

The Pandemic and American Orthodox Christian Parishes

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“We tell our parishioners that we expect them to be responsible (not just accountable) Christian adults. And they act that way almost all of the time. Even in times of crisis.”

“People say, Orthodox and non-Orthodox, that when this is over, they will be at church. Are they really going to do this?”

“As a potential game-changer to the western and American way of life, we may well be on the threshold of needing to adapt in decisively uncharted waters in more significant ways that we could have ever imagined previously in order to stabilize our resources (human, material, spiritual), learn together what God is doing in the midst of this mess, and then decide how to respond to the prompting of Christ's Spirit.”

(Comments by the study participants, parish priests in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese and the Orthodox Church in America)

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Executive Summary

This report examines the current impact and possible long-term consequences of the pandemic for American Orthodox Christian parishes. Each chapter can be read separately depending on the reader's particular interests. Data were gathered May 4-9, 2020 through an online survey of 234 parish priests from all parts of the country, representing seven Orthodox jurisdictions. The following major subjects are discussed in the report:

- ❖ Bringing liturgical life online, plus additional adaptations to worship services, religious education, small group meetings, and children's ministries
- ❖ New ways of offering Sacraments and new practices in serving Holy Communion
- ❖ Changes in parish finances caused by the pandemic
- ❖ Physical, spiritual, emotional well-being of the clergy, types of outside support they need, and their principal sources of help
- ❖ Meeting the challenge of "digitally disconnected" parishioners, and how parishes try to assist members with special needs resulting from the pandemic

Special attention was paid to understanding how various membership demographics, as well as distinctive local cultural elements of parishes (their "identities"), have influenced parishes' responses to the pandemic. Several open-ended questions allowed us to learn about creative strategies and innovative practices developed by the parishes which help them through this crisis. Descriptions of these strategies and practices are included in the report.

A few examples of key results are given below:

- ❖ Prior to the pandemic, only 13% of parishes posted online recordings or live-streamed their services. By the beginning of May, the percentage of such parishes reached 64%. Nearly two-thirds of clergy in the parishes with live-streamed services measure their online attendance. Remarkably, 44% of these priests reported greater current online attendance as compared to in-person attendance prior to the pandemic.
- ❖ The use of Zoom (or other videoconferencing platforms) seems to be increasingly popular for offering online religious services *instead of* or in addition to live-streaming. Some priests felt that videoconferencing creates a more engaging experience than simply live-streaming. The report presents several descriptions of how Zoom is used for worship services.
- ❖ Compared to the success of a great majority of parishes in bringing their liturgical services online, religious education and other ministries did not recover as rapidly. Less than half the parishes have organized online meetings for their religious education classes (45%) or small groups (37%).

- ❖ No other area of the parish life was hit harder by the pandemic than the Sacraments. In the case of Holy Communion, more than one-third of parishes (36%) have stopped offering the Eucharist entirely. The plurality of parishes (48%) serve Communion only to a very limited number of members who are permitted to attend services. Just 16% of parishes have found ways to continue offering Holy Communion to *all their members*. The report presents the creative approaches and practices these 16% of priests are using.
- ❖ Clergy most frequently reported feeling an “extreme or strong” need for help in “finding ways for offering personal spiritual support and nourishment to individual parishioners while being physically remote from them” (44%). About one in three priests felt an “extreme or strong” need for “tips on surviving the financial crunch” (38%), “tips on how to encourage parishioners to give” (36%), and “help with organizing youth ministries and activities under conditions of social isolation” (32%).
- ❖ When asked to assess their physical, spiritual, and emotional/mental well-being, a significantly greater percentage of senior (65+) priests, as compared to middle-aged (46-65) or younger (up to 45) clergy, described their spiritual health as “excellent” or “good.”
- ❖ A vast majority of parishes have a sufficient financial “cushion” for a few months if the pandemic continues: 51% of clergy feel that their finances are sound enough to run the parishes without any changes during that period, while 35% would need to make only minor adjustments to their budgets. At the same time, nearly half the parishes have already experienced a decline in giving as compared to what was typical before the pandemic. The median decrease reported by these parishes was 31%. The report presents a number of the respondents’ comments on changes in their parish finances.
- ❖ The median percentage of “digitally not connected” households in American Orthodox parishes is 10% (i.e., households that either have no access to equipment/connectivity or are not capable of using computers/email/Internet). However, the problem is greater than it may appear from this modest percentage. In one-fifth of the parishes, *at least* 30% of their membership cannot be remotely reached by online means. When asked about various obstacles to offering online services, by far the greatest percentage of clergy (67%) indicated that a major (27%) or moderate (40%) obstacle was that some parishioners do not have either adequate access to the Internet or the necessary computer skills.
- ❖ Only 10% of parishes provide special assistance for households that were especially strongly affected by the pandemic. Clergy of these parishes were asked to describe what they were doing, and their responses are summarized in the report.

Introduction: What You Will Find in This Report

The three priests' comments on the title page reflect very different ways of thinking about the effects and possible long-term consequences of the pandemic for our Churches. On the following pages, we will uncover the impact of the Coronavirus on different areas of Orthodox parish life in America, such as worship services, sacramental life, parish finances, well-being of parishioners, needs of the clergy, and much more. We will also share many creative strategies and practices developed by parishes to respond to the challenges of the pandemic, enabling them to continue not only their liturgical services, but also other ministries and activities. The report also presents some priests' thoughts on how the process of reopening parishes for in-person, onsite worship may evolve, as now we enter a new stage of cautiously relaxing restrictions.

The report is based on Phase 2 of the national study "The Pandemic and American Orthodox Parishes," 234 parishes from all parts of the country and representing seven Orthodox jurisdictions participated in the Phase 2 study. Data were gathered May 4-9, 2020, through an online survey of parish priests. Two months into the pandemic, after experiencing mandatory social isolation and quarantine rules, parishes were feeling the full impact of the Coronavirus. By then, however, they had also regrouped and adjusted – at least to some extent – to their entirely new circumstances.

Phase 1 of the study¹ was administered one month earlier (April 6-13, 2020) and was limited to only nine questions. Phase 2 not only included most of the Phase 1 questions to enable comparisons, but also added many more items to delve deeper into the many changes affecting local parish life. Three comments should be made before turning to the report itself.

First, this is not an "academic" study with full analysis of all data gathered in the survey. On the following pages we present only those findings which could be useful and provide insight for church leadership, clergy, and parishioners. At the same time, if a national jurisdiction, diocese, or a parish is interested in a more in-depth examination of any of the subjects presented here, we would welcome such requests and try to help.

Second, each section of the report covers a very distinct subject (the titles are self-explanatory) and can be seen as a mini-report on its own. A few key findings listed at the beginning of the section gives a good idea of what

¹ The report from Phase 1 of the study can be accessed here:
<https://orthodoxreality.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CoronavirusUSOrthodoxParishes.pdf>

they will learn more about in the paragraphs to follow. That is, readers can select their own areas of particular interest rather than read the entire report.

Finally, a significant number of survey questions were open-ended, allowing clergy to share their thoughts, ideas, and experiences. Some truly fascinating insights came from these answers, such as new ways of serving Holy Communion, certain nuances of live-streaming services, and much more. Almost all sections contain some information from open-ended questions. One entire section, "Success Stories and Personal Reflections of the Clergy," is devoted to priests' descriptions of new parish practices and approaches that they wanted to share with other parishes.

We invite everyone to offer feedback and tell us what specific issues related to the pandemic's impact on Church life should be further examined. To do so, please send your comments and suggestions to orthodoxdata@usreligioncensus.org or use the contact form on the website, www.orthodoxreality.org.

I. Characteristics of the Orthodox Parishes Participating in this Study

234 Orthodox Christian parishes participated in this study. They represent seven national Eastern Orthodox Church jurisdictions² and geographically are located all across the United States. See Fig. 1 and 2.

Fig. 1 Percentage (%) of Parishes of Various Jurisdictions Participating in the Study



² Regrettably, the leadership of the Antiochian Archdiocese has declined to participate in the study and, therefore, Antiochian Orthodox parishes are not present in our sample. This means we cannot discover those experiences that may be unique to Antiochian parishes. However, our sample size (234 parishes), jurisdictional representation (7), and nationwide geographic distribution are sufficient to draw reliable conclusions. The data allow us to describe the disruptive effects of the pandemic on the lives of Orthodox parishes., the challenges reported by American Orthodox clergy and many of the adaptive approaches they have taken, with confidence that these descriptions are representative of the current nationwide situation of Orthodox parish life.

Fig. 2 Geographic Distribution of the Parishes Participating in the Study

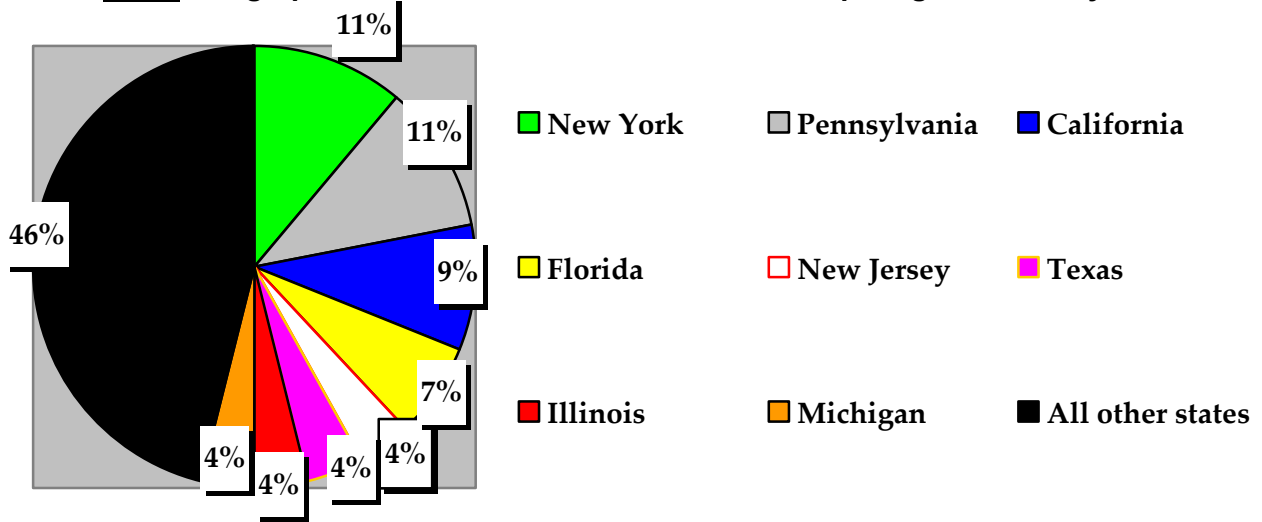


Table 1 offers an overview of various membership characteristics in the participating parishes. For each characteristic, it shows the median percentage of parishioners who belong to a certain demographic category. “Median” means that it is the midpoint: in half of the parishes in our sample this percentage is higher, while in the other half the percentage is lower. Later, we will examine how differences in these demographics are related to parish response to the pandemic.

Table 1 Demographics of Membership in the Parishes Participating in the Study

% of parishioners who are:	Converts to Orthodoxy	US-born	Recent immigrants to US (within five past years)	Live within 15 min. of the church	College graduates	Volunteer regularly in a parish	Live below poverty line	Senior citizens (age 65+)
Median percentage	30%	80%	5%	35%	50%	25%	5%	30%

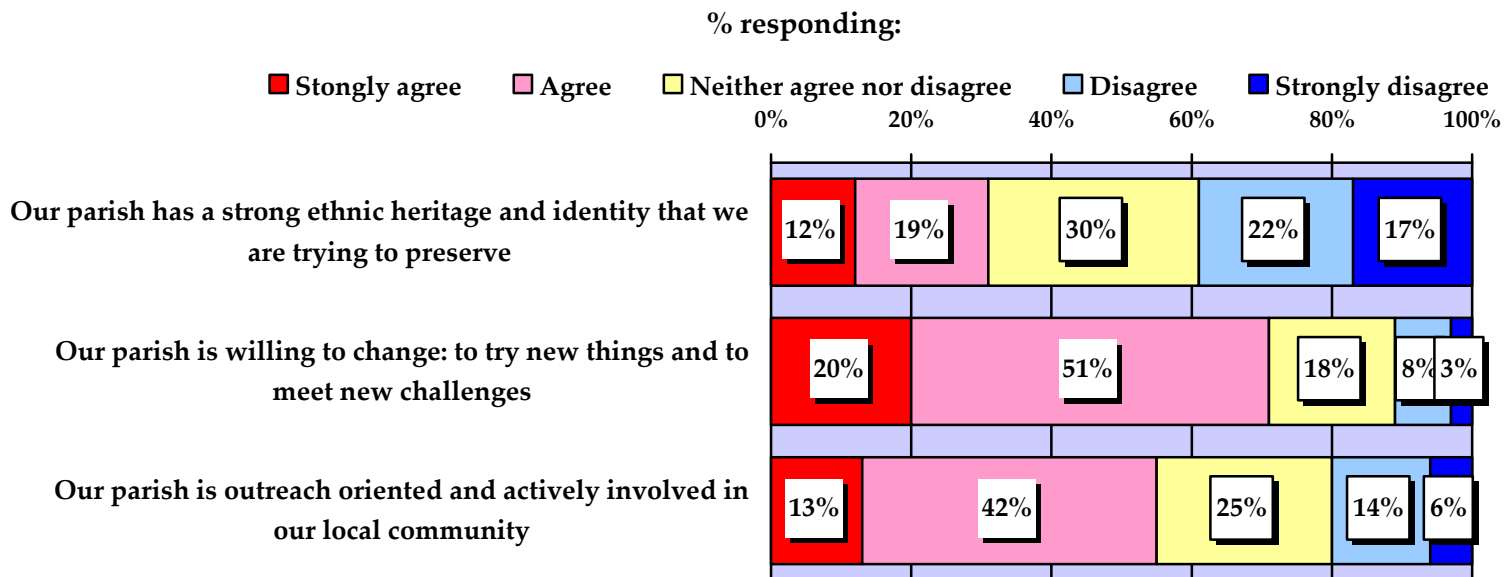
Clearly, not only variations in parishioner demographics may influence the ways in which their churches dealt with the crisis. Perhaps an even more influential factor in this regard is what could be called “parish identity” – various distinct features that, combined, create a unique local Christian community. Indeed, Orthodox parishes organize themselves in very different manners. Some cherish their ethnic identity and make a conscious effort to preserve their ethnic heritage, while others strive to be “pan-Orthodox” and/or “all-American” parishes. Some churches embrace innovation and change, while others emphasize their adherence to established practices and ways of doing things. Some parishes consider outreach to the local community among their top priorities, while others are more insular and have few relations with their neighborhoods and towns. Strictness in observance of the various Orthodox Church requirements and practices also varies greatly from parish to parish.

To better understand the unique identities of the parishes involved in the study, the questionnaire asked, “Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your parish?”

- ❖ Our parish has a strong ethnic heritage and identity that we are trying to preserve
- ❖ Our parish is willing to change: to try new things and to meet new challenges
- ❖ Our parish is outreach-oriented and actively involved in our local community

With regard to each statement, the respondents could say: "strongly agree," "agree," "neutral/not sure," "disagree," or "strongly disagree." See Fig. 3.

Fig. 3 “Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your parish?”



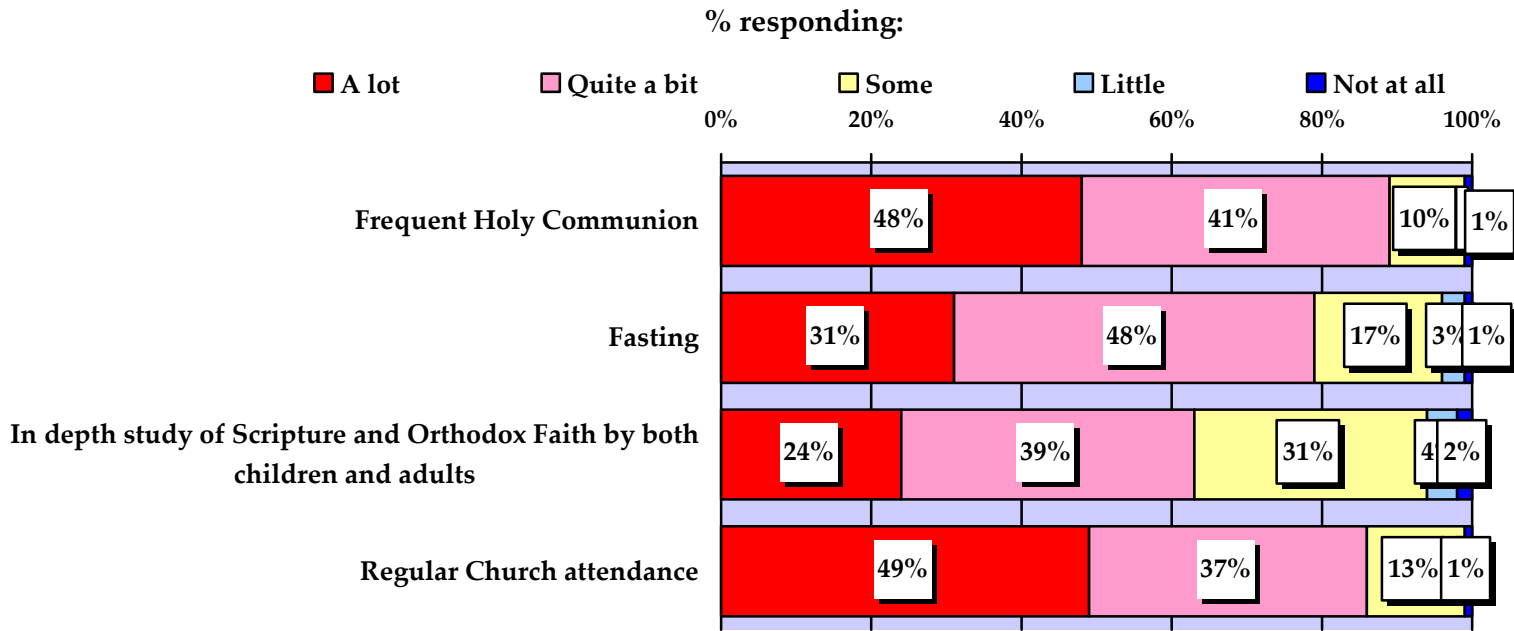
On the following pages we will examine whether the parishes which “strongly agreed” with each of the statements (that is “truly ethnic,” “truly innovative,” “truly outreach oriented” parishes) were in any way significantly different in their responses to the pandemic as compared to all other parishes.

We also wanted to identify those parishes in which various Orthodox Church requirements and practices are more strictly enforced and emphasized and then see whether these more “intentionally Orthodox” parishes differed from other churches in how they are dealing with the new challenges. The questionnaire asked, “How much does your parish emphasize the following personal and family religious practices?”

- ❖ Frequent Holy Communion
- ❖ Fasting
- ❖ In-depth study of Scripture and Orthodox Faith by both children and adults
- ❖ Regular worship attendance

With regard to each practice, the respondents could reply: "a lot," "quite a bit," "some," "little," or "not at all." See Fig. 4.

Fig. 4 “How much does your parish emphasize the following personal and family religious practices?”



18% of the parishes in our sample reported that they emphasize all four religious practices “a lot.” For the purposes of comparison, these parishes formed a group of what we will consider the “intentionally Orthodox” parishes.

II. Adjusting Liturgical Services During the Pandemic

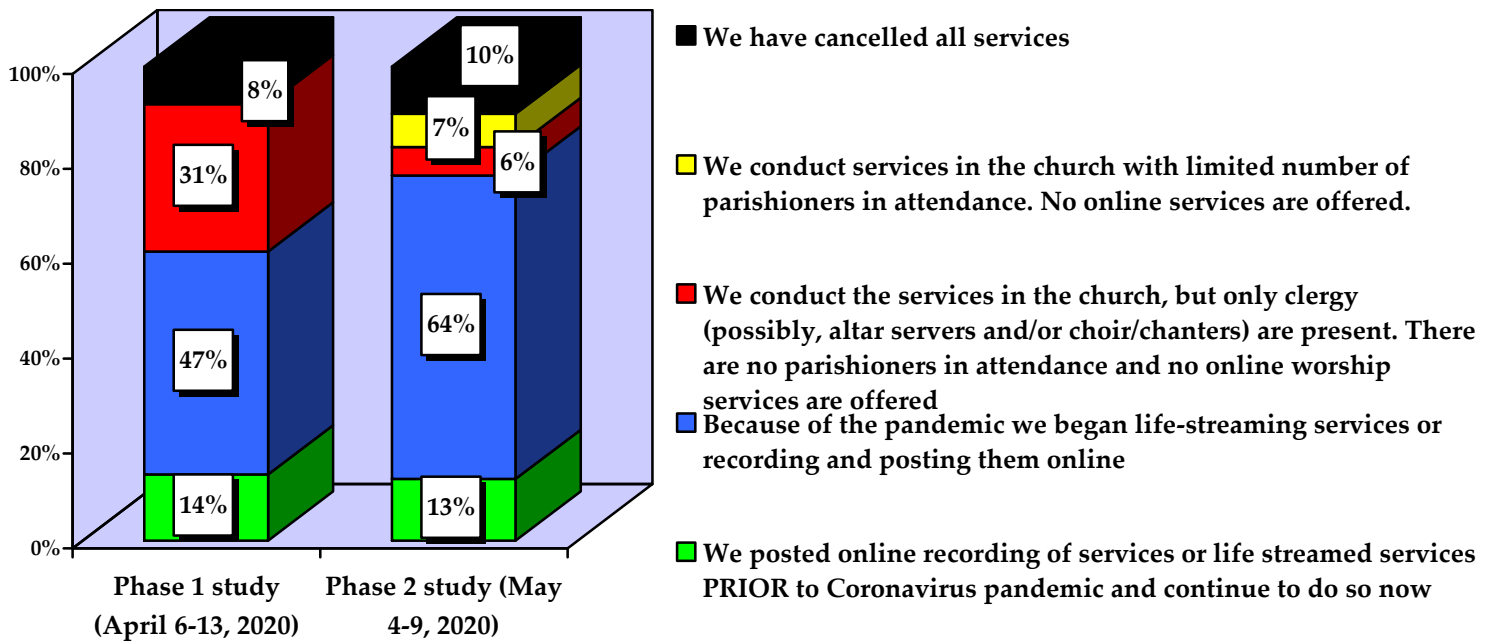
KEY FINDINGS:

- ❖ Between early April and early May, the percentage of parishes that began live-streaming their services after the pandemic outbreak increased from 47% to 64%.
- ❖ A number of clergy indicated that they are using Zoom or other videoconferencing software for offering religious services to parishioners *instead of* or in addition to live-streaming. These priests felt that videoconferencing creates a more engaging experience than simply watching online services.
- ❖ Nearly two-thirds (64%) of clergy in the parishes with live-streamed services measure their online attendance. However, fewer than half among them attempt to track whether their viewers have “attended” the entire service.
- ❖ Among clergy who track the number of people watching their services online, 44% reported greater current online attendance as compared to in-person attendance prior to the pandemic (24% “about the same,” 21% “lower,” 11% “not able to compare”).
- ❖ When asked about various obstacles to offering online services, by far the greatest percentage of clergy (67%) indicated that a major (27%) or moderate (40%) obstacle was that some parishioners do not have either adequate access to the Internet or the necessary computer skills. Nearly one priest in five (19%) felt that simply preaching and singing to an empty church presents a major obstacle for him.
- ❖ Between early April and early May, many more priests have become concerned not simply with offering online services but with their qualitative aspects. While in Phase 1 study only 18% of the clergy reported that creating an “engaging online worship and interaction experience” presents a moderate or major challenge for them, in the Phase 2 this percentage increased to 40%.
- ❖ Only slightly more than half of the parishes (53%) plan to return to in-person services as soon as legally permissible if the pandemic continues.
- ❖ Less than half (46%) the parishes with current online services plan to continue live-streaming after resuming in-person services.

Legal restrictions requiring social distancing and banning public gatherings, in combination with Church guidelines issued by many dioceses and national Orthodox Church jurisdictions, have made it impossible for the vast majority of Orthodox parishes to continue their worship services in the usual format: with clergy, choirs, readers, altar boys, and the faithful being physically present. How have parishes and clergy adjusted to the new circumstances? The questionnaire asked, “Which best describes your current situation with worship services?” The same question was asked during Phase 1 of the study conducted one month earlier. See Fig. 5.

The most important change between early April and early May is that the percentage of the parishes which began live-streaming or posting recorded services online after the outbreak of the pandemic has increased significantly: from 47% to 64%. Combined with the churches that were already live-streaming prior to the Coronavirus, well over three-quarters of parishes (77%) currently offer the opportunity to partake in their liturgical lives online.

Fig. 5 "Which best describes your current situation with worship services?"

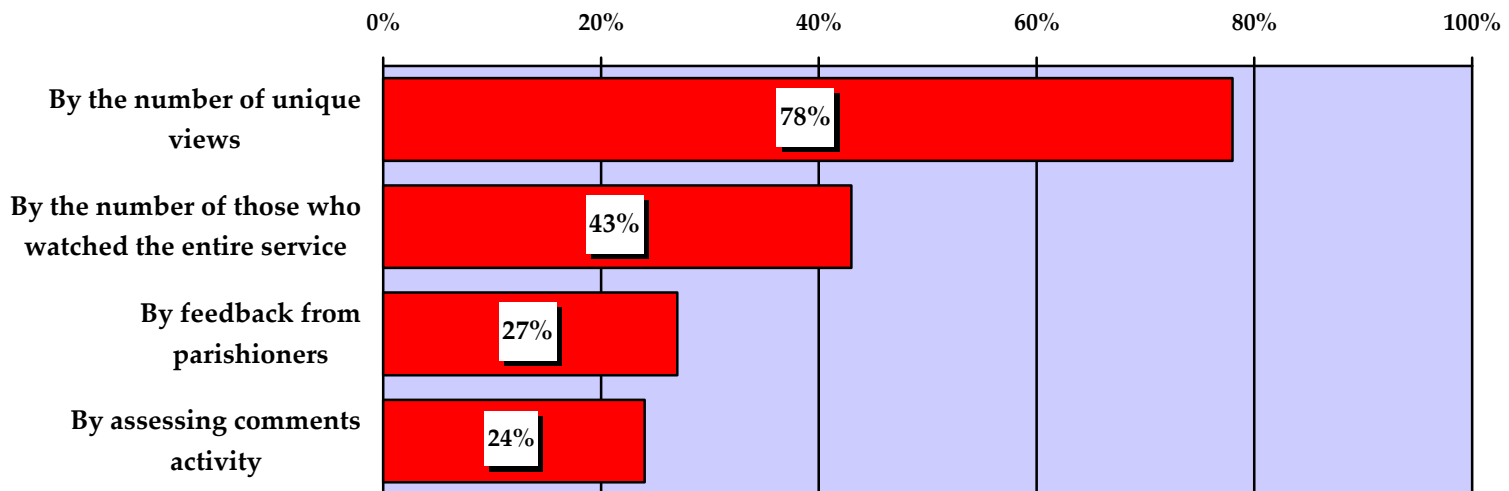


Respondents were also given the opportunity to comment on their answers. Three themes emerged. First, clergy mentioned using Zoom or other videoconferencing software to offer religious services to parishioners *instead of* or in addition to live-streaming. These respondents felt that videoconferencing creates a more participatory and engaging experience for members (who can see both the priest and each other) than simply watching online services. Second, a number of priests indicated that they live-stream their services *and* also have begun offering onsite services with a limited number of parishioners in attendance. Finally, some churches mentioned the practice of placing loudspeakers in their parking lots so that parishioners could “drive in” and listen to services from their cars.

We asked clergy in parishes with live-streamed services whether they tracked the number of people watching their services. Nearly two-thirds (64%) reported that indeed they try to measure their online audience.

As Fig. 6 shows, the most popular way of tracking online attendance is by the number of unique views.³ More than three-quarters of the clergy (78%) use this approach. Notably, whether a viewer stays through the entire service is used as a measure by less than half (43%) of the priests who track attendance.

Fig. 6 How do you measure your online attendance?
(the sum of responses exceeds 100%, because respondents could select multiple options)

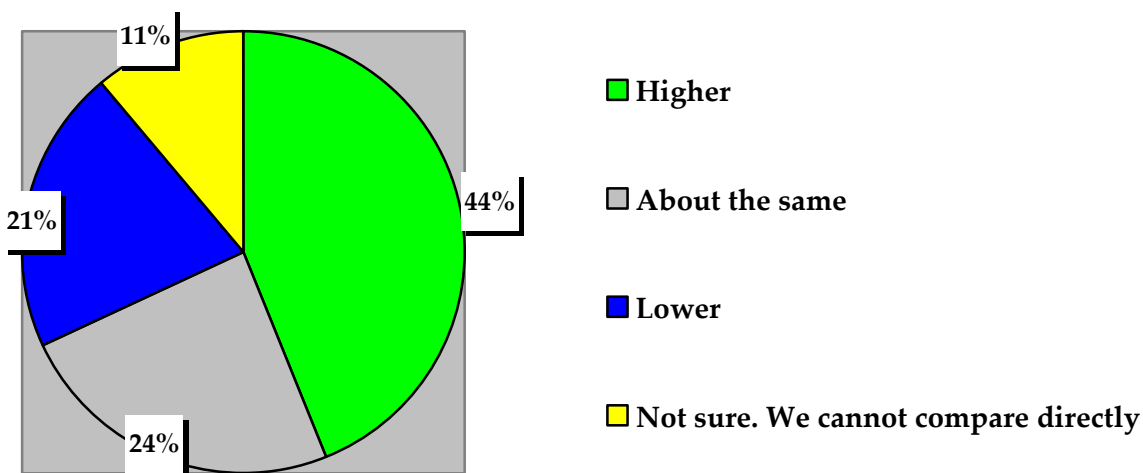


The major challenge in assessing the number of *individual people* participating in an online service via the number of unique views is that the latter reflects the number of digital devices (smartphones, tablets, laptops, computers) watching the service. Each device can be used either by a single person or by an entire family, making it very difficult to measure accurately. It is also impossible to know whether those viewing the service are actually present in front of their device the whole time. In their open-end comments to this question, some respondents indicated that they apply certain “multipliers” in order to convert the number of unique views into the number of actual persons, based on their knowledge of their parish demographics.

Understanding that clergy estimates of online attendance may not be accurate for many reasons, we nevertheless asked, “Is your most recent online attendance higher or lower than in-person attendance prior to this crisis?” As Fig. 7 shows, the plurality of respondents (44%) believe that their current online attendance is higher than in-person attendance prior to the pandemic.

³ In their open-ended comments to this question some clergy indicated that YouTube as a platform for live-streaming automatic counts devices used to view the service (as does Facebook).

Fig. 7 Is your most recent online attendance higher or lower than in-person attendance prior to this crisis?



When further asked, “Approximately by what percentage (%) higher?” the median reported percentage was impressive: 50%. At least two circumstances can explain such an increase. First, it is possible that the ease of watching at least part of the services from one’s own house, without needing to travel to church, encourages greater attendance. A related contributing factor is that people have many fewer options for weekend activities, given the requirements of “sheltering-in” and quarantine in many areas of the country. This, too, could increase the probability of virtual church attendance.

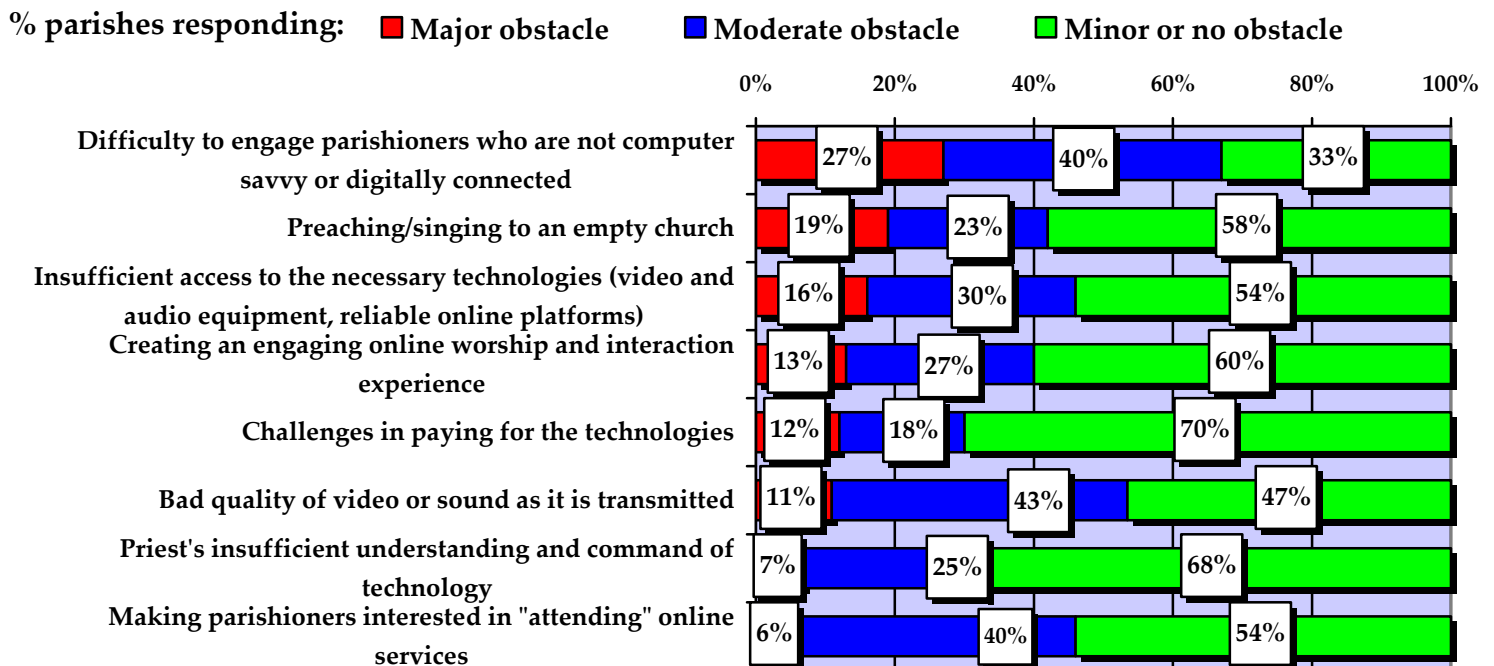
Second, it is also likely that many churches reporting growth in online versus in-person attendance are now receiving “virtual attendees” from other parishes – those which either do not offer live-streamed services or whose services are mediocre in quality. Indeed, some priests reported an increase in online versus in-person attendance of more than 100% (and as high as 500%), which would be impossible to achieve without attracting parishioners from other churches. Projecting this trend into the future and assuming that many churches will likely keep live-streaming even after restoring onsite services, it is possible to imagine a situation in which distant churches that provide an outstanding experience of worship, preaching, and liturgical music might “outcompete” some local parishes, drawing a significant number of church members away from their home parishes or reducing their participation in the local church.

It remains for future research with church members to understand out the attractiveness of “virtual membership” in a faraway parish versus the traditional in-person membership. It is also possible that the most attractive live-streaming parishes will become “halfway houses” for unchurched Orthodox and potential converts, who may find safe “virtual homes” there as they grow into readiness for true membership in an in-person parish. Certainly Orthodoxy tries to impress upon its members that it is an embodied Church that

engages all the senses and requires physical presence. While priests are increasingly verbalizing this in their sermons to their virtual attendees for good reason, the extent to which this message is being successfully absorbed may soon be tested.

Regardless of whether they offer their services on the Internet, all parishes were asked the question, "Are you finding any of the following to be an obstacle to offering online services?" Fig. 8a shows that by far the greatest problem from the perspective of the clergy is that some of their parishioners are "technologically disabled," without either sufficient access to the Internet or necessary computer skills. More than two-thirds of parish priests (67%) quoted this reason as a major or moderate obstacle to offering online services. About half the parishes are seriously or moderately concerned with the technical aspects of live-streaming: either inadequate quality of video and sound transmission (54%) or insufficient access to necessary equipment and technologies (46%). The absence of interest in virtual liturgical services on the part of parishioners was also quoted by almost half of the clergy (46%) as a "major" or "moderate" obstacle. Notably, one in five priests (19%) feel that simply having to conduct services without their congregations, preaching and chanting in a nearly empty church, presents a major obstacle for them.

Fig. 8a Challenges to Offering Online Worship Services in US Orthodox Parishes
"Are you finding the following to be an obstacle to offering online services?"

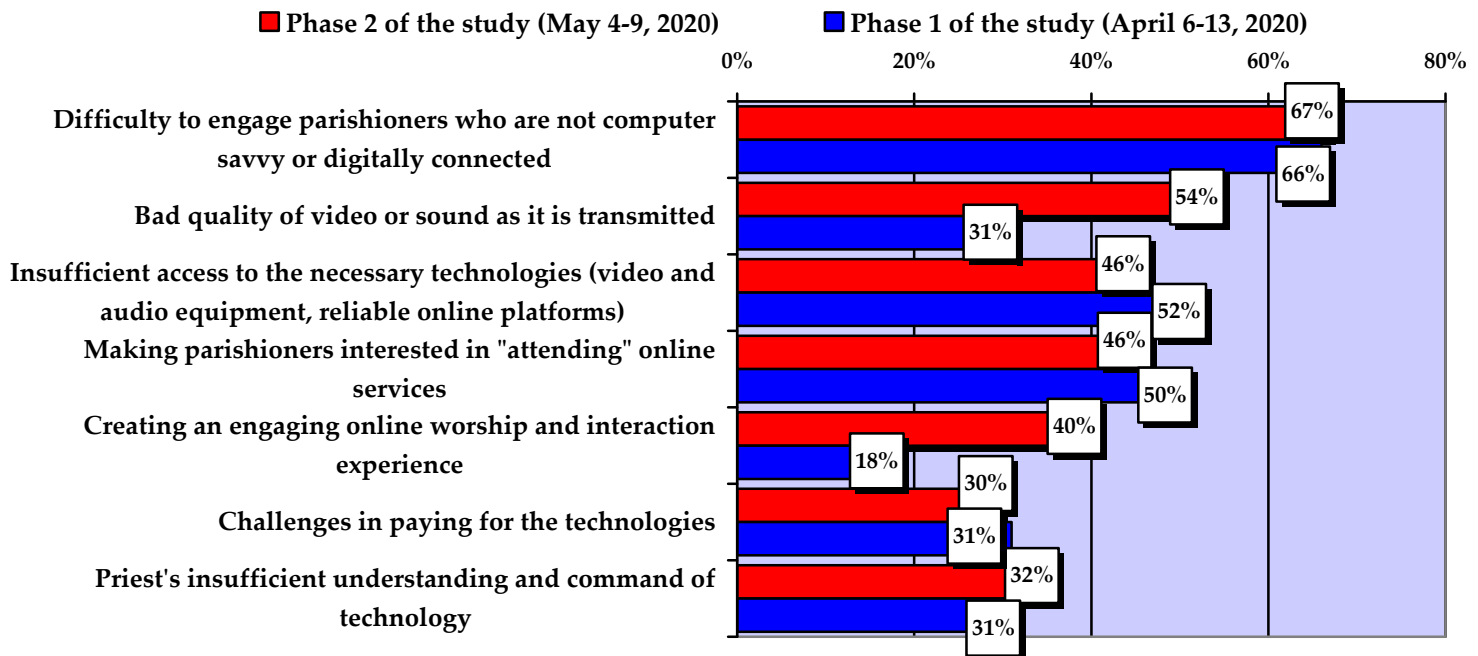


The same question was asked during Phase 1 of the study, conducted one month earlier. Fig. 8b compares the percentages of priests in Phase 1 and Phase 2 reporting each difficulty as being significant for them; i.e., either “major” or “moderate” (combining the two categories).

Fig. 8b Challenges to Offering Online Worship Services in US Orthodox Parishes

"Are you finding the following to be an obstacle to offering online services?"

% parishes reporting each difficulty as being either "major" or "moderate" obstacle



As Fig 8b shows, the most important change over time is that many more priests have become concerned not simply with offering online services but with their qualitative aspects. In early April, only 18% of the clergy reported “creating an engaging online worship and interaction experience” as a moderate or major challenge and 31% said the same about “bad audio or sound quality.” By the beginning of May, the respective percentages grew to 40% and 54%.

We also gave clergy the possibility to offer comments about other major obstacles to offering online services. Many replies were related to one of the difficulties presented in Fig. 8a and 8b. At the same time, several new themes also emerged. First, some clergy emphasized that simply watching online service is insufficient for real participation in liturgical worship. Here are two examples:

- ❖ Online services watched at home, unless thoroughly engaged in both soul as well as body, promote spectators not worshippers

- ❖ It is difficult for parishioners to actually pray along with an online service, and so while we offer streaming services, we also encourage people to pray reader services

Another theme raised by some priests was to question the “theological validity” of online services which include Holy Communion. Here is an example:

- ❖ The incarnational theology of the Eucharist 'served' online seems highly contradictory. Prayer services seem to be another matter.

The third trend in responses was about the absence of immediate feedback from parishioners in attendance to clergy while they pray or preach. For example:

- ❖ Not having immediate feedback. Parishioners easily tell you everything they like/dislike face-to-face, but will say nothing until you directly ask by telephone now.
- ❖ The disconnect I feel when preaching, because there is not any 'crowd' feedback to let me know if people are understanding the message.

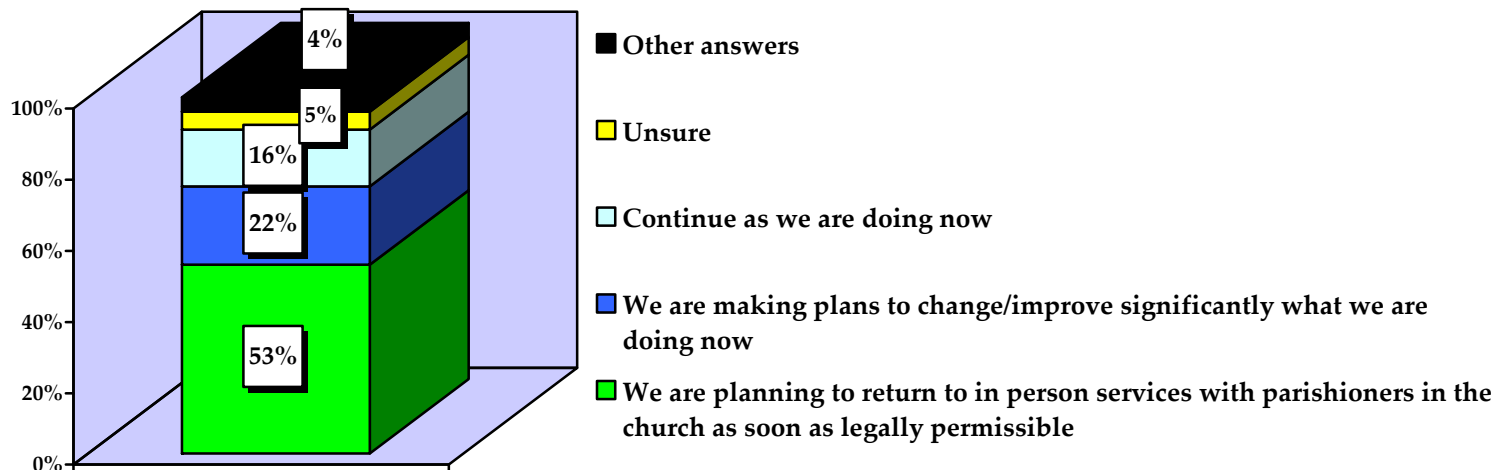
Finally, a number of clergy expressed fear that parishioners may get accustomed to simply watching services from their homes and would not return to the church when in-person worship is resumed. For example:

- ❖ We have been reluctant to go to streaming because of the precedent it sets. Streaming has major limitations for sacramental worship and could create problems down the road when the pandemic ends, i.e., the cure being worse than the disease.
- ❖ Concern about parishioners getting used to the remote experience and it becoming a point of contention once the shelter in place is over

While more parishes were gaining experience with live-streamed services and also adjust to other new realities of liturgical life under the pandemic, some states were already beginning to soften restrictions on social activities and public gatherings. Do parishes intend to resume onsite in-person services *immediately* after legal restrictions are lifted and even under the conditions of a continuing pandemic? Fig. 9 shows that only slightly more than half of the parishes (53%) plan to return to in-person services as soon as legally permissible. It should also be noted that nearly all answers in the “Other” category emphasized that a parish will wait for and follow guidelines of their respective hierarchs.

Fig. 9 Only Half of the Parishes Plan to Resume Onsite In-Person Services as Soon as Legally Possible

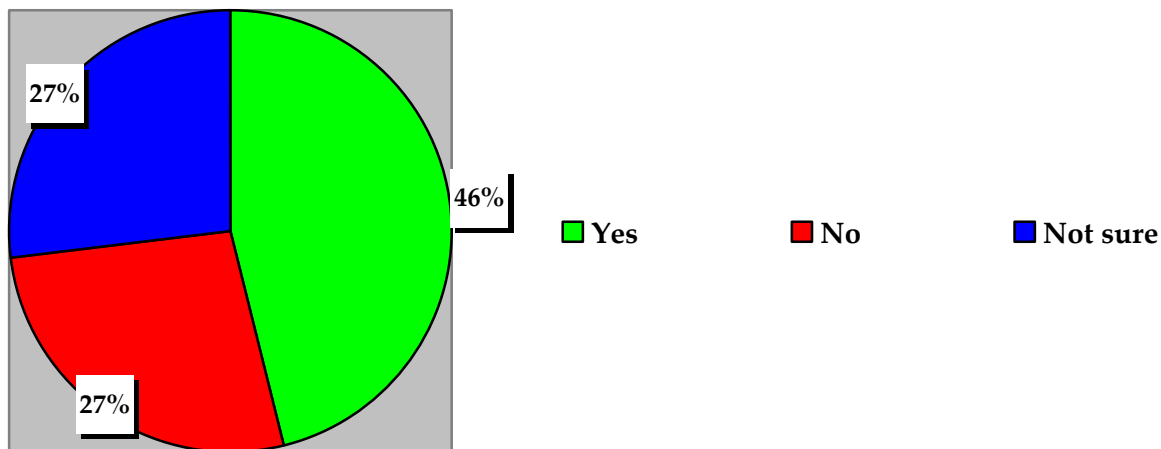
“Which of the following best describes your future plans for worship services while the pandemic continues?”



Those parishes offering their services online were also asked if they planned to continue live-streaming after resuming in-person services. Somewhat surprisingly, less than half of them replied “yes.”

Fig. 10 Only Half of the Parishes Plan to Continue Offering Online Worship After Resuming In-Person Services

“After returning to in-person services, will you also offer online services?”



III. Adjusting Religious Education, Small Groups, and Children’s Ministries to the New Circumstances

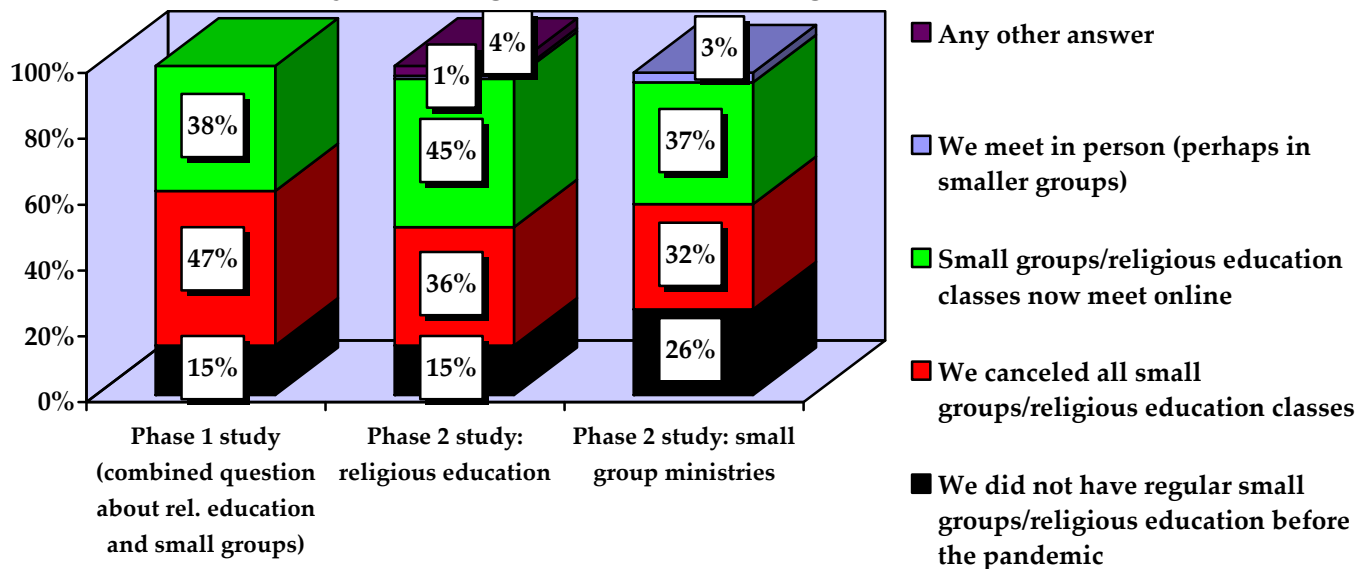
KEY FINDINGS

- ❖ Less than half the parishes were able to organize regular online meetings for their religious education classes (45%) and small groups (37%).
- ❖ Ministries for children ceased to exist in 41% of the parishes. 59% of the parishes are either offering online meetings for children (25%), or some resources for parents to use at home (23%), or both (11%)

One of the major findings of the Phase 1 study was that, compared to liturgical life, religious education classes and small group activities in parishes have suffered even more from the Coronavirus outbreak. Indeed, at the beginning of April, only 38% of the parishes had been able to organize regular online meetings for these activities. Did the situation change a month later? See Fig. 11. (Note that Phase 1 asked a single question about both religious education and small group ministries - “What is the current status of your small group ministries or religious education classes?” - while Phase 2 asked about these two activities separately).

Fig. 11 Religious Education and Small Group Ministries Suffered Significantly from the Pandemic

“What is the current status of your small group ministries or religious education classes?”



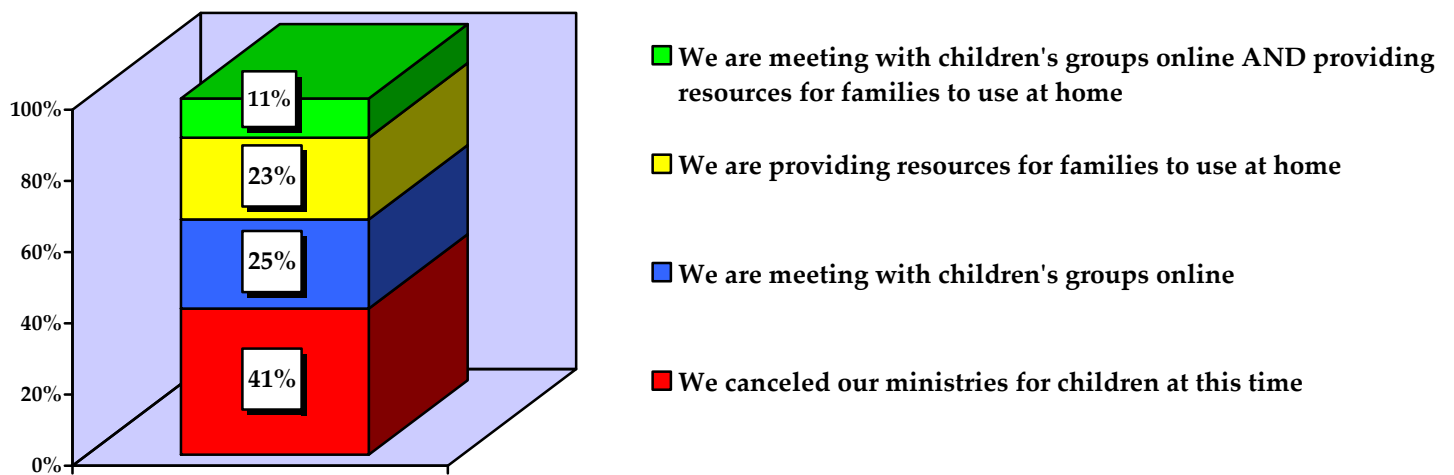
While between early April and early May the situation improved, still less than half the parishes were able to organize regular online meetings for their religious education classes (45%)⁴ and small groups (37%).

⁴ All answers on “Other” category were about: a) religious education materials sent to parishioners either via email or via regular postal services; b) clergy referring parishioners to resources offered on the diocesan or national jurisdictional websites.

What about any other ministries for children: have parishes been able to adjust to the new circumstances and offer something to their youngest parishioners? Fig. 12 shows that ministries for children ceased to exist in 41% of the parishes, while 59% were able to either organize online meetings for children (25%), or offer some resources for parents to use at home (23%), or both (11%).

Fig. 12 How have your ministries for children - below the “youth” age - changed in light of the current situation?

Note: the parishes that did not have children ministries before the pandemic were excluded from this question



The clergy in the parishes offering online meetings for children’s groups or resources for families to use at home were asked the question: “Tell us a few words about your current ministries for children. What are you offering specifically for children and their families?” Below we offer a few “creative and innovative” responses that may be helpful to other parishes:

- ❖ We have a children's sermon via Zoom meeting after each service
- ❖ We organize web meetings with our bishop
- ❖ Online Holy Friday Retreat. Religious story-time videos recorded by families and posted on YouTube for younger families.
- ❖ Our children meet with their church school teachers as a group (online) for 30 minutes before the start of our live-streamed Sunday morning service. Parents also join these meetings. It's fantastic.
- ❖ We post videos specifically for children on subjects that relate to each Sunday
- ❖ There are three Zoom meetings each week. Kids meet online with their teachers for a brief lesson and then are allowed a supervised chat online for half an hour.

IV. How Sacramental Life Continues Under Pandemic Restrictions: New Practices of Serving Holy Communion

KEY FINDINGS

- ❖ Only 16% of participating parishes have found ways to continue offering Holy Communion to all their members during the pandemic. The plurality of parishes (48%) serve Communion only to a (very) limited number of members who are permitted to attend services. In the remaining parishes (36%), no parishioners can presently receive the Eucharist.
- ❖ Among those parishes offering Holy Communion to attendees at the onsite worship services, 19% reported that they had “changed the way of offering Holy Communion.” This chapter offers descriptions of how Holy Communion is presently served in these parishes
- ❖ Clergy who reported having “found ways to continue offering Holy Communion to all or most parishioners” were asked to describe exactly how they were accomplishing this. The present chapter describes creative approaches and practices used by priests, that enabled them to continue offering Holy Communion to all their members.
- ❖ In comparison to Holy Communion, most other Sacraments have been “put on hold” even more severely. Overall, only one parish in six (16-17%) continues to perform the Sacraments of Marriage, Baptism and Chrismation. ROCOR parishes are the exception: 47% continue to offer the Sacrament of Marriage, and 63% perform Baptisms and Chrismations.

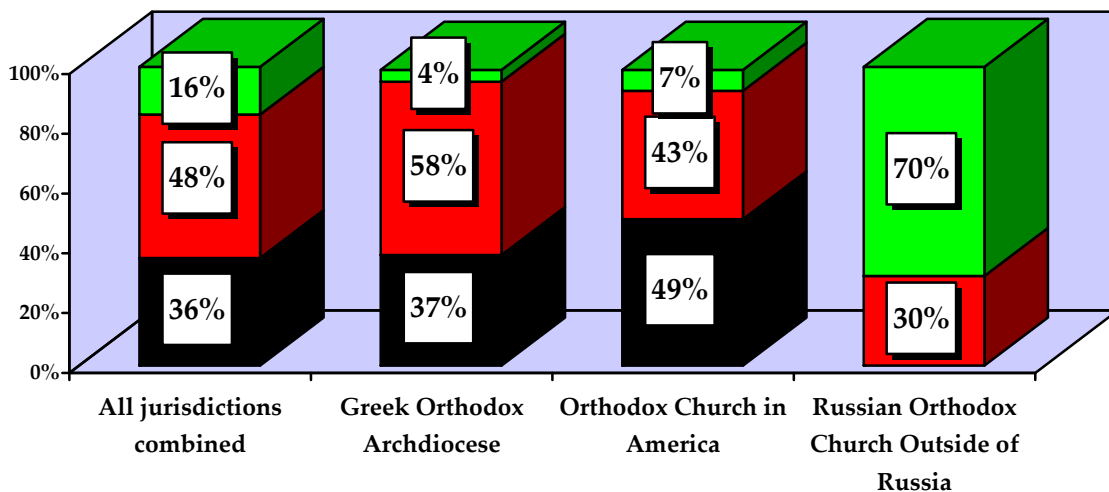
Perhaps no other area of the parish life was hit harder by the Coronavirus pandemic than the Sacraments. Indeed, participation in the Sacraments is essential to the Orthodox Church. However, their performance demands close proximity (and in some cases, direct physical contact) between clergy and the faithful –which is in complete opposition to the social distancing that has been mandated. In particular, Holy Communion is a central and inseparable part of the Orthodox liturgical worship, but its traditional way of offering to parishioners – by the use of a communally shared spoon and chalice – would seem to be problematic under the changed circumstances of the pandemic. How have parishes addressed this challenge? Have some creative ways been developed to offer the Holy Communion in a manner compatible with “quarantine” requirements?

We asked the clergy, “Under the current conditions of social isolation or ‘quarantine,’ do you continue to offer Holy Communion to your parishioners?” Fig. 13 shows total responses to this question, along with a breakdown of responses for the three jurisdictions with significant numbers of respondents. Overall, only 16% of parishes have found ways to continue offering the Holy Communion to all their members during the pandemic. The plurality of parishes (48%) serve Communion only to an extremely limited number of parishioners who have been permitted to attend services. In more than one-third of the parishes (36%), not a single parishioner can presently receive the Eucharist. Among three jurisdictions, the situation in the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia appears to be different from this overall picture: 70% of ROCOR clergy reported that they have found ways to offer Holy Communion to all or most of their parishioners.

Fig. 13 Offering Holy Communion During the Pandemic

“Under current conditions of social isolation or ‘quarantine,’ do you continue to offer Holy Communion to your parishioners?”

- We found ways to offer Holy Communion to all or most of our parishioners (even outside of the Liturgy)
- We offer Holy Communion only to a limited number of people who are permitted to be physically present in the services
- We stopped offering Holy Communion



Parishes that offer Holy Communion only to a limited number of people present in the church were asked the follow-up question, “Do you offer Holy Communion in a traditional manner, with the same spoon, or in some other way?” The vast majority of them (81%) replied “yes, we offer Holy Communion in the same manner as we did before the pandemic.” The remaining 19% of the parishes selected the answer “no, we changed the way of offering Holy Communion.” These parishes were asked to describe how they presently performed this Sacrament. Below is a selection of quotes that reflect different practices:

- ❖ Give individual pieces of the Eucharist with a drop of Blood.

- ❖ Faithful opens mouth and priest put particles on tongue and receiving person doesn't close mouth until priest takes the spoon out. This way there is no touch with the spoon.
- ❖ We use the same spoon and then dip it in boiling water and use it again
- ❖ I use 2 spoons to “dump” (seems so crass!) the Holy Communion in the parishioner's mouth. Between each person I dip the spoons in alcohol, then rinse in very hot water, then dry off with clean, disposable paper towel sections, which are later burned.
- ❖ We use multiple spoons disinfected in grain alcohol after each use
- ❖ We use multiple spoons, soaking the used spoons in boiling water. People are instructed not to kiss the chalice. They do not use the cloth to wipe their mouth: paper towels are used instead and burned afterwards
- ❖ We use a different disposable wooden spoon for each person

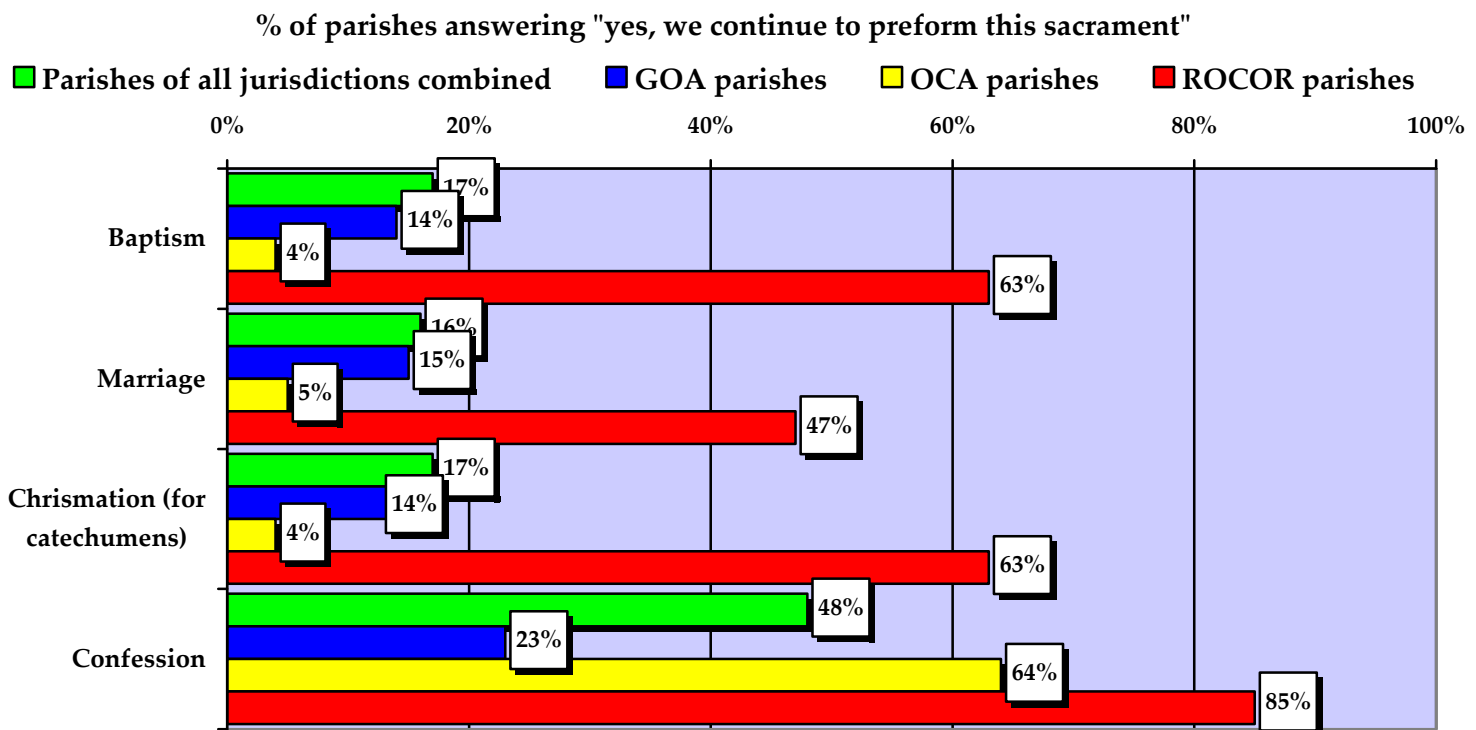
What techniques are being used by the 16% of the parishes that reported having “found ways to continue offering Holy Communion to all or most parishioners”? Below is a selection of the methods described by the priests of these parishes:

- ❖ After service is over, we keep communion in the chalice until noon. Then we arrange time slots when parishioners come individually or in separate small groups to partake.
- ❖ We commune at every Liturgy and after every evening service. Faithful prepare as for a Presanctified (evening) Liturgy. At Liturgy we tincture the Body of the Lord with the Blood of the Lord. The individual Communion is presented on the paten for each to take their portion. Paper towels are later burned. At evening services we moisten the Reserved Mystery with wine and present on the Paten as mentioned above.
- ❖ We offer confession and distribute Holy Communion by appointment to individuals and families throughout the week by using the Sacrament from the previous Liturgy. I use the Rule for the Sick.
- ❖ Weekly we have four one-hour meetings wherein we have an Extraordinary Rite of Confession (offering general absolution) followed by reception of the Holy Eucharist.
- ❖ Church is open daily 12-2pm. If anyone desires to receive Communion, they reach out to the priest, and come outside of services.
- ❖ I prepare individual “Communion Packages” after every Liturgy and together with my Deacon distribute to parishioners
- ❖ We distribute the Presanctified Gifts to families with the detailed instruction how to keep them, partake of them, and pray over them.
- ❖ We bless the bread online.

As Fig. 14 shows, in comparison to Holy Communion, most other Sacraments have been “put on hold” even more severely. Overall, only one parish in six (16-17%) continues to perform the Sacraments of Marriage, Baptism and Chrismation. ROCOR parishes are the exception: 47% continue to offer the Sacrament of Marriage, and 63% perform Baptisms.

An understandable exception is the Sacrament of Confession, requiring less close physical proximity. Confessions are still heard in 48% of all surveyed parishes. Among ROCOR parishes, 85% hear confessions.

Fig. 14 Sacramental Life Was Put on Hold in the Vast Majority of Parishes
Presently, in your parish, do you perform the following sacraments?



Anecdotally, we knew that the need to defer the performance of most Sacraments (which is also often mandated by the respondents’ hierarchs) is a very painful subject for most parish clergy. Therefore, the survey asked an open-ended question, “Would you like to add any additional explanatory note about the current status of Sacraments in your parish?” Several common themes emerged from the answers to this question.

First, many clergy wrote that they hear Confessions online or on the phone. Some were not particularly satisfied with this solution:

- ❖ “Confession is done online. I find it very unsatisfactory.”
- ❖ “Confession only by phone or online, but few have taken up this offer.”

Another common topic was about clergy who were willing to visit in-person parishioners to perform the Sacraments, but the church members (especially, older) were reluctant to have any visitors:

- ❖ “I have offered to the parish to visit their homes to personally administer the sacraments, but with a mostly older parish, many are afraid to have me over.”

A number of clergy emphasized that they cannot even consider performing Sacraments, because of strict orders and prohibitions from their hierarchs:

- ❖ “I want to begin offering Holy Communion, Holy Confession, and Holy Unction to parishioners on a one-by-one appointment basis (at least), but this request was not granted by my Metropolitan.”
- ❖ I am being obedient to the directive of my Hierarch to not administer the Holy Mysteries. However, I do not necessarily agree that this is spiritually beneficial to the flock entrusted to my care, particularly in the case of Holy Communion, Holy Unction, and Holy Confession - which are all essential for spiritual health.

Finally, another group of clergy wrote specifically about the Sacrament of the Anointment and their inability to perform it, because secular authorities would not allow them to visit hospitals:

- ❖ “I performed two funerals over the phone, also last rites. I had my wife, who worked in the hospital, bless people in the hospital and anoint, because I was not allowed to go into hospital.”

V. What It Means to Be an Orthodox Parish Priest during the Pandemic:

Work Priorities, Major Needs, and Sources of Support

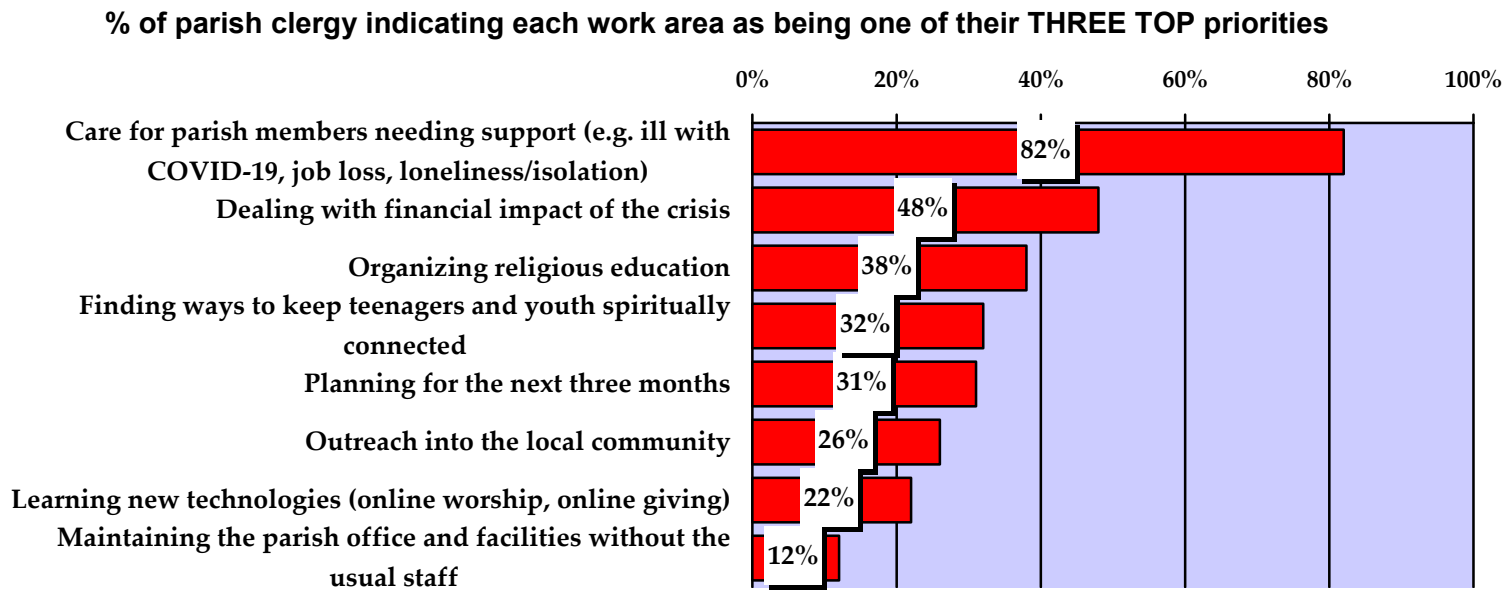
KEY FINDINGS:

- ❖ Other than conducting worship services, the current top three work priorities of parish clergy are: “care for parishioners who need support” (selected by 82% of respondents as one of top three priorities), “dealing with the financial impact of the crisis” (48%), and “organizing religious education” (38%).
- ❖ Priests’ jurisdictions, their age, and their parish demographics significantly influence which areas of pastoral work receive greatest attention. This chapter offers an overview of these differences.
- ❖ When asked how strong their need is for help in various areas of pastoral work, the area with the most clergy reporting “extreme” or “strong” need for help was “finding ways for offering personal spiritual support and nourishment to individual parishioners while being physically remote from them” (44%) About one out of three clergy feel “strong” or “extreme” need for “tips on surviving the financial crunch” (38%), “tips on how to encourage parishioners to give” (36%), and “help with organizing youth ministries and activities under conditions of social isolation” (32%)
- ❖ Clergy were also asked an open-ended question, “Are there any other areas where you urgently need better resources and support?” This chapter offers an analysis of the most common answers to this question.
- ❖ Priests report that by far the most significant source of support – as clergy lead their parishes through the pandemic – are their immediate families. 68% feel that support coming from their wives, children, siblings is “extremely important” to them. Next in importance is support from the bishops: 45% said that their hierarchs’ support is “extremely important.” Support from priests’ parish communities (both from parish leaders and all parishioners) is “extremely important” for well over one-third of the clergy.

The challenges brought by the pandemic shackled up all aspects of the local parish life: their liturgical and sacramental lives, finances, ministries, personal circumstances and needs of parishioners, the ways of communication among parishioners, and between parishioners and clergy. As many new pressing issues emerged, the “job description,” work load and priorities of the parish priests have changed as well. Besides worship services, which tasks today take today most of the clergy attention? The questionnaire offered clergy the list of eight work areas and asked to choose their current top three priorities.

Fig. 15 shows that one concern occupies the minds of the vast majority (82%) of the priests: their members who need support in these difficult times. The distant second and third areas which are on the top of clergy agenda are dealing with financial difficulties brought by the pandemic (selected by 48% of the priests among top priorities) and organizing religious education in the parishes (38%).

Fig. 15 Work Priorities of the Clergy in the Times of Pandemic:



“Care for parish members needing support” was chosen among top three work priorities by far the greatest percentage of all various categories of the clergy: GOA, OCA, and ROCOR priests; younger (up to 45), middle-aged (46-65) and older (65+) clergy. At the same time, depending on jurisdiction and age of the priests certain work areas received significantly greater attention as compared to other categories of the clergy. In summary:

- ❖ Compared to OCA and ROCOR priests, GOA clergy are especially concerned with “dealing with financial impact of the crisis” and “finding ways to keep teenagers and youth spiritually connected”
- ❖ Significantly more ROCOR clergy than the priests of other jurisdictions selected “planning for the next three months” among their top priorities
- ❖ Compared to other age categories, the younger clergy (up to 45) are paying more attention to “organizing religious education” and “finding ways to keep teenagers and youth spiritually connected”
- ❖ Differently, senior priests (65+) focus much more on “dealing with financial impact of the crisis” than the younger (up to 45) and middle-aged (46-65) clergy

We found that the demography of a parish (the percentage of parishioners in certain demographic categories) is related to how much attention clergy give to particular work areas. In short:

- ❖ In the parishes with high percentage of college graduates, significantly more clergy reported that “planning for the next three months” is on the list of their top three priorities
- ❖ In the parishes with high percentage of immigrants (persons born outside of US), significantly more clergy reported that “finding ways to keep teenagers and youth spiritually connected” is on the list of their top three priorities
- ❖ In the parishes with high percentage of low income households, significantly more clergy reported that “finding ways to keep teenagers and youth spiritually connected” and “organizing religious education” are on the list of their top three priorities

What types of support do Orthodox priests need when dealing with the uncharted waters of this pandemic?

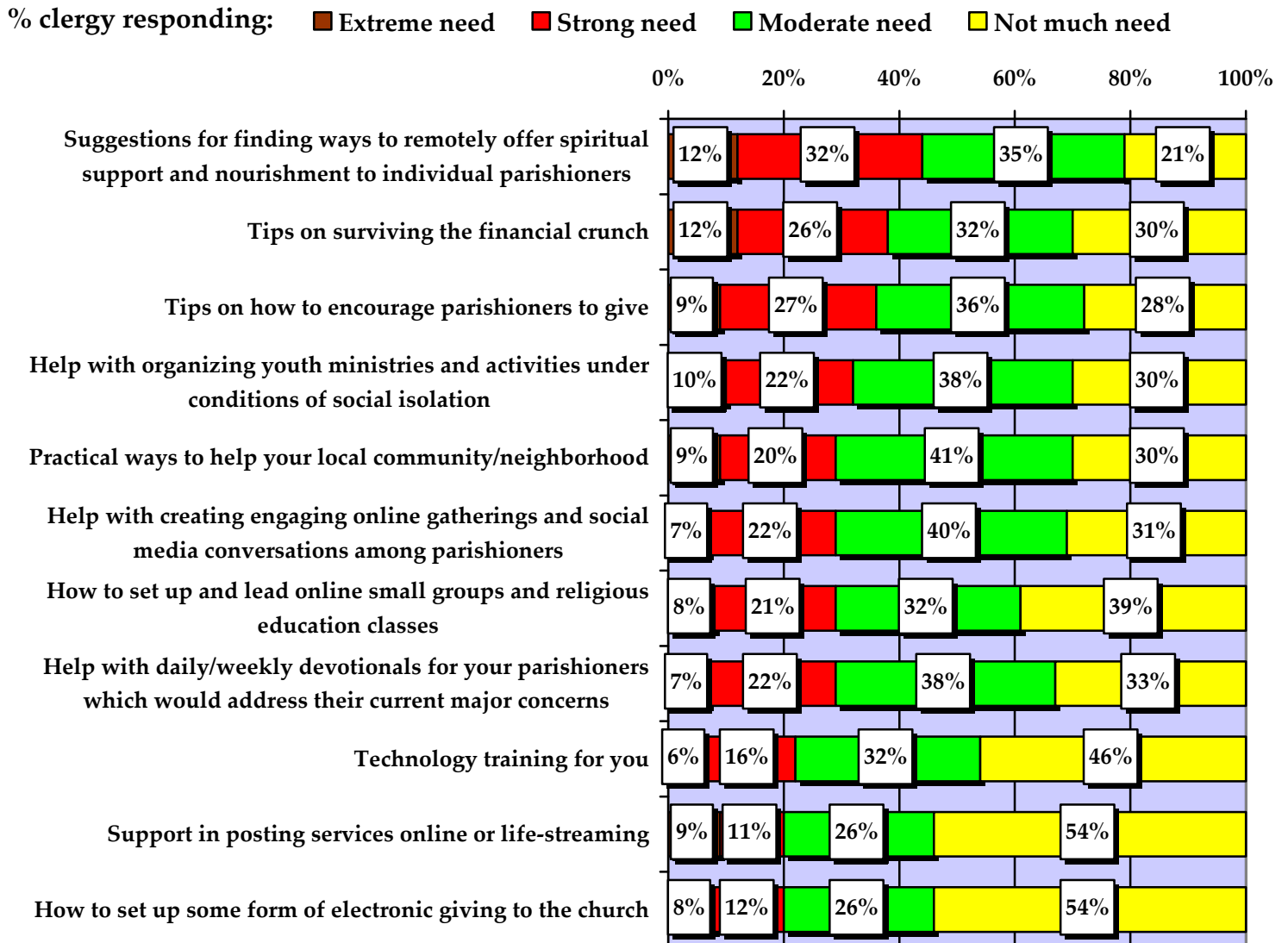
The questionnaire asked, “How strong is the need for the following resources and help for you to lead your parish through the Coronavirus pandemic?”

As shown in Fig. 16a, clergy experience by *far the greatest need* for help in “finding ways for offering personal spiritual support and nourishment to individual parishioners while being physically remote from them.” Clearly, everyone would agree that one-on-one interaction with church members, and offering intimate spiritual guidance or life advice to them, are at the very heart of the pastoral vocation. Yet the data in Fig. 16a are telling how crucial it is to be face-to-face for these communications. Figuratively speaking, “laying on hands” has been and remains central to their pastoral calling.

The second urgent issue is dealing with the financial pressure that parishes feel as a consequence of the pandemic. Well over one-third of the clergy express a strong or extreme need for “tips on surviving the financial crunch” (38%) and “tips on how to encourage parishioners to give” (36%). The next section of the report will discuss the impact of the pandemic on parish finances.

Finally, nearly one third of the priests are deeply concerned with how to reach out to their young members and keep them engaged: 32% of the clergy reported strong or extreme need for “help with organizing youth ministries and activities under conditions of social isolation.”

Fig. 16a “How strong is the need for the following resources and help for you to lead your parish through the Coronavirus pandemic?”

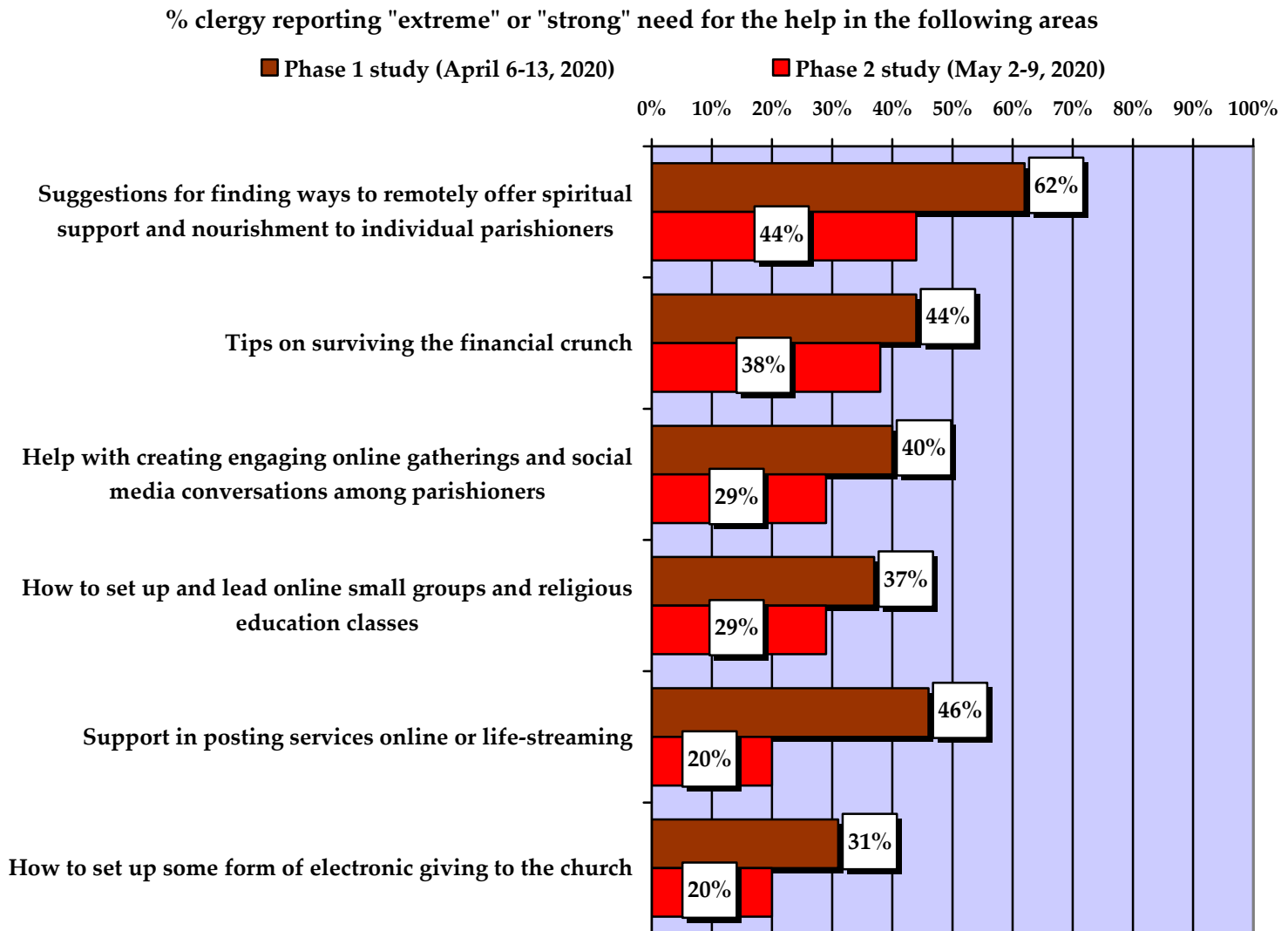


The question about clergy’ needs for help in various areas of parish life was also asked during the Phase 1 study conducted one month earlier. Seven areas of potentially needed support offered for respondents’ consideration were the same in both study phases. Fig. 16b shows the changes between early April and early May. It is noteworthy that the rank order of what is needed barely changed, with the need for “finding ways to remotely offer spiritual support and nourishment to individual parishioners” remaining most urgent.

What did change, however, is that the overall intensity of need for outside support has decreased significantly as more and more clergy have found ways to adjust to the new circumstances. Indeed, in all seven areas of possible support, by early May many fewer clergy indicated an “extreme” or “strong” need for help as

compared to early April. And this positive change was especially obvious in the most important area of parish life: offering online worship services to parishioners during the pandemic. While in early April nearly half (46%) the clergy reported an “extreme” or “strong” need for “support in posting services online or live-streaming,” one month later only one-fifth (20%) of the clergy felt this way.

Fig. 16b “How strong is the need for the following resources and help for you to lead your parish through the Coronavirus pandemic?”



We also offered respondents the opportunity to freely describe any other areas where they urgently needed better resources and support. Several subjects were brought up repeatedly. First, a number of priests wrote that they actually did not need more support, but more freedom, to decide locally (by themselves and in consultation with their parishioners) how best to organize the life of their parish under the pandemic. These

clergy felt that the universal guidelines issued by the bishops and national jurisdictions were out of touch with the unique context of each parish:

- ❖ “We don't need blanket directives across the country from the hierarchy. We need to be empowered to make the right decisions that make sense for our local realities. What makes sense for Manhattan does not at all make sense for rural [NAME OF THE AREA] in a county with no active COVID cases.”

Many priests needed more clarity and advice in offering worship services, sacraments, and other activities to the senior parishioners, because their dioceses and jurisdictions imposed especially strict restrictions and requirements of social isolation for these high-risk elderly church members:

- ❖ “I need the ability to allow healthy individuals over 65 to participate in services, or at least some flexibility in making that determination. This age limit appears to be random, and we have many under 65 who are less healthy than some of our older parishioners. But those healthy older individuals are not permitted to attend, while the unhealthy younger parishioners are.”

Somewhat related to the previous theme were requests for help and advice about how to keep parishes running, when their members were predominantly seniors:

- ❖ “How to keep a small elderly parish engaged and not discouraged?”

A number of clergy indicated that they need legal help and advice in how to approach various governmental sources of support and funding:

- ❖ “We need detailed instructions for accessing the Federal Government's CARES/Small Business?/501c3? financial resources (e.g., forgivable loans to cover my salary and our utilities). I think it's tragic that I haven't been able to access and attain these monies because I don't know how, and I don't know who to ask who will give me precise advice about exactly what to do!”

Some clergy expressed the desire for some sort of clergy communication network through which all priests could share their needs, resources, ideas, strategies, etc.:

- ❖ “Regular communication with brother clergy to share successes and failures is something I would like. Sharing wisdom would accelerate our learning as we cope with the pandemic.”

Several priests wrote that during the height of the pandemic they experienced much more cooperation and interaction with Orthodox parishes of other jurisdictions than before this crisis. These priests expressed the desire to maintain this cooperation in the future:

- ❖ “The Lenten Church school activities were great (Making Holy Week at Home). It was great to have ALL the Orthodox jurisdictions participating in the common goal of educating the family and children. We need more of this for the summer.”

Finally, a number of clergy emphasized that now, when most of parishioners cannot come to the church and are limited to watching the services online, they need much better resources for the laity on how to organize a regular worship life in their homes:

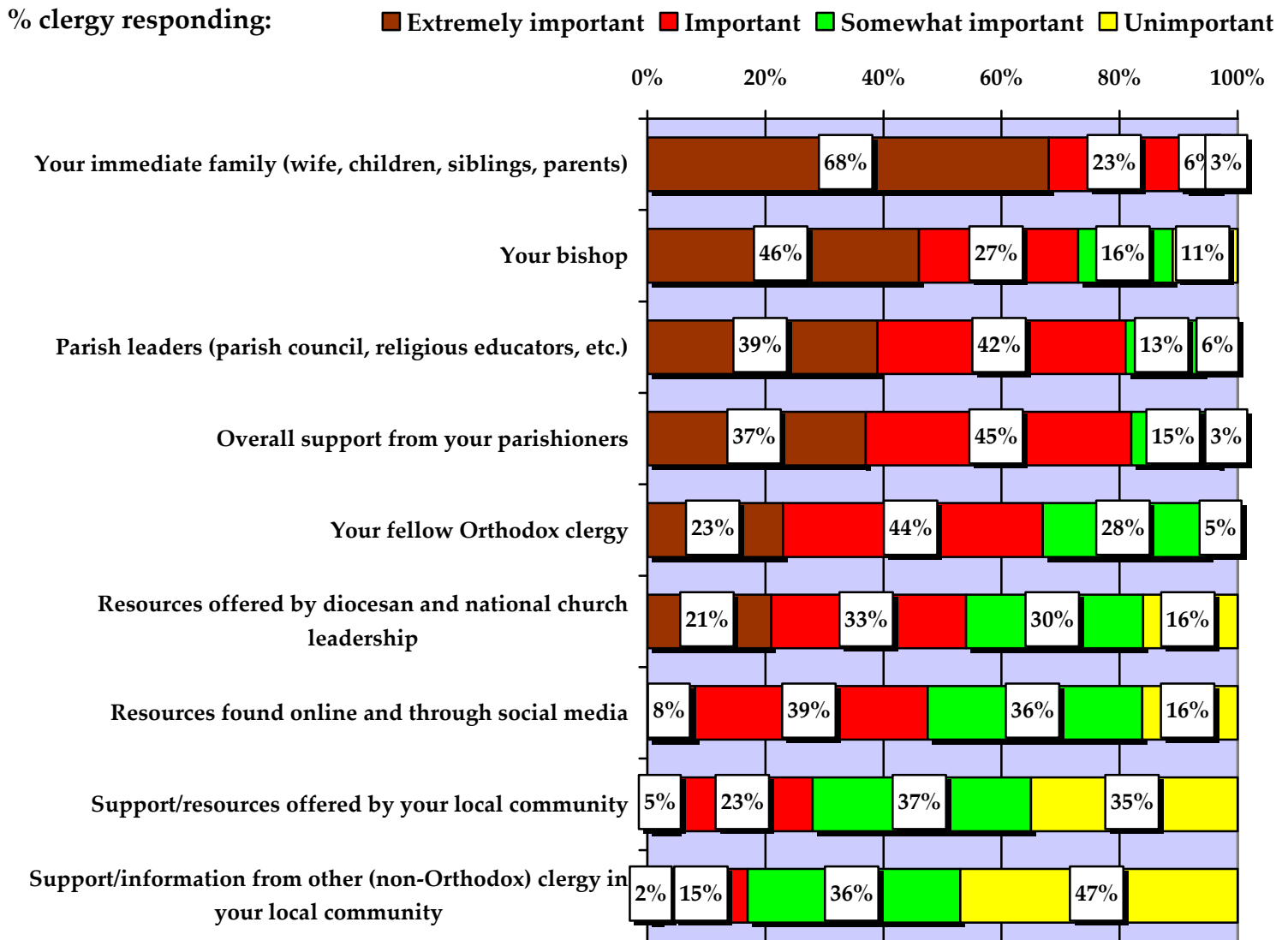
- ❖ “Materials for educating the laity on how to offer prayers and services at home as a family; i.e., not to be passively dependent on watching streaming services in order to pray to God while at home.”

One way or another, even the most experienced, charismatic, and resolute priests need some personal support and help in their pastoral daily work. And clearly this need has become much greater since the Coronavirus crisis. Our study examined the question of whom the clergy feel they can rely upon, if necessary, in these difficult times.

As Fig. 17 shows, by far the most significant source of support for clergy are their immediate families: more than two-thirds of the clergy (68%) feel that support coming from their wives, children, and siblings is “extremely important” to them. The second in importance is support from their respective bishops: 45% of the respondents said that their hierarchs’ support is “extremely important” to them. Finally, support from the priests’ parish communities (both from parish leaders and all parishioners) is “extremely important” for well over one-third of the priests.

Fig. 17 Who and What Helps Clergy to Lead Their Parishes Through the Pandemic?

“How important and helpful have the following sources of support and resources been to you in leading your parish through this crisis?”



The data in Fig. 17 also point to two facts which deserve more future attention. First, while personal support from their hierarchs was highly valued by the 45% of the priests, a much lower percentage of them (21%) felt the same way about the actual resources offered by their dioceses and national church headquarters. Second, anecdotally we know about active pastoral associations in many locales that bring together clergy from a variety of Christian denominations, including Orthodox priests. Yet, for some reason, support from the non-Orthodox clergy who live and work in the communities of our respondents is not nearly as important to them (only 17% said it is “important” or “extremely important”) as support coming from other Orthodox clergy (67%).

Fig. 17 reflects the combined results for all the different priests and parishes participating in the study. However, when we looked separately at the answers from younger (up to 45), middle-aged (46-65) and older clergy (65+); from priests representing various Orthodox jurisdictions with enough responses to be analyzed separately (GOA, OCA, ROCOR); and those serving parishes with different membership demographics (e.g., percentage of converts, college graduates, senior citizens, immigrants to the USA, etc.) the overall picture remained the same. It appears that the most and least impactful sources of support for Orthodox priests are remarkably constant (with no statistically significant differences) across many categories of the clergy.

We also asked an open-ended question, “Are there any other major sources of support that help you to go through this crisis?” Among those who answered this question, the most frequent theme was the value of personal prayer, God, and the Orthodox Faith in supporting them:

- ❖ “The Lord and all the Saints.”
- ❖ “Prayer life clears my mind and reminds me of my true purpose as liturgist.”

Another common response was about the helpfulness of personal or family friends:

- ❖ “There is not a 'friends' option in the above list, which has been my mainstay in this period. Many of my friends are clergy, which is the only reason I've listed Orthodox clergy as important. Otherwise, I'd put clergy as unimportant.”

For some priests, physical exercise or manual labor calmed them emotionally:

- ❖ “I should spend more time in my garage making things in my shop, it helps my sanity. I haven't had to go to [place of work] terribly often and have used some of this time working in my yard trying to stay 'grounded' literally.”

A number of bi-vocational clergy wrote that their secular job helps them to disengage temporarily from concerns about their parishes:

- ❖ “My secular employment is a great outlet for me, although I worry/believe it keeps me from doing my priestly work sufficiently.”

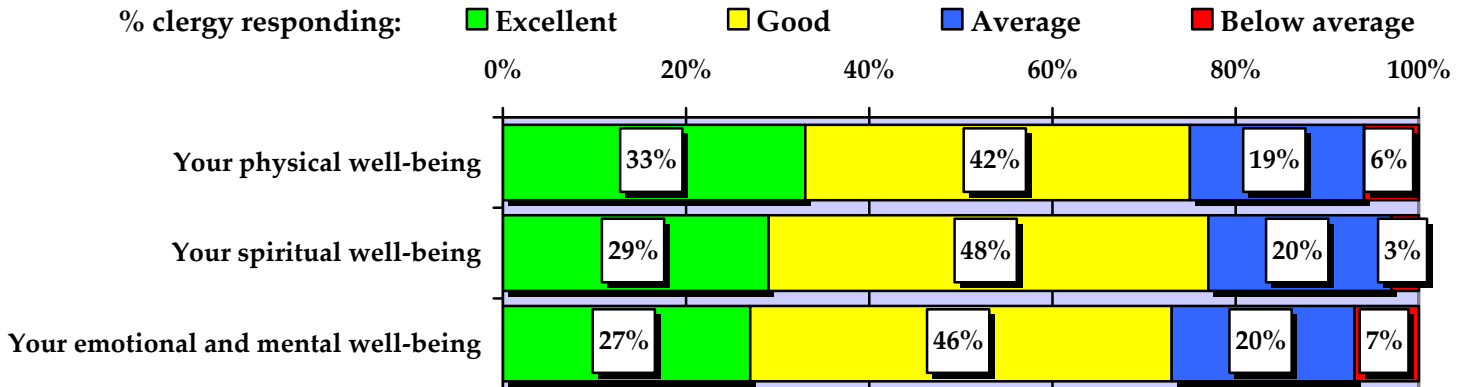
VI. Physical, Spiritual, and Emotional Well-Being of Our Clergy

KEY FINDINGS

- ❖ Three quarters of the priests described their a) physical, b) spiritual, c) emotional, and mental conditions as “excellent” or “good.” Under 10% felt that their condition on these three dimensions was “below average.”
- ❖ A greater percentage of senior (65+) than middle-aged (46-65) or younger (up to 45) clergy described their spiritual health as “excellent” or “good.”
- ❖ Priests were given a variety of words describing various emotions and asked to select three that best reflected their present state. “Hopeful,” “determined,” and “resilient” were the most frequent choices.

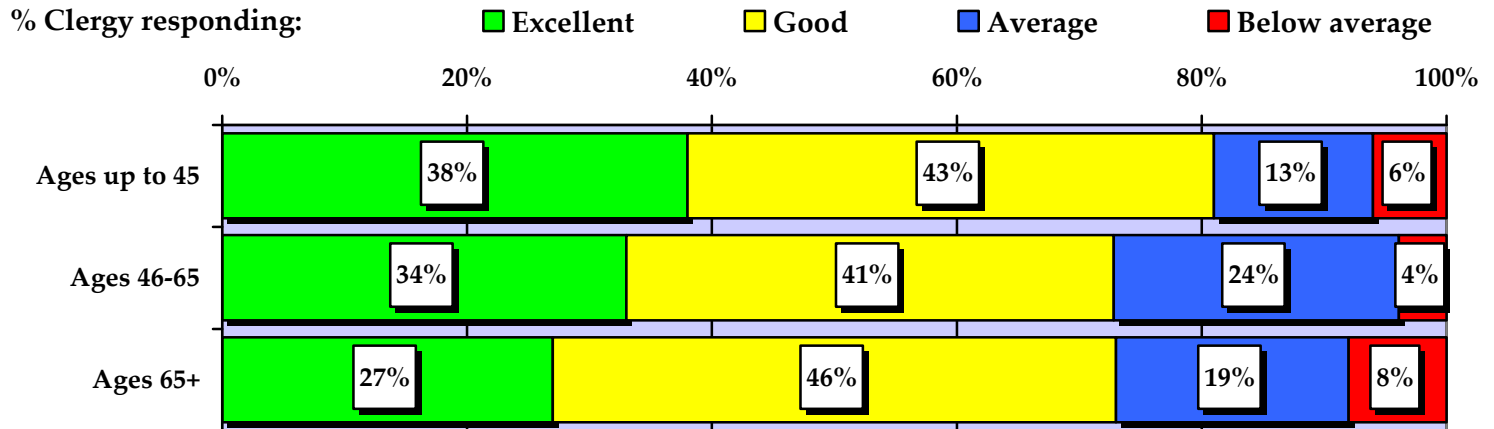
The previous chapter discussed various sources of support that help clergy to lead their parishes through these difficult times. Yet the many challenges, high stress, and great uncertainty imposed by the pandemic could potentially wear down their physical, spiritual, or emotional health. We asked clergy to evaluate their physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being. See Fig. 18. Three quarters described their condition on all these dimensions as “excellent” or “good.” Under 10% felt that their condition on any of these was “below average.”

Fig. 18a “Overall, how is your personal state?”



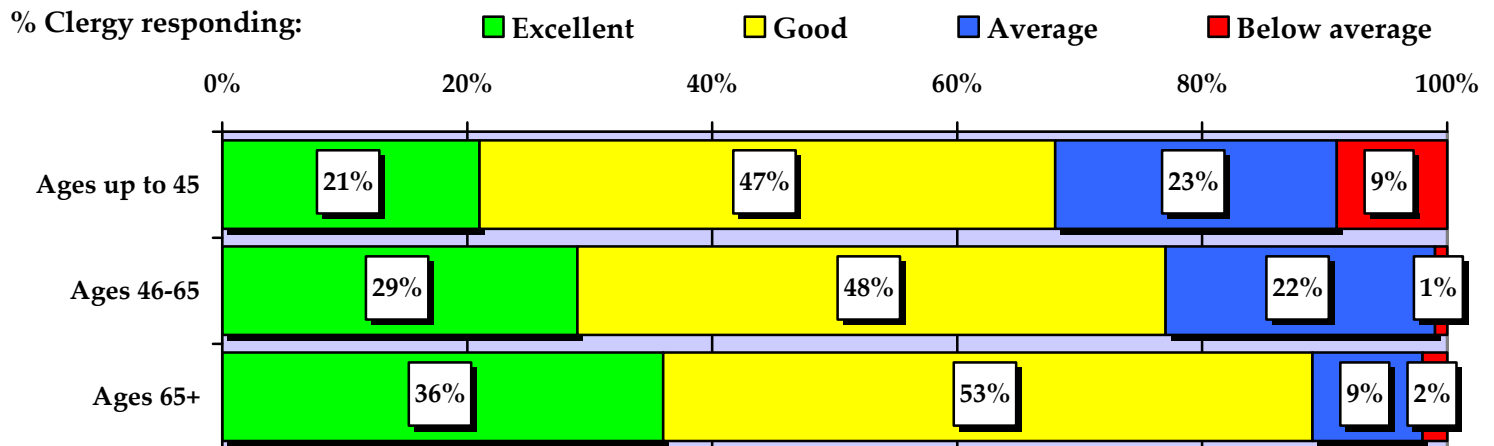
Naturally, we expected to find that a greater percentage of younger clergy (up to 45) would report “excellent” or “good” physical health than the middle-aged (46-65) or older (65+) priests. And, indeed, this was the case. See Fig. 18b.

Fig. 18b “Overall, how is your physical well-being?”

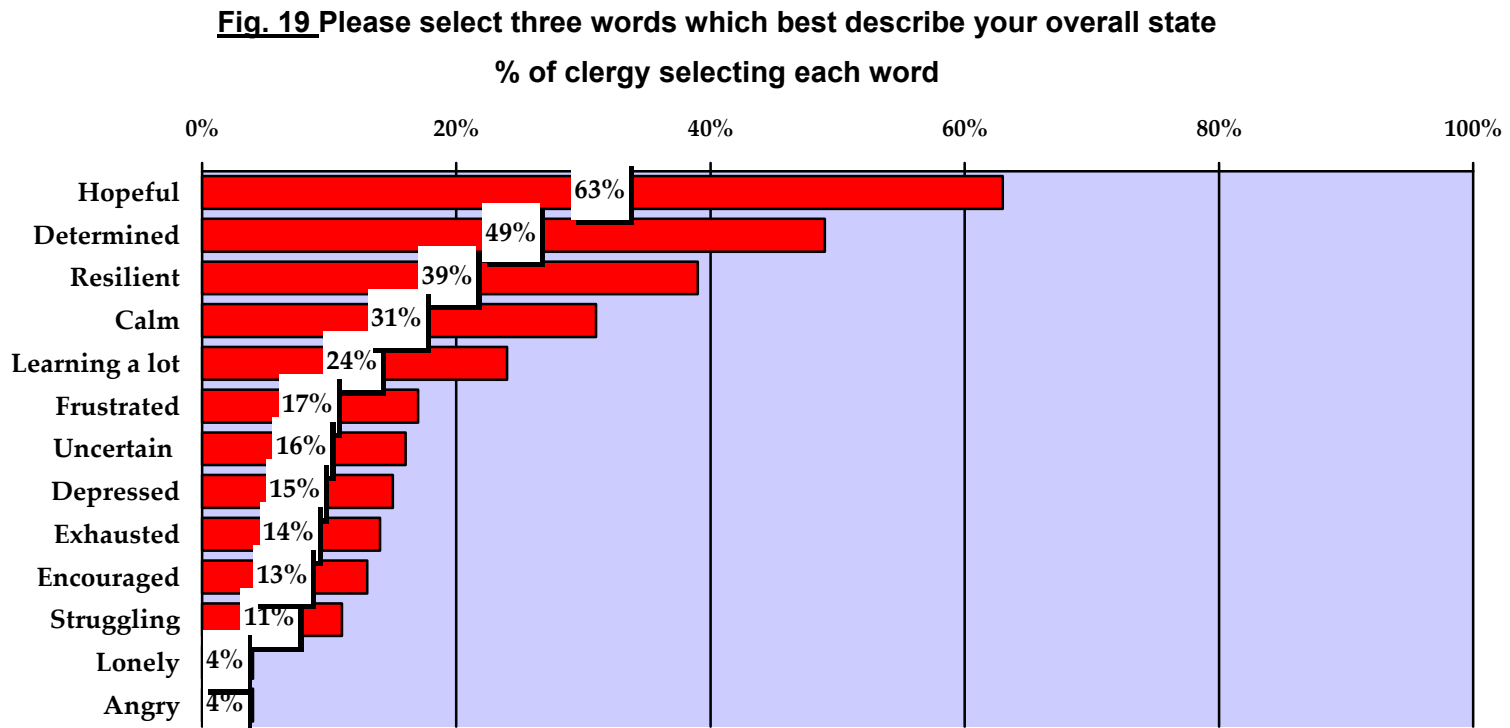


At the same time, as Fig. 18c shows, the senior priests experience more robust spiritual health than the middle-aged or younger clergy.

Fig. 18c “Overall, how is your spiritual well-being?”



We also offered respondents a selection of words describing attitudes and emotions and asked them to choose three that best reflected their present state. As Fig. 19 shows, “hopeful,” “determined,” and “resilient” were the most frequent choices.



Notably, there was virtually no difference among the different age categories of clergy in how frequently each word was chosen. The only slight variation that the younger priests (up to 45) were less likely to select the word “resilient” (28%), but, at the same time, not one of them described his emotional state as “depressed.”

VII. The Pandemic and Parish Finances

KEY FINDINGS:

- ❖ A vast majority of parishes have a sufficient financial “cushion” for a few months. They report they can manage new financial challenges without significant budgetary changes at least through the summer. About half (51%) the respondents feel that their church’s finances are sound enough to run their parishes without any changes during that period, while 35% would need to make only minor adjustments to their expenses and budgets.
- ❖ Parishes with a high percentage of college graduates are much better financially prepared to endure the pandemic. On the other hand, parishes with a high percentage of older (65+) parishioners and those with a strong ethnic identity and culture are more challenged by the current financial pressures.
- ❖ Nearly half the parishes have experienced a decline in giving as compared to what was normal for them before the pandemic. The median decrease reported by the clergy in these parishes was 31%.

- ❖ Among the three jurisdictions with a significant number of respondents participating in the study, fewer OCA parishes experienced a decline in giving (37%) than GOA (52%) or ROCOR (56%) churches.
- ❖ The more “intentionally Orthodox” parishes (i.e., defined here as parishes where various Orthodox Church requirements and practices are more strictly enforced and emphasized) saw less of a decline in giving than other parishes.
- ❖ Respondents were invited to offer additional comments on changes in their parish finances. This chapter offers an overview of the most typical answers.

There are at least three reasons why the Coronavirus outbreak is likely to have a strong negative impact on the budgets of American religious congregations in general and US Orthodox parishes in particular. The first is the unavoidable reduction in members’ engagement in parish life. Not all church communities were able to bring their liturgical services online. Even if they did, many parishioners may not see this as satisfactory as being physically present in church, worshipping as a congregation, and partaking in the Sacraments together. This sense of loss is especially true for Orthodox Christians, who normally worship in ways that engage all five senses. Even fewer parishes (see section III) have managed to organize online meetings for their religious education classes or other small groups. For those that have done so, online participation may not equal that of physical meetings for many reasons, such as parishioners’ capabilities to connect digitally or simple strong preference for in-person meetings. Finally, people come to church not only to worship but also to mingle and socialize with friends and like-minded parishioners. That interaction cannot fully be replaced by online gatherings.

One might argue that many states are now or soon softening restrictions on public gatherings, permitting churches to reopen for in-person services. However, as we saw in Section II, only about half the Orthodox parishes are actually planning to resume in-person services as soon as it is legally permissible. Furthermore, parishes will probably need to limit the number of the people allowed to worship together, following the guidelines set forth by government and those of their respective bishops and national headquarters. And even if the churches open again their doors, many members (especially senior citizens) may be reluctant to attend services as long as the pandemic continues. The bottom line is that this decrease in engagement will likely translate into reduced giving.

The second reason is that in many parishes the physical “passing of the plate” in church remains an important way of gathering donations. Many parishes have yet to develop some form of online giving that would allow

members to easily give electronically. And even if parishes offer such an option on their websites, many clergy have thus far paid little attention to promoting online giving versus more traditional approaches.

The third and most economically driven reason for the financial pressures being experienced by many congregations is the rapid growth in unemployment and consequent abrupt decrease in income among parishioners who have lost their jobs or are being furloughed.

Are parishes strong enough to withstand this financial storm brought on by the pandemic? Both the Phase 1 (early April) and Phase 2 (early May) studies asked the same question: "How prepared is your church financially to face this crisis if it continues well into the summer?" See Fig. 20a.

A vast majority of parishes have a sufficient financial "cushion" for a few months. They report they can manage their new financial challenges without significant budgetary changes at least through the summer. About half (51%) the respondents feel that their church's finances are sound enough to run their parishes without any changes during that period, while 35% would need to make only minor adjustments to their expenses and budgets. Even more encouraging, the percentage of parishes reporting a good or decent financial situation slightly increased between early April and early May.

Fig. 20a Parishes Face Financial Uncertainty in Times of Coronavirus Pandemic

"How prepared is your church financially to face this crisis if it continues well into the summer?"

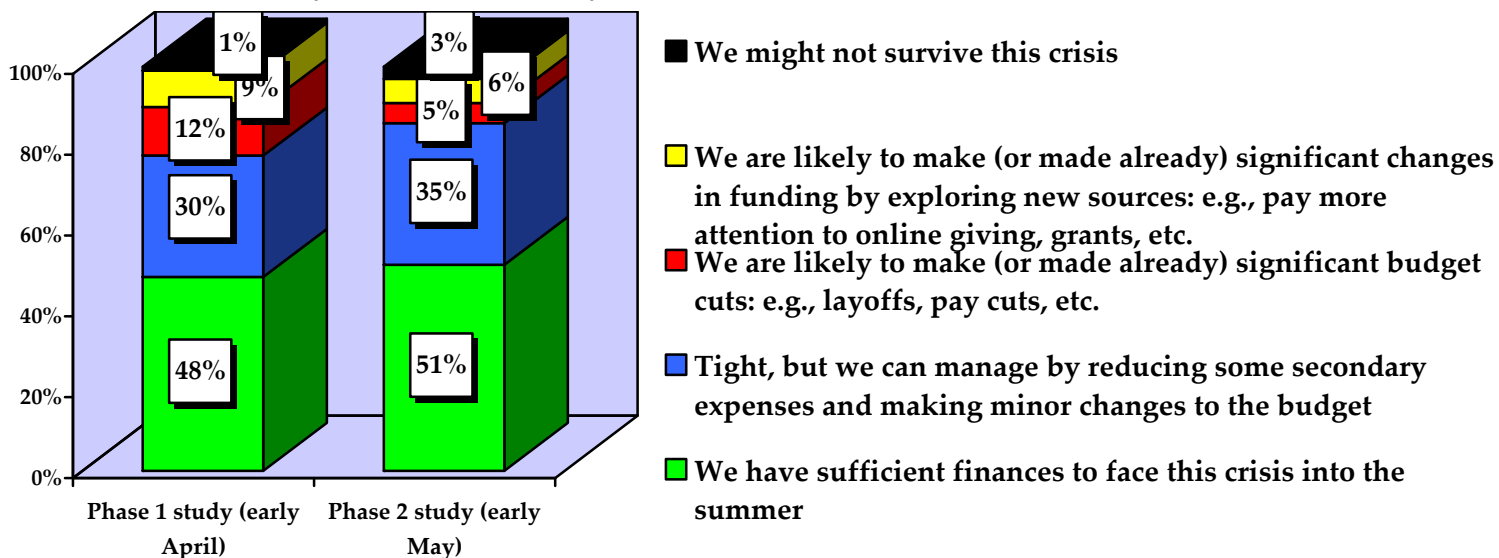
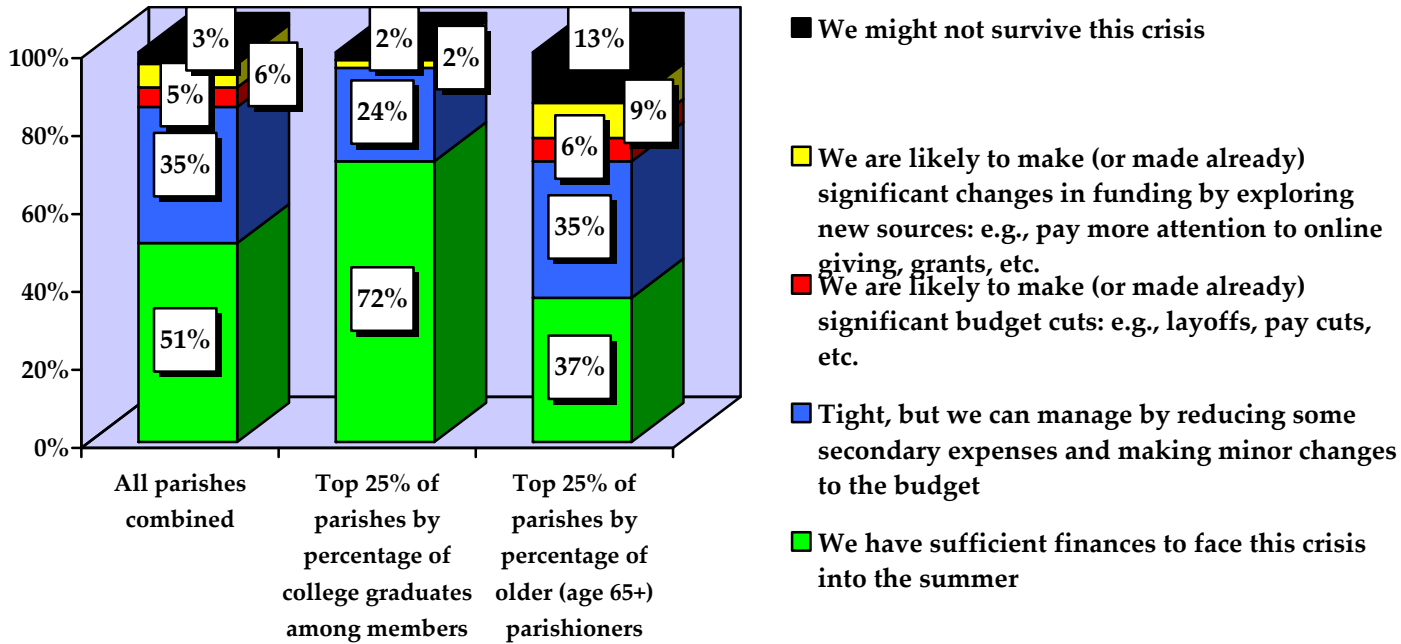


Fig. 20a presents the overall financial situation of all parishes combined, but the picture is actually more nuanced. Results differ by the demographics of parish membership and by what was defined in Section 1 as "parish identity." Demographically, parishes with a high percentage of college graduates (typically related to

higher income) are much better financially prepared to endure the pandemic than are the other parishes. On the other hand, parishes with a high percentage of older (65+) parishioners are more challenged by the current financial pressures. See Fig. 20b.

Fig. 20b Parish Demographics Influence Readiness to Face Financial Uncertainty

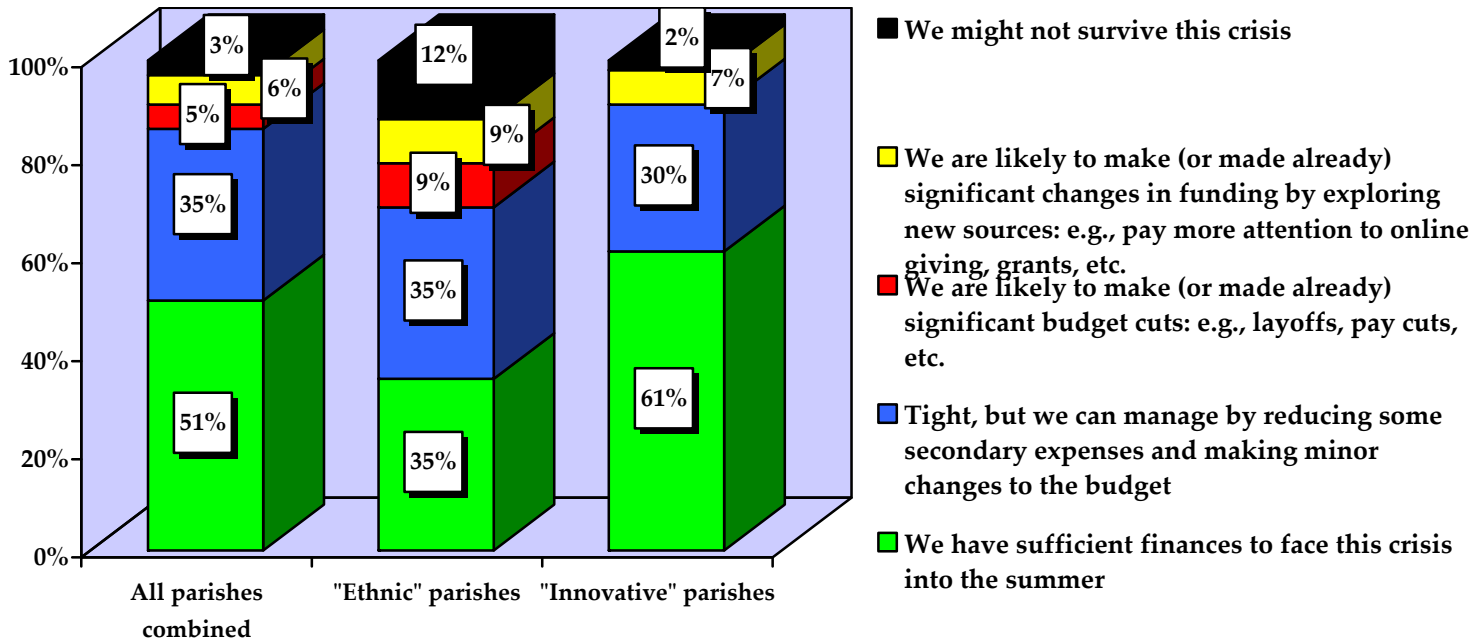
"How prepared is your church financially to face this crisis if it continues well into the summer?"



“Ethnic” parishes (those that strongly agreed with the statement, “Our parish has a strong ethnic identity and culture that we are trying to preserve”) are more financially challenged by the current financial difficulties than others. Conversely, “innovative” parishes (those that strongly agreed with the statement, “Our parish is willing to change: to try new things and to meet new challenges”) are more financially prepared to endure this crisis.

Fig. 20c “Innovative” Parishes Are More Prepared to Face Financial Uncertainty, While “Ethnic” Parishes Are Less Prepared

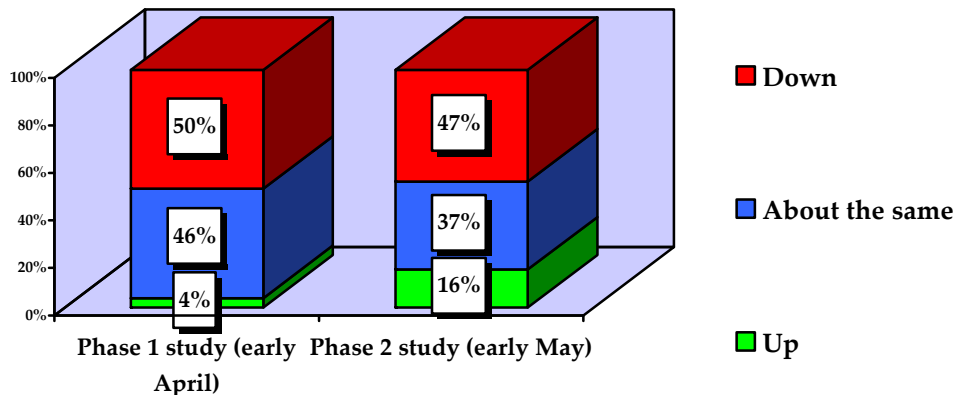
“How prepared is your church financially to face this crisis if it continues well into the summer?”



While a strong majority of parishes appear to be reasonably well prepared for possible future economic hardships, the reality is that about half of them have experienced a decline in giving as compared to their normal levels before the pandemic. Both the Phase 1 and Phase 2 studies asked, “Which of the following best describes your church’s giving over the last month compared to a typical month before COVID-19?” Fig. 21a shows that in both studies nearly the same percentage (47-50%) of parishes experienced a decline in contributions.

Fig. 21a Members Give Less to their Parishes in the Times of the Pandemic

“Which of the following best describes your church’s giving over the last month compared to a typical month before COVID-19?”



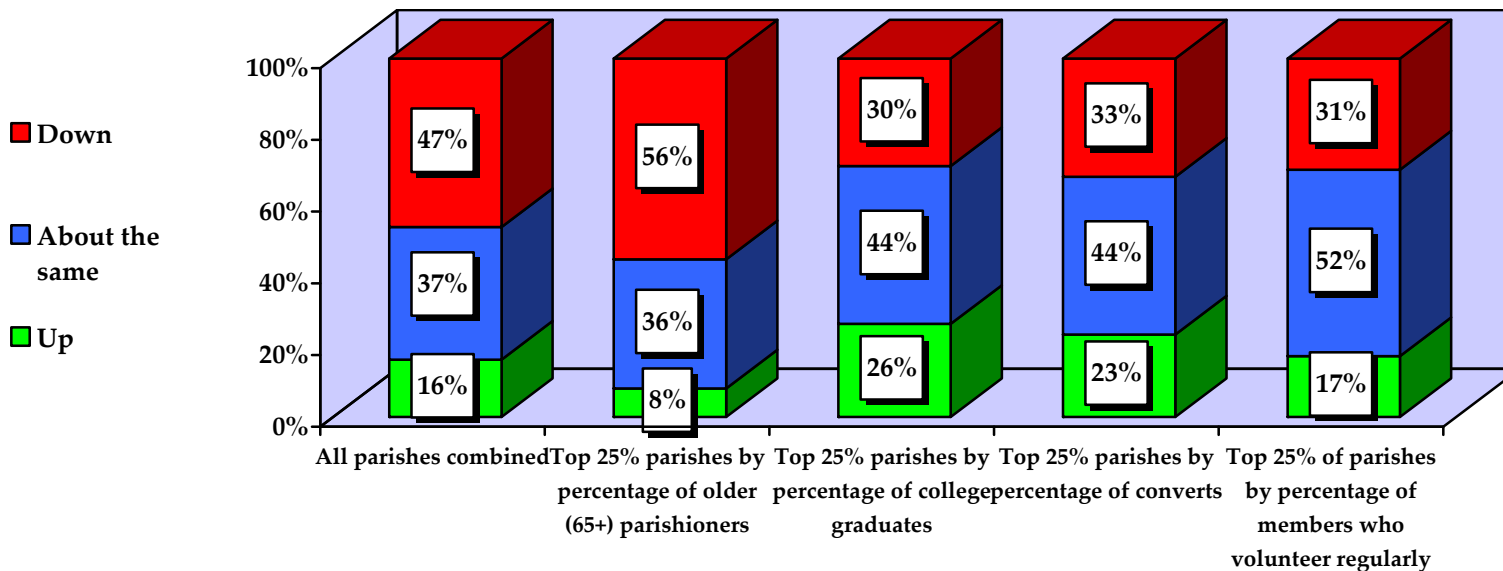
In both studies, parishes that had experienced a decline in giving were asked to estimate how significant this decline was so far (as a percentage of their original level). The median decrease remained the same - a hefty 30-31% - in both April and May.

Consistent with our findings about the overall financial situation, changes in members' contributions differed somewhat in parishes depending on membership demographics, types of parish "identity," and jurisdiction.

Demographically, the parishes with high percentage of college graduates, converts and persons who regularly volunteer in a parish (which means who have stronger commitment) were less affected by decline in giving than other parishes. On the contrary, the parishes with high percentage of older (65+) parishioners have experienced stronger decline in members' contributions. See Fig. 21b.

Fig. 21b Demography of Parishioners Affects Changes in Giving

"Which of the following best describes your church's giving over the last month compared to a typical month before COVID-19?"

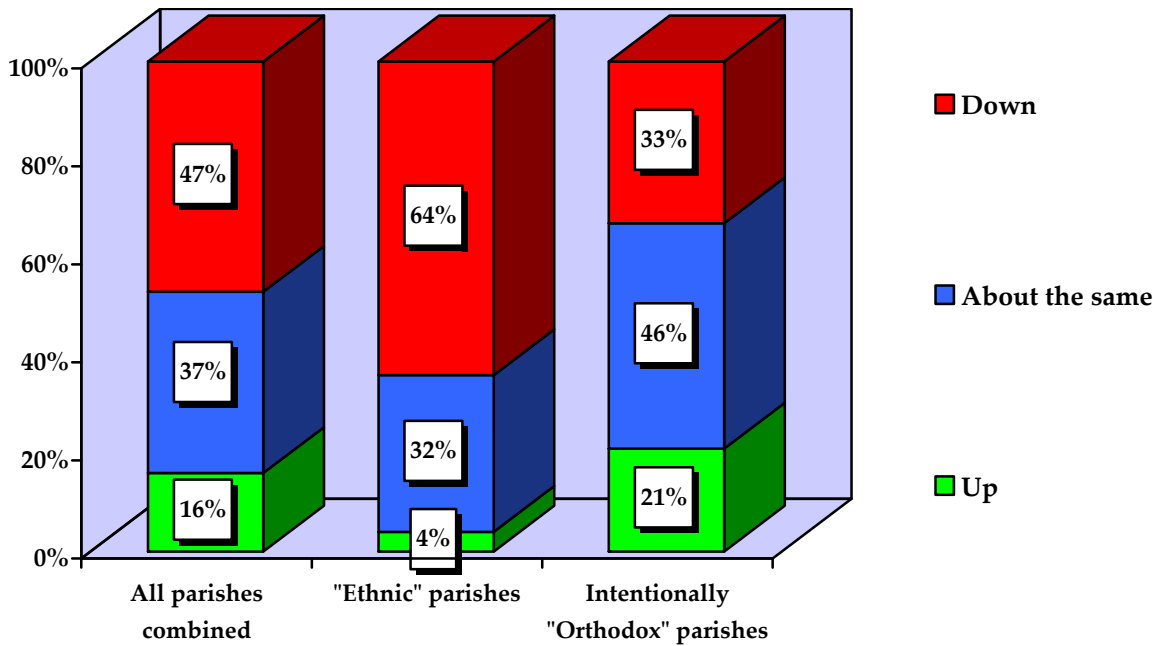


Particular parish identities (for definitions of identities see Section 1) also influence stability of contributions. Highly "ethnic" parishes were more strongly impacted by a decline in contributions, while highly "intentionally Orthodox" parishes (those following Orthodox practices more rigorously) were less affected by the drop in giving.

Fig. 21c “Ethnic” Parishes Experienced Significant Decrease in Giving.

“Intentionally Orthodox” Parishes with Stricter Religious Practices Were Less Affected

“Which of the following best describes your church’s giving over the last month compared to a typical month before COVID-19?”



Among the three jurisdictions with a significant number of respondents participating in the study, fewer OCA parishes experienced a decline in giving (37%) than GOA (52%) or ROCOR (56%) churches.

Respondents were also invited to offer their comments on changes in finances in their parishes. Below are selected quotations that illustrate repeated themes.

Some clergy indicated that so far donations were steady, but they expected a decline in the future:

- ❖ “I expect to see the reduction in giving, as the wider economic effects of the pandemic set in, and as the novelty of online services begins to fade.”

A number of answers coming specifically from Greek Orthodox parishes emphasized the loss of vital revenues from their traditional Greek festivals:

- ❖ “Due to the cancellation of the Greek Festival, we will have to make up about \$100K to meet our budget.”

In some parishes, members’ contributions via stewardship/pledges have remained stable, but their physical absence in the church has caused a noticeable decline in other sources of income:

- ❖ “Stewardship remains healthy but income from candles, prosphoras, and other giving that depends on presence in church has fallen.”

Clergy also wrote that they need advice and guidance on how to apply for possible governmental funds and grants:

- ❖ “I really would like detailed guidance about accessing the 'free' money from the government. I think it's a sad, tragic waste that I have no idea how to access it correctly!”

In contrast, other priests wrote that they had been able to obtain additional government funds:

- ❖ “We have also applied for and received the financial grant through the federal Paycheck Protection Program.”

Finally, a number of clergy from smaller parishes without additional staff support wrote that they need relevant financial training to better adjust to these new circumstances:

- ❖ “If we receive some materials, online courses about giving online, financial consultations, it will help us to manage the parish better, especially those communities that can't pay a secretary or a bookkeeper.”

VIII. The Impact of the Pandemic on Parishioners: How Parishes Try to Help, and the Problem of “Digitally Not Connected” Members

KEY FINDINGS:

- ❖ The pandemic triggered a broad range of difficulties in the lives of Orthodox parishioners. The most pervasive effects are emotional ones: 83% of clergy feel that in their parishes “some” or “many” parishioners are struggling with loneliness and feeling of helplessness. In addition, economic issues (job loss or inability to pay bills) and family problems affect “some” or “many” parishioners in over half the parishes.
- ❖ Relatively few parishes have “some” or “many” parishioners who became ill (reported by 19% of parishes) or who have died from the Coronavirus (6%).
- ❖ The questionnaire asked clergy, “What other negative effects of the pandemic have you noticed in your parishioners?” This chapter offers an analysis of the most common responses.
- ❖ The median percentage of “digitally not connected” households in American Orthodox parishes is 10% (i.e., households that either have no access to equipment/connectivity at home or are not capable of using computers/email/Internet). However, in one-fifth of the parishes, at least 30% of their membership cannot be remotely reached by online means.

- ❖ To keep in touch with their “digitally not connected” members, the vast majority of parishes resort to phone calls made by clergy, staff, and volunteers. Very few parishes have attempted to help these members connect digitally, either by teaching them how to use computers (only 6% of parishes do this) or by providing needed devices and/or financial help to get online (3%).
- ❖ Only 10% of parishes provided special assistance for households that were especially strongly affected by the pandemic. Clergy of these parishes were asked to describe what they were doing, and their responses are summarized in this chapter.

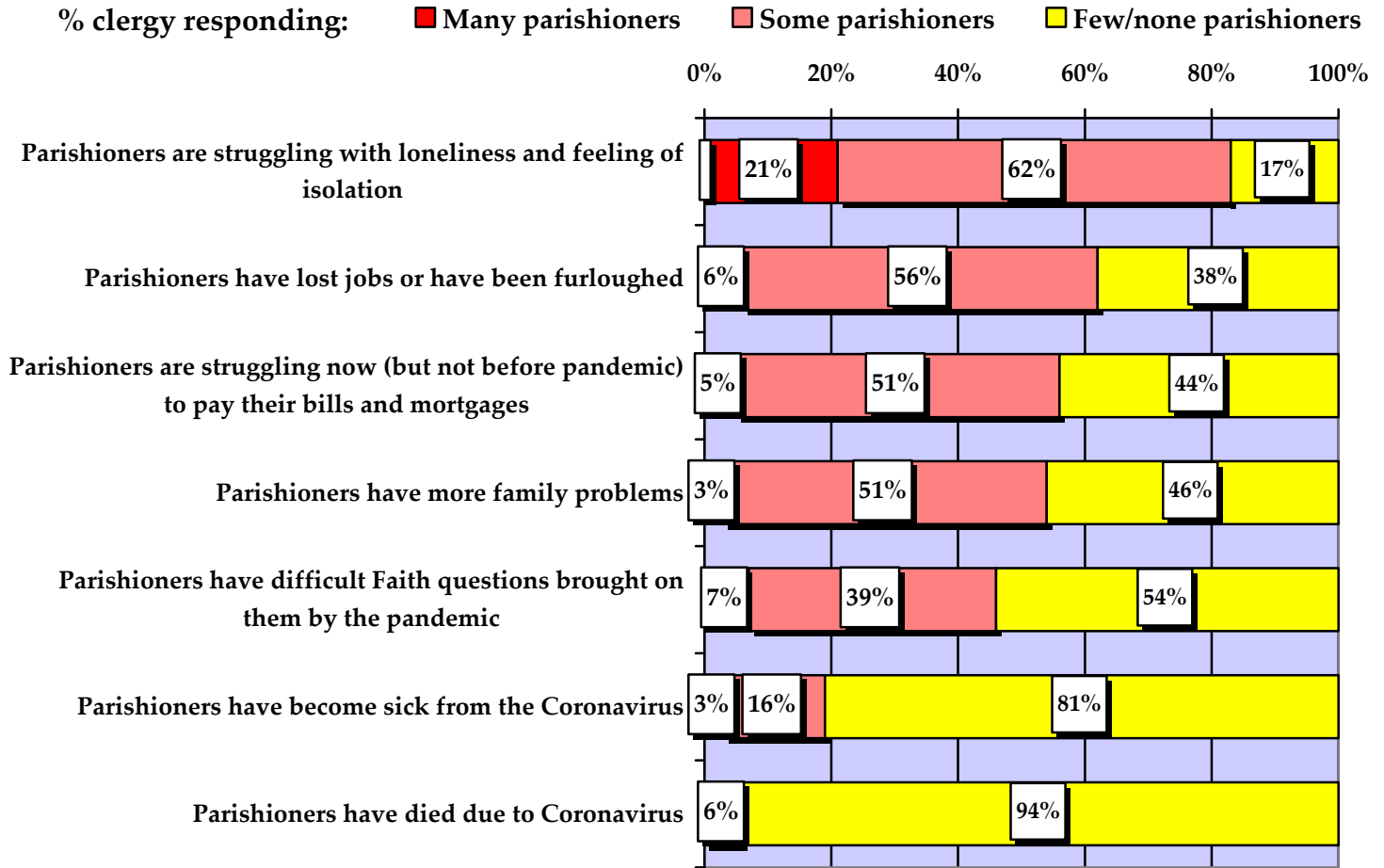
The previous chapter explored the self-reported physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being of the clergy. We have not surveyed lay church members for their direct reports of pandemic-related needs, and challenges, but the study gathered indirect data by asking priests, “There have been many negative effects of the pandemic on people's lives. With regard to your parishioners, how many have been affected by each of the following?”

Priests reported that emotional hardships were the most pervasive negative effects of the pandemic (Fig. 22). The vast majority of clergy (83%) feel that in their parishes “some” or “many” parishioners are struggling with loneliness and feeling of helplessness. In more than half the parishes, “some” or “many” parishioners are dealing with the economic consequences of the pandemic, such as job loss (62% of parishes) or inability to pay their bills (56%), and are also experiencing an increase in family problems (54%).

On a positive note, relatively few parishes have “some” or “many” parishioners who became ill (reported by 19% of priests) or who have died from the Coronavirus (6%).

Fig. 22 Impact of the Pandemic on Parishioners

“There have been many negative effects of the pandemic on people's lives. With regard to your parishioners, how many have been affected by each of the following?”



We also asked clergy, “What other negative effects of the pandemic have you noticed in your parishioners?” Several themes emerged. The most frequently-cited effect was that church members simply miss each other and the possibility to gather, worship together, and socialize:

- ❖ “They miss coming to church. We are a close-knit parish and it is very hard for parishioners not to be together.”

A related theme addressed loss of spiritual and emotional support from the church when it was most needed:

- ❖ “Huge spiritual burden piled on them overnight, all without Holy Communion and Liturgy. This is the recipe for spiritual disaster for many who don't have the spiritual strength.”

Many clergy wrote that parishioners feel a strong need for “real” in-person worship, because online services are not an adequate substitute:

- ❖ “The longer this goes on, the more they are calling for churches to reopen. For many, worship at the Liturgy cannot be replaced by live-stream services or Typica and services at home.”

Clergy also reported that many lay members feel “abandoned” and left without sufficient support from their diocesan and national church leadership:

- ❖ “Parishioners have a sense that many Orthodox dioceses/bishops have abandoned their flocks. While ROCOR has remained open with regulatory limits, non-ROCOR Orthodox Christians are seeking consolation within the ROCOR diocese - which is fine. It is going to take time for all Orthodox Christians to trust the hierarchs again.”

A significant cluster of responses addressed parishioners’ anger at government and secular authorities who consider church “non-essential” during the pandemic:

- ❖ “They feel that we have allowed the government to impose its will on our religious freedom, which is unconstitutional. They are upset that liquor stores and abortion clinics and Home Depot are all open and the church is closed.”

In some parishes, the pandemic has divided members into factions with very different views on how to resume the life of their parish after churches reopen:

- ❖ “The virus is now dividing the parishioners into opening up the churches or to stay in lock down mode. Many believe it is a conspiracy to attack our church, and right to worship. Many think the wearing of face masks, limiting people to come to church, communion spoons, is destroying the church practices. But there are some who are fearful of returning to worship while there is insufficient testing, no vaccine, and no sure cure.”

Many clergy indicated that there is an increasing overall anxiety among parishioners, because of the uncertainty of their future life:

- ❖ “Tremendous fear and anxiety and anger. The general anxieties about the future, how this will change all of our lives.”

Finally, a significant number of priests wrote that elderly members, especially were experiencing the hardships of social isolation especially strongly:

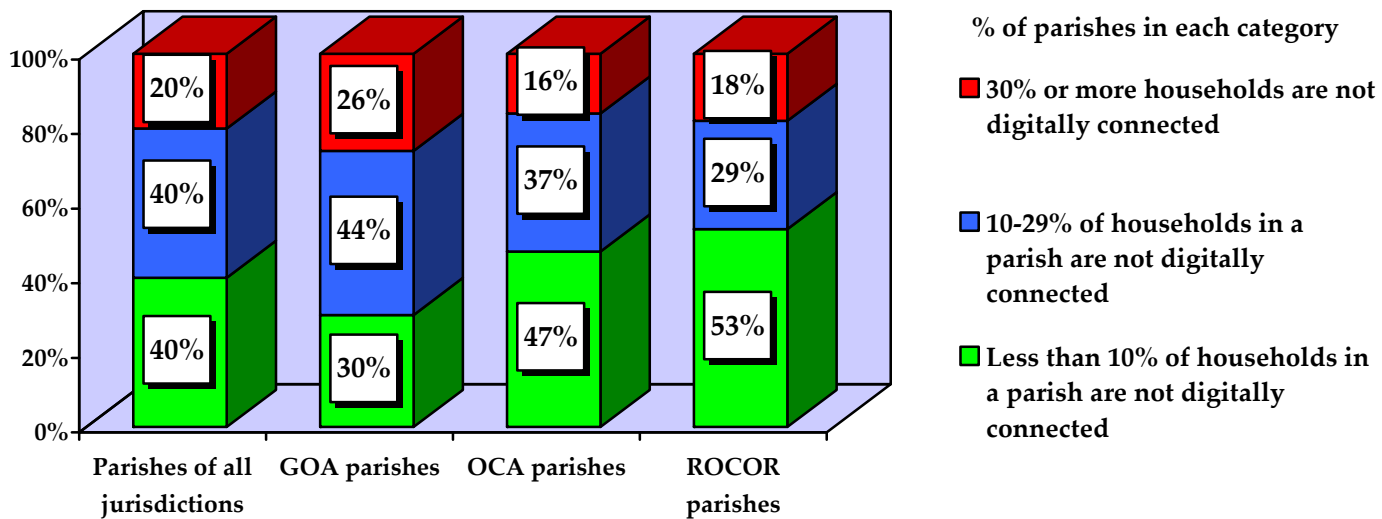
- ❖ “The isolation is particularly hard for our elderly and shut-ins (who now live in almost solitary confinement in care homes) as they often have the least access to technology and online services.”

This concern raised in the last quote regarding access to online services leads to the question: in American Orthodox parishes today, what percentage of parishioners are “digitally not connected”? We have already seen indications of this as an issue: indeed, as discussed in Section II, two-thirds of the clergy (67%) said that parishioners without Internet access or adequate computer skills presented a “major” or “moderate” obstacle for bringing parish liturgical life online.

The survey asked, “Approximately what percent of your parish households are not ‘digitally connected:’ that is, households that either have no access to equipment/connectivity at home or are not capable of using computers/email/Internet?” what percent of parish households were “digitally not connected?” The median answer was 10%. In other words, in half the churches fewer than 10% of households are not digitally connected, while in the other half more than 10% of the households do not have access to Internet.

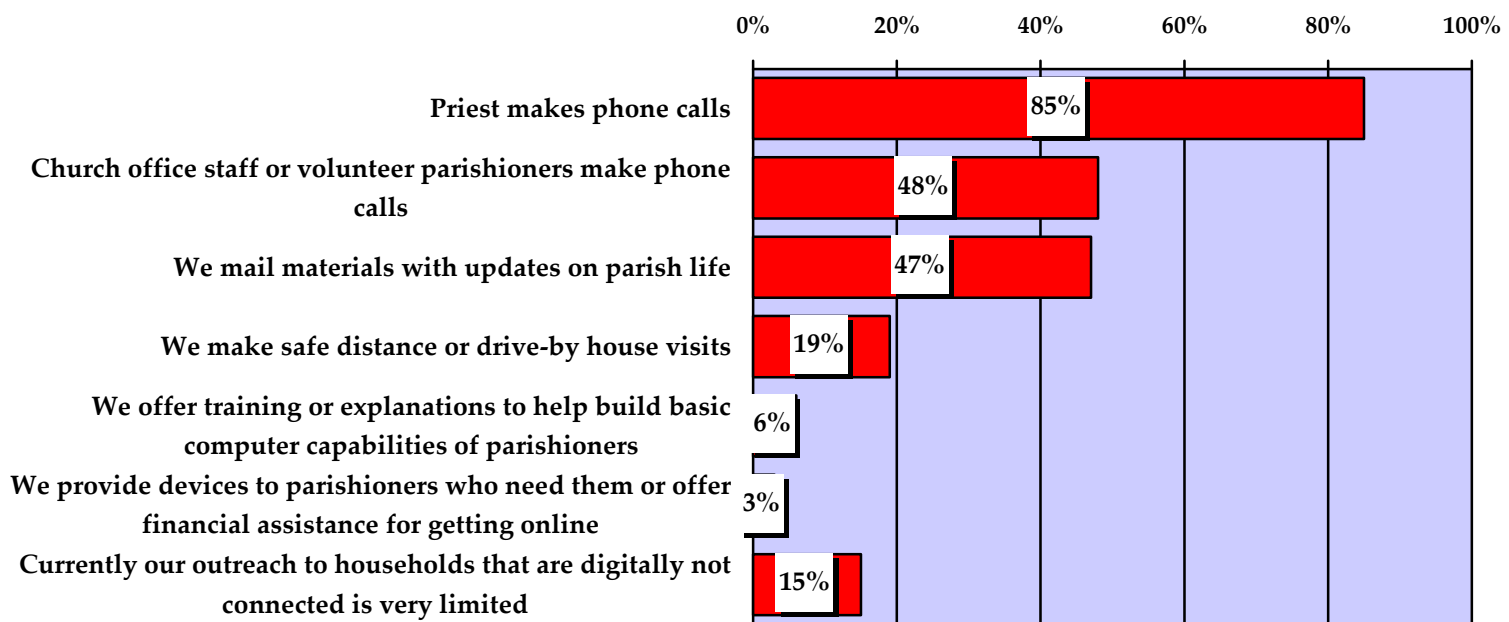
Although 10% may seem a fairly low number, this median percentage may downplay the problem. As Fig. 23 shows, the reality is that one-fifth of the parishes have many more such households: at least 30% of their membership cannot be remotely reached by online means. Among the three Orthodox jurisdictions with a significant number of parishes participating in the study, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese has an especially high percentage of parishes (26%) where at least 30% of members are digitally not connected.

Fig. 23 Approximately what percent of your parish households are not “digitally connected:” that is, households that either have no access to equipment/connectivity at home or are not capable of using computers/email/Internet?



In this time of social isolation how do clergy and parishes keep in touch with their members who are not digitally connected? Fig. 24 shows, the vast majority of parishes resort to phone calls made by clergy (85% of parishes) or by staff, and volunteers (48%). Nearly half the churches (47%) mail materials with updates on parish life. Strikingly few parishes have attempted to improve the situation by helping these members connect digitally, either by teaching them how to use computers (6% of parishes do this) or by providing needed devices and/or financial help to get online (3%). Sadly, one out of seven parishes (15%) reported that at this point they have very little communication with their members who are digitally not connected.

Fig. 24 How are you reaching these "digitally not connected" households? Select all answers that apply

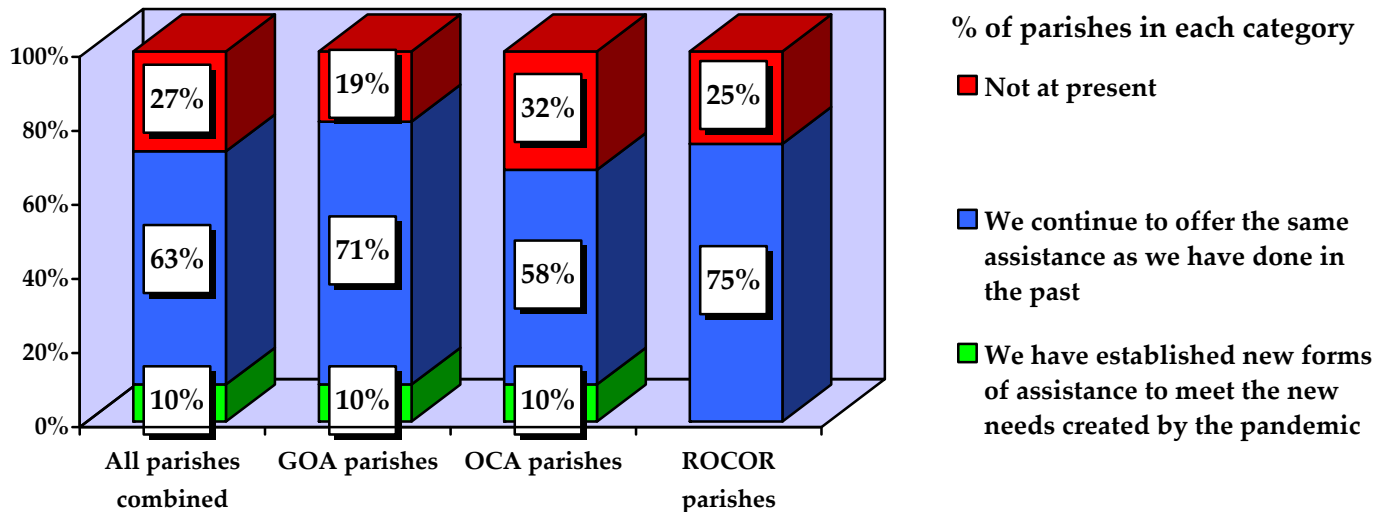


We also asked clergy if they used any other approaches to reach households that were digitally not connected. Out of 234 respondents, only 11 responded. Most of these wrote that other parishioners, relatives, or friends kept in touch regularly with these digitally not connected households. Yet we did hear of two creative approaches. One OCA parish ordered and arranged home delivery to these households of “inspirational goods, treats to help keep the personal connection to their priest and church.” Another OCA parish offered a toll-free number which members of these households could call and listen to the services.

Do Orthodox parishes offer any help to those members who have special needs or problems triggered by the pandemic? As Fig. 25 shows, only 10% of parishes provided some special assistance for households that were experiencing especially strong pandemic-related difficulties.

Fig. 25 Very Few Parishes Help Their Members to Deal with Problems Caused by the Pandemic

Does your parish have any special forms of assistance to help your members at this time?



We also looked at the answers to this question offered by parishes with different demographic characteristics (i.e., percentages of college graduates, converts, older persons, and immigrants among the membership) and with different “identities” (for definitions of parish “identities,” see section I of the report): i.e., “ethnic,” “innovative,” and “intentionally Orthodox” parishes. Notably, there was virtually no difference in responses to this question.

We asked the 10% of clergy whose churches had “established new forms of assistance to meet the new needs created by the pandemic” to describe what their parishes were doing. Below are a number of the suggestions that might provide helpful insights for other parishes:

- ❖ “We have established a Parish Safety Net in which we call each parishioner every week two to check in with them and to address any needs (like bringing them groceries or medicine) and to 'lend an ear' to those isolated or lonely.”
- ❖ “We have parishioners offering to anonymously support struggling families.”
- ❖ “Parishioners in need can send prayer requests using a form on our website. We go through the requests before each service and light a candle for each one.”
- ❖ “We have a Food Pantry and we set aside funds to help those who have lost their jobs.”
- ❖ “We created an Emergency Response Team to assist those in need.”

- ❖ “We deliver both prepared meals and groceries to families that are under quarantine, to the elderly, and to the poor.”

IX. Success Stories and Personal Reflections of the Clergy:

What They Want to Share with Others

In previous sections, we discussed various changes introduced by the parishes into their worship services, sacramental life, religious education, finances, ways of communication, etc., that helped them to meet the challenges of the pandemic and adjust, at least partially, to their new circumstances. But we also wanted to give the clergy one more opportunity to freely share with others their ideas, thoughts, and experiences. At the end of the survey, an open-ended question asked the priests either to write about some successful creative approach/practice developed in their parish or offer a broader reflection (either positive or negative) on dealing with the Coronavirus pandemic.

We first offer readers a number of creative approaches and “novelties” implemented in the parishes. Please note that the ideas and practices which were already shared earlier in this report (especially, new sacramental practices) are not included below:

- ❖ “One thing has been very helpful financially: our online “candle lighting ministry.” Please see details on our website www.atlgoc.org
- ❖ “We now have virtual coffee hours every Sunday and it is great. What we do is set up a meeting on Zoom. When Liturgy ends, people can call in and we talk. We also separate people in groups if desired (i.e., if there are too many people to have a productive conversation all together).”
- ❖ “We have Zoom meetings for all parishioners. 40 min session goes long way in reconnecting people.”
- ❖ “Together with other clergymen, we organize joint weekly online conference for our parishioners. The conferences are in the evening and we have good attendance for our size and the people are enriched by their words and answers to the questions.”
- ❖ “Now that most parishioners are accustomed to using Zoom, for our online classes we are scheduling outside speakers from across the country on a regular basis.”
- ❖ “In our online services, we bring in guest chanters from other parishes.”
- ❖ “For each service, we use a combination of ZOOM and YouTube. Participation on ZOOM is limited to those who have a singing or reading function, but then we stream that ZOOM service on YouTube so all parishioners can watch.”

- ❖ “We have been using Zoom to broadcast our services. What I like about Zoom, it balances listening and watching services with 'live' participating. During the service I am screen-sharing the text of the service and everybody has to do some reading, chanting, or singing. Zoom also allows us to greet each other at the beginning and end of services.”
- ❖ “I am serving daily matins and vespers 5 days a week plus weekly liturgy. All our services are not only streamed, but interactive. I send parishioners the materials in advance and they take turns reading, chanting, and singing in the services. This has been huge in keeping them connected.”
- ❖ “In our online services, those without ability to be on Internet still can call in to listen to the services via GoToMeeting.”
- ❖ “I heard about Orthodox church doing a resurrection procession in cars. That would be good.”

In addition to their practical ideas and approaches, the priests shared their broader reflections either on recent experiences or on possible future consequences of the pandemic for Orthodox parish life.

Comments on “What have we learned?”

- ❖ “We learned that people want more connection in Lent. And we had more live-streamed services than we would typically hold during this time. Plus, almost daily Zoom 'Prayer, Scripture, and Conversation' sessions.”
- ❖ “I discovered in my parish that Confession is the best help against anxiety and depression, which seem to be the biggest problems we are facing. Being able to hear Confessions and grant absolution over the phone has been a great encouragement and source of healing.”
- ❖ “Calling every family at least once a week and checking on them has been the best pastoral practice I have implemented during this time.”
- ❖ “We have never offered our services through live streaming before now. We had the ability but we chose not to for several reasons: mainly that we did not want to reinforce that the Liturgy was something you merely watched. After this crisis, we plan on continuing live streaming *but* we will end our live stream broadcast at the end of the public part of the Divine Liturgy. We will end the stream at 'The doors, the doors' and before the faithful say the Creed.”
- ❖ “What have we learned? 1. Increased appreciation for the Eucharist, services, and for worshipping with others (the Body of Christ). 2. Power of videoconferencing for bringing folks together without extended travel times for our weekly discussions of Orthodoxy.”
- ❖ “We learned to be united and more receptive to each person's problems.”

- ❖ “This Pandemic has actually helped many to begin appreciating one another, looking forward to someday meeting again and worshiping together. A certain hunger and thirst for the Sacraments has been expressed. Live streaming does not seem to dampen the spirit within parishioners to actually participate physically in worship, which is pleasantly surprising to me. I have been afraid that parishioners would be tempted to give up making the effort to travel to church, since they could simply watch services being 'performed' on the screen. But, so far, I have been pleasantly surprised.”
- ❖ “We tell our people that we expect them to be responsible (not just accountable) Christian adults. And they acted that way almost all of the time. Even in times of crisis.”

Comments on “What am I concerned about?”

- ❖ “The guidelines to reopen the churches are way too complicated. The Bishops seem to think we should stay closed. Parishioners are getting impatient with the wait, and some think the Bishops are keeping churches closed or restricted primarily from fear of litigation.”
- ❖ “I am saddened that the clergy and the Church have been deemed 'non-essential' during this crisis. Clergy have been generally banned from entering hospitals and nursing homes.”
- ❖ “The amount of extremism and ignorance I've seen online from clergy and laity alike has been really disheartening. Our clergy are among the most schooled people in their communities, but typically they lack schooling in the sciences. We need to more closely consider some of the things we say. Communion couldn't hurt you? The Eucharist is the body of blood of Christ, but it's also still bread and wine, isn't it? Otherwise, why do we dry it before putting it in the tabernacle? For it not to be still bread and wine would be something of denial of the dual nature of Christ, wouldn't it? And, even if, in light of that, we elect to say the Eucharist can't hurt you or be a vector for disease, there's plenty of opportunity for disease transmission in church other ways. To 'safely' return to business 'as normal' is a contradiction. Thankfully, someone else is responsible for the decisions and it isn't the politicians, but I'm deeply concerned that they (the hierarchs) are good at dead and minor languages but terrible at science and may get it wrong. I pray that the Holy Spirit (and their human advisors) will give them discernment.”

Comments on “What about the future?”

- ❖ “People say that when this is over, they will be at church. Are they really going to do this?”
- ❖ “As a potential game-changer to the Western and specifically American way of life, we may well be on the threshold of needing to adapt in decisively uncharted waters in more significant ways that we

could have ever imagined previously. We need to stabilize our resources (human, material, spiritual), learn together what God is doing in the midst of this mess and our world, and then decide how to respond to the prompting of Christ's Spirit. The western world was already drastically changing under our very feet before this hit; now in the chasm that has opened up, we have the opportunity (fearful yet exciting) to do the hard work of discovery."

- ❖ "I feel that while this was a serious situation, the civil leadership yet has used extreme fear propaganda to control social distancing and to keep people home. I believe this will make it very difficult to reverse. I feel that it will be at least a year or year and half before we get many people to feel comfortable coming back to church."
- ❖ "It would be great to actually see either diocesan or national practical responses to some of my 'complaints:' 1) detailed instructions on how to do live-streaming using various resources and for various budgets; 2) detailed instructions on how to legally access federal 'loans' and grants. Neither of these is 'rocket science,' for the younger generation who grew up using all kinds of social media. But we older folks may not be computer savvy and trained with hands on live-streaming skills."

Two Concluding Paragraphs

The information provided by study participants and used in this report was frank, heartfelt, and insightful. Thanks to the input from 234 priests, representing seven jurisdictions and all parts of the country, we were able to paint a picture of the great variety of local circumstances and how parishes have responded to them. As you saw on previous pages, some findings presented in the report are troubling, while others instill hope or offer helpful ideas you may be able to adapt to your own parish situation. But one important element was definitely missing in this study. So far, we have been able to hear only the perspectives of the clergy on how the pandemic has affected local parish life. We believe it is also crucially important to hear and learn from Orthodox parishioners. Whether you are a clergyman or a lay parishioner, we have a question for you: "Would you be willing to help with such a study in your parish?" If so, please communicate with us either via email orthodoxdata@usreligioncensus.org or via the contact form on our website, www.orthodoxreality.org.

We encourage you to share this report with your parish communities as well as with Orthodox friends and relatives. And, of course, we welcome your feedback and suggestions. Furthermore, if your national jurisdiction, diocese, or parish would be interested in a more in-depth examination of any of the subjects presented in this report, we would welcome such inquiries and try to help. You can send your requests via email or the contact form indicated above.