UNDERSTANDING THE PANDEMIC IMPACT ON BLACK AND MULTIRACIAL CONGREGATIONS

FAITH COMMUNITIES TODAY SURVEY & THE EXPLORING THE PANDEMIC IMPACT ON CONGREGATIONS NATIONAL RESEARCH

"Shiloh Baptist Church Sunday Worship," photographed by Benjamin Watts, Jr., used with permission from Shiloh Baptist Church, New London, CT.
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One of the recurring themes of the COVID-19 pandemic is how the pandemic did not impact all social groups similarly. Factors such as economic class (being able to work from home, having health insurance, etc.) and where people live (in a house or an apartment, in a city or suburbs) shaped how frequently people were exposed to COVID-19 and whether they had the resources to avoid weekly exposure. In the same way, race plays a significant role in how people experience and respond to the pandemic and what resources they have access to. Many news outlets have reported that Black, Brown, and Indigenous people of color (BIPOC) are more likely to be exposed to COVID-19 due to being more likely to work in service or retail jobs but are also more likely to be COVID “cautious” (continuing to wear masks and social distancing when possible).

Little information exists about how race has shaped congregational responses to the pandemic. This report is a topical study of the similarities and differences between majority-Black, majority-white, and multiracial congregations in how they approached the pandemic and the extent of how they are impacted. It is important to note that majority-Black congregations in this study are from various mainline and evangelical denominations, including those from historical Black denominations. Multiracial congregations are measured as no one racial group accounts for more than 80%. This report uses the Faith Communities Today (FACT) 2020 data and the first four Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC) surveys, collected in summer 2021, late fall 2021, spring 2022, and spring 2023. This report does not include other racial groups due to the small sample sizes in our EPIC surveys.
Our report shows that while some trends show a great deal of similarity in attendance patterns and the new numbers of volunteers and attendees, majority-Black and multiracial congregations showed more investment than majority-white congregations in contributing to community COVID-19 wellness, encouraging vaccines, and volunteering their buildings as COVID-19 testing sites. Additionally, majority-Black congregations greatly utilize hybrid forms of worship, programming, and activities. However, majority-Black congregations have been hit particularly hard on financial stability issues, and Black clergy are experiencing a greater decline in well-being.
Previous EPIC reports have shown that attendance has consistently declined for most congregations in the United States, and Figure 1 affirms this trend. All three racial categories saw a decline in average attendance (see Figure 1) from pre-pandemic (PP) to Spring 2023 (S23). Multiracial congregations experienced the highest decline (pre-pandemic 80 attendees to 37 by Fall 2021). However, overall, they had a higher average level of attendance for all four time periods (80 people pre-pandemic to 85 in Spring 2023). Ebb and flow of attendance showed similar levels among majority-white congregations. However, majority-Black congregations experienced the least decline, from 60 (pre-pandemic) to 45 (Fall 2021). Majority-Black congregations combined in-person and virtual attendance had a lower median but remained the most stable over all four periods.

While the first vaccine was generally available by Summer 2021, the Delta variant began to spread rapidly through the country by late summer, and by late fall a sizable portion of Americans (vaccinated and unvaccinated alike) had contracted the Delta variant. The drop in Figure 1 between Summer 2021 and Fall 2021 likely represents the impact of the Delta variant spread on congregational attendance.

**FIGURE 1**

*Combined Attendance Trends Across Groups (In-Person and Virtual Worship Attendance)*

The percentage of new attenders also dropped steeply across all groups due to the pandemic (see Figure 2). By Summer 2021, new attendees represented less than 10% of majority-white and majority-Black congregations; even multiracial congregations dropped under 10% by Fall 2021. Nevertheless, there was an increase of almost double across congregations by Spring 2023.

**FIGURE 2**

**Combined % of New Attenders Across Groups**

![Figure 2](see Figure 2)


Before the pandemic, regular volunteers in majority-white and multiracial congregations hovered around 40% of the congregation and about 30% for majority-Black congregations. By Summer 2021, congregations across all racial groups saw a significant decline in volunteers: majority-Black drop to 6%, multiracial drop to 15% and majority-white drop to 20% (see Figure 3). As of Spring 2023, Black congregations are seeing numbers similar to pre-pandemic at about 30%, whereas multiracial and majority-white congregations have not fully recovered, hovering around 35%.

**FIGURE 3**

**Combined % of Regular Volunteers Across Groups**

![Figure 3](see Figure 3)

A large majority of groups stopped worshipping in person by Summer 2021. Only 5% of multiracial congregations chose to continue worshipping in person throughout the pandemic compared to 7% majority-Black and 15% majority-white congregations (see Figure 4). Since multiracial congregations are also larger on average, they may have been more likely to go online than majority-Black and majority-white congregations due to already having the resources and technology to conduct online services.
In other reports, we also noticed that smaller congregations, those located in rural and smaller towns, and Catholic and Orthodox churches were more likely to continue to worship in person.

**FIGURE 4**

![Graph showing % of congregations that stopped worshipping in-person during pandemic](image)

By Spring 2023 majority-Black congregations were least likely to meet only in person at 15% compared to 25% of multiracial and majority-white congregations (see Figure 5). Hybrid worship—in-person and virtual worship—remains the most utilized worship mode, with 83% of majority-Black congregations engaged in hybrid worship, while 75% of majority-white and multiracial congregations do so.

**FIGURE 5**

![Worship mode Spring 2023](image)
As the vaccine rolled out in Spring/Summer 2021, respondents were asked if their religious leader encouraged people to get vaccinated during their sermons and from the pulpit. Nearly all (99%) of pastors of majority-Black congregations encouraged their congregations to get vaccinated, almost double the percentage of pastors of majority-white (53%) or multiracial congregations (49% (see Figure 6). This might be due to several reasons. Black churches have historically been leaders in civic engagement, especially regarding health (i.e., cardiovascular disease prevention workshops, breast cancer screenings, etc.). Another factor may be awareness of the impact of COVID-19, particularly on BIPOC communities. That said, due to historical and present-day healthcare/medical oppression against Black/African Americans, like the Tuskegee experiment, increasing rates of Black/African American maternal mortality, and disparate access to healthcare, local health officials may have worked to increase partnerships with Black clergy leaders to participate in COVID-19 relief efforts.

FIGURE 6

% of Pastors who Encouraged COVID-19 Vaccinations (Summer 2021)

During the pandemic, some religious congregations and community centers opened their buildings for use to administer COVID-19 tests and vaccinations. When congregational leaders were asked if their buildings were used as testing and vaccination sites, 15% of majority-Black and 9% of multiracial congregations said yes. In comparison, only 4% of white congregations said yes (see Figure 7). Although COVID-19 greatly impacted vulnerable subpopulations, this may point to the commitment and history of Black churches and oppressed groups whose civic duties reach beyond any one congregation.

**FIGURE 7**

![Bar chart showing percentage of congregations that served as COVID-19 testing sites.](image)

Many congregations have struggled financially throughout the pandemic for myriad reasons: issues with renting out their facilities, closure of religious schools, and other obstacles related to systemic injustices. As a result, some attendees increased their donations to the congregation to maintain its financial viability. In the Summer 2021 there was an increase in donations from congregants across all three racial groups. However, by Fall 2021 fewer congregations saw an increase in donations, particularly with majority-Black congregations at a 33% decrease (see figure 8).

FIGURE 8

Monetary Donations Summer 2021 to Fall 2021

When comparing financial health five years prior (2018) to present day (Spring 2023), majority-white congregations led with 49% stating their financial health has stayed the same, whereas only 41% of majority-Black congregations thought their financial status was the same. Moreover, Spring 2023 results show 34% of majority-Black congregations say their financial health has decreased since 2018, compared to 28% multiracial and 29% majority-white congregations (see figure 9). Nevertheless, about a quarter of majority-Black churches (25%) seemed to be thriving financially compared to multiracial (24%) and majority-white (22%) congregations. Perhaps for some congregations, additional congregant giving, and federal relief provided during COVID subsidized the financial burdens across all congregations. Majority-Black congregations still seemed to struggle to reach financial stability. This cycle of instability and dependence speaks to the systemic issues facing majority-Black congregations and the intersections of race and socioeconomic class.

FIGURE 9

![Financial Health Comparison 2018 v 2023](chart)

Despite the financial challenges many of the majority-Black congregations were facing, they reported a similar assessment of their “struggle to adapt during the pandemic” as majority-white congregations. While only 35% of multiracial congregations reported struggling to adapt during the pandemic in Fall 2021, 41% of majority-Black congregations and majority-white congregations reported this. (see Figure 10). Perhaps this demonstrates a certain level of adaptability in majority-Black congregations that allowed them to adjust to their congregation’s needs slightly more easily even with financial difficulties.
A sizable percentage of all congregations offered online and virtual worship opportunities at least once a week across racial groups: 70% in majority-Black and multiracial congregations and 82% in majority-white. However, majority-Black congregations provide more virtual worship opportunities throughout the week. Majority-Black congregations led with 27% offering multiple weekly virtual possibilities compared to 23% multiracial and 15% majority-white congregations (see Figure 11). This may point to the importance of multiple weekday worship activities and gatherings in Black churches such as midweek Bible studies, prayer groups, and celebratory services like the church’s anniversary even in a virtual context.
All racial groups utilized some combination of online platforms, conferencing (ZOOM), social media (Facebook), and video hosting (YouTube) (see Figure 12). Conferencing was most utilized by majority-Black congregations at 75% compared to 42% for multiracial and 27% in majority-white congregations. However, video hosting patterns differed, with nearly half (49%) of multiracial and majority-white congregations using it, fully 8% more than majority-Black congregations. Majority-Black congregations utilized social media the most at 62% while multiracial congregations did so the least at 46%. The lack of video hosting in majority-Black congregations might speak to accessibility issues, like purchasing subscriptions and audio-visual equipment, knowledge of how to use the technology, balancing sound systems with streaming platforms, and having volunteers who can juggle all the above skills. The use of certain platforms for virtual worship may also speak to the traditions and culture of Black church worship that emphasizes engagement and fellowship.
Spring 2023 results show that 41% of Black congregations offered hybrid prayer gatherings, at approximately four times the rate of multiracial and majority white congregations. This may highlight the zealously to gather, and especially for prayer, which remains a frequent practice and coping mechanism among Black adults. Pew Research Center reports 63% of Black Protestants pray daily compared to 52% of white Protestants.

Despite many congregations across racial groups utilizing hybrid forms of gathering for Sunday worship, fewer than 20% of churches use virtual or hybrid programming and activities for seniors, young adults, and youth. While in 2021, much of the programming for youth and young adults was hybrid or virtual compared to senior programming, by Spring 2023, this pattern reversed. However, senior programming in majority-Black congregations was more likely offered in online and hybrid platforms at 26% compared to 6% multiracial and 5% majority-white congregations (see Figure 13). When comparing the mode of religious education,
Spring 2023 results show that majority-Black congregations were less likely to utilize in-person education than multiracial and majority-white congregations but led in hybrid religious education for adults by almost double at 55% (see Figures 14 and 15). According to Pew Research, youth and young adult attendance is declining across churches. This trend aligns with our observed decreases in programming dedicated to youth and young adults in majority-Black, multiracial, and majority-white congregations. This pattern could highlight the need for programmatic change and adaptation to address the needs of today’s youth and young adults in ways that encourage active church-life participation.
All three groups reported providing activities in their local communities. For majority-white congregations, 71% of pre-pandemic congregations agree and strongly agree that they are involved in the community, and this rate remained constant into Spring 2023. However, for majority-Black and multiracial congregations the percentage of congregations that agree and strongly agree decreased 21% and 12% respectively (see Figure 16). For majority-Black congregations, this lack of participation in civic engagements could be due to the social climate, decreased political tension, or inter-generational differences in activism. For example, differences around Black LGBTQ rights, tension with denominational traditions, and issues of gender and sexism. On the other hand, differences in median attender age and health conditions (pre-, during, and post-COVID) and a shortage of volunteers might also have influenced this reported decline in community activities of some churches.

![Figure 16](image)

While all three racial categories have similar pre-pandemic levels of agreement in reporting they are spiritually “vital and alive,” majority-Black and multiracial congregations reported an increase in those strongly agreeing they were spiritually vital and alive in Summer 2021, but then a return to pre-levels Spring 2023 (see Figure 17). While this decrease in strong agreement is 9% for majority-white congregations, majority-Black and multiracial congregations who identify strongly agreeing they are “vital and alive” decreased by 32%.
This perhaps indicates the significance of the pandemic’s impact on majority-Black and multiracial congregations, and a decline in their overall wellbeing. But, more specifically, the boost in vitality within majority-Black and multiracial churches during the peak of the pandemic could reflect a boost to morale that the new and innovative programming and activities, modes of worship, and accessibility to wider audiences created. That said, the settlement into post-pandemic life, increasing responsibilities, and fewer members could have influenced feelings of vitality in the reverse.

**FIGURE 17**

![Choropleth Map of Vitality by Race and Ensemble](chart.png)

**Source:** Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations Study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research.
An optimism scale ranging from 0-16, measuring ability to embrace new opportunities, adaptability of mission work, feelings of emerging from the pandemic stronger, and willingness to change, shows a decrease in optimism from Summer 2021 and Spring 2023 in majority-Black and multiracial congregations. Regardless of challenges like attendance, finances, and decreased perception of vitality, majority-Black congregations remain slightly more optimistic than multiracial and majority-white congregations (see Figure 18).

**FIGURE 18**

![Optimism Scale Chart]

Despite majority-Black congregations' perceptions of a decrease in spiritual vitality, leaders of majority-Black congregations report in 2021 higher levels of mental well-being compared to majority-white and multiracial congregation leaders. However, the Spring 2023 results show a decline in well-being among churches' majority-Black and multiracial clergy lead and an increase in majority-white congregations (see Figure 19). This might indicate that the stress on majority-Black and multiracial congregations is taking a toll on these religious leaders.
Nevertheless, even with this drop in self-assessed mental health wellness, Spring 2023 results show that majority-Black clergy were less likely to doubt their “call” to ministry, with 83% “never” doubting compared to 72% majority-white and 62% multiracial clergy. (see Figure 20). Although majority-Black congregations and leaders' well-being is declining, their “call” as spiritual leaders remained firm.
On the other hand, when asked about thoughts of leaving the congregation, leaders of congregations across all racial groups were more likely to have these thoughts in 2023 compared to 2021 (see Figure 21). Clergy of majority-Black congregations went from 95% who “never” considered leaving their congregation in Summer 2021 to 64% in Spring 2023. This increasing consideration of leaving is double that of multiracial and majority-white clergy. The leaders who reported they had thought of leaving pastoral ministry “a few times,” increased 15% in majority-Black and 19% in multiracial congregations (see Figure 22). Note that from Fall 2021 to Spring 2023, all groups reported a sizeable increase of having these thoughts related to leaving. However, clergy in majority-Black congregations seem to be in a less dire position compared to multiracial and majority-white congregations in relation to thinking about leaving the pastoral ministry.
FIGURE 21

Considered Leaving Congregation

Majority-Black
- Never
- Once or twice
- A few times
- Fairly often
- Very often

Multiracial

Majority-White


FIGURE 22

Considered Leaving Pastoral Ministry

Majority-Black
- Never
- Once or twice
- A few times
- Fairly often
- Very often

Multiracial

Majority-White

Since the EPIC study began in 2021, our reports have shown how the pandemic has impacted congregations on attendance, vitality, volunteers, religious education, and innovative ways those congregations have adapted. For majority-Black congregations, the combined effect of the pandemic and ongoing structural racism in the United States multiplies this experience. External factors outside of the pandemic, such as income inequality, redlining, disparate education, and access to resources, multiply the effects of the pandemic on Black communities. Moreover, internal factors resulting from said influences have also played a part in clergy well-being. The decreased well-being among clergy and increased consideration of leaving ministry or one’s faith community is a shared burden among all clergy, yet slightly less dire for Black Christian congregational leaders. The burdens of systematic racism persist in both individual and collective systematic ways in majority-Black and multiracial congregations.

Nevertheless, Black congregations have historically exercised great innovation, resilience, and adaptability. Throughout the pandemic, survey data shows that majority-Black congregations feel like they can adapt and have chosen various mediums to put this into practice. From using technology like conferencing and social media to promote fellowship and worship to providing hybrid programming to all age groups, majority-Black congregations have led the pathway notwithstanding, participating in COVID-19 mitigation initiatives, like becoming vaccination sites. Black clergy’s commitment to their call and subsequent congregations’ resilience throughout the pandemic has been and continues to be unwavering.
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

The surveys used to compile this report come from Faith Communities Today (FACT) and the Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC) study. Questions for this study are generated by a collaborative venture of denominations from the FACT cooperative partnership and Hartford Institute for Religion Research staff. The survey wording was customized slightly for individual faith groups. The specific wording for questions used in the above graphics can be found on the EPIC and FACT websites. 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 the national analysis, the 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. Using statistical weighting, 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. Sample sizes for majority-Black congregations range from 774 in FACT 2020 to 140 in EPIC 4; majority-white congregations range from 10,073 in FACT 2020 to 2,802 in EPIC 4; and multiracial congregations range from 2,623 in FACT 2020 to 841 in EPIC 4. An estimate for the margin of error is +/- 4% at the 95% confidence level.

“Shiloh Baptist Church Sunday Worship,” photographed by Benjamin Watts, Jr., used with permission from Shiloh Baptist Church, New London, CT.