

Analyzing Religious Organization Response to COVID-19

Social Disruptions

In March of 2020, social distancing became part of the American lexicon, determining the majority of our daily activities and putting enormous strain on the ability of our social institutions as they struggled to adapt. Religious organizations, which simultaneously act as community centers, organizers, gathering places, and policy influencers, are faced with unprecedented challenges as they attempt to meet the needs of their participants and communities in an environment that discourages the traditional method by which they are able to facilitate these efforts. In short, the need that religious organizations fill for many has been increased substantially, while their ability to provide has been severely diminished.

Our research team collected data using the online platforms of local religious organizations in an effort to document their responses to COVID-19. Data was captured and coded in the qualitative software Atlas.ti, and discussion was facilitated by the team leader to uncover implications presented by our findings.

Data

Tables 1 and 2 provide descriptive statistics for our data collected.

Table 1: Descriptive data of religious organization online platforms

Outdated Facebook	33
Current Facebook	109
Outdated Website	6
Current Website	102
National Website	15
Total	165

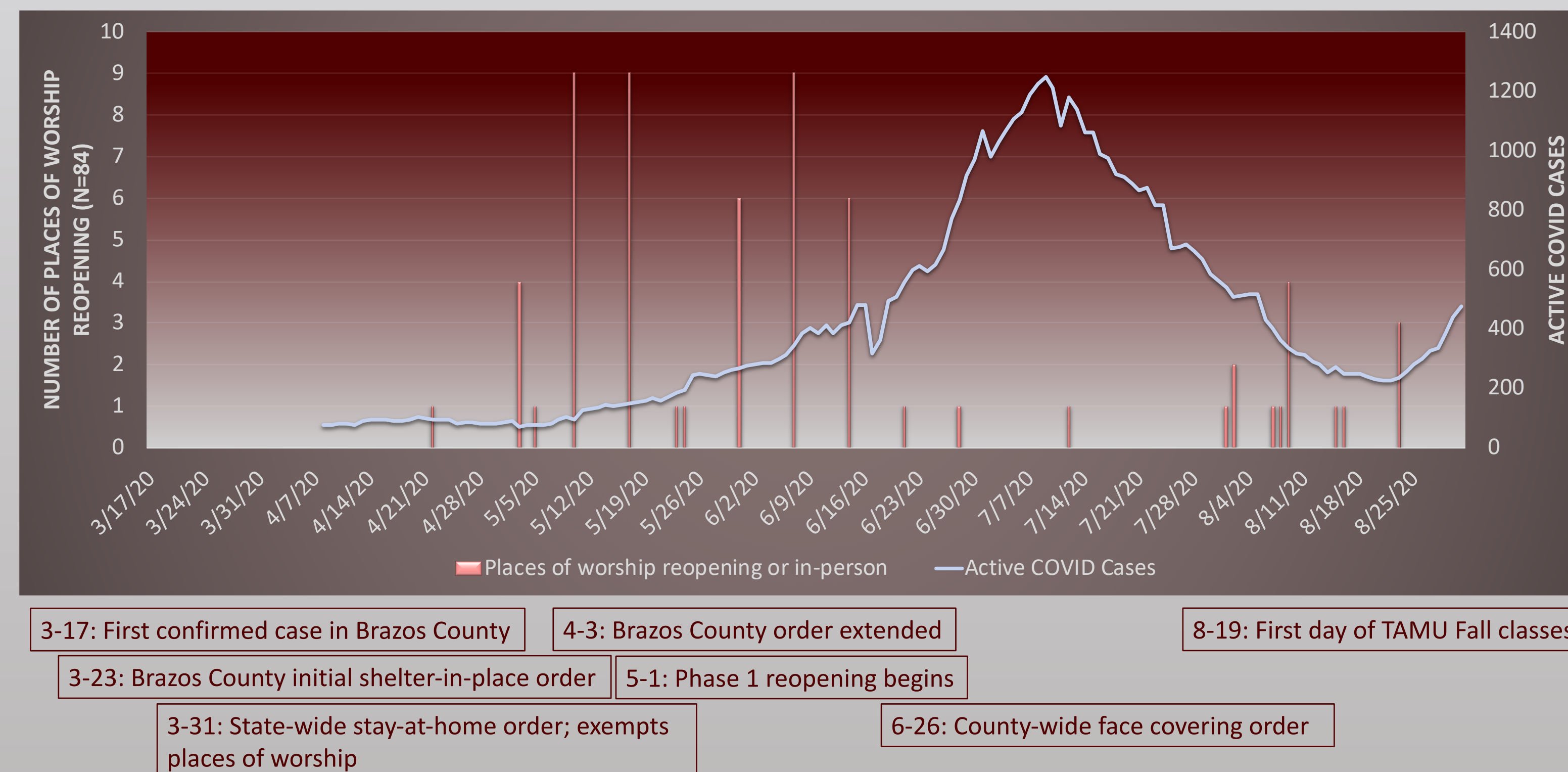
Table 2: Descriptive data of religious organization reopening sample

Open as of 8/31	69
Did not close at all	1
Did not reopen	13
Total	84

Table 3: Summary of Qualitative Code Groups in Two Rounds Website Coding

Quotations are items on the captured website documents marked for coding. Quotations can have multiple codes. Codes are labels created by the research team to categorize qualitative findings in the documents. Related codes are grouped into the categories listed below.	Round 1, May 21st Quotes=1214; Codes=383		Round 2, August 10th Quotes=400; Codes=180		Totals
	Individual codes	Column %	Individual codes	Column %	Absolute
activities adjusted Quotes=84; Codes=13	37	8.24%	47	20.98%	84
activities cancelled Quotes=55; Codes=12	46	10.24%	9	4.02%	55
activities suspended Quotes=4; Codes=3	2	0.45%	2	0.89%	4
affective reactions Quotes=12; Codes=3	12	2.67%	0	0.00%	12
apocalyptic Quotes=5; Codes=2	4	0.89%	1	0.45%	5
community aid Quotes=22; Codes=2	19	4.23%	3	1.34%	22
coronavirus info Quotes=17; Codes=8	14	3.12%	3	1.34%	17
COVID protocols Quotes=97; Codes=29	61	13.59%	36	16.07%	97
Donating to church Quotes=175; Codes=27	132	29.40%	43	19.20%	175
in-person discussion Quotes=121; Codes=10	51	11.36%	70	31.25%	121
no covid response Quotes=52; Codes=8	44	9.80%	8	3.57%	52
prioritizing religious values Quotes=29; Codes=17	27	6.01%	2	0.89%	29
Totals	449	100.00%	224	100.00%	673

Fig. 1: Places of Worship Reopening & Active COVID Cases, Brazos County, TX



Analysis: COVID-19 Challenges what it means to *be* the church

Two rounds of website coding and analysis were performed from data captured May 21st and August 10th. The research team visited the websites and social media platforms (Facebook) of religious organizations and captured documents of homepages, calendars, and specific COVID-19 related information pages. Online platforms of 165 religious organizations were surveyed. Table 3 summarizes these data.

In round one coding (5-21), donating to the organization or to the organization's efforts accounted for 29.4% of the substantive codes created by the research team. The next highest item coded was protocols or policies related to COVID-19 (13.59%), and cancellations of the organization's activities (10.24%). In round two (8-10), donations to the organization accounted for only 19.2% of the coded items, COVID-19 policies increased to 16.07%, and cancellations dropped to only 4.02%. Besides donations, round two's most substantive coded items were discussion of in-person activities (31.25%) and adjusting existing activities (20.98%).

The initial emphasis on financial contributions to the organization is consistent with findings from the Barna group that online giving was initially slow: "During the first few weeks of the pandemic, church leaders reported lower than usual numbers when it came to weekly offerings (62% week 1, 79% week 2, 64% week 3). Within the last month however, this trend has plateaued. The most recent data collected this past week show more than one-third of pastors (37%) reports lower giving. Thirty-eight percent say giving has remained the same and one-quarter (25%) confirms an increase in weekly giving"¹. Much of this lag is due to limited options for distance-friendly donation options or lack of knowledge about how to use these platforms for this purpose, which might explain the emphasis we see in the use of organization websites to highlight their online giving options.

Understandably, cancellations of events were seen more during phase 1 than phase 2, as adjustments were made to follow safety protocols. Similarly phase 2 saw more emphasis on reopening plans as resistance to social distancing began to increase among religious adherents in the area. Campbell, Sheldon, Gibson, and Guzman² find that religious organizations utilizing digital communication technologies orient the content of their digital media around "insider" or "outsider" focus, referencing the target audience for whom the site or platform is intended while communicating the markers of the organization's identity. In our data, religious organization websites/platforms were overwhelmingly oriented to "insiders", as organizations scrambled to establish, refine, and communicate their online capabilities to their participants.

At the end of March, the Texas Attorney General released guidance for places of worship that defined them as essential services and permitted their gathering for services³. As Fig. 1 illustrates, religious organizations began reopening shortly thereafter. In a sample of 84 religious organizations in Brazos County, we found that by August 31st, 69 organizations (82% of our sample) had reopened for at least partial in-person services. Only 13 organizations in our sample did not reopen at any time after the initial shutdown of gatherings.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the social distancing measures taken in response to the epidemic have seriously challenged what it means to be a congregation for many local religious organizations. Despite numerous instances in our data of language emphasizing the "Church" as more than in-person gatherings, there appears to be strong impulse towards this in order to maintain validity as a religious body. The language used in the Texas AG's directive to religious organizations emphasized "churches, congregations, and houses of worship", common and interchangeable terms for Western—particularly Christian—religious participation, but severely lacking in terms of accounting for the myriad ways in which religious organizations facilitate their practices. The insider focus of the website content, as well as the push to resume in-person gatherings and the privilege to do so imbedded in policy-making suggests that it is exceedingly difficult to provide an alternative to the traditional organizational model of religious groups. Even significant social changes resulting from a global pandemic failed to fully unseat this particular facet of our culture. For good or ill, religious organizations in our study seem unready to cede their established behavioral norms.

References

¹<https://www.barna.com/research/things-we-learned>

²Campbell, Heidi A., et al. "Technological and Mediated Identity in American Multisite Churches." *Ecclesial Practices* 7.1 (2020): 11-31.

³<https://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/sites/default/files/images/admin/2020/Press/Third%20Revised%20AG%20Guidance%20for%20Houses%20of%20Worship%20During%20the%20COVID-19%20Crisis%20-%20Final.pdf>