



Alexei Krindatch (akrindatch@aol.com), National Coordinator
Census of Orthodox Christian Churches / 2020 US Religion Census

Ten Questions and Answers about the Pandemic's Impact on American Orthodox Christian Parishes

Why this study is important and how it was conducted	p. 2
Spoiler: "Did you know that..."	p. 5
Question 1. How complete was the lockdown of Orthodox parish life during the pandemic?	p. 6
Question 2. How strong was the impact of the pandemic on parishioners' personal wellbeing?	p. 7
Question 3. How strong was the impact of the pandemic on the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of Orthodox parish clergy?	p. 9
Question 4. What was the impact of the pandemic on the financial health of parishes?	p. 10
Question 5. Did the pandemic change the level of involvement of members in their parishes?	p. 12
Question 6. Which areas of parish life were affected most negatively and strongly by the pandemic?	p. 17
Question 7. How widespread were the conflicts in parishes caused by disagreements regarding various restrictions brought on by the pandemic?	p. 18
Question 8. Did parishes make an effort to educate their members about the pandemic and/or encourage them to get vaccinated?	p. 19
Question 9. Currently, how significant is online attendance in American Orthodox parishes as compared to their in-person attendance?	p. 20
Question 10. How do parishes envision their future in the light of their experiences of the pandemic?	p. 21
Ideas that worked: examples of successful adaptations made by parishes in response to the pandemic	p. 23



Why this study is important and how it was conducted

There is little doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic will have many lasting consequences for all American religious congregations and for Orthodox Christian parishes in particular. Even if and when the disease no longer poses a threat, it will leave many indelible imprints on Orthodox Church life in America.

Indeed, the pandemic forced the Orthodox Church - the Church that "never changes" - to introduce many innovations amazingly quickly. Already by early May 2020, 64% of American Orthodox parishes were offering their services online versus 13% prior to the pandemic. Similarly, religious education, as well as other parish ministries and activities, moved from "in-person" to "virtual" format. These emergency adaptations not only helped parishes to endure the crisis, but also gave rise to entirely new resources and approaches that may enhance parish life in the future. Yet their lasting effects remain unclear and have to be deeper examined. For the first time, members had the option to regularly "attend" church from the comfort of their homes. Will all of them resume in-person attendance post-pandemic? Further, parishioners began to compare sermons, music, and additional interactive features of many churches situated far from their home areas. Will some church members abandon their home parishes and remotely join distant churches that have greater appeal to them? More generally, can "hands-off" virtual worship be a viable option for the highly "hands-on" Orthodox Church?

New challenging questions surfaced in the parishes during the pandemic which need to be addressed. Some parishes were torn apart by fierce arguments among parishioners about many restrictions and changes pertaining to the pandemic such as in-person attendance, limiting the number of people in the church, wearing masks, changes in ways of serving the Holy Eucharist, etc. How long will it take to heal the scars of these conflicts and dissents?

Online religious education via Zoom had differential success for adults versus children. For adults, it proved to be in many ways more efficient than in-person classes (resulting in higher attendance, for instance). For children, however, there was a "Zoom fatigue" that depressed attendance, and also the issue of scheduling and its impact. . The newly introduced virtual "Sunday schools" were not necessarily held on Sunday, which worked for some but not for others.. In addition, if this is continued post-pandemic, might families stop making the effort to come for Sunday services, because for many of them, Sunday school had been an important reason to go to church?ⁱ

The need for rapid and efficient adaptations to the crisis also challenged the traditional Orthodox governance model of waiting for a bishop to decide what his multi-state diocese should do. In some cases, parishes had to grudgingly accept decisions that did not fit into their unique local contexts; in others, hierarchs granted them some degree of local autonomy to customize liturgical solutions, or the parishes simply took it upon themselves to do so (e.g., clergy were experimenting with new ways of administering Holy Communion). After the experience of successful local improvisation (and, in certain instances, harsh criticism towards bishops), will some parishes be emboldened to further test independence from their hierarchs?

These and many other questions of utmost importance for the Orthodox Church in the United States are being examined in the ongoing study, *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Parishes: Innovation Amidst and Beyond COVID-19*. It should be noted that this study is being conducted in partnership with many other Christian denominations. The outcomes and findings will be shared by all participating Churches, allowing each partner (including Orthodox Christian Churches) to obtain a broader perspective on post-pandemic recovery and change in America's diverse religious congregations. The collaborative effort is coordinated by the [Hartford Institute for Religion Research](#) and the [Faith Communities Today](#) research initiative.

This article presents *initial and selected* results of the survey of US Orthodox parishes conducted July 1-14, 2021. A more detailed report will follow later this fall, which will also include the data from other participating Christian Churches.

As noted, the following short report is based on an online survey of Orthodox parish priests representing all American Orthodox jurisdictions. 151 clergy completed questionnaires. Despite the relatively small sample size, it is well balanced in terms of representation of the various Orthodox jurisdictions (only the Antiochian Archdiocese is underrepresented) and geographic distribution of parishes. See Fig. 1a and Fig. 1b.

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

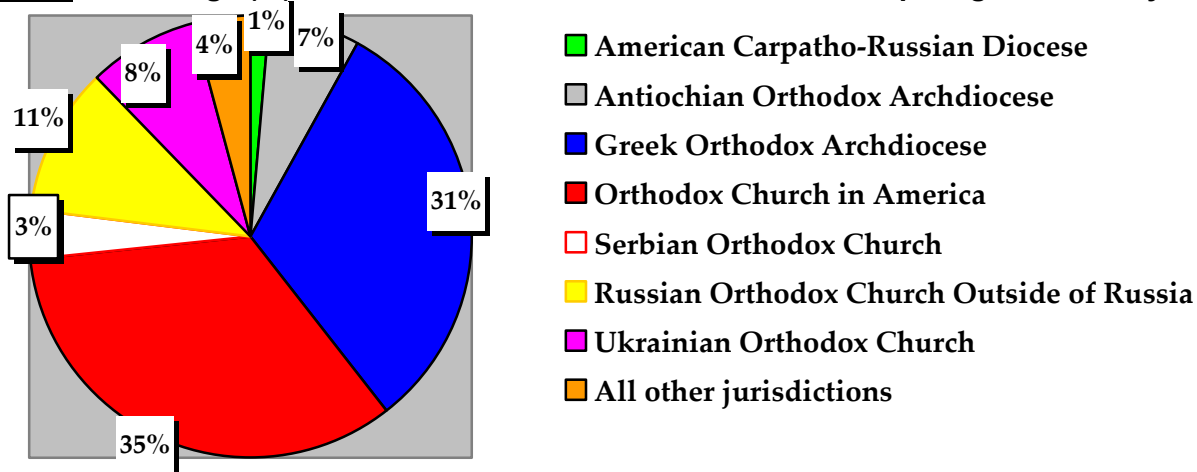
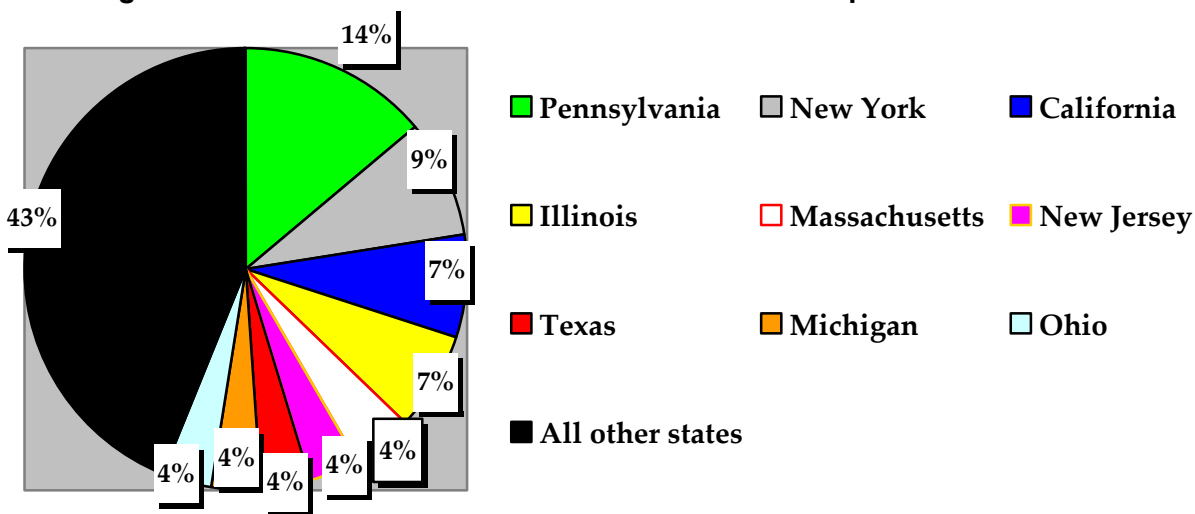


Fig. 1b Geographic Distribution of Parishes Participating in the Study: Percentage of Each State in the Total Number of Parishes. Top Nine States Shown



On the following pages, we present results and discuss findings for all parishes combined and separately for three jurisdictions with the largest numbers of respondents:

- Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (GOA)
- Orthodox Church in America (OCA)
- Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR)

It should be noted that another reason for profiling ROCOR parishes separately (along with the much larger GOA and OCA jurisdictions) was the different approach they took to dealing with the pandemic. It can be informative when contrasts emerge naturally and clearly, as they did in this case. These differences will be discussed throughout the following pages.

We invite everyone to offer feedback and tell us which specific issues related to the pandemic's impact on Church life should be further addressed. Please send your comments and suggestions to orthodoxdata@usreligioncensus.org.

We also encourage everyone to share with us the experiences of your parish. To do so, use the following link and complete the survey. It should take about 15-20 minutes:

https://covidreligionstudy.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_7a0UBXEsQmqb6mi

In the coming months, we will offer more new study results. The reports will be posted at www.orthodoxreality.org and on the upcoming project website *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations*.

Spoiler: "Did you know that..."

Did you know that:

- ...less than one-third (31%) of US Orthodox parish clergy have publicly encouraged their parishioners to get vaccinated;
- ...nearly half of American Orthodox parishes (48%) "profited" financially from the pandemic, because their members give now more than they did prior to COVID. Only 16% of parishes experienced a decline in donations;
- ...overall the pandemic had a negative influence on parishioners' involvement, but, at the same time, certain Orthodox jurisdictions benefited from the crisis by winning more members and increasing church attendance;
- ...about one-third (32%) of the members in American Orthodox parishes continue to attend their churches online and worship remotely from their homes.

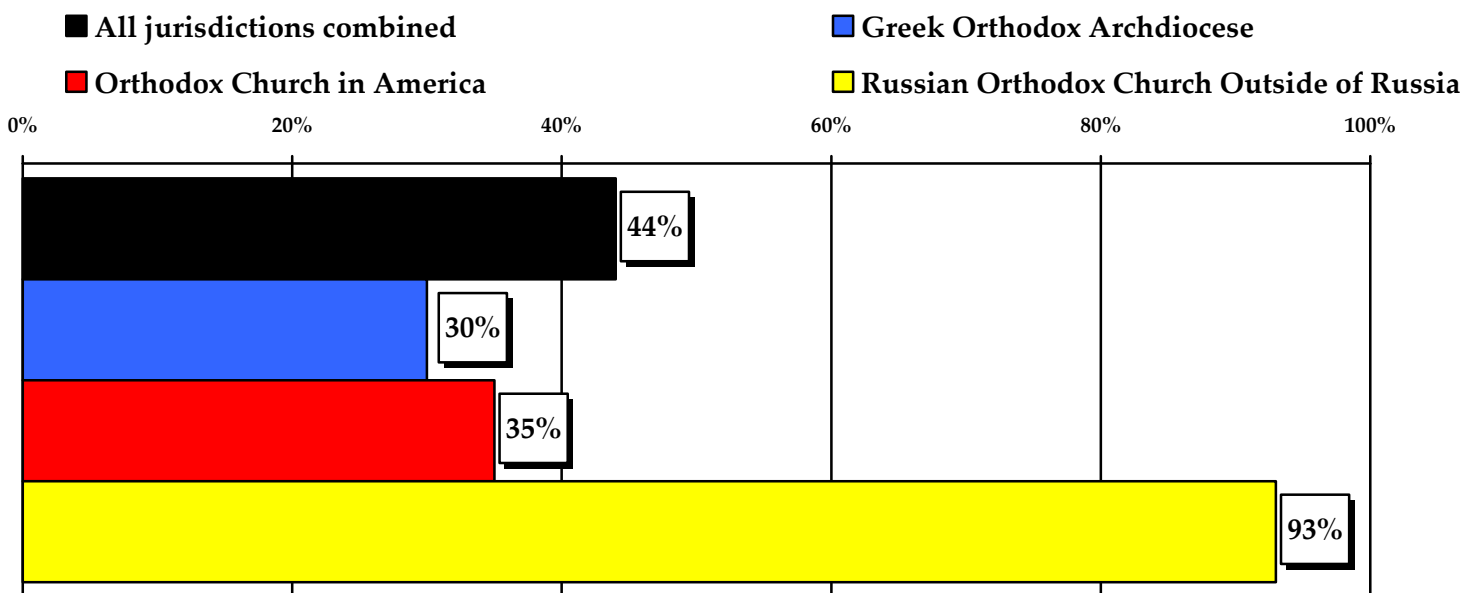
If this appears interesting and you want to know more about the consequences of the pandemic for American Orthodox parish life, then keep reading and share this report with your friends and fellow parishioners.

Question 1. How complete was the lockdown of Orthodox parish life in America during the pandemic?

The short answer to this question: "It was far from complete."

The survey asked "Did your parish stop worshipping *in person in your building* due to COVID-19?" 44% of parishes replied that they never ceased in-person services. Among the three Orthodox Church jurisdictions for which we report individual data, the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia has the highest percentage (93%) of parishes continuing in-person services through the pandemic.

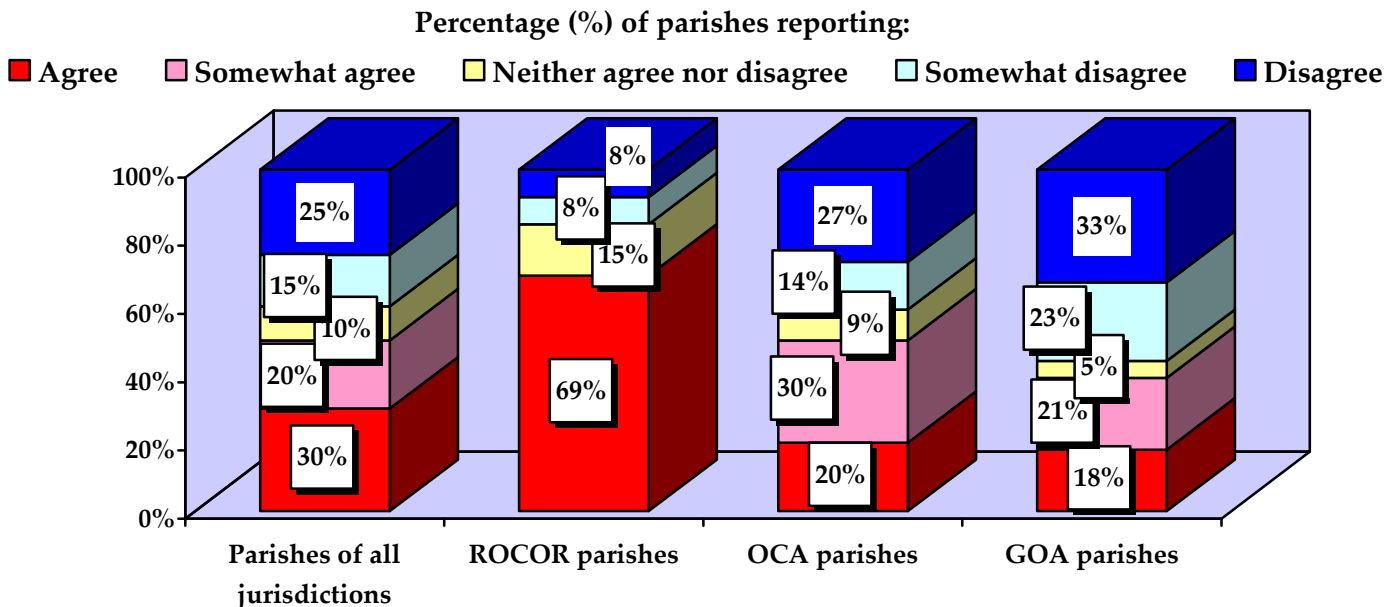
Fig. 2 Percentage of Parishes which Continued In-Person Services through the Entire Pandemic



Further, a significant number of parishes reported that, overall, their lives continued without major changes. The questionnaire asked parish clergy whether they agreed with the statement, "The ministries of this parishes have continued *without major disruption.*" Half the parishes (50%) either fully agreed (30%) or somewhat agreed (20%) with this statement. Again, among the three jurisdictions, the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia had the highest percentage (69%) of such parishes. See Fig. 3.

Fig.3 Pandemic and Continuation of the Church Life

Do you agree or disagree: "The ministries of this parish have continued ***without major disruption.***"



Further, an open-ended question asked: "What have been the most successful adaptations your parish made in response to the pandemic?" While many parishes wrote about various technological innovations and other adjustments to better deal with the new challenges, a number of the respondents indicated that they actually did not change anything and were even proud of it. Here is a quote from one of such parishes in Texas: "We didn't change anything - literally nothing - and no one ever got sick. We stayed open, served the community, celebrated the Holy Mysteries, and took care of other parishes whose clergy or hierarchs ignored them." Or, a similar reply from the parish priest in Georgia: "We simply continued to attend and support."

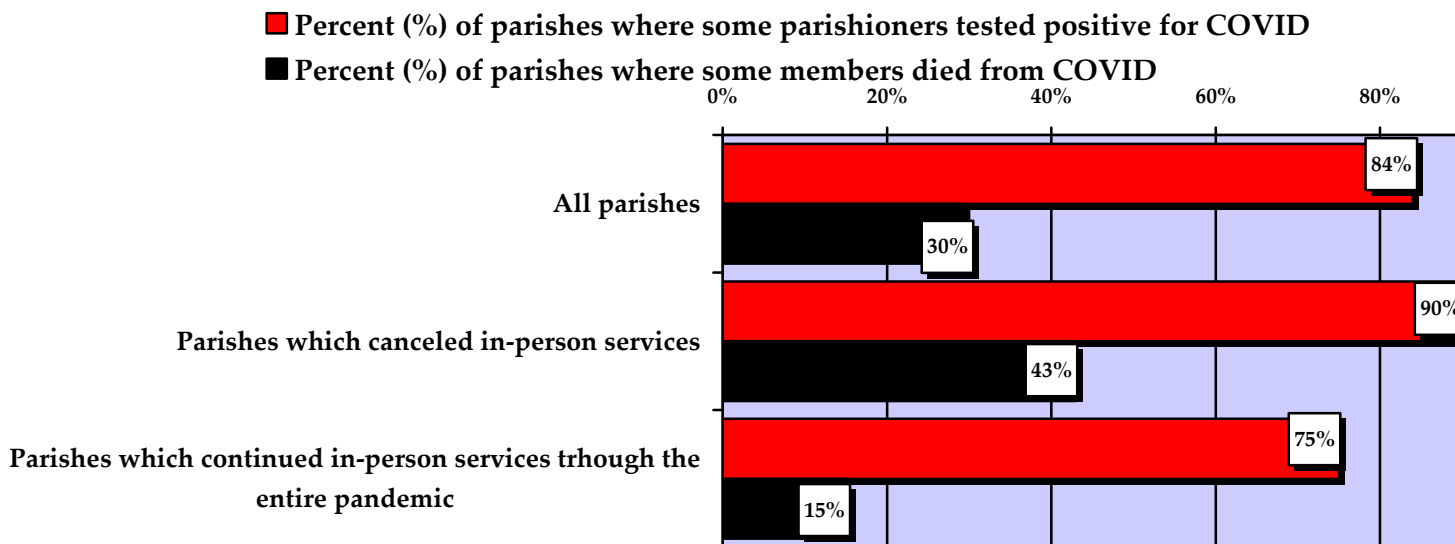
Question 2. How strong was the impact of the pandemic on parishioners' personal wellbeing?

The answer to this question depends on how wellbeing is defined. From the purely medical perspective, the vast majority of parishes (84%) reported that some of their members were infected with COVID, while 29% had (one or more) parishioners who died from the disease. See Fig. 4.

Survey data also indicated that those parishes that continued in-person services throughout the pandemic were less affected by the COVID infection and COVID-related deaths among members (75% and 14% of parishes respectively) than were the parishes which had stopped in-person worship (90% and 43%). A possible explanation of this fact might be that the parishes with continuing in-person services were situated in safer areas that were less exposed to COVID.

Accordingly, there was no need to completely shut them down, and their parishioners also suffered less from the disease.

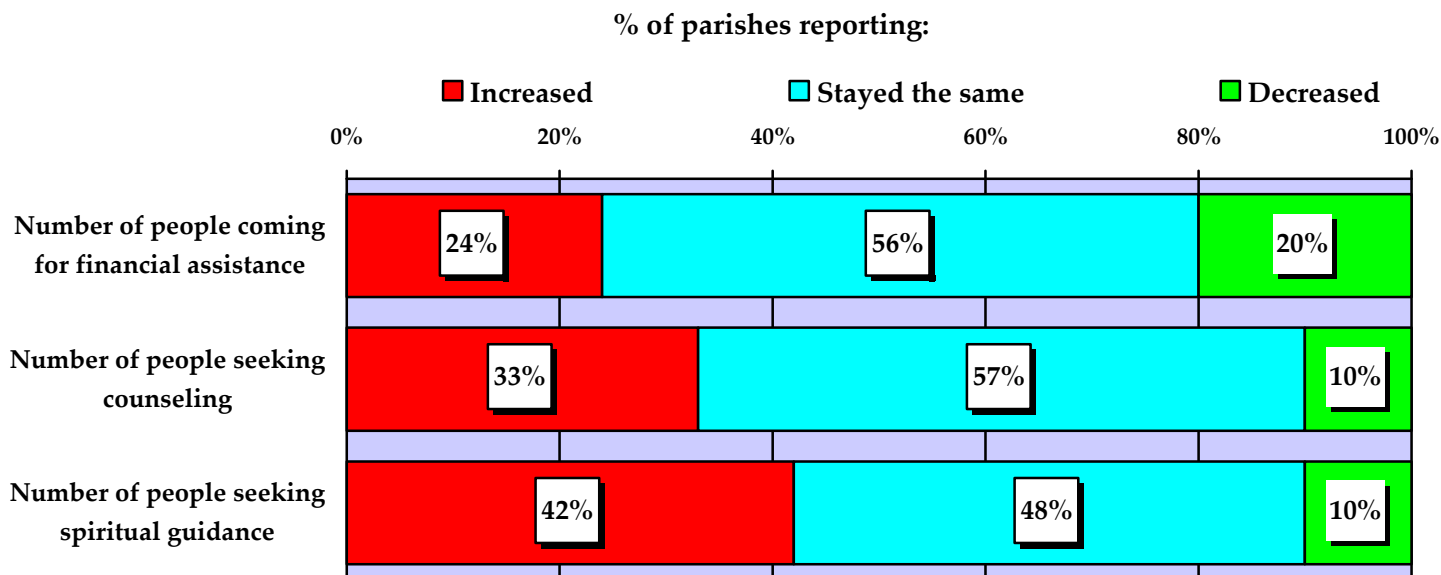
Fig. 4 Rates of COVID Infections and Mortality in US Orthodox Parishes



It was found that the pandemic had relatively little impact on the financial wellbeing of parishioners, but it affected much more strongly their needs for counseling and spiritual guidance. Fig. 5 shows that less than one quarter of the parishes (24%) indicated an increased number of people looking for financial assistance. At the same time, one-third of the parishes (33%) experienced growth in members seeking counseling and 42% reported an increase in parishioners asking for spiritual guidance.

Fig. 5 The Pandemic and the Well-Being of Parishioners

“How have the following changed since the start of the pandemic?”



Question 3. How strong was the impact of the pandemic on the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of Orthodox parish clergy?

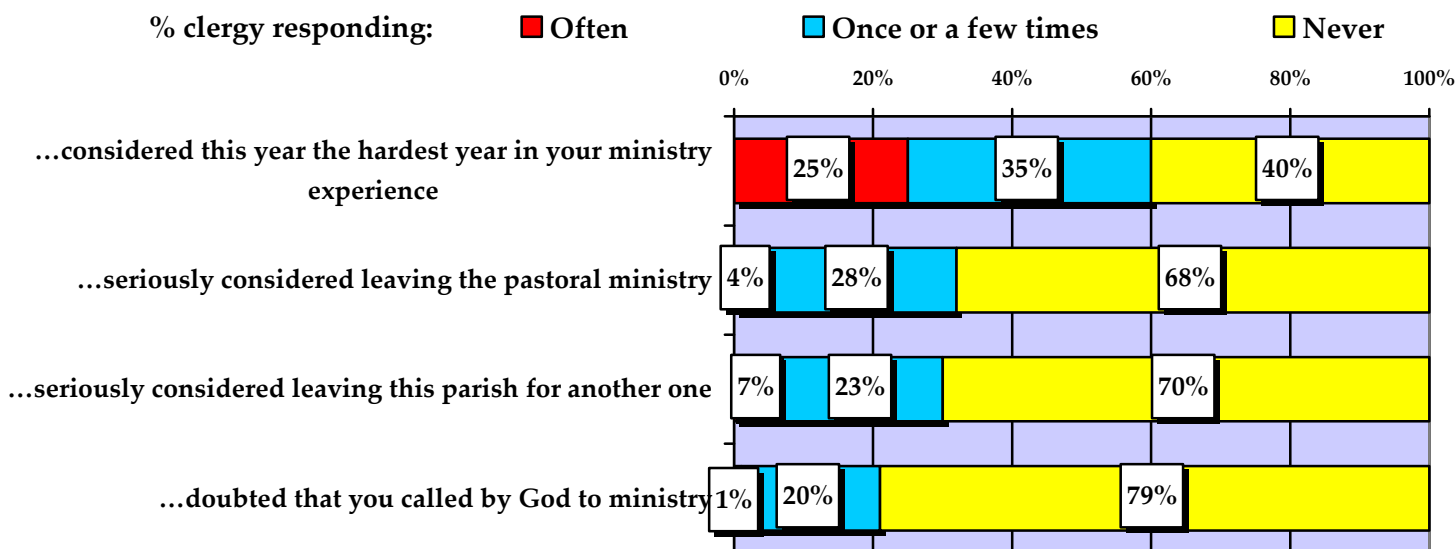
In every parish, there is a core group of engaged members who fully invest themselves in the life of the church. Undoubtedly, these members greatly helped their parish communities to deal with the crisis caused by the pandemic. Nonetheless, the clergy usually feel (and generally are) ultimately responsible for all that happens within their parish. How did American Orthodox priests handle the challenges and stress imposed on them by the pandemic?

The survey asked clergy: "In the past year, how often have you..."

- ...doubted that you are called by God to ministry
- ...seriously considered leaving pastoral ministry
- ...seriously considered leaving this parish for another one
- ...considered this year the hardest year in your ministry experience." See Fig 6.

Not surprisingly, an absolute majority of clergy (60%) felt – at least once – that this year was the most difficult in their entire priestly experience. One in five (21%) questioned their overall pastoral calling and nearly one-third (32%) thought about resigning altogether from the clerical vocation.

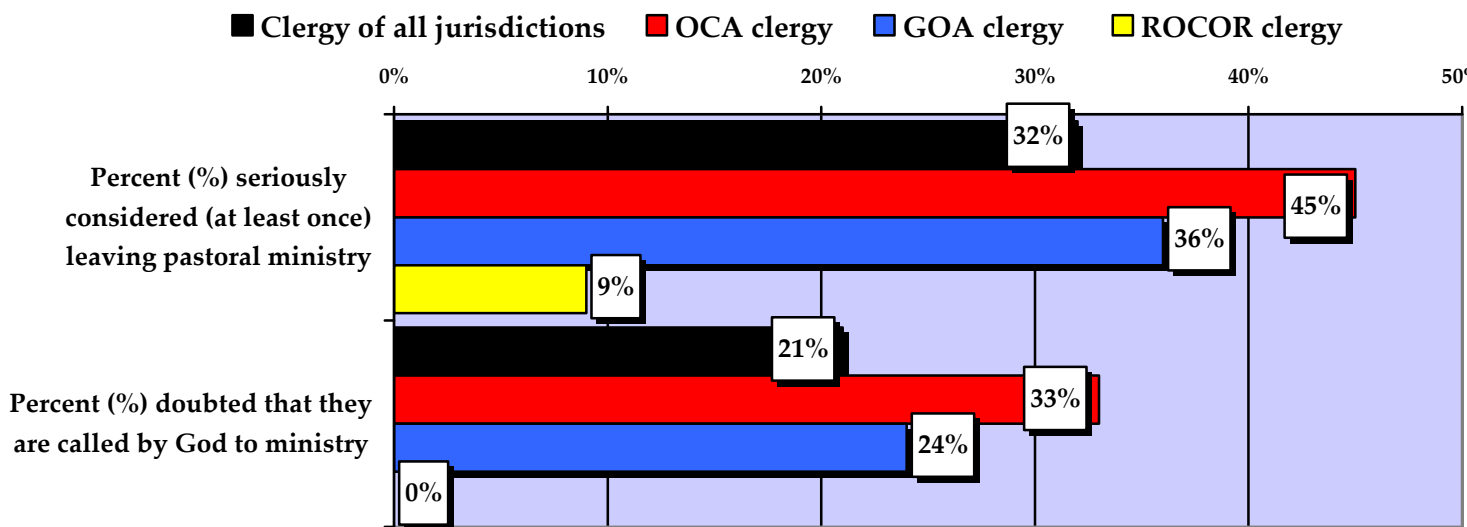
Fig. 6 Pandemic and Emotional Wellbeing of the Orthodox Parish Clergy
 "In the past year, how often have you..."



Among clergy of the three jurisdictions for which we report separately, the priests of the Orthodox Church of America appear to be especially pressured by the challenges brought by the pandemic.

Fig. 7 shows that in the past year, 45% of OCA clergy considered (at least once) leaving the pastoral ministry. In comparison, 36% of GOA priests and 9% of ROCOR clergy had such thoughts. Similarly, one-third of OCA priests had doubts that they were called by God to ministry as compared to 24% of GOA clergy and no ROCOR clergy at all.

Fig. 7 OCA Clergy Felt More Pressured by the Pandemic than the GOA and ROCOR Priests

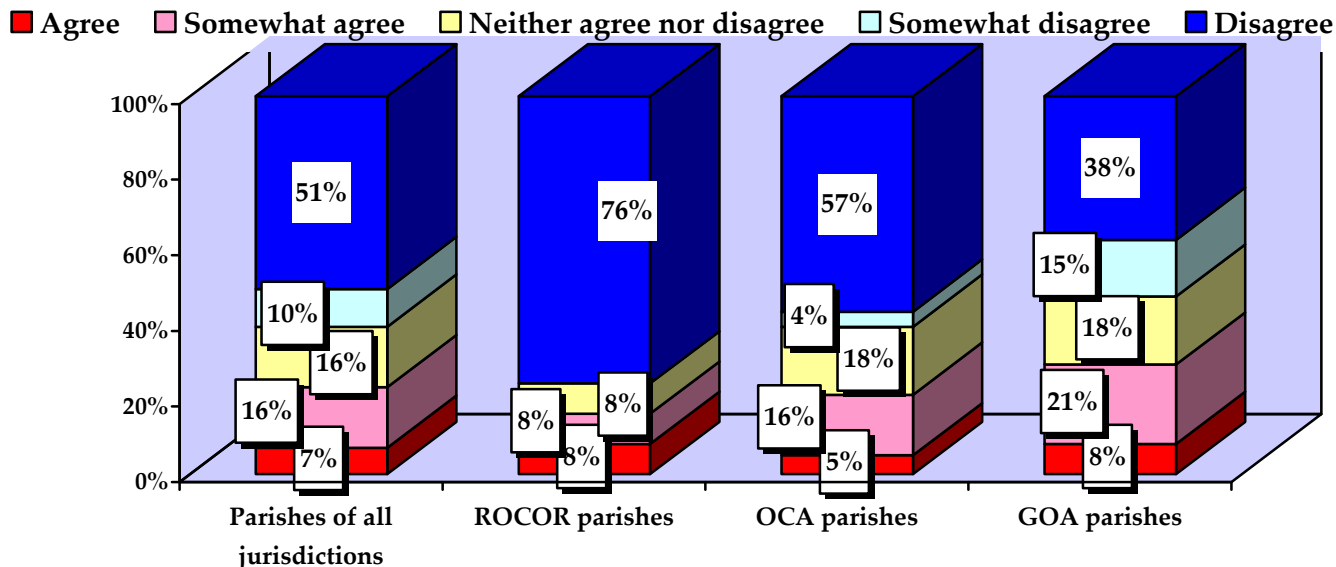


Question 4. What was the impact of the pandemic on the financial health of parishes?

Somewhat surprisingly, the survey revealed that pandemic had little impact on the finances of the vast majority of parishes. Only 7% of the parishes “agreed” and 16% “somewhat agreed” with the statement, “The financial viability of this parish has been put at risk by the pandemic.” See Fig. 8. Among various jurisdictions, the budgets of GOA parishes were somewhat more challenged by the pandemic. 29% of them felt (at least, “somewhat”) that their financial viability might be at risk.

Fig. 8 Pandemic and Financial Health of the Parishes

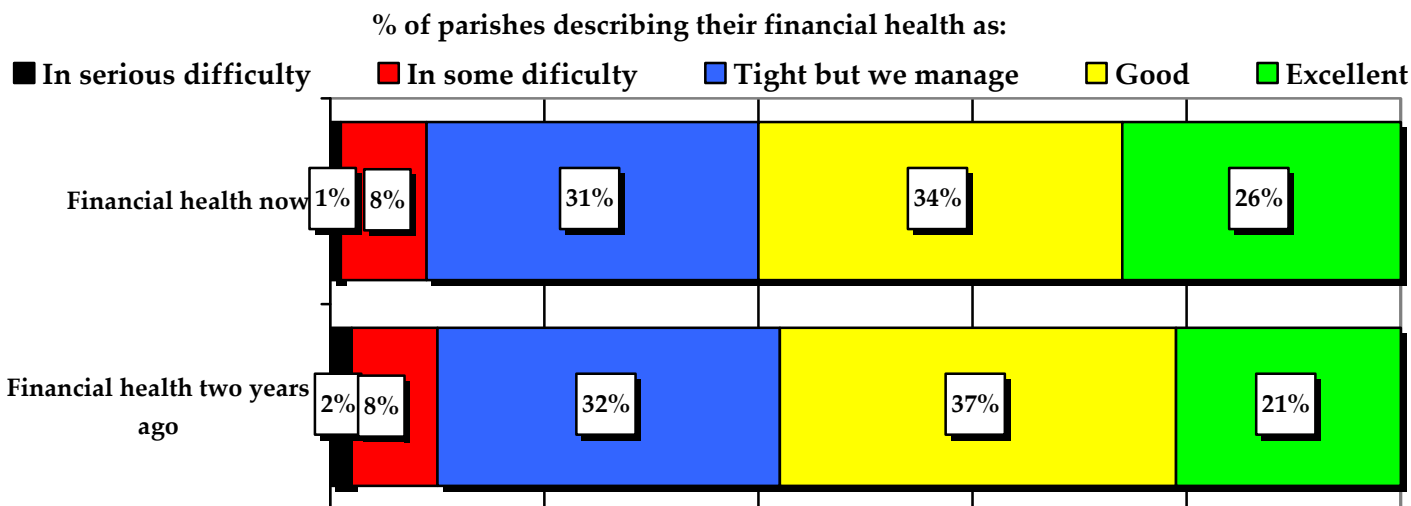
Do you agree or disagree: "The financial viability of this parish has been put at risk by the pandemic"



When evaluating their overall financial health today (post-pandemic) and two years ago (pre-pandemic), roughly the same percentages of the parishes described their situations as "in serious difficulty," "in some difficulty," "tight but we manage," "good," or "excellent." See Fig. 9.

Fig. 9 Overall Financial Health of U.S. Orthodox Parishes: Now and Pre-Pandemic

"How would you describe your parish's financial health today and two years ago?"

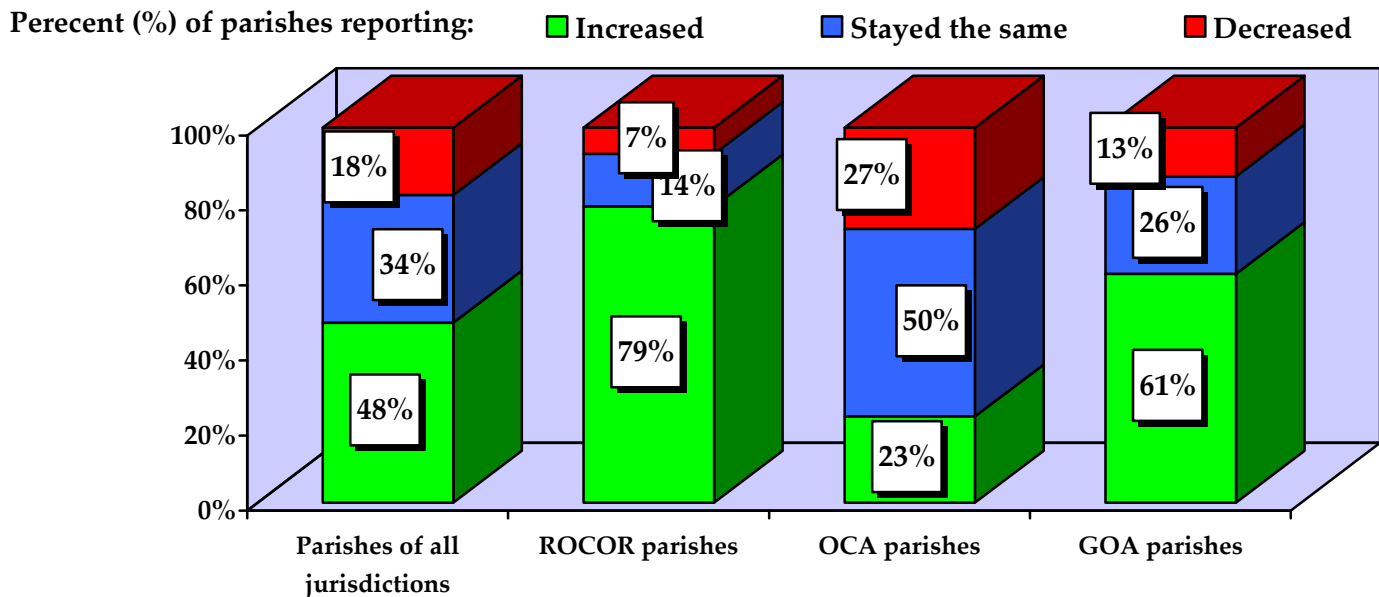


More importantly, it appears that pandemic has even enlivened the generosity of parishioners towards their churches. Overall, nearly half of the parishes (48%) experienced an increase in donations since the start of the pandemic, and only 18% reported that their members were giving less than they did before the COVID.

There were, however, significant variations in this regard among the parishes of the three jurisdictions for which we report separately. The “spark of generosity” among church members was much stronger in ROCOR and GOA churches than in the OCA parishes. See Fig 10.

Fig. 10 The Pandemic and Donations of Parishioners

“How has the amount of donations coming from parishioners changed since the start of the pandemic?”



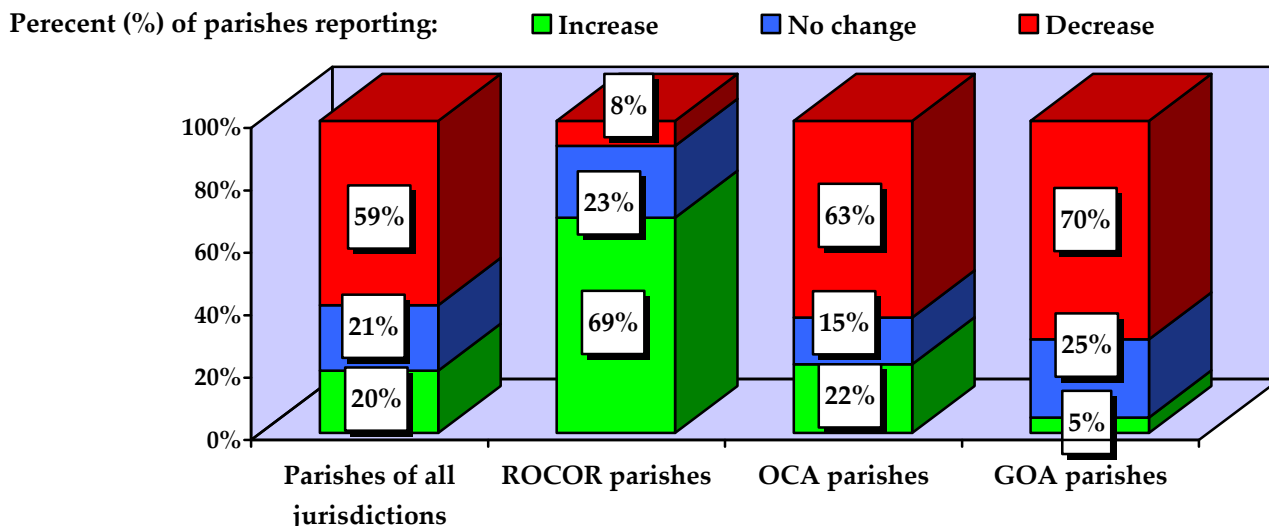
Question 5. Did the pandemic change the level of involvement of members in their parishes?

This is a complex question that can be answered differently from different perspectives. In short, the number of parishioners participating regularly in the lives of their parishes decreased in comparison with pre-pandemic level. The same is even more true, if we compare pre-pandemic and current numbers of people attending in-person Sunday worship services. However, this general picture of lower involvement and attendance is much more nuanced when taking into account virtual attendance at online services and significant differences among the various jurisdictions. Here are survey data which reflect the impact of the pandemic on attendance and participation in the parishes.

First, the questionnaire asked: “How many people (including children) regularly participate (once a month or more including in-person and virtual) in worship or other religious activities in your parish *currently and prior to the pandemic*?” Comparing two numbers given by respondents, it was found that 59% of the parishes experienced a decline in the number of actively involved parishioners, and only 20% grew in regular participants. See Fig. 11.

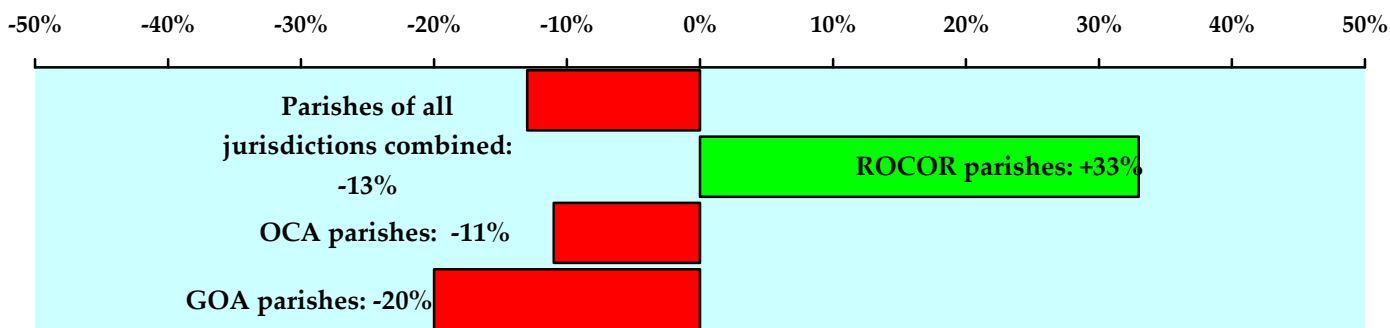
At the same time, this dynamic was quite different across the parishes of the three jurisdictions for which we report separate data. The decrease in regularly participating members was especially strong in GOA parishes: 70% of them reported a decline. On the other hand, more than two-thirds (69%) of ROCOR churches grew in the number of actively involved parishioners.

Fig. 11 Change in the Number of Regularly Participating Parishioners: Now Versus Pre-Pandemic



To better understand the degree of either decline or growth in actively involved members, we calculated median¹ percent change in the number of regularly participating parishioners for all jurisdictions combined and individually for GOA, OCA and ROCOR parishes. Fig. 12 shows that – compared with the pre-pandemic level – a “typical” Orthodox parish in the USA declined in the number of regular participants by 13%.

Fig. 12 Median Percentage Changes in Number of Regularly Participating Parishioners: Currently Versus Pre-Pandemic



¹ “Median” means that it is the midpoint. In other words, in half of the parishes in our sample this percentage is higher, while in the other half the percentage is lower. For instance, say we have nine parishes and their percent changes in number of regularly participating parishioners are: -13%, -9%, -4%, 2%, 3%, 8%, 9%, 11% and 13%. In this example, the median percent change is 3% - the number which is in the middle of the sequence of nine numbers.

Besides the overall decline in regularly participating parishioners, the pandemic had an even stronger negative influence on the number of people attending in-person weekend services.

The questionnaire asked: "Please estimate the average in-person attendance at all of your regular weekend (Friday, Saturday, Sunday) worship services, including children *now and two years ago.*"

A comparison of the two numbers given by respondents revealed that three-quarters (76%) of the parishes declined in the average in-person worship attendance as compared to the 2019 level, and only 15% grew in the number of people present in the church on a typical weekend. See Fig. 13. GOA parishes were especially hard-hit by this trend: 88% of them reported a decrease in in-person attendance now versus two years ago. On the contrary, most ROCOR parishes (64%) experienced growth in the number of people worshipping in the church on a typical weekend.

Fig. 13 Change in the Number of People Attending In-Person Worship Services: Now Versus 2019

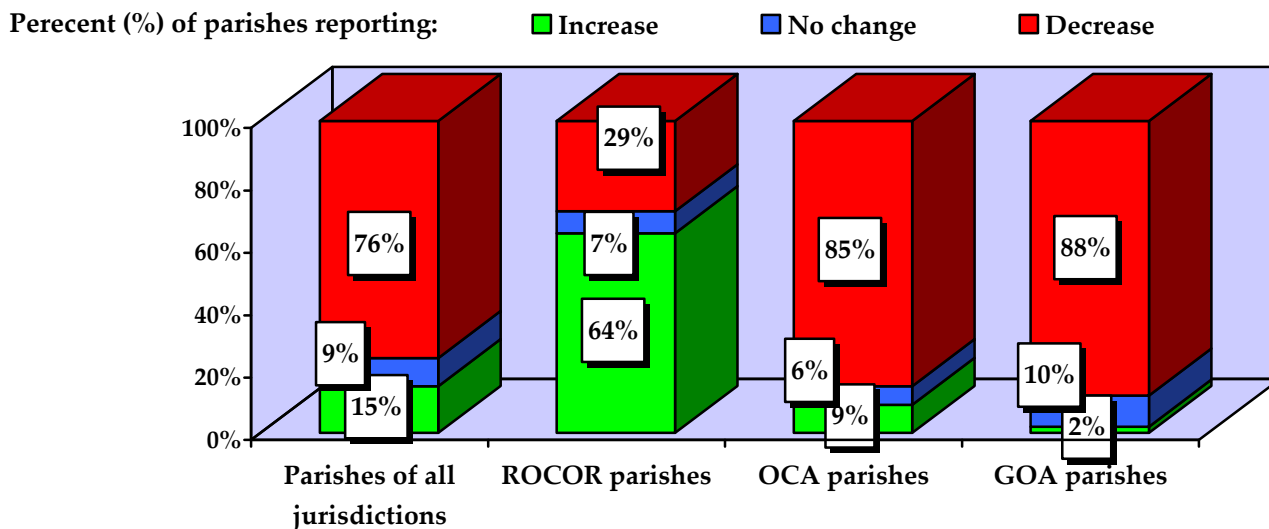
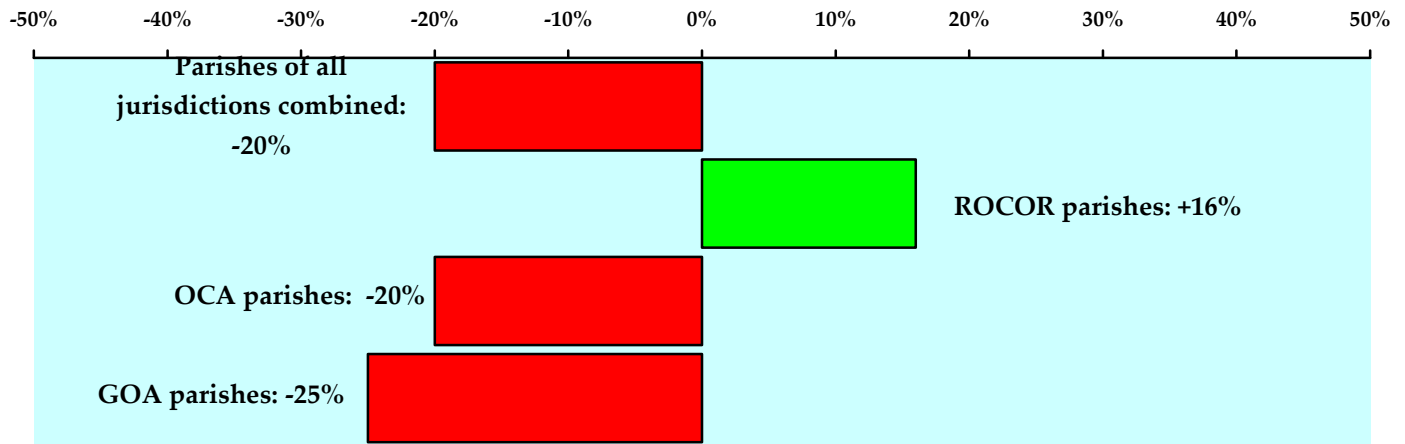


Fig. 14 helps to visualize the degree of change in the level of in-person worship attendance. It shows that a “typical” (median) American Orthodox parish presently has 20% fewer people attending in-person worship services in comparison with 2019. This decline was especially strong in the GOA parishes (a typical parish declined in attendance by 25%), while ROCOR parishes experienced growth (a typical parish has now 16% more people worshipping in person as compared with 2019).

Fig. 14 Median Percentage Changes in Number of People Attending In-Person Worship Services: Currently Versus Pre-Pandemic



However, the analysis of changes in worship attendance triggered by the pandemic would be incomplete without taking into account the new reality: during the pandemic many people began, and continue now, to attend their churches virtually, watching either live-streamed or recorded (and later posted online) services.

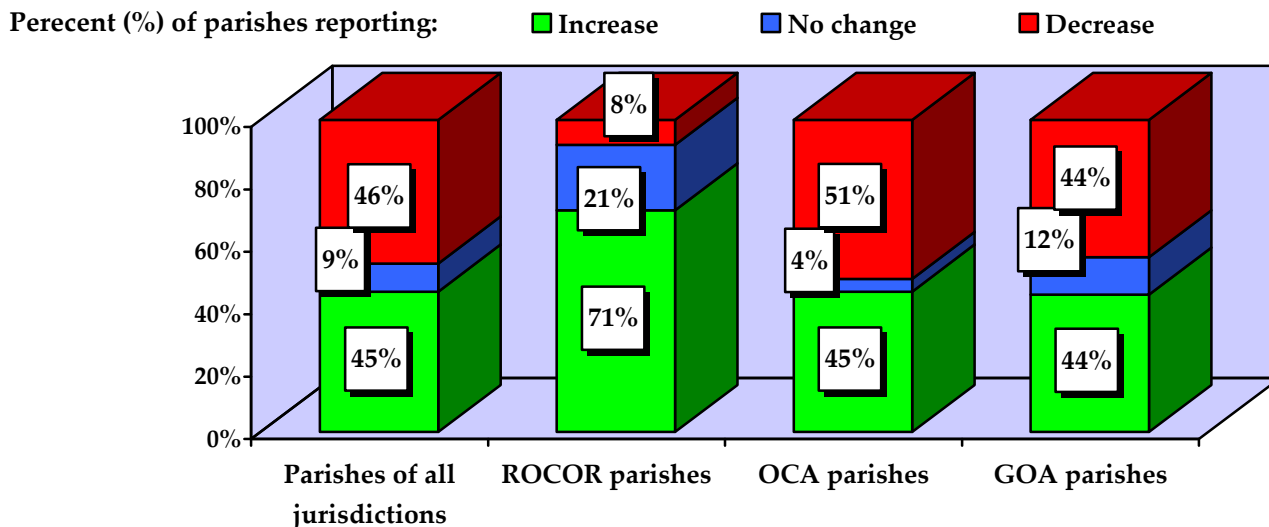
The degree of adoption and speed of proliferation of online services in American Orthodox parishes is hard to overestimate. The national study, “The Pandemic and American Orthodox Christian Parishes,”² conducted at the beginning of the pandemic, revealed that 64% of American parishes were already offering their services online in May 2020 versus only 13% prior to the pandemic.

Therefore, the questionnaire also asked: “Please estimate the average *virtual/remote attendance* at all of your regular weekend (Friday, Saturday, Sunday) worship service(s), including children now and two years ago.”

² Available at: <https://orthodoxreality.org/coronavirus-and-american-orthodox-parishes/>

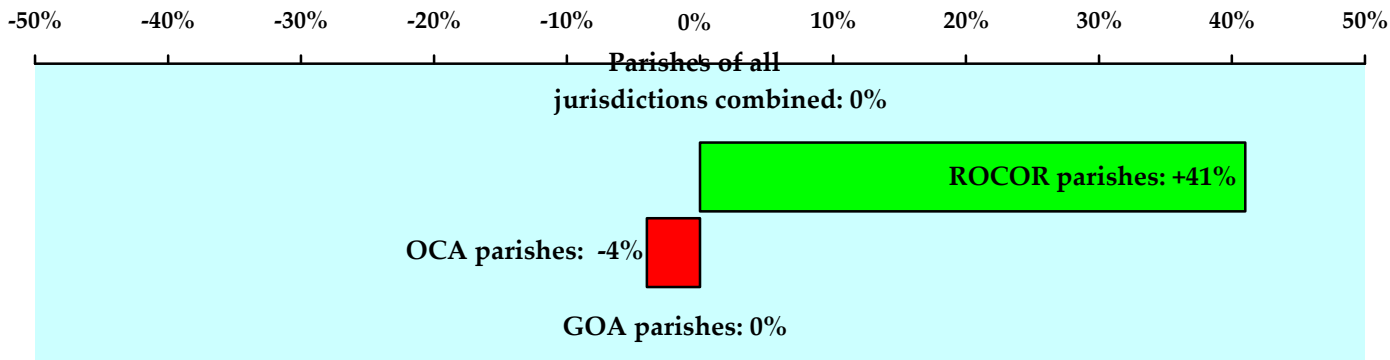
Fig. 15 shows the changes in combined (in-person plus online) number of people attending worship services in American Orthodox parishes now as compared to pre-pandemic level. The most important observation from the data presented in Fig. is that *when taking into account both in-person and online attendance* the pandemic had relatively little impact on the number of people worshipping in American Orthodox parishes on a typical weekend. Nearly the same percentage of parishes reported either increase (45%) or decrease (46%) in attendance now versus two years ago.

Fig. 15 Change in the Combined (In-Person + Online) Number of People Attending Worship Services: Now Versus 2019



The median percent change in the combined number of people attending services (either in-person or online) in American Orthodox parishes currently versus pre-pandemic confirmed this finding: it is 0% (zero). See Fig. 16.

Fig. 16 Median Percentage Changes in Combined (Either In-Person or Online) Number of People Attending Worship Services: Currently Versus Pre-Pandemic



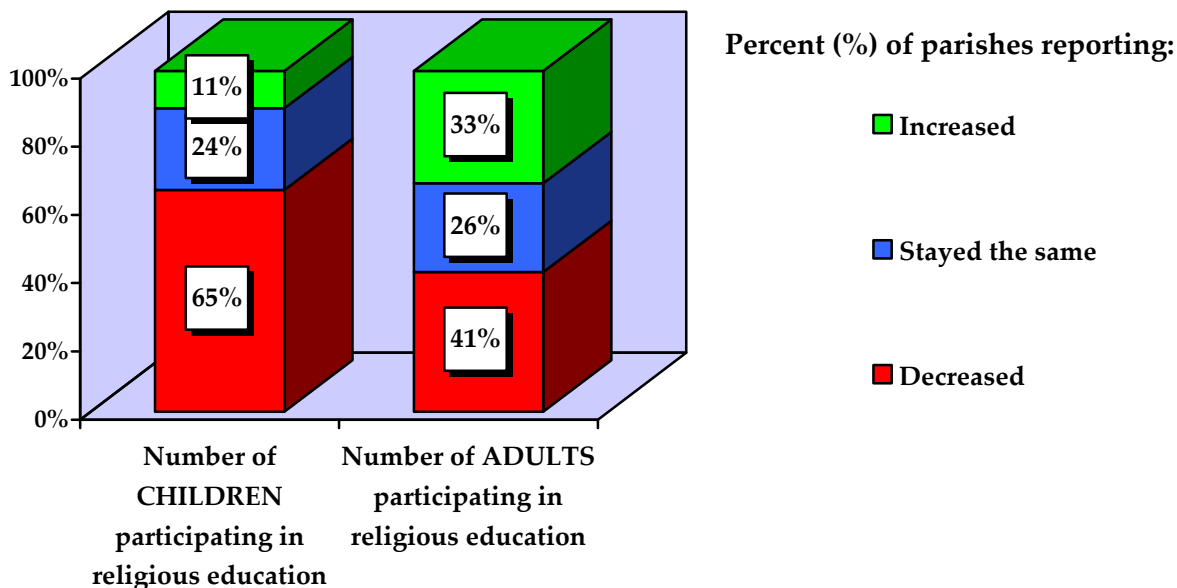
Question 6. Which areas of parish life were affected most negatively and strongly by the pandemic?

Looking at all Orthodox jurisdictions combined, the single most negatively affected parish ministry was religious education for children. Respondents' answers to two questions confirm this conclusion.

Fig. 17 shows that nearly two-thirds of the parishes (65%) experienced a decline in the number of children participating in religious education programs since the start of the pandemic. Religious education for adults suffered as well, but not nearly to the same degree (41% parishes reported a decline in adults' involvement).

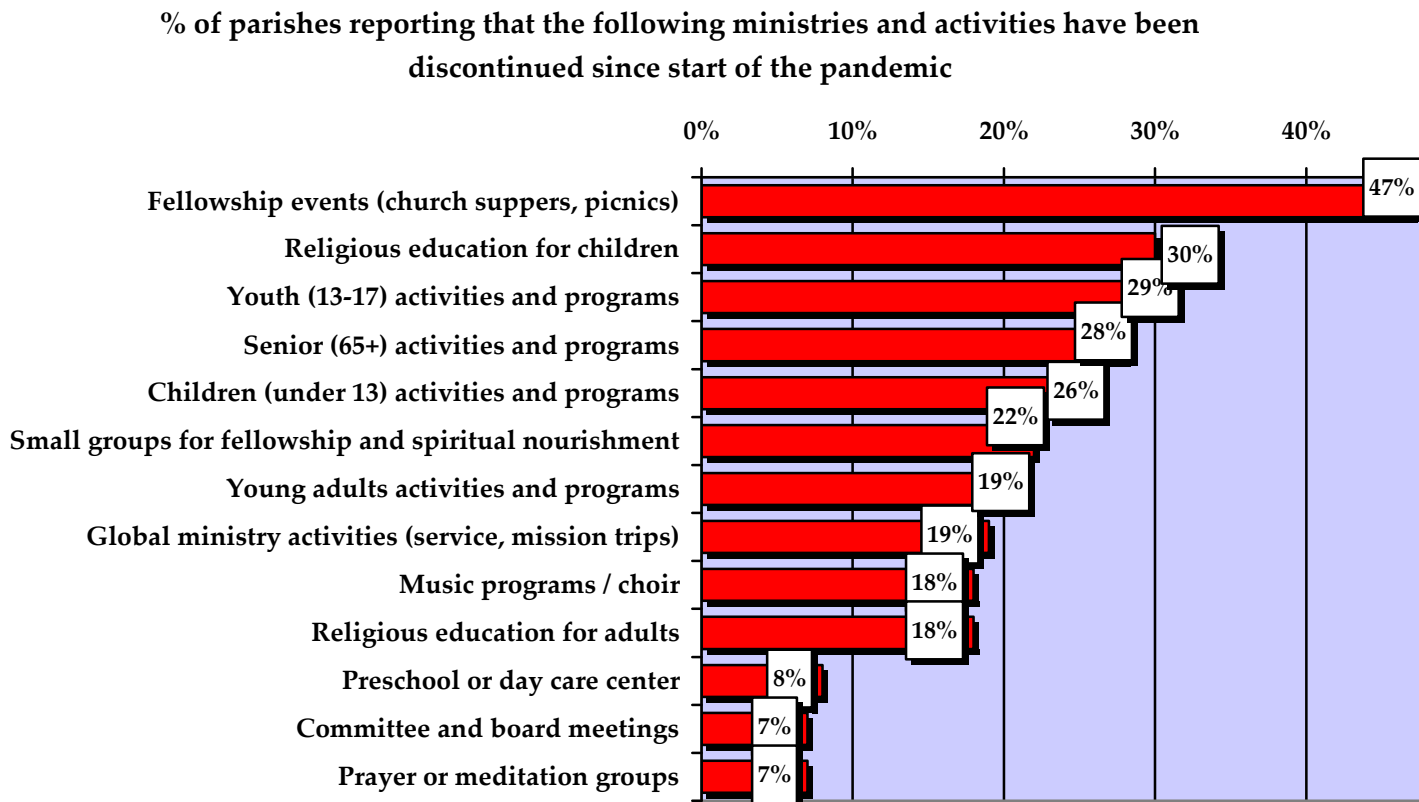
Fig. 17 Pandemic and Religious Education in the Parishes

"How has the number of children and adults participating in religious education changed since the start of the pandemic?"



The questionnaire also asked about fourteen parish programs and activities, examining whether they were discontinued altogether (i.e., neither continued in person nor switched to online mode) since the start of the pandemic. Aside from the predictable termination of in-person fellowship activities, religious education for children was the ministry most frequently indicated as abandoned: 30% of the parishes shut down entirely their Sunday Schools for children. See Fig. 18.

Fig. 18 Pandemic and Ministries that Has Been Discontinued in the Parishes



Question 7. How widespread were the conflicts in parishes caused by disagreements regarding various restrictions brought on by the pandemic?

Both anecdotally and from previous studies about the impact of the pandemic on Orthodox Church life in the USA, we learned about conflicts among the parishioners, as well as cases of clergy's and members' dissent with guidance provided by either bishops or secular authorities regarding pandemic-related restrictions. Areas of disagreement included continuation of in-person services, limiting the number of persons in attendance, wearing masks in church, ways of administering Holy Communion, kissing the priest's hands or Cross, venerating icons, etc.

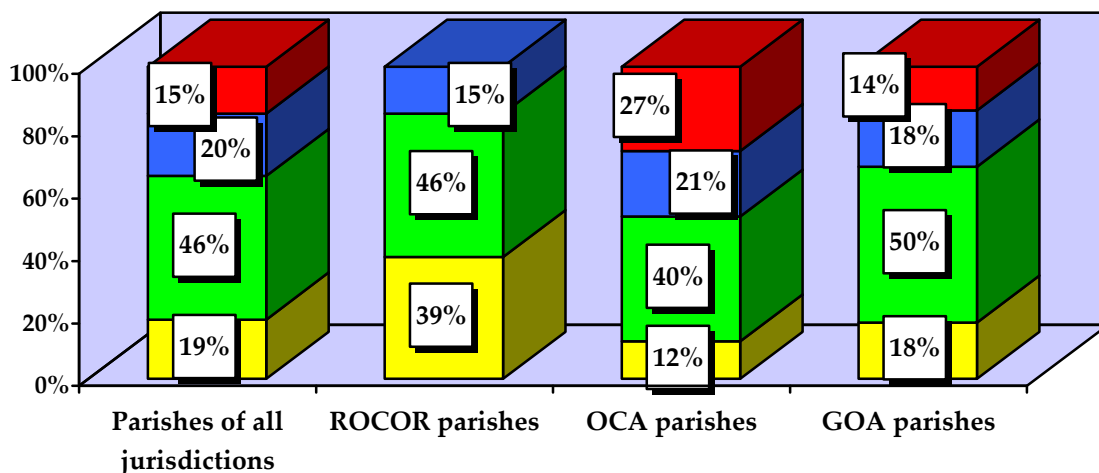
The study evaluated how widespread and strong these conflicts were. Fig. shows that less than one-fifth of the parishes (19%) avoided any internal dissent caused by the restrictions in church life related to the pandemic. On the contrary, more than one-third (35%) experienced either moderate (20%) or harsh (15%) disagreements. See Fig. 19.

Among the three jurisdictions for which we report separately, the ROCOR parishes transitioned through the pandemic most peacefully: 39% of them reported no conflict at all and only 15% experienced moderate levels of disagreement. In contrast, OCA churches were most affected by conflicts: nearly half of them (48%) went through either moderate (21%) or severe (27%) internal disagreements.

Fig. 19 Conflicts in Parishes because of Restrictions Related to the Pandemic

“How would you describe the level of dissent and/or conflict within the parish regarding the COVID response (e.g., mask-wearing, vaccine distribution, closing/opening of parish facilities)?”

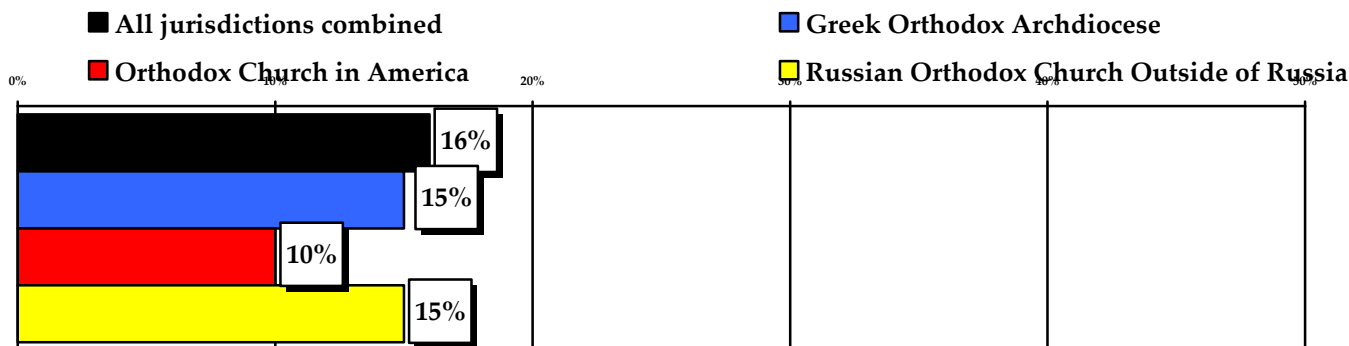
Percent (%) of parishes reporting: ■ No conflict ■ Mild conflict ■ Moderate conflict ■ Severe conflict



Question 8. Did parishes make an effort to educate their members about the COVID-19 pandemic and/or encourage them to get vaccinated?

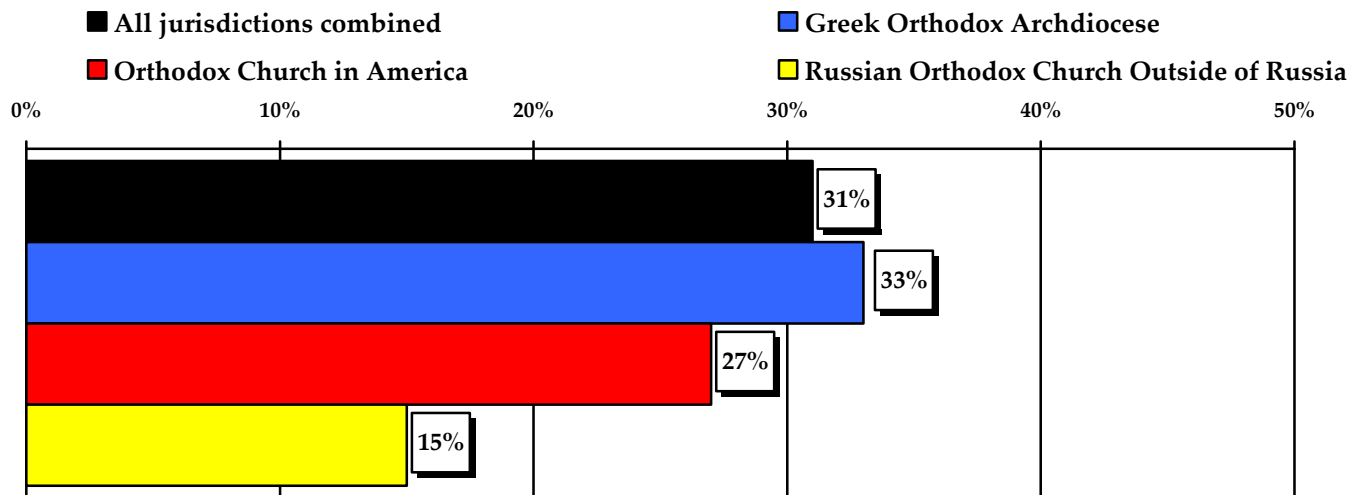
The short answer to this question is: only a minority of parish communities did so. The survey asked: “Have you had a medical professional address the parish about COVID-19?” Overall, only 16% of the parishes answered “yes” to this question.

Fig. 20 Percentage of Parishes which Invited Medical Professionals to Speak about COVID-19



Further, when asked: "Has the priest of the parish publicly encouraged parishioners to get vaccinated?", less than one-third (31%) of the clergy responded affirmatively. ROCOR clergy were especially passive in this regard with only 15% of them promoting to their parishioners the need for vaccination.

Fig. 21 Percentage of Parishes where Clergy Publicly Encouraged Parishioners to Vaccinate



Question 9. Currently, how significant is online attendance in American Orthodox parishes as compared to their in-person attendance?

This question is more important than it may originally appear. Indeed, today, post-pandemic (or nearly post-pandemic), churches may be permitted to resume in-person services at their full capacity, but it is likely that they will also keep their online presence which spiked in response to the pandemic. That is for – at least – two reasons. First, some parishes discovered that high-quality online services could attract many new “regular attendees” who live far away and would not be able otherwise to “attend.” Second, the reality is also that a number of parishioners (especially, those who were marginally involved or had health limitations) found it much easier and more appealing to attend their churches in the comfort of own homes. How strong and persistent these two trends will be, remains to be seen and must be examined at a later date.

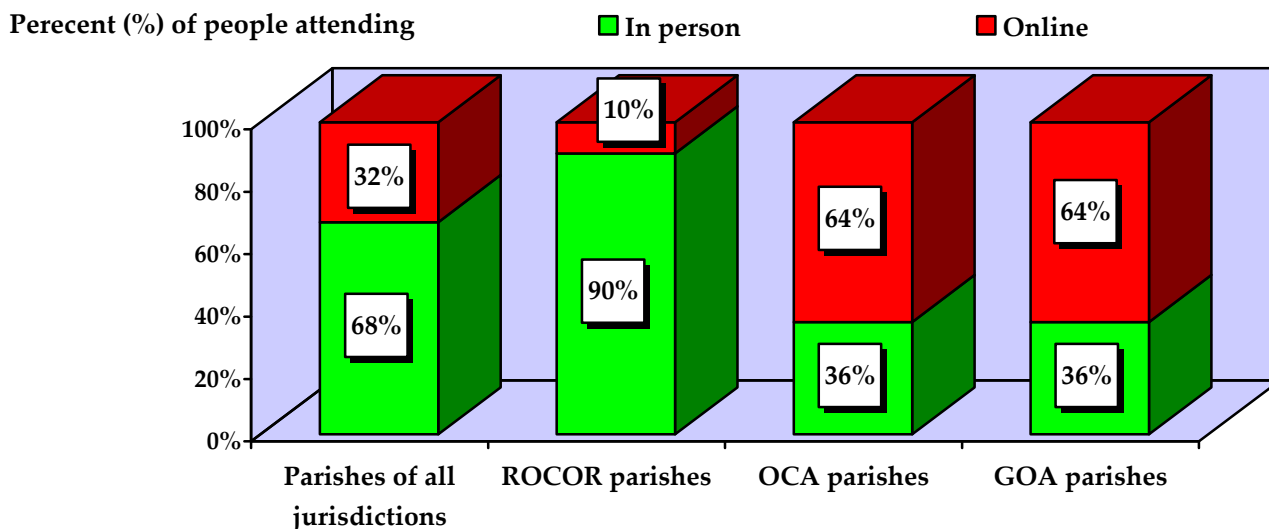
At this point, we can simply compare the numbers for people worshipping in-person and with those continuing to watch services online. The questionnaire asked two questions:

- “Please estimate the average in-person attendance now at all of your regular weekend (Friday, Saturday, Sunday) worship services, including children;”
- “Please estimate the average virtual/remote attendance now at all of your regular weekend (Friday, Saturday, Sunday) worship service(s), including children.”

We summed up the numbers provided by the parishes in respond to these questions. Results for the parishes of all jurisdictions and separately for GOA, OCA and ROCOR parishes are presented in Fig. 22.

About one-third (32%) of the regular attendees in American Orthodox parishes now take part in their churches' worship remotely from their homes. In the two largest American Orthodox jurisdictions – GOA and OCA – this percentage is even slightly higher: 36%. Very differently, in ROCOR parishes, the audience attending online is relatively small: only 10% of all regular worshippers.

Fig. 22 Percentage (%) of People Attending In-Person and Online in Combined Attendance at Weekend Services



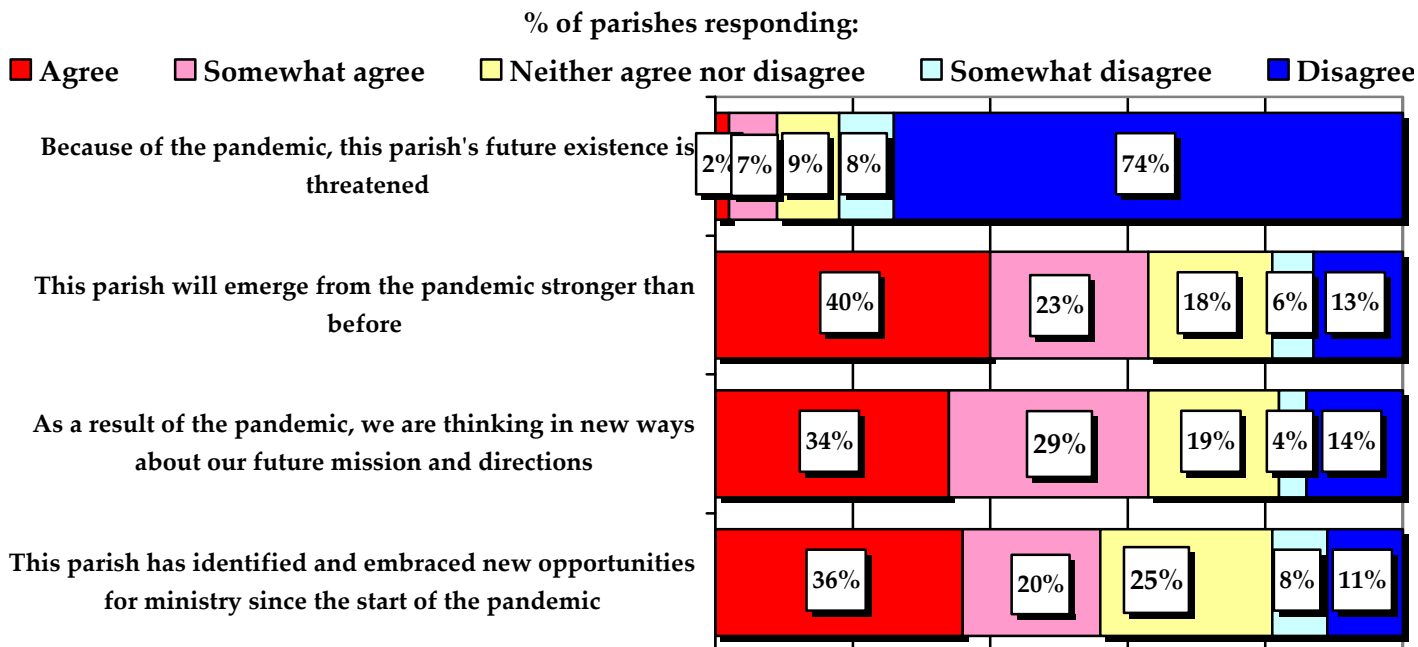
Question 10. How do parishes envision their future in light of their experiences of the pandemic?

Overall, the strong majority of parishes are very optimistic about their post-pandemic lives and, most importantly, have even found ways to rejuvenate themselves while dealing with the challenges of the COVID-19.

Fig. 23 shows that less than one in ten parishes (9%) feel that their future is threatened because of the pandemic, while 63% hold the view that they will emerge from the pandemic stronger than before. In about two-thirds of the parishes (63%), the pandemic triggered the process of re-examining the parish's vision for the future ("As a result of the pandemic, we are thinking in new ways about our future mission and directions").

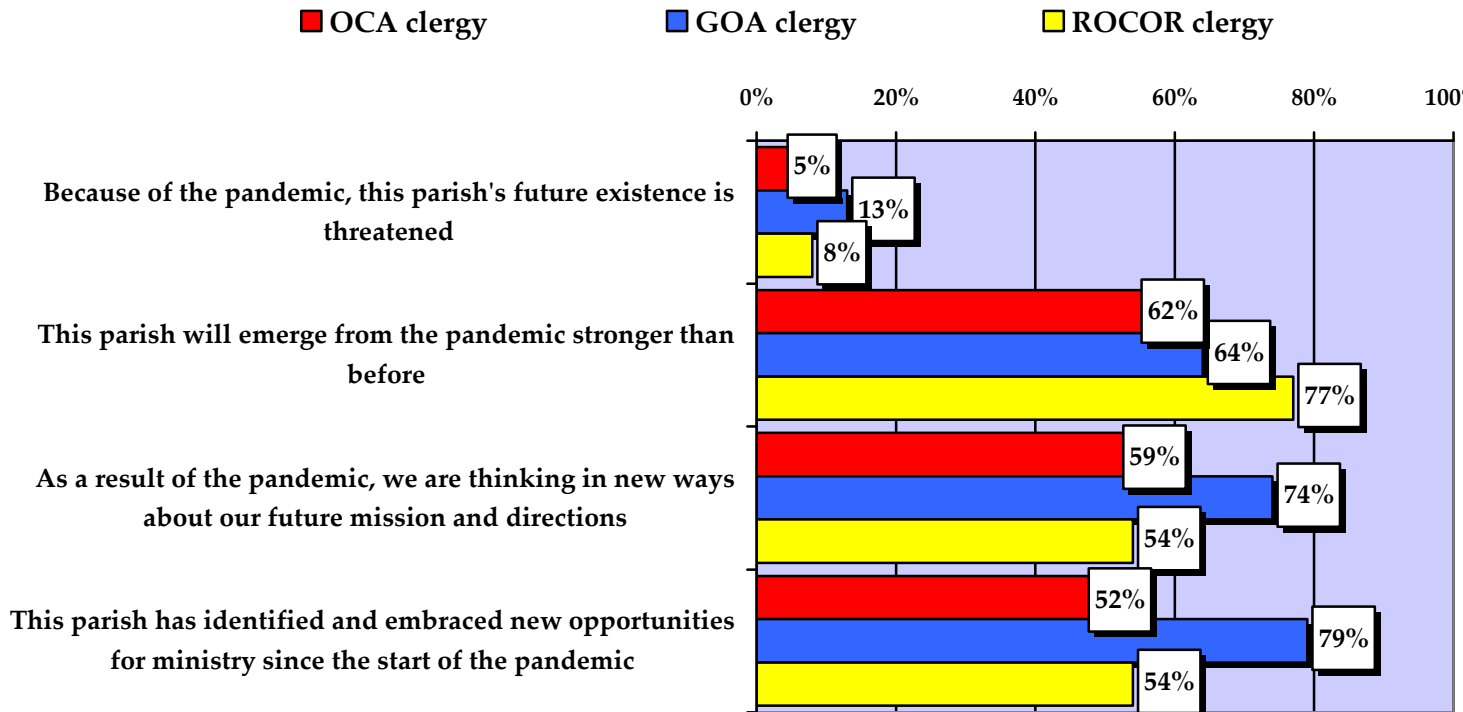
And more than half of the parishes (56%) have *already* uncovered and employed some new opportunities for their ministries since the start of the pandemic (“This parish has identified and embraced new opportunities for ministry since the start of the pandemic”).

Fig. 23 Pandemic and the Vision for Parish Future
Do you agree or disagree with the following statements:



With some variations, this optimistic vision for the post-pandemic future of their parishes is shared by the clergy of all three jurisdictions for which we report data separately. See Fig. 24.

Fig. 24 Percentage of Clergy Who Agreed (including "Somewhat Agreed") With Following Statements



Ideas that worked: examples of successful adaptations made by parishes in response to the pandemic

We saw in our discussion of the previous question that the majority of parishes have uncovered new opportunities for their ministries since the start of the pandemic. The questionnaire offered respondents the possibility to describe these innovations and adaptations in detail, asking: "What have been the most successful adaptations your parish made in response to the pandemic?"

Predictably, a majority of replies were about adopting new technologies to bring worship services and other ministries online. Yet, a number of answers were unrelated to this subject or presented some interesting – not obvious – aspect of using online tools in the life of the church. Below we offer a selection of the replies from the parishes.

For some parish communities, the challenges of the pandemic have become an impetus to strengthen their Faith: "The pandemic served as a wonderful teaching tool, that we are NOT in control of the world around us, that we do and must depend on God for all things." Or, another example: "We never stopped worshipping, ever. We strengthened in leadership and committed to becoming a tithing parish."

Similarly, the restrictions on number of people in attendance resulted also in intensification of their liturgical lives and an increase in the number of Liturgies during the week: "We doubled the number of weekday Divine Liturgies from two to four, which strengthened the spiritual life of the parish."

In other parishes, the adaptations in worship services triggered by the pandemic produced ideas about how their liturgical services could be improved in the future. Here is an example: "We have now a greater understanding of best worship practices." Or: "Major improvements in choir thanks to intense rehearsals in pandemic."

Bringing their services and ministries online allowed some parishes to reach much further out and engage people who do not live in the immediate vicinity of the parish: "Broad outreach to 100 more people not in our area." Or: "Live streaming services allowed for access to not only regular parishioners but those that had moved out of the area." Or: "Bible Study on line has blossomed. We now have many participants from all over."

A number of parishes discovered that having Bible studies via Zoom and not in-person is helpful for greater overall participation in the classes, because the people joined who were previously unable to attend due to long commute distances: "Having a book study over Zoom was a good adaptation. Many of our parishioners commute long distances and cannot make it to evening activities during the week, so this was easier for many to attend than in-person regardless of the pandemic." And: "Use of Zoom and Facebook Live for meetings and youth ministries and especially adult education saw a large increase in participation over in-person at-Church classes."

Similarly, one clergyman discovered that "the Catechumen class via Zoom was better. It broke down a lot of unease when having people be in their own homes. This really allowed me to get to know them as they journeyed toward the Orthodox faith."

Some parishes used enforced closures and the absence of in-person services as a time for repairs and enhancement of their Sanctuaries: "We accomplished enhancements of the narthex and seating configuration in our temple." Or: "When services indoors were not possible, we used this time to renovate the interior of the church."

In addition, a few parishes actually bought bigger properties, which allowed them to have more people in attendance during the pandemic: "Local restrictions meant only 30 people could attend throughout the pandemic, mostly due to our building size. Caused us to look for an alternative venue, and we stumbled upon a new church building for sale. Have now moved into a building twice as big." And: "In spite of the pandemic, our Archdiocese agreed the purchase was beneficial for our parish and we moved into the new church and began regular services there by July of 2020. The larger space enabled the congregation to spread out within the nave at the height of the pandemic."

Some parishes - because the format of their ministries changed – have "discovered" talented parishioners who were capable of leading these new versions of programs and activities. As a result: "More diverse leadership in some ministries."

The traditional Orthodox governance model (i.e. waiting for a bishop to decide what his multi-state diocese should do) made it difficult to rapidly introduce the locally contextualized adaptations to the crisis. Some parishes were, therefore, proud that they were able to make decisions that fit into their unique contexts and yet stayed by what was permitted by the hierarchs: "I am very proud that, while we formally kept to our bishop's guidelines, we creatively pushed those boundaries as far as was possible (within the confines of obedience.) Our people appreciated our efforts to keep the church maximally functional, given the constraints we were obliged to work under, both civilly and ecclesiastically." Or: "We are proud that as a small mission parish we were able to 'hold our own grounds' and yet put in place the protocol of our Metropolis."
