

# The Perceptions and Lived Experiences of African-American Pastors at the Onslaught of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Mississippi

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## Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore perceptions and lived experiences of African-American pastors addressing the onslaught of COVID-19 with their congregation. Thirty-seven pastors representing various denominations from across Mississippi participated in semi-structured, in-depth interviews. From the data, five themes emerged including (1) Pastors' relentlessness, (2) Pastors' adoption of new technology, (3) Maximized social capital, (4) Unintended consequences resulting from COVID-19, and (5) Unintended benefits resulting from COVID-19.

## Keywords

COVID-19, faith-based organizations and administration, community engagement, African-American clergy

## Introduction

African-American churches are a trusted source in the Black community (Brewer & Williams, 2019; Ecklund & Coleman, 2020; Frazier, 1996; Williams & Cousin, 2021). The Black church serves as a refuge where its members can receive spiritual, emotional, physical, and monetary support particularly in times of crisis (Baruth et al., 2014; Blake, 2021; Hankerson et al., 2018; Matthews et al., 2002; PBS, 2020). Henry Louis Gates Jr. stated "The Black church is the oldest, most continuous and the most important institutional

structure created by African Americans." The Black church is the birthplace and nurturing ground for major social, cultural, educational, economic, and political institutions that define Black America (PBS, 2021). However, in Mississippi

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on March 14, 2020, at the onslaught of the state's first cases of COVID-19, Governor Tate Reeves asked churches to suspend worship services to abate the spread of the virus with implications that further guidance would be provided (Skinner & Ganucheau, 2020).

Due to the COVID-19 guidelines, several services and programs that are embedded in the fabric of the Black community's culture and relegated as core responsibilities of the church were restricted or stopped altogether. Pastors found themselves treading unfamiliar terrain. Services such as visiting the sick in hospitals, officiating congregants' funerals, and supporting them through the loss of a loved one, hosting face-to-face worship, and physically interacting with their congregants were either suspended, limited, or stopped all together (State of Mississippi Office of the Governor, 2020a; 2020b; 2021). A summary of the initial Mississippi Executive Orders is listed in Table 1.

As ongoing changes to guidelines and protocols continued, pastors had to be nimble and respond accordingly (Johnson, Eagle, Headley, & Holleman, 2021). The few quantitative studies conducted did not capture how religious leaders have responded to the altering of traditional religious activities (Lifeway Research, 2021; O'Brien, 2020). Johnson, Eagle, Headley, Holleman (2021) conducted a qualitative study to learn how pastors and congregations responded to COVID-19 restrictions and guidelines. However, their study focused on one denomination, the United Methodist. Additionally, their study sample consisted of 88% White pastors. Due to the duality of the Black church in Black communities, it is crucial to explore how these pastors addressed COVID-19 guidelines and met the needs of their congregants during the pandemic. Therefore, in-depth, semi-structured, interviews were conducted with African-American pastors across Mississippi during the months of July–December 1, 2020. The purpose of the interviews was to take a deeper dive into African-American pastors' perceptions and lived experiences in addressing COVID-19 with their congregants.

**Table 1.** Executive orders timeline in Mississippi.

Issue Date	Executive Order	Order Details
March 14, 2020	EO No. 1463	Restricts nonessential gatherings of 10 people or more
April 3, 2020	EO No. 1466	Statewide shelter-in-place order to slow the spread of COVID-19, which goes into effective from Friday, April 3, 2020 to Monday, April 20, 2020.
April 21, 2020	EO No. 1477	Establishes a statewide Safer at Home order laying out a measured and strategic plan to reopen Mississippi while continuing to flatten the curve and conserve health care resources.

## Methodology

To explore African-American pastors' perceptions and lived experiences of addressing the onslaught of COVID-19 with their congregation, a phenomenological study design was applied to the study. Health care professionals and scholars have used a qualitative study design to learn of the lived experiences of others (Neubauer et al., 2019; Peart et al., 2020). According to Glesne (2006, p. 4), qualitative research methods are used to understand a phenomenon from the perspective of those involved. A purposive snowball sampling frame was used to recruit pastors across Mississippi. According to Morgan (2008) to seek as much diversity in the sample as possible, it is best to start the sample with seeds that are as diverse as possible. To this end, gatekeepers in the local communities aided in the recruitment of African-American pastors from churches of all denominations and membership sizes and from rural and urban areas. According to the Mississippi State Department of Health (2015), rural is defined as any Mississippi county that has a population of less than 50,000 individuals; this equates to 80% of the 82 counties in Mississippi. Each interview session was attended by one or more of the co-investigators and/or the research assistant for the purpose of observation and note taking. Pastors were assigned a pseudocode and a number to equate with the part of the state in which they resided. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim.

## Interview Guide

A semi-structured interview questionnaire was used to guide the in-depth conversation with each pastor. In-depth interview was the method used to collect data for this study. Polit and Beck (2006), define an interview as a method in which one person asks questions of another person. This method was appropriate to explore the study research question. As noted by DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), a semi-structured protocol allows the researcher to collect open-ended data, to dive deeper into sensitive matters, and to explore the participant's thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about a particular topic. Topics included sources for COVID-19 information, financial challenges, consequences and unintended benefits of COVID-19, technology use, and how COVID-19 had impacted their life professionally and personally. For an in-depth look at the interview guide view "Engaging African Americans in COVID-19 Research: Lessons Learned" (Hayes et al., 2021).

## Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Ritchie and Lewis's (2003) Framework Approach. Pastors meeting the inclusion criteria (at least 18 or older, African-American/Black, serving in the position of pastor or associate pastor, and residing in

Mississippi) were recruited to participate. The interview process continued until data saturation occurred. The researchers followed closely Ritchie and Lewis's Framework Approach (2003). The Framework Method is a popular approach to analyzing qualitative data and is widely used in the health care field. According to Gale et al. (2013), the Framework Method is most used for the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews. The Framework Method follows seven steps: (1) The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim using a denaturalized approach, (2) Transcripts were read and reread so the investigators could become familiar with the data allowing open coding to take place, (3) All researchers coded the first two transcripts independently to allow for different perspectives to reduce the likelihood of one perspective becoming dominant, (4) Researchers then met and compared the labels they applied, and agreed on a set of codes thus forming a working analytical framework, (5) The analytical framework was then applied to subsequent transcripts using identified categories and codes, (6) Researchers used NVivo software to help simplify the raw data into frequencies, patterns, and categories, and 7() Data were interpreted to describe or explain aspects of the data.

## Results

The researchers recruited 44 pastors to participate in the study. Thirty-nine completed the consent forms, and 37 pastors participated in the in-depth interviews. Eighty percent of the churches' congregants ranged from the ages of 18 to 65 years; 17.95% had an age group that ranged from 65 and over. Eighty-two percent of the pastors were married, 10.26% were divorced, and 5.13% had never married. The majority of the pastors had a graduate degree (40%), 27% had a bachelor's degree, 5% had completed community college, and 5% had completed high school. A majority of the pastors had secular jobs, just 31% pastored only. Most of the pastors were bi-vocational (48.22%), meaning they pastored and worked an external job in addition to pastoring, and 20.5% pastored and performed outside the ministry part-time. In the study, 8% of the pastors had been infected with COVID-19 themselves. From the data, five themes emerged including (1) Pastors' relentlessness, (2) Pastors' adoption of new technology, (3) Social capital helped sustain during challenging times, (4) Unintended consequences resulting from COVID-19, and (5) Unintended benefits resulting from COVID-19.

### Theme I: Pastors' Relentlessness

Pastors first learned of COVID-19 from the news (50%), work (21%), or from other sources (35%). For example, many pastors learned of COVID-19 from families and friends who lived in states already impacted. All pastors discussed-making quick, fast, and informed decisions, as congregants trusted them for guidance. They reported notifying their

members of the initial changes for worship service in countless ways, at church one Sunday in March or April, by word of mouth, emails, text messages, individual phone calls, robo-calls, or video messages through Facebook and YouTube. They also used flyers and Twitter to announce the changes in worship services to their congregants. Ninety-seven percent of the pastors reported stopping in-person worship services in March 2020 immediately following the state guidelines; this caused a minor break in service for some as they sought alternate ways to continue worship services. While the remainder (8%) reported, they never stopped in-person worship services. Theme one entails two sub-themes, approach to guidelines adherence and giving.

*Approach to Guidelines Adherence:* Pastors used several approaches to follow the COVID-19 guidelines related to in-person service. One pastor (S1), transitioned to online services, but was adamant about not opening the church back up until a vaccine became available. One pastor (C1) stopped church altogether and did not hold in person or virtual services. He shared with us how challenging technology can be in rural areas, C1 indicated, "That makes it challenging to have services online, challenging to sometime to use Cash Apps or whatever. Another thing you have to have is people need the expertise to get those things done. And not every community has that or easy access to it." Most pastors (76%) talked with their church leadership, Boards of Bishops, their health team, or their congregants who were medical/health care experts and decided to transition worship services online in March 2020 or shortly after (S2, S3, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9, S10, S11, C1, C2, C3, C4, C8, C9, C10, C13, C12, C14, C15, C17, N1, N2, N4, N6, N7, N8, N9). The majority of the pastors (98%) reported little to no resistance from congregants about worship services. N1 shared, "And when the pandemic struck, the pastors who I know of and the ones that I pastor, it was like someone dropped a bomb at one time. It was just like somebody shooting at a herd of buffalo because everyone became frightened. Everybody wanted to run, and the question I asked the pastors, if the shepherds are running, who's attending to the sheep?" S10 met with his deacons and decided to still have worship service as usual but would modify how attendees partook in Communion. For example, they had planned to use the small peel off cups, to make certain attendees sanitize, and would not shake hands. However, when the fourth Sunday in March came and no congregants were in church S10 revealed, "The people stopped coming. The people's voices have been heard." Eight percent of the pastors in this study never stopped having in-person service; they either transitioned to outside worship services (S4) or delegated essential personnel to live stream the worship services for the broader audience (N3). Some pastors opted to have the congregants in the church closely follow COVID-19 guidelines and protocols (S15, C7). C7 stated, "We never shut down; because the mandate I have from the Lord would not allow me to shut down."

**Giving:** Giving, including tithes and offerings, varied depending on the church in this study. Oddly enough, most of the pastors (46%) reported that their finances increased; some spoke of a higher increase than before COVID-19. Pastors (29%) said tithes and offerings were sustained. Fourteen percent of the pastors reported struggling financially and reported tithes and offerings had decreased significantly. S11 conveyed, “As I said, everybody still got their job, but the charitable gifts to the church have been affected, really, bad.” While S2 noted, “That the giving was slow but had not affected their ability to operate.” C10 reported, “As far as having the financial support prior to the pandemic, we don’t have it now. We’re at ground zero; we are going back to service.”

## Theme 2: Adaption and Adoption of Technology

Pastors in this study discussed using limited technology to support church services prior to COVID-19. N3 stated, “There was not much technology protocol going on, not at that point anyway. We were going to do it eventually, but COVID-19 pushed us in what we were actually going to do.” Over 70% of the pastors at the time of this study had started or heightened their use of Facebook Live, Zoom, YouTube, and Application to hold church worship services on Sundays. Several of the pastors used these systems to conduct bible study on Wednesday nights. Fourteen percent of the pastors used conference call lines to communicate and deliver their Sunday messages. Pastors also used YouTube, conference calls, emails, and text messages to stay connected with their members between worship services. S10 stated, “I send 80–125 text message of encouragement to members of both churches. I send the same message to all of them, you know ‘keep the faith’, ‘don’t let fear set in’, ‘keep trusting God’.” To sustain the financial support of the church, pastors used specific applications such as Givelify, Cash App, and Pay Pal to receive tithes, offerings, and other donations during the pandemic. Table 2 provides a listing of the types of service delivery approaches.

**Table 2.** Type of service delivery approach.

Service Type	North	South	Central
Online Facebook/Zoom/You Tube	7	10	9
Radio	0	0	1
Conference Call	3	0	2
Church Application	0	0	1
Transferred Outside (i.e., parking lot services)	0	2	0
Church Inside/Online	1	0	1
No Church Services	0	0	1

## Theme 3: Maximized Social Capital

Social capital is the relationship, assets, and reputation that exist among people, its customers, and partners that make the organization runs effectively and efficiently (Mask, 2019). Several churches (10%) had an already established health care team or relied on members of their congregation who were medical experts such as doctors, nurses, pharmacists, or those who worked in other related fields. Pastors trusted these teams or individuals to implement COVID-19 guidelines, to educate the congregation, to modify information to assure it was culturally and linguistically appropriate for the assembly and the community at large, and to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable populations such as the elders and those with underlining chronic health conditions. In addition, they helped to sift through erroneous information while dispelling myths and clarifying facts. S5 stated “What I did was, I moved myself out of the way. All my decisions were made with Dr. Blank, who is in that field.” C3 stated, “We have a medical ministry. On the medical ministry we do have nurse practitioners, nurses, pharmacy; so, we really allow our team to function in that aspect and give us council and direction.” Pastors used their connections with other pastors within and external to their denominations. C14 described his work with other pastors, “I did some teaching and training through Zoom to actually help other pastors to get some of these programs going for their congregation.”

## Theme 4: Unintended Consequences

Unintended consequences were denoted as those negative factors that happened because of COVID-19 that were unexpected. Several of the pastors (8%) described never expecting to be infected themselves with COVID-19. More than 25% of the pastors in this study mentioned not expecting the pandemic to last as long. Pastors listed unintended consequences as loneliness, depression, and grief. They mentioned not being able to see, touch, or observe congregants as an unintended consequence. S5 specified, “We couldn’t hug and fellowship.” Pastors described not being able to take care of their pastoral duties like visiting the sick, officiating funerals, or being able to comfort members through the loss of a loved one. S9 described it as, “My biggest burden, it has affected me, my ministry is one of visitation.” S5 stated, “We are in a situation now where we go straight to the graveside and bury our loved ones.” Pastors expressed being heavily burdened by the inability to “worship inside the building.” S4 stated, “Moving outside the building was the hardest thing for us.” Pastors were overwhelmed by the unexpected death tolls. S12 stated, “The death rate bothers me. I work for a funeral home part-time, directing funerals. The death rate, it’s real! It’s real as it can be! Again, our president didn’t take it as such. He took it lightly, but it’s definitely serious.” Pastors described the church

closing as something they never expected. Additionally, pastors also mentioned an increase in domestic violence and couples on the verge of divorce seeking counseling. C7 reported,

“One thing that I have seen creep up is domestic violence between husband and wife or live-in boyfriend or girlfriend. Even people at the verge of divorce. People angry with one another. If a man went to work, he spent 9–10 h away from home; he could tolerate the wife/children whatever. But when things shut down and people must tolerate each other 24/7; it began to show a lot of things that people didn’t know about each other. It causes a lot of tension to flow.”

### Theme 5: Unintended Benefits

Forty-nine percent (49%) of the pastors in the study mentioned tithes and offerings not decreasing as a benefit. N9 stated, “People felt the need to give more to the poor people’s fund/the benevolent fund just in case we had a situation where a family might need additional help during the pandemic.” Pastors listed the adoption and adaptability to technology as a benefit. C4 shared, “It’s a rural area and people want to stay in their ways. Now we’re forced to get out of our way and comfort zone. Even though it’s a lot of things on the internet that is bad, we can use what’s good.”

C3 reported “To see, a 70-year-old senior have a screen up that tickles me to death; to see them press their way through and to see that we are going to stay connected. That pushes your real heart button, to see people push their way through the learning curve, have been the best benefit.”

Eight percent (8%) of the pastors in this study emphasized the resources from government programs as a benefit during this time. More specifically, the pastors applauded government programs such as the stimulus checks and the additional unemployment funds as valuable benefits for their congregants. C9 stated, “Government wise; from federal to state, instead of you having to find agencies, they came and found us. The usual paperwork and red tape, the majority of that was eliminated. That was the best benefit for me.” Pastors also mentioned people relying on God more, being able to spend more quality time with family, helping each other more, and an increase in the number of people receiving their Sunday messages through technology as unintended benefits.” N3 denoted “Being in a small rural town like we are, we are getting 500–600 views or whatever the case may be. When you are getting views like that, you’re reaching more than you were sitting in the pews. God works in mysterious ways.”

### Discussion

At the onslaught of COVID-19, pastors found themselves treading unfamiliar territory due to federal and state

restrictions forcing them to rethink how worship services are implemented and how they intermingled with their congregants and the community.

Data revealed how pastors diffused information with their congregants, what sources they utilized and trusted, and the opportunities and benefits derived as consequences of COVID-19. This study has implications that may be useful to support health care professionals, decision-makers, and pastors alike to develop projects, programs, services, and interventions in collaborating with religious leaders across the state as we continue to address the pandemic now and in the future.

All pastors in this study self-reported following the recommended COVID-19 guidelines; they were determined to protect their congregants with a particular focus on seniors and those with an underlining condition. This meant adapting, modifying, and creating new strategies and practices to conduct culturally traditional worship services and pastoral care. Their decision-making process was based on where, who, and how they obtained their COVID-19 information. For example, bi-vocational pastors received firsthand information from their jobs, and thereby they had time to process the information before disseminating it and acting upon it with their congregants. Pastors who had churches with established health care ministries were confident in letting those teams handle the coordination, organization, and dissemination of COVID-19 information and prevention activities. In a short period, they came up with new innovative ways to continue worship services that were not in the “building.” The “building” symbolizes a sacred space for African Americans to gather for not only worship services but also a space for refuge, support, resources, political, and economic activism. Therefore, closing the church or congregants being unable to gather in the “building,” left pastors disconcerted. S4 described the experience as, “Church is all I know since I was 10–11 years old. To move outside the building, that was hard for me, and I don’t know when we will be able to go back inside.” The Pastors’ approaches may have differed, but they all desired to mimic worship services that closely aligned with the cultural traditions seen in the Black church; singing, playing musical instruments, and taking communion while simultaneously striving to stay connected to the congregants. They remained connected to congregants through virtual services, phone calls, conference lines, and delivery of foods baskets, sanitizers, masks, and other personal protective equipment. They also provided counseling when needed. These findings aligned closely with Johnston et al. (2021). These researchers used Swiler’s Framework to analyze their data. Their study sought to maintain preexisting practices such as singing, worship, and connection to pastoral care. These researchers referred to Swiler’s mention of “unsettled times” as being characterized by making a conscious effort to match new practices and strategies of actions with preexisting ideas, values, and resources while being responsive to the changing context. The relentlessness

of pastors to protect their congregants appeared to be part of their core values.

Pastors relied profoundly on guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Mississippi State Department of Health as their sources for information on COVID-19 and, in many instances, received this information on an individual basis. Therefore, implementing a system statewide where all pastors in Mississippi could receive education on COVID-19, updated guidelines and protocols as they are rolled out, and offering them a space to provide input, to ask questions, and to receive feedback is recommended.

Technology tools used to help enhance programs and services were now flaunted as essential. Pastors in the study learned new skills and discovered new talents unbeknown to them. Pastors who were more technological savvy taught other pastors to use the virtual platforms that included how to set up their services, record their messages, and send and make available their recordings to congregants. Since the pastors were working with limited personnel to assist with services, they relied on their young congregants to help the elderly members stay connected. These identified congregants pulled double duty, enabling them to develop new talents and skills. The new areas pastors ventured into gave them newfound confidence. S1 shared that "having to address a lot of the key issues myself, I now believe in myself more." Pastors experienced a paradigm shift, and although they will hold on to some traditions, some decided to adopt these new practices and strategies long-term. Shifting from face-to-face to an online platform caused pastors to study more. C10 discussed, "it made me study more, made me dissect God's word more, and I had to be a professional at all times."

During a *Follow-up Results Session* organized for the participating pastors at the end of 2021, they discussed returning to face-to-face services. However, they had a demand from some congregants to continue online services. Therefore, a sustainable training program to assist pastors in developing their technical skills and knowledge is recommended, and the adoption of policies where concrete progress is made to decrease the digital divide in rural areas and reduce the technological inequalities.

Putnam discusses social capital in terms of internal bonding and bridging. Putnam (2000) states that internal bonding is needed "when specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity is necessary for 'getting by' in oppressive situations." Trust is a foundational element of social capital. At the onslaught of the pandemic, pastors continued to lean on their members connected in the community through larger groups such as civic organizations, occupational associations, minority nonprofit organizations, and church groups to assist in addressing COVID-19 with their congregants. Pastors were relieved to have health care teams already established within the church; the health care teams had networked with external agencies and could link their leadership and congregants to immediate resources and services. As social capital is embedded in the networks of the Black church and

is an essential construct built into its foundation, two pastors in this study specifically spoke out about their perception and experiences of the diminishing social bonds between the pastors. One pastor noted, "You don't see pastors gather together like they used to; it's more competition. Decision-makers would call one person, and all the pastors would assimilate themselves together. Decision-makers don't hear us because we don't come in numbers anymore."

Moreover, external to the church is what Putnam (2000) described as bridging social capital. Putnam (2000) defines bridging social capital as building various social groups to find common ground and cause. Putnam states, "Bridging networks are good for linking to external assets and for information diffusion for 'getting ahead' of the status quo." Pastors bridged social capital by working with diverse social and community groups. For example, during the study and still in progress today, Mayor Tolby Barker of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, formed a diverse COVID-19 working group, consisting of representatives from various sectors as well as local pastors. The purpose of this workgroup is to protect the city's most vulnerable populations and prevent an overrun of the health care system by slowing the spread of the coronavirus. During weekly meetings, updates are provided. Pastors in the Forrest County area receive direct and indirect information from this group. S3 discussed how he and several pastors met with the mayor early on where they received information about COVID-19, and they were forewarned about the closing of the churches to abate the continual rise of the coronavirus cases. Internal bonding appeared strong among the pastors; however, it is recommended that the government agencies and health care organizations facilitate social bridging to increase the pastors' linkage to resources and services during a crisis.

Pastors noted unintended consequences and benefits from COVID-19. Pastors have carried the responsibility on their shoulders to visit the sick, officiate funerals, and check on their congregants to offer support and resources. Being a pastor is who they are, and they grieved not being able to carry out these duties. Their core purpose was being challenged. C9 expressed, "In the African American church, we don't bury our loved ones, and it's a two- or three-day thing. So, there will have to be some counseling." Having congregants receive stimulus checks and extra funds for unemployment was seen as beneficial to pastors. In addition, pastors experienced a moment to regroup, reflect, and reprioritize. Pastors saw this refocusing as a silver lining during the pandemic. A recommendation is for mental health agencies, crisis management organizations, health care professionals to partner with pastors to provide them and their congregant's services post-COVID-19.

## Limitations

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of African-American pastors at the

onslaught of COVID-19 and how they addressed it with their congregants. This study was conducted with a small sample of African-American pastors in the northern, southern, and central regions of Mississippi who met the study's criteria. Therefore, data cannot be generalized for all African-American churches in Mississippi. More pastors from different areas of the state may have different perceptions and experiences and, therefore, should be recruited from areas where there was limited to no representation.

## Future Studies

This study looked at pastors' perceptions and lived experiences as they addressed COVID-9 at the onslaught of the pandemic. Future studies should explore the pastors' responses in the later stage of the pandemic and extend the analysis to focus on other races and ethnicities. In Mississippi, 97.8% had broadband width in urban areas compared to 63.4% in rural areas (Congressional Research Services, 2021). Future studies may focus on how pastors will manage the two worship services, online and face to face with the same resources and personnel. Pastors mentioned an uptick in domestic violence and divorce rates, having COVID-19 themselves and experiencing depression. Future studies may address mental health among congregants and pastors and assess the available mental health resources. Additionally, pastors' engagement with agencies and organizations outside the reach of their members was not explored, so future studies should address social bridging among pastors across the state.

## Conclusion and Implications

The Black church has and still is considered a hub in the Black community. African Americans depend on the church for refuge, a safe place to gather, and one where congregants and the community come to collect or learn about resources. However, during the onslaught of COVID-19, pastors were being asked to suspend worship services and later reduce the number of attendees. This study provides an in-depth look at how African-American pastors in Mississippi responded to the COVID-19 guidelines and restrictions with their congregants. Pastors in this study learned new skills, gained newfound confidence, and instituted alternative strategies and practices for hosting worship services virtually. Pastors witnessed growth in the number of people listening to their messages and in tithes and offerings. Not all pastors were able to adopt the new innovative technological strategies. The broadband width in some rural areas is still low. Other factors that prohibit technology adoption and use were aging congregants and people not having internet services because of affordability. The pastors in our study spoke about the loss of loved ones, the inability to have closure at funerals, domestic violence, and an uptick in people needing marital counseling as focus areas after

COVID-19. Thus, there are implications for agencies and nonprofit organizations to collaborate with pastors to create programs and services to address the issues. Research is already underway looking at how Black churches can become more involved in managing mental health.

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## Author's Contribution

Conceptualization (TF, TH, LB, SMJ); Methodology: TF, TH, LB, SMJ; Formal analysis and investigation: TF, TH, LB, SMJ, SL; Writing: TF, TH, LB, SMJ, SL; Reviewing and editing: TF, TH, LB, SMJ, SL.

## Availability of Data and Material

Not applicable.

## Code Availability

Not applicable.

## Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

## Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Ethics Approval

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Southern Mississippi (#IRB-20-201).

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