

Americans return to in-person church with emotion — and uncertainty about the future of worship

The wave of vaccinations in recent weeks is bringing some back to experience fellowship after the pandemic upended their spiritual life

By **Michelle Boorstein**



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Over 13 months, Sunday church had devolved for Justin Chang into sitting at a laptop in his room, alone in his sweatpants, watching services online. Sometimes he would sleep in and miss the live service altogether.

For Chang, the pandemic was a spiritual shock. Before, much of his communal life revolved around church, in particular Christ Central Presbyterian Church in Centreville, Va. The traditional Korean American congregation was where he had grown up, had a faith crisis, was brought to Christ in high school and where his faith was rooted. During the year, he questioned where he was living, worried about a work contract drying up and wondered about God's purpose for him.

On Sunday, the tall 26-year-old civil engineer beamed as he walked into the bright, sunny church, fist-bumping at check-in, then greeting a high school friend who became the church drummer. During the service, Chang watched the lights come down and people around him reach out their arms in prayer. He stood with his eyes closed, feeling the vibrations of the band's music.

He was back at church.

"It's like a small glimpse of heaven," he said of the in-person worship experience, something that's been elusive for millions of Americans since March 2020. "We can't hug, but seeing people in person, worshiping in person, it's so different from singing at a television in the living room. You can feel the music, feel God's presence, be in sanctity with other believers, have some sense of normalcy."

The wave of coronavirus vaccines across the United States in recent weeks is allowing some to experience in-person worship after the pandemic upended their spiritual life. According to the Pew Research Center, about 45 percent of Americans attended worship services at least monthly before the pandemic. For those who seek in-person worship, vaccinations and loosened legal restrictions are bringing them back to a place that can't be replicated.

Since about Easter, attendance numbers at Christ Central have been on an upward trajectory, said Senior Pastor Owen Lee — which is part of a national trend. Pew reported that the percentage of people who said they went to a religious service in the past month went from 33 percent in July 2020 to 42 percent in March.

Pre-pandemic, the large Centreville church had to have two services to fit in 700 or 800 people on Sundays. When the shutdown began, many tuned in to a live stream. In September, when the church began offering limited, socially distanced in-person worship, it got about 20 or 30 people at one service, Lee said. That number stayed about the same until around Easter.

Since then, the numbers have risen. Last Sunday, 140 people attended. This Sunday, 76 people spread out among the wooden pews, facing toward the high-ceilinged stage, where Lee and other clergy stood below two large screens across which words, song lyrics and scripture bits pass. Musicians and singers were spread to their right and left.

Easter, he said, was the first time the room began to look populated.

“To see faces, to hear people singing together, greeting each other awkwardly — it was so good to be together, like family,” Lee said. “Some people were weeping. It was one of the sweetest days.”

Though more crowded, the sparsely filled pews of the cavernous sanctuary are a reminder that at Christ Central, as at almost all American congregations, the future of worship in 2021 is uncertain.

From the start of the pandemic, clergy and worship experts have warned of potential consequences of a year away from in-person church. Many houses of worship have invested deeply in video-streaming capabilities and online programming, while other, smaller congregations that can't afford that have focused on Facebook Live, phone calls or visits. Some people realized they prefer the convenience of online worship. Some now have a new routine. Some are realizing they don't want to go back.

At Christ Central, Lee said a recent questionnaire showed that about 20 percent of the congregation had stopped attending altogether. “That was heartbreaking,” he said.

Lee said the pandemic sped up the use of the Internet for church programs. In the future, he said he expects Christ Central to trim back its programmatic offerings.

“I think we're realizing, people who were there just for the frill, they're gone,” he said. “And those who are staying are committed to our mission. We may be smaller and stronger.”

Also in the pews Sunday was Peter Kim, who teaches high school and has been a regular for 15 years. He returned to services early this year, even before he got his vaccine. Now he comes alone; his wife and son stay home.

After the service, his eyes were moist. The messages he heard about Christ's presence and love and forgiveness, he said, mean a lot during a period of uncertainty. He thinks of his oldest son, whom he drove during the pandemic to Portland, Ore., for an internship. He thinks of his students, who he could see through the screen were suffering from stress and isolation.

“We need to hear the gospel again and again,” he said. “It refocuses us.”

Jenny Kim came up to greet him after services. Her spouse and children were at home, too.

The less crowded church suits her, she said. In normal times, she found loads of people — many of whom she knows — to be distracting. She likes being there in the relative quiet.

“The whole year my heart wasn't engaged. We're not meant to be apart,” she said. “And here, you're not.”
