Religious Education During the Pandemic: A Tale of Challenge and Creativity
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Over the past two years, researchers, practitioners, and journalists have given significant attention to the way the pandemic has impacted congregational worship, from its gathering modalities to trends in attendance. Worship, however, is only one component of how congregations shape their communities. Little research has explored another key function of churches – that of nurturing the faith in the next generation of children and youth. Our earlier studies from summer and winter 2021 provided an indication that although worship was being held in person in at least 90% of churches, religious education was still far from normal. It is precisely these types of religious educational programs and activities for children and youth that dramatically shape the next generations of church participants, suggesting that these pandemic challenges and adaptations will have much longer-term consequences for religious communities.

For many Christians, their earliest memories of religious life are not participating in worship but rather their involvement in Sunday School or attending children’s programming. Most data shows that this dimension of the congregational reality suffered greatly throughout the pandemic. Until recently, scholars and religious leaders attributed the diminishment of religious education programming to the lack of vaccines available to children and youth coupled with an already high volume of remote education. Today, however, nearly all schools have been in-person for over a year. Likewise, those 12 and older have been approved for the vaccine since May 2021 (16+ in Dec 2020) and children aged 5-11 were approved for the vaccine in November 2021.

Our team at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research decided to focus on the topic of Religious Education with our March 2022 survey. This report, based on data from the third key-informant survey of the Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations: Innovation Amidst and Beyond Covid-19 project, includes an over-sampling of 14 denominational groups and a random sampling of congregations in other denominations for a total of 31 Christian denominational groups and 615 responses. This online survey was fielded throughout the month of March 2022 and the resulting dataset was weighted to improve its national representativeness (see methodology section below).

From our Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC) survey series, it is clear that religious educational programming has been slow to adapt and recover from the pandemic. Our initial survey of the study conducted in summer 2021 showed that the participation of children and youth had decreased for 60% of churches and adult involvement in religious education dropped in 51% of congregations. As the most recent March 2022 survey shows, while 46% of congregations surveyed agreed that their education programming had continued without major disruption, half had faced major disruption.

Such responses exemplify the trend that the pandemic has not affected all congregations in the same way. The current survey shows that smaller churches, those in the mainline tradition, and churches that did not quickly return to a modified in-person education program suffered more during the past two years. It is also clear that virtual religious education did not work well for younger children and youth, though it has benefited adult education efforts. Based on open-ended comments, religious education is being reconceptualized for a significant group of churches, discontinued for a smaller percentage, and is back to “business as usual” for the remaining congregations.
Pandemic Trends in Children’s and Youth Religious Education

Pre-pandemic

Religious Education for children and youth is highly important for most churches. In our 2020 pre-pandemic survey of over 15,000 congregations, nearly three-fifths of churches (57%) claimed to place “a lot of emphasis” on child and youth educational programming like Sunday school. Only 12% of churches reported not having such programming, and for the vast majority of these it was because they had very few children in their churches.

Summer 2021

Our initial pandemic survey found 27% of churches had stopped educational programming for children and youth altogether. Roughly half (46%) of respondents explained that their church conducted this programming in either online or hybrid formats. In terms of the number of children participating in religious education, whatever the mode of delivery, we found participation had decreased for 60% of churches, with only 8% claiming an increase in participation.

November 2021

Several months later, more programs (16%) reported an increase in participation, but roughly the same percentage reported experiencing a decline in their children’s programs compared to six months before (57%). When asked about their level of emphasis with regard to children’s religious education compared to the pre-pandemic 2020 survey, churches reported a significant decline. The strong emphasis on children’s religious education fell from 57% of churches to just 43%.

March 2022

Currently, 46% of churches agree that their religious educational programming has continued without major disruption throughout the pandemic, and 50% disagree.

Figure 1

Religious Education Continued Without Major Disruption (% of All Congregations)

Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research
Based on respondents’ answers to similar questions regarding 2019 involvement, children’s (0-12) participation is down on average by 30% and youth (13-17) involvement in religious education programs is down by 40%. Although congregational and program size varies widely, churches are currently averaging a median of five children and two youths in their educational programming overall for a median sized church of 75 worship attendees.

When asked whether and how churches were offering religious education for children and youth, our data clearly showed that in-person programs are the most widespread option. The second most-often selected choice was closing the program (at least temporarily). While respondents often cited moving online or offering a hybrid approach as a creative adaptation, few congregations chose this route with religious education for the younger children and youth. Analysis showed that those who closed their programs had the greatest decline in involvement even after they restarted. Likewise, churches that moved religious education online lost a higher percentage of participants than churches who modified their efforts with safety protocols but continued meeting in person either outdoors or in small groups.

Throughout the pandemic, many congregations have struggled to cultivate consistent and reliable volunteers for ministry programming. Overall volunteering has been significantly down since the pandemic, from roughly 40% of the membership in early 2020 to 20% in March 2022. Given this pattern and the fact that lay volunteers make up the bulk of Children’s and Youth education programming, it is not surprising that 57% of churches agreed they had volunteer challenges in the education program during the past two years. For Children’s education, lay volunteers are responsible for running the ministry in 57% of churches, followed by the congregation’s pastor (19% of churches) and other church staff (18% of churches). For Youth programming, lay volunteers are still pivotal in many churches (42%), but more weight is put on the pastor in 34% of congregations, and other staff members, such as youth pastors, for some (18%). Roughly 74% of congregations purchase external literature for children’s programming, but only 50% do so for youth programming.
Not surprisingly, smaller churches (those under 100 attendees) were most likely to report both not having children and youth programming as well as discontinuing children and youth programming during the pandemic and presently. Larger churches above 100 persons were far more likely to make adjustments (such as briefly pausing the program, masking, distancing, outdoor gatherings, and sanitation protocols) but also to continue meeting in-person with some hybrid techniques adopted. In the smallest churches (1-50 attendees) pastors were most likely in charge of the religious education programs, while for those between 51 and 100 worshippers, volunteers bore the bulk of leadership responsibilities. In churches above 100 attendees, these leadership duties were shared between volunteers and staff, with congregations above 250 giving greater duty to the staff, such as youth pastors. Therefore, given the significant decline noted in volunteer participation and the considerable other stresses on clergy during the pandemic, it is not surprising that the churches under 100 reported suffering the most disruption to their children’s and youth programs during this time.

**Figure 3**

*Size Is a Major Factor in Continuing Religious Education (RE Program Continued Without Major Disruption)*

![Bar Chart](chart)

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

Although churches with the largest percentage of attendees above 65 years old were less likely to have Sunday school programs, they were more likely to have faced disruption in the religious education programs they do offer. Additionally, Mainline churches experienced the most disruption to their educational programs, followed by Catholic/Orthodox congregations, with the least disruption being experienced by churches in Evangelical denominations.
Mainline religious education programs were more likely not to have a Christian education program prior to the pandemic and to discontinue it if they did have one. For children’s programs, 82% of both the Catholic/Orthodox and Evangelical churches continued meeting in-person, often with modifications.
For youth religious education, 75% of Catholic/Orthodox and 68% of Evangelical congregations continued in-person meetings, whereas only 29% of Mainline churches did so.

**Figure 6**

Youth Religious Education by Faith Family

- **Catholic/Orthodox**
  - None: 4%
  - Discontinued: 33%
  - In-person: 75%
  - Online: 6%
  - Hybrid: 21%

- **Mainline**
  - None: 4%
  - Discontinued: 0%
  - In-person: 29%
  - Online: 0%
  - Hybrid: 8%

- **Evangelical**
  - None: 4%
  - Discontinued: 0%
  - In-person: 29%
  - Online: 0%
  - Hybrid: 3%

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

### Adult Religious Education

Adult religious education matters too. In our pre-pandemic 2020 survey, all but 4% of congregations reported offering religious education for adults and 60% of faith communities gave this activity “a lot of emphasis.” Based on our most recent survey, churches were better equipped to carry this support of adult education into a COVID situation than the aforementioned programming for younger audiences. Fewer churches put their adult education programs on pause compared to their children’s programs with roughly two-thirds of congregations moving classes online or to a hybrid context. By the summer of 2021, adult religious education participation had declined for about half (51%) of the churches surveyed, but only 18% stopped outright. Sixteen percent of programs even saw an increase in participation. In our November 2021 survey, adult programs looked relatively the same as they had six months before, with 17% growing and 50% having decreased.

Our March 2022 survey showed that adult education participation as a whole had the smallest losses compared to pre-pandemic levels, and many churches’ adult programs remained even (23%) or grew (25%) since 2019. Overall, congregations reported an average attendance of 37 adults in 2019. Today they report an average attendance of 39 in adult religious education programs. A median attendance of 15 has remained the same since 2019. Nevertheless, this positive note wasn’t shared by all churches in the study since roughly half (52%) of churches saw adult education program losses.

For adult programming, the pastor has the primary responsibility for education in 44% of congregations but lay volunteers have that task in many churches (38%), and other staff members for some (14%). Fewer than half (47%) of congregations purchase external literature for adult education programming, with most others identifying that they created their own materials.
With adult religious education programs, a majority of churches are offering in-person education programming, though significant numbers of congregations have utilized hybrid forms of programming successfully. Obviously, discontinuing the religious education program produced the greatest decline in participation from 2019 to 2022. Online only efforts also showed a significant decline, regardless of whether the programming targeted young adults, middle-aged adults, or seniors. The hybrid approach showed fewer losses than online-only approaches, except for hybrid senior adult programming which evenly maintained attendance. Only in-person educational modalities (most often with safety modifications) sustained attendance. Nearly all adult programs that grew during this time were held in person.

Perhaps because of the differences due to these teaching modalities, Catholic and Orthodox Christian Churches actually showed growth in adult education, Evangelical congregations remained on average what they were in 2019, but Mainline churches (which more often discontinued or opted for only online efforts) saw participant declines in adult education. It was also true that the smallest churches (1-50 attendees) saw the greatest loss in their adult education program while the largest churches (those over 250 worship attendees) increased their programs by 19% on average.

Vacation Bible School (VBS) and Church Day Camps

For many congregations, Vacation Bible School (VBS) and Church Day Camps offered during the summer had for decades operated as a missional outreach to attract children and youth from the community who were not regular attendees. Increasingly, this programming has shifted to serve the congregation’s children and youth. Prior to the pandemic, 36% of churches offered this type of programming. In 2020, that number dropped to 17% of congregations, and while that number rebounded back to 36% in summer 2021, currently only 31% of churches plan to offer VBS in 2022. It is too early to tell if the 2022 dip indicates a permanent decline in these summer programs, but the open-ended comments from survey respondents suggest both challenges and alternative models at work.
Many of the comments indicated that churches dealt with the pandemic challenges of 2020 in three different ways: 1) discontinued, 2) virtual (often with DIY “at home packets” and “take out boxes”), or 3) in-person mostly outside with various precautions. In 2021, more churches offered VBS programming, but the methods for doing so are less clear. One respondent whose church transitioned their VBS online in both 2020 and 2021 summarized their efforts as “not as impactful as in-person” yet they felt compelled to “keep the tradition alive and ongoing.”

A few churches decided not to hold any activities in 2021, but even churches who did offer programs reported drastic decreases in attendance and volunteers. Some churches continued with an online/hybrid and “home kits” version of VBS. A larger number did hold the event in-person, but it seemed quite different from normal. Events were held mostly outside with adapted programming and a shortened schedule. One said they “went from a typical 200+ kids to about 35. We shortened the number of days and moved VBS to the afternoon.” Another said they meet “once a week on Wednesdays over lunchtime. [It was] easier on volunteers and gives the kids something to look forward to in the middle of the week.” Another similarly expanded the week of VBS to once a week for five weeknights. Overall, most of the comments about the summer Christian education camp efforts had a discouraging tone. These comments indicated that very few of the alternative approaches that were tried truly captured the vitality and excitement of the traditional VBS experience.

**Creativity and the Changing the Landscape of Religious Education**

The pandemic, coupled with declining trends in church membership, has created numerous challenges over the past two years that have the potential of permanently changing longstanding norms in congregational religious education. Open-ended responses to the survey make it difficult to predict how many changes are proactive decisions or merely reactive responses to challenging circumstances.

Aside from Covid-related adaptations like implementing health precautions, meeting outdoors, or utilizing Zoom, many congregations reported shifting away from a traditional model of delivering Sunday School.

**Home and Family Based Education**

When asked about the most successful adaptations they made, several congregations discussed a reversed teaching model where they sought to help parents better “equip their children” with religious education done at home rather than relying upon the Sunday School model. One church called this approach “Family Faith Formation.” This family and home-based approach was echoed by a good many comments. Some called it “parish to porch,” a “family approach,” or “monthly home kits” but essentially it entailed getting the entire family involved in the education effort and focused on building family relationships while also teaching basic religious stories and values.
Intergenerational Education Events

Intergenerational efforts that combined enjoyable interactions with education across the age groups were discussed often. Some focused on utilizing small home-based groups aimed at education and relationships to “spur conversations between generations.” Other churches employed ideas like “messy church,” “godly play,” or what one called “Sunday Funday” to get whole families and congregational members of all ages involved in both interactive and educational discrete events. One church began planning “fun in-person ‘field trips’ rather than age-based classes.” Another substituted a Dungeons and Dragons youth gathering where moral and ethical themes were indirectly discussed. Another church described creating a “Pizza Church” to both entertain and educate the entire congregation.

Technology Enhanced Education

Without a doubt, Zoom, YouTube, texting, and other platforms played a major role in the adaptation of religious education to pandemic realities, but from the comments, many of these features will remain a part of the educational program. Churches noted that having a hybrid program meant more could participate. Recordings of talks and lessons allowed those who missed a week to stay caught up and allowed people to participate on their schedule “on demand.” Many of the online options allowed the education opportunities to be adaptable and flexible on multiple platforms. Quite a few congregations also discussed their increased use of video resources. In a survey question explicitly about this reality, 48% of the congregations agreed to great use of video resources. One church even created their own productions for children to watch during the week.

Other Adaptations

Finally, some modifications might have been due to necessity but might also form permanent alternative approaches to religious education. Several churches collaborated with other congregations in the community. A few consolidated classrooms and combined age groups, while some did away with their Sunday classes and moved them to weeknights for the whole family. For some churches, these decisions may have been a conscious choice, but for others, they may have been necessary to respond to shrinking numbers. It does seem apparent that both size of the congregation and the program modality (in-person, online-only, or discontinued) were significant factors in whether children, youth, or adult education programs remained viable or experienced losses across the last two years. The vitality of the program was further compounded by the numbers of children and youth within these churches pre-pandemic, as well as by the resilience of their volunteers. It was clear that many of these adaptations mentioned might work for some churches and fail miserably for others. Equal numbers of respondents praised Zoom as decried the ineffectiveness of it as a platform for religious education. Nevertheless, it was impressive to see the wide range of efforts tried and creativity of congregations of all sizes when faced with the reality of the pandemic and the need to educate their members young and old.

What the long-term effects of these creative efforts will be on congregational religious education participation remains to be seen in our later surveys. As we look toward the future, questions also remain about how religious education programming is implemented and who will lead it. Traditional models of Vacation Bible School and Sunday School may no longer be feasible in many congregations either because of the lack of volunteers or the lack of participants. As churches adapt and innovate, we see some turning to intergenerational programming and other educational models more suited to a smaller pool of volunteers and participants. Only time will tell whether these directions become a new path for religious education.
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 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 57 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 of early to late March 2022. 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, staff, or lay leadership. For purposes of the overall national analysis, the 14 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 the 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 615 congregations from 31 denominations. The response rate and sampling error for a survey using this methodology can only be roughly estimated. An estimate for the margin of error is +/- 4% at the 95% confidence level.