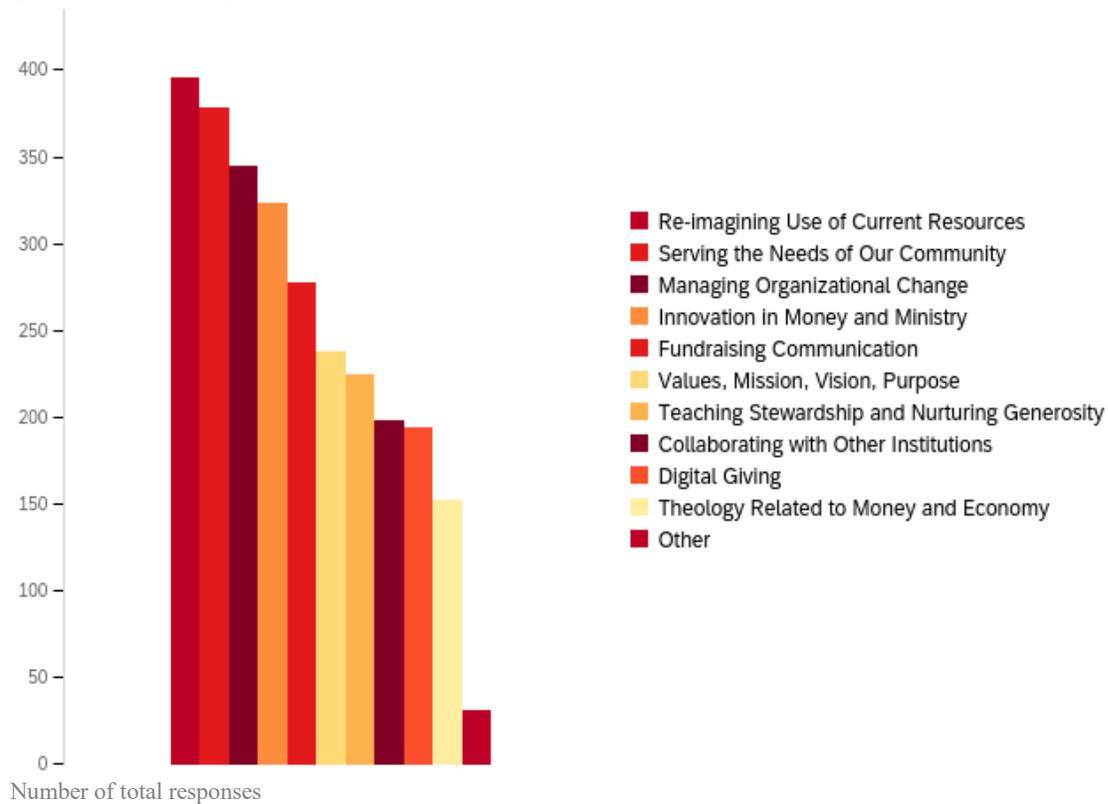
Looking even further ahead to a year from now, 30 percent of respondents expressed a hope for some kind of **return to stability** that would allow them to resume their normal, rooted ways of doing their work and accomplishing their mission. However, the majority expressed hope for a lasting change: 30 percent indicated something more like a **'reset,'** involving renewed vision, redirection, or realignment of energy and resources. 20 percent expressed hopeful expectations of **growth** in giving or participation out of the experiences of this crisis, and nearly 15 percent anticipated that this year would bring **innovation** to their institution's work.

The respondents’ expectations of how those hopes might come to fruition varied. The most common response was some sort of **internal transformation of the organization itself**—shifting mission and vision, new types of leadership, and even divine guidance. Many noted the importance of changes in how the organization would accomplish its ongoing mission, **communicating more effectively** with members and donors and taking on a spirit of **experimentation. Planning,** including revised approaches to budgeting, and **assessment of resources and priorities** also marked tangible steps the organizations would need to take, along with an emphasis on **teaching and formation** of their members and donors around the values of the institution, including the value of generosity. Finally, a small proportion of the respondents noted the importance of reaching out more to other organizations to share knowledge and resources and to work together in **partnership** toward shared goals.

Finding Help: Topics and Resources

Along with learning about respondents' challenges and hopes, we sought to understand better where they are finding help and what topics they feel are most urgent to consider.

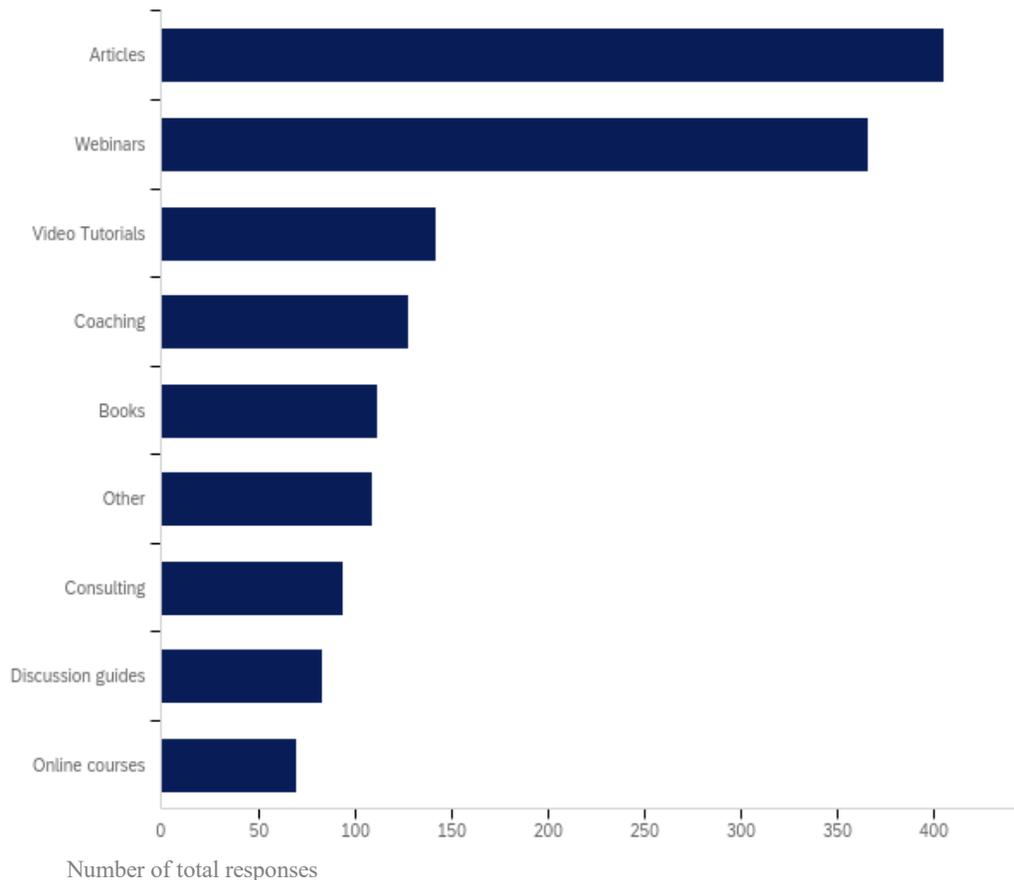
Asked to rank-order the topics they find most urgent to consider in light of the current crisis, respondents emphasized adaptive learning over more technical learning. More than half of the respondents noted the importance of “Re-Imagining Use of Current Resources,” “Serving the Needs of Our Community,” “Managing Organizational Change,” and “Innovation in Money and Ministry.” It is worth noting, however, that all ten suggested topics were important to at least a quarter of the respondents.



When asked where they have found their best help in thinking about faith and giving since the crisis began, over half of all respondents selected “other colleagues and leaders in the field,” with just under a quarter noting their denomination/network as the best sources of guidance.



When asked about the types of resources they have found most useful since the crisis began, respondents mentioned articles first, and webinars as a close second.



In Conclusion

The respondents to the survey were tremendously generous in sharing their challenges and their hopes and expectations, and there is great promise in the data for additional insight into how thoughtful leaders are addressing the present crisis and looking to the future. Lake Institute will be going deeper into these questions with follow-up focus groups and additional qualitative research to discover how we and others might best resource congregations and religious nonprofits. Some observers have suggested that the pandemic crisis may be an “accelerating” force among religious institutions—hastening both welcomed and unwelcomed changes of all types—and we see elements of that perspective across the wide spectrum of experiences and expectations that organizational leaders shared in this survey. As congregations and religious nonprofit organizations move forward through these rapidly changing times, Lake Institute on Faith & Giving will continue its commitment to provide the best of educational resources, public conversations about faith and generosity, and reliable research. We thank all those who shared their perspectives with us in this snapshot of such an unprecedented time.