NAVIGATING THE PANDEMIC: A FIRST LOOK AT CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSES
Navigating the Pandemic: A First Look at Congregational Responses

As much as we would like to have definitive answers regarding the impact of the pandemic on congregational life in the United States, and even with some people and organizations claiming to have definitive answers, there remains a lot of uncertainty. The last 20 months have tried churches and clergy in new and challenging ways. From challenges of public health safety and the use of technology to pressing socio-political challenges like racial injustice, political polarization, and climate change, churches and their leaders are certainly wrestling with a lot of compounding and intersecting issues.

This report contains data from the first key-informant survey of the Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations: Innovation Amidst and Beyond Covid-19 project. Drawing upon the partnership of Faith Communities Today, this survey includes an over-sampling of 13 denominational groups and a random sampling of congregations in other denominations for a total of 38 Christian denominational groups and 2,074 responses. The online survey was fielded from mid-June to the end of August, 2021. This resulting dataset was double-weighted first to account for national representation of denominational groups and second by denominational family, region, and size groupings (see the methodology section below).

Initial Findings

This survey serves as the first glimpse of the project’s examination of how congregations are continuing to navigate the pandemic. That picture shows congregational life is far from being “back to normal.” This should not be surprising. Despite the wide availability of vaccines, the emergence of the “Delta” variant made the past summer subject to the second-largest wave for both recorded cases and hospitalizations of the entire pandemic. Thanks in part to this reality, we find that an overwhelming majority of congregations, 80%, are offering hybrid services with both in-person and remote options, 15% of congregations are solely worshiping in person and only 5% of congregations are continuing to solely worship virtually.

At first glance, congregational attendance findings appear to have matched pre-pandemic rates. Churches reported a median attendance for in-person worship at 45 with a median attendance for online worship at 20 for a total median attendance of 65. This number correlates with the pre-pandemic data from the 2020 Faith Communities Today Survey that also found congregations had a median attendance of 65. Such a comparison would suggest congregational attendance has remained stable, but a closer look shows what most churches know – there has been a decline in congregational attendance, but it currently is not as severe as might be expected nor shared equally by all churches.
### Churches and the Pandemic

#### Attendance
- **Median attendance (in person & online combined)**
  - 2021: 65
  - 2019: 75

#### Vaccine
- **62%** of church leaders encouraged getting vaccinated

#### Restrictions
- **41%** of churches struggled to adapt to restrictions

#### Need
- **41%** of churches had increased donations from members

#### Ministry
- **33%** of clergy 2020 was not the hardest ministry year – for it was!

#### Further Information
- **12%** (median) worship attendance decline in 18 months.
- **88%** of churches suspended in person worship for some time.
- **93%** of these have resumed in person worship now.
- **15%** only in person worship
- **5%** only online worship
- **80%** hybrid worship (both in person and online)
- **83%** of churches had at least one member test positive
- **37%** had at least 1 staff test positive
- **17%** had one or more member die of COVID-19 and
- **15%** had staffing changes due to pandemic
- **15%** of churches stopped fellowship events during pandemic
- **54%** of congregations served as test or vaccine sites
- **8%** of churches had more seeking spiritual guidance
- **37%** of churches had more for financial assistance
- **68%** of churches say they will emerge stronger than before
- **69%** of churches said they embraced new ministry opportunities
- **18%** of pastors seriously considered leaving ministry a few times or more.
- **67%** it was!
- **62%** of churches had at least one member test positive
- **31%** of churches had more come for food assistance
- **24%** of churches had moderate to severe conflict around COVID restrictions
- **6%** of churches had at least one member die of COVID-19 and
- **25%** of churches had more for financial assistance
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When asked what their attendance was in 2019, congregations in this study reported a median attendance of 75 people. This means there has been a 12% decline overall in only two years. For comparison, the pre-pandemic 2020 Faith Communities Today survey found a 5-year median attendance decline of 7% for all US congregations. But not all churches are experiencing the pandemic equally. In certain churches, decline is happening rapidly, while others are growing. Since 2019, 35% of churches reported a decline of 25% or more in attendance and another 22% of congregations reported a decline greater than 5% but less than 25%. Additionally, 15% of churches reported a relatively stable attendance in the past two years. Yet 28% of congregations reported growth in the past two years, with 18% of these reporting significant growths of over 25% (Table 1). These numbers reveal how turbulent and chaotic the last two years have been on US congregations. At the same time, when compared to pre-pandemic data, these numbers show how the pandemic has not created a new problem. Rather, it seems to be exacerbating and accelerating declining trends that congregations have been facing for years (see the 2020 Faith Communities Today report).

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2019 to 2021 (Median -12%)</th>
<th>Rates of Change</th>
<th>2015 to 2020 (Median -7%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>35%</td>
<td>Decline -25% or more</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22%</td>
<td>Decline btw. -5.0% &amp; -24.9%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15%</td>
<td>Stable btw. -4.9 &amp; +4.9%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11%</td>
<td>Growth btw. +5.0% &amp; +24.9%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18%</td>
<td>Growth +25% or more</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

### Worship In-Person, Online, or Both?

These trends in median attendance are affected by the delivery mode of worship services. The 15% of congregations who report solely meeting in person also reported the steepest decline at 15.7%. These congregations tend to be smaller in size with older clergy, are the least willing to change, and had the most struggle to adapt. These congregations represent 40% of Catholic/Orthodox, 8% of Mainline, and 7% of Evangelical congregations.

For the 5% of congregations who remain solely online, they have seen a decline of 7.3% of attendees. These congregations tended to be more mid-sized with older clergy, are the most willing to change, and had the least struggle adapting to the pandemic. While these congregations reported the fewest Covid-19 infections, they also reported being the most worried or threatened by the pandemic. These congregations represent no Catholic/Orthodox, 30% of Mainline, and 3% of Evangelical congregations.

For the 80% of congregations who maintain a hybrid mode of worship (both in-person and digital delivery), they showed overall growth at 4.5%. These congregations tended to be larger with younger clergy, reporting moderate willingness to change, and expressing some struggles to adapt.
They also reported the most infections of Covid-19 of staff and members, as well as the most congregational deaths. These congregations represent 60% of Catholic/Orthodox congregations, 62% of Mainline, and 90% of all Evangelical congregations.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In Person Worship Only</th>
<th>Online Worship Only</th>
<th>Hybrid - Both In Person &amp; Online</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More decline -15.7%</td>
<td>Some decline -7.3%</td>
<td>Most growth 4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least willing to change</td>
<td>Most willing to change &amp; Most worried/threatened</td>
<td>Moderate willing to change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smallest size</td>
<td>Mid-sized</td>
<td>Largest size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More struggle to adapt</td>
<td>Least struggle to adapt</td>
<td>Some struggle to adapt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some tested positive</td>
<td>Fewest tested positive</td>
<td>More tested positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some attender deaths</td>
<td>Fewest attender deaths</td>
<td>More attender deaths &amp; more staff tested positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older clergy</td>
<td>Older clergy</td>
<td>Younger clergy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40% Catholics</td>
<td>0% Catholics</td>
<td>60% Catholics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8% Mainline</td>
<td>30% Mainline</td>
<td>62% Mainline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7% Evangelical</td>
<td>3% Evangelical</td>
<td>90% Evangelical</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

Fighting the Pandemic

For many congregations the pandemic has taken a physical toll on staff and membership. Most churches (83%) reported at least one member had tested positive, and 17% had at least one member die from the virus. Congregational staff also suffered with 37% of churches reporting a staff member tested positive for the virus and 2% reporting a staff member died from the virus. Only 15% of congregations were forced to make staffing changes and, for most of these churches, this entailed letting staff go rather than decreasing hours.

Churches found themselves on the front line of the United States’ public health response and many did their part to protect congregants from the virus and support wider systems of public health. A majority of clergy (62%) encouraged their congregants to get vaccinated and 28% of congregations welcomed medical personnel to address their membership. These figures varied widely depending on the religious family. Among clergy from historically African American denominations 100% encouraged vaccinations, while 77% of Mainline Protestant clergy, 49% of Catholic/Orthodox clergy and 41% of Evangelical Protestant clergy publicly encouraged their attendees to get vaccinated. Within majority Latino churches from various denominations, 65% of their clergy encouraged the vaccine. Only 8% of churches, however, volunteered to serve as either a testing or vaccination site, most of which were larger churches. Clearly, there is room for greater cooperation between churches and public health officials. Clergy have the authority and trust of their members; therefore, their voices and congregational spaces are ideal for promoting vaccinations and greater public health (Pew Research, Oct 15, 2021).
As churches encouraged mask-wearing, pushed vaccines, and endured closures, only 25% reported no conflict with regard to safety measures. Most congregations (52%) reported mild conflict with another 17% reporting moderate. A final 7% of congregations reported severe conflict over efforts to enact safety measures.

Congregational Programming

Although challenges to Sunday morning worship have been the primary focus for many researchers and practitioners throughout the pandemic, other programming was drastically altered as well. Some programming went online whereas other programming was discontinued altogether.

Church programming including Committee and Board Meetings, Adult Religious Education, and Prayer and Meditation Groups more easily made the transition to either online or hybrid formats. Most striking from these findings, however, was that throughout a pandemic when people around the country were experiencing severe isolation, over half of the churches (54%) reported completely discontinuing fellowship events, rather than moving this community-building practice online.

Community Service activities, on the other hand, were more likely to remain in person and for good reason. Over 30% of congregations saw the demands for food assistance, counseling, and spiritual demands grow over the course of the pandemic, and close to 25% saw needs for financial assistance grow. Fortunately, many congregations (41%) also saw their giving increase to help meet this growing demand. Not all congregations witnessed such an increase, and 30% reported a decline in giving. Those who did have the money to meet the increased need, however, might have experienced a decline in human resources. Churches reported that only 15% of regularly participating adults were volunteering. This represents a significant drop from the pre-pandemic Faith Communities Today survey level of 40% of participants being volunteers. In the same way that supply chains have been drastically upended by the pandemic, so too have many congregational ministry systems been disrupted.
Clergy and Congregational Wellbeing

We all know clergy are struggling, but perhaps not as much as we might think. Two-thirds of clergy (67%) have thought at least once in the past 12 months that this was the hardest year of their ministry, with 12% and 17% having this thought fairly or very often. For one-third of pastors, however, this was not their hardest year of ministry. Sizable majorities of clergy remained committed to their vocation. Three in four ministers never once doubted their calling (76%) nor considered leaving their church this year (79%), although 37% seriously considered leaving pastoral ministry as a whole at least once, and 20% reported having this thought once or twice. One in 10 clergy (10%) reported that a few times over the past year they seriously considered leaving pastoral ministry, and another 8% said they had thought about it fairly or very often.

Figure 2

The Hardest Ministry Year Ever

Despite all the challenges that Covid-19 and the past 20 months have thrown at congregations, there does remain a sense of optimism. Most congregations are generally optimistic about their church’s continued existence, future directions, and new ministry opportunities. Most, 68%, think their congregation will emerge from the pandemic stronger than before.

The pandemic, however, is not over and a good many congregations continue to struggle. The question remains as to how long congregations can continue to weather the challenges the pandemic has brought. While over 50% of congregations disagreed that they struggled to adapt to restrictions, another 40% agreed that they did struggle. 40% also agreed that their ministries suffered major disruptions, and 42% of congregations struggled to maintain contact and a sense of community with their membership. Finally, nearly a third (30%) agreed the financial viability of their congregation has been put at risk because of the pandemic.
While certainly much of the data surrounding congregational attendance and the struggles churches are facing are grim, such data should not be surprising nor overblown at this point in congregational recovery efforts. The Covid-19 pandemic has created the most drastic public health crisis the United States has experienced in a century, and it has coincided with one of the most politically polarized moments in decades. It makes sense that congregations are sharing in this struggle. Attendance will continue below pre-pandemic levels for quite some time, but it is apparent in the data that hope is not lost and a solid percentage of churches are beginning to rebound and thrive. The true task facing pastors and lay leaders is that of reminding wayward members of the benefits of spiritual education, the joy of community, and the richness of fellowship with other believers. If they do this, it is quite likely that many parishioners will return, whether it is to in person or online worship. And our continuing research project will persist in recording what happens across the coming five years.

**Remarkable Resilience**

While much of the data outlined in the preceding sections may seem less than optimistic, our survey findings also highlighted a high level of resilience and adaptability. As one leader astutely put it, “Let it never be said again that the church cannot change quickly!” Another respondent shared that “In a certain way the virtual experience gave the church a new sense of what means to be the church in this century.” Yet another observed that “We started approaching the topic of innovation as a choice, then that choice was made for all of us. We have all had to innovate.” Though this is a continuing journey of adaptation as the pandemic evolves, faith leaders, lay leaders, and their congregants have demonstrated their ability to rise to the occasion and will no doubt continue to do so in the months ahead.
About This Study

The Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study is generously funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. and led by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace (formerly Hartford Seminary). We will continue to release targeted analyses of more specific findings from our topical surveys breaking down how Mainline/Evangelical, multiracial, Black congregations, Latinx congregations, and churches of differing sizes are navigating the pandemic. Sign up to receive our newsletter at www.covidreligionresearch.org and like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter to make sure you receive our reports as soon as they are released.

Methodology

This Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study is the result of a collaborative venture of 13 denominations from the Faith Communities Today (FACT) cooperative partnership and Hartford Institute for Religion Research staff. Together a common core questionnaire of 40 questions was crafted by this group. A copy of this questionnaire is available at www.covidreligionresearch.org and should be consulted for the exact wording of items used in this report and the question’s general frequencies. Using this common questionnaire, partner groups conducted an online survey of a representative, random national sample of their congregations supported by Hartford Institute during the period mid-June to the end of August 2021. The survey wording was customized slightly for individual faith groups. A national sample of congregations from non-FACT partner denominations was drawn from a random sample sourced from a national marketing company list.

This key informant questionnaire was completed by a congregation's primary leader in 70% of the cases and the others were done by staff or lay leadership. For purposes of the overall national analysis, the 13 sub-surveys were individually weighted by region and attendance size for their faith group. Then responses from each partner denomination and the random sample were combined into an aggregated dataset.

Through the use of statistical weights, this data was adjusted to be proportionate to a group's representation in the total population of congregations in the United States as well as adjusted for size and regional distribution using a combination of 2010 US Religion Census, the 2018/19 National Congregations Study, and the 2020 Faith Communities Today research.

The aggregated dataset includes responses from a total of 2,074 (1,612 usable surveys after weighting) congregations from 38 denominations. The estimated response rate for the overall survey was 30%. Sub-survey response rates ranged from 10% to 80%. Sampling error for a survey using this method can be only roughly estimated. We believe a conservative estimate is +/- 4% at the 95% confidence level.