

**The “New Traditional” in a Most Traditional Church:  
How the Pandemic Has Reshaped American Orthodox Christian Churches**

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*“We are smaller in size than two years ago, but more agile. While we had some conflicts, and we lost some parishioners permanently, the community is more close-knit and active. Parish life in some ways has never been better.”*

**(Comment submitted by an Orthodox parish priest who participated in the study)**

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## Executive Summary

The core question addressed in this report is: how has the pandemic transformed the Orthodox Church, “the original Christian Church that never changes”? The report examined not only overall impact of the pandemic and the ongoing process of recovery in church life, but most importantly, the possible long-term consequences of the past two years for American Orthodox Christian parishes. Special attention has also been given to the “mysteriously” strong growth in vitality that some parishes experienced despite and even because of the pandemic. This study was made possible thanks to a generous grant provided by the Louisville Institute (<https://louisville-institute.org>).

Each chapter can be read separately depending on the particular interests of the readers. Data were gathered January 24 – February 10, 2022 through an online survey of 370 Orthodox parish clergy from all parts of the country. The following major subjects are discussed in the report:

- ❖ Changes in membership, worship attendance, and involvement in religious education. The reasons for growth in some parishes against the backdrop of a general and widespread decline
- ❖ The positives and negatives of switching to an “online mode” for church services, religious education and other ministries
- ❖ Church closures and mortality rates among church members
- ❖ Internal conflicts within parishes and their disagreements with ruling bishops because of pandemic-related decisions
- ❖ The pandemic’s effects on financial health of the parishes
- ❖ Changes in overall parish vitality and distinctive features of the 12% of parishes manifesting strong growth in vitality throughout the pandemic
- ❖ Greatest achievements of the parishes and their major fears for the future

Several open-ended questions allowed us to learn about creative strategies and practices developed by the parishes that helped them through this crisis. Descriptions of these strategies and practices are included in the report.

The study was conducted in cooperation with the national research initiative *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations: Innovation Amidst and Beyond COVID-19*. Therefore, in several instances, the report presents consequences of the pandemic for US Orthodox Churches as compared to other Christian denominations.

A few examples of key results are given below:

- During the past two years, most parishes suffered losses in the total number of parishioners and, even more dramatically, in the number of people who attend liturgical services now that their churches have reopened for in-person worship. A “typical” (median) parish shrank by 15% in members who were regularly involved. If measured by average in-person worship attendance, a “typical” Orthodox parish has lost 22% of its pre-pandemic “people in the pews.”
- However, one in five parishes experienced the opposite trend and grew substantially by more than 20% in members and in-person worship attendance. And this growth was not random. The report identified and discussed seven particular characteristics and factors that were associated with this growth
- More than one-fifth (22%) of US Orthodox parishes never closed their doors and continued in-person worship services throughout the pandemic, in comparison with only 7% of other American Christian religious congregations
- The single area of church life most negatively affected by the pandemic has been faith formation of children and teenagers. Nationwide, a “typical” (median) parish is currently missing a quarter of its pre-pandemic students. About one-fifth of the parishes completely shut down their faith formation programs for young people with the start of the pandemic and have not yet resumed them
- Despite the overall decline in young people’s participation in religious education, one in seven parishes (14%) witnessed the opposite: growth by more than +20% in the number of students. The study looked at distinctive demographic characteristics of these parishes and also found two factors contributing to greater participation of children and teenagers. The first is the modality of religious education. Maintaining in-person religious education classes and not switching to an online format is important for young people’s engagement in faith formation programs. The second factor – statistically even more significant – is continuous and consistent in-person attendance of young people at worship services.
- Presently, nearly two-thirds (63%) of the parishes offer their worship services on the internet. The study found that the online format can potentially enhance two parish ministries: work with prospective converts and catechumens, and religious education for adults. But in all other areas of parish life, the virtual version of programs and activities has had a rather negative impact on parishioners’ involvement. The online modality has an especially strong negative influence on parishioners’ participation in Sunday Liturgy, the involvement of children and teenagers in religious education, and youth activities and programs.

- The rate of deaths from COVID-19 is nearly three times higher among members of American Orthodox Churches than among the general US population. American Orthodox parishes also suffered more from COVID-related deaths than other Christian congregations
- For many parishes, the pandemic was a powerful learning experience in effective local decision-making. One-third of the parishes (33%) reported that during the pandemic they “became accustomed to making decisions locally and without waiting for guidance from the diocesan headquarters.”
- During the pandemic, one in eight American Orthodox parishes (12%) reported strong growth in overall vitality. In summary, “strong growth” in vitality in these parishes includes:
  1. Both growth in the number of new members and greater involvement of existing (pre-pandemic) parishioners, which especially manifests itself in more frequent participation in in-person worship services
  2. A substantial increase in engagement of adults in learning about their faith and the ability of a parish to - at least - maintain the rate of young people’s participation in religious education during the pandemic
  3. Not only improvement of parish finances, but in many instances their full reversal from “tight or difficult” to “excellent or good”
  4. Finding new ways to get involved in their local community to a much greater extent than they had done pre-pandemic.
- The study looked at distinctive characteristics of the parishes with strong growth in vitality. Compared to all other parishes, these 12% of churches:
  1. Placed great emphasis on keeping their worship services and other practices as unchanged as possible throughout the pandemic including in-person services, in-person religious education classes, and continuing the traditional way of administering Holy Communion (with one spoon from a common chalice)
  2. Pay more attention to collective decision-making, in which entire parish community participates
  3. Are reluctant to offer their services online, consistent with the negative attitude of their clergy towards virtual Orthodox worship as undermining the very nature of the Orthodox liturgical tradition.

The next crucially important stage of this study will be to listen the “people in the pews” – ordinary Orthodox parishioners – and learn from them how the pandemic has changed the lives of their congregations. If you are willing to help with such a study in your parish, please communicate via email to [orthodoxdata@usreligioncensus.org](mailto:orthodoxdata@usreligioncensus.org) or via the contact form on the website, [www.orthodoxreality.org](http://www.orthodoxreality.org).

## **Introduction: What This Study Is About and How It Is Being Conducted**

COVID-19 will leave indelible imprints on many aspects of our society, including America's diverse religious congregations. But its long-term consequences will differ from one local faith community to another depending on the nature of a particular religious tradition and unique context of each congregation.

The more a worship style accentuates physical presence and collective participation, and the more a church emphasizes a tightly knit community with abundant in-person interaction, the more it will struggle with online forms of participation and other "church made simple" innovations brought by the pandemic. Orthodox Christianity is a prime example of such a highly "embodied" Church, both during and beyond worship services.

Two years of the pandemic revealed that various Orthodox parishes responded to the crisis in diverse ways. They demonstrated marked differences in the ability to change and successfully adapt in ways that were acceptable to their communities of the faithful. Innovations provoked by the pandemic became a source of pride and rejuvenation for some congregations. But elsewhere, sudden changes caused conflict, when they ignored the unique context of the parish and were perceived as betraying what was truly essential for Orthodoxy.

The core question addressed in this study is: "How has the pandemic transformed the Orthodox Church, 'the original Christian Church that never changes'? Did prolonged church closures, virtual services, and other innovations undermine the future of this Church that worships in highly embodied ways, vigilantly guards its ancient traditions, and is intentionally change-resistant? Most importantly, how have some parishes emerged from the crisis stronger than ever, having creatively adapted to new realities while carefully preserving what is core to Orthodox Christianity?"

On the following pages, we will uncover the impact of the pandemic on different areas of Orthodox parish life in America, such as overall involvement of members, worship services, religious education, financial health, social outreach, process of decision making, and much more. We will also share various strategies and practices developed by parishes in response to the pandemic, enabling them not only to continue liturgical services, but also to create new ministries and keep members fully engaged. Finally, this study aims to understand the success factors of those parishes which managed to thrive and grow in vitality despite and, perhaps even because of, challenges brought on by the pandemic.

This study is conducted in cooperation with the national research initiative *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations: Innovation Amidst and Beyond COVID-19*.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, in certain instances, we will look at the consequences of the pandemic for US Orthodox Churches as compared to other Christian denominations.

The study will evolve in three stages. This first report discusses opinions and information provided by hundreds of Orthodox parish clergy from all across the USA. The second stage will engage ordinary parishioners. Through the survey, we will listen to the voices of the people in the pews and examine their needs, hopes and, most importantly, vision for the post-pandemic future of the Church. The last stage will focus on several parishes that have thrived and grown in vitality during the past two years. Through in-person visits, participant observation, and interviews with their priests and members, we will write and share the “portraits” of each parish – the stories that depict their journeys through the pandemic to greater strength. All findings and publications will be posted at: <https://orthodoxreality.org/coronavirus-and-american-orthodox-parishes>

This first report is based on an online survey of 370 Orthodox parish priests from all parts of the country, representing ten national Orthodox Christian Church bodies. Data were gathered January 24 - February 10, 2022. A number of survey questions were open-ended, allowing clergy to freely share their thoughts and ideas. Some truly fascinating insights came from their comments, such as the blessings and pitfalls of online church participation, ways to keep parishioners engaged through the pandemic, and much more.

This study was made possible thanks to a generous grant provided by the Louisville Institute (<https://louisville-institute.org>). It is our hope that this inquiry into the long-term consequences of the pandemic will help American Orthodox Christian Churches plot a course to a viable and vibrant future, and that we may also provide insights into renewal approaches that can inspire other Churches.

If you would like to participate personally or with your parish in the next phases of the study, or indicate specific issues related to the pandemic’s impact on Church life that should be examined, please send your comments to [orthodoxdata@usreligioncensus.org](mailto:orthodoxdata@usreligioncensus.org)

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<sup>1</sup> *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations: Innovation Amidst and Beyond COVID-19* is a five-year research project funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. and led by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. The focus of this expansive initiative is to research the possible changes and long-term implications the pandemic might have on religious life across the United States. More information at: <https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/>

## I. About the Orthodox Parishes Participating in this Study

### **AMONG THE KEY FINDINGS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER:**

- In a typical (“median”) American Orthodox parish, 40% of its members are converts to the Orthodox faith and 4% represent various racial or ethnic minorities (e.g., Latino, Asians, African Americans).
- Parishes served by clergy who are converts to Orthodoxy have a significantly higher percentage of young people (under 18), parishioners who are converts to Orthodox Church, and new members who joined the parish during the pandemic.
- Overall, 5% of parishioners joined their current churches since the start of the pandemic. But the influx of new members was twice as strong (10%) in parishes that emphasize becoming more diverse racially and ethnically.
- Compared to other American Christian congregations, Orthodox parishes are less willing to try new ways of doing things and less striving to become diverse racially and ethnically.
- Compared to other Christian denominations, American Orthodox Churches are more focused on religious education of their young people, but pay less attention to continuing religious education for adults, small group activities, and social services for their local communities.
- 17% of the parishes were defined as “intentionally Orthodox.” These parishes reported placing “a lot of emphasis” on four aspects of their lives: observance of Orthodox religious practices (fasting, Church attendance), Orthodox evangelism, faith formation of young people, and religious education for adults.

370 Orthodox Christian parishes participated in this study. Their clergy (or in a few instances, Parish Council presidents) completed an online survey administered from January 24 to February 10, 2022. These parishes represent the following national Orthodox Church bodies:

- Remained anonymous and did not provide data on their affiliation – 59 parishes
- American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese – 3
- Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese – 10
- Armenian Apostolic Church – 7
- Coptic Orthodox Church – 14
- Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America – 65
- Orthodox Church in America – 148
- Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia – 32
- Serbian Orthodox Church – 8
- Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch – 2
- Ukrainian Orthodox Church - 21



Geographically, the participating parishes are spread all across the United States. See Fig. 1. It should be noted that the geography of the respondents accurately mirrors the actual geographic distribution of Orthodox Christian Churches in the USA

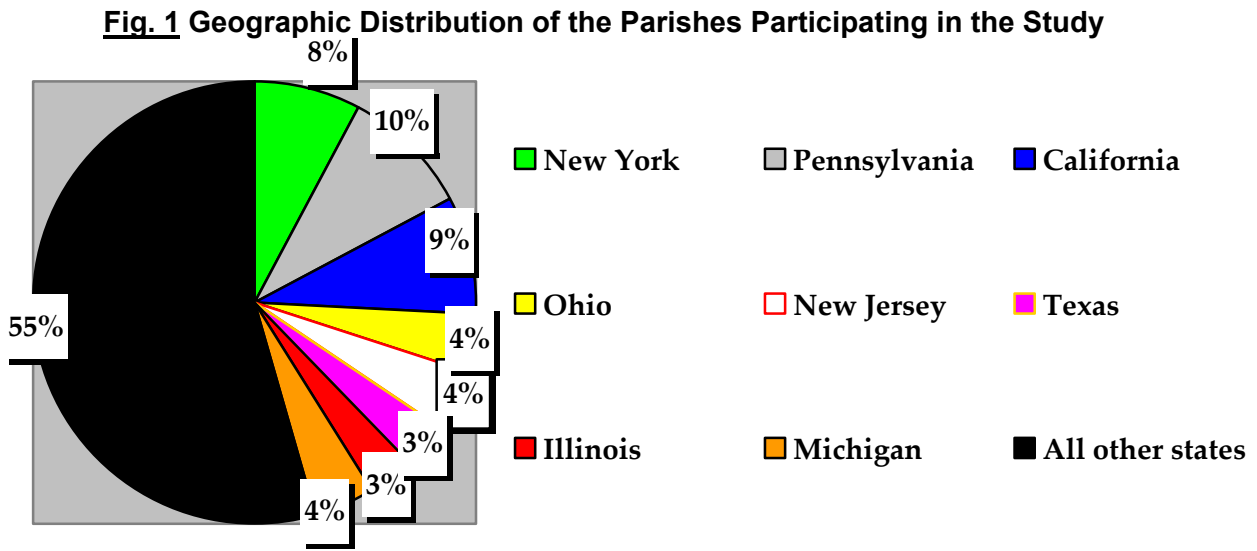


Table 1 offers an overview of various membership characteristics in the participating parishes. For each demographic category, it shows the median percentage of parishioners who belong to this category. “Median” percentage means that it is the midpoint: in half of the parishes in our sample this percentage is higher, while in the other half the percentage is lower. While there was a huge variety in the demography of participating parishes, the below table can be seen as a “snapshot” of a typical” US Orthodox parish.

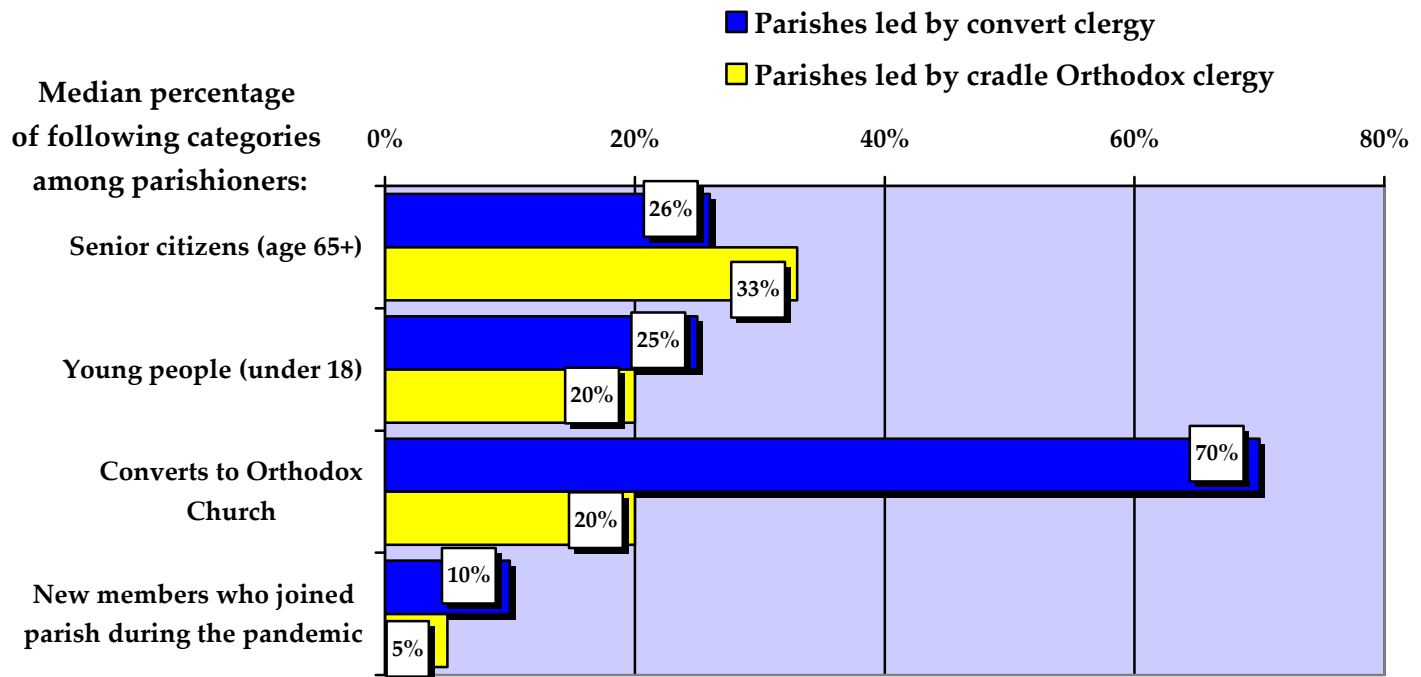
**Table 1 Demography of the Parishes Participating in the Study**

| Parishioner characteristics: | Children and youths (age 0-17) | Senior citizens (age 65+) | Converts to Orthodox Church | Represent racial/ethnic minorities (African-American, Asian, Latino) | Joined the parish since the start of the pandemic | Volunteer regularly in a parish |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|--|---|---------------------------------|
| Median percentage            | 22%                            | 29%                       | 40%                         | 4%   | 5%  | 30%                             |

42% of the parish clergy in participating parishes were converts to Orthodox Church, while 58% were cradle Orthodox (i.e. life-long members of the Orthodox Church). There is a sound statistical correlation between religious upbringing of the clergy (converts vs. cradle Orthodox) and three demographic features of their parishioners. Compared to the parishes served by the cradle Orthodox priests, parishes with clergy who are converts to Orthodoxy tend to have significantly higher percentages of young people (under 18), parishioners who are converts to Orthodox Church, and new members who joined the parish during the pandemic. See Fig. 2.



**Fig. 2 Parishes Served by Convert Clergy Have More Young People, Converts to Orthodoxy, and New Members Who Joined During the Pandemic**

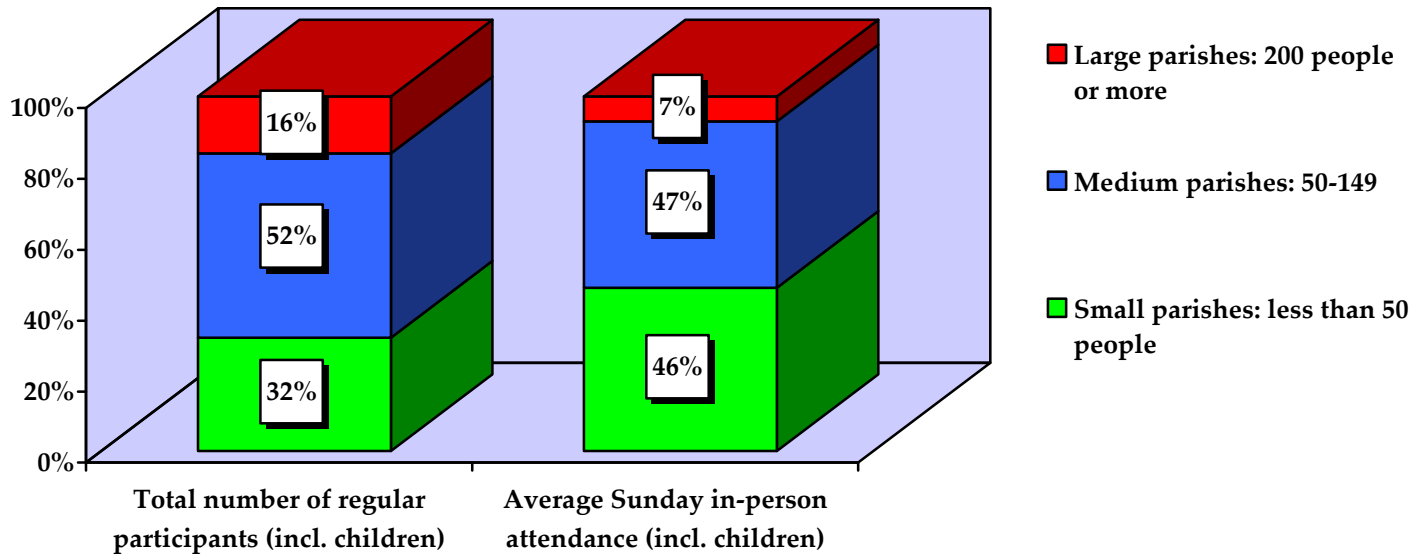


Two questions in the survey assessed the size of the parishes:

- How many people (including children) regularly participate in worship services or other activities in your parish *at least once a month* (counting both in-person and online)?
- What is the total (including children) average in-person attendance at your Sunday service?

Fig. 3 shows the distribution of parishes by three size-levels: small (fewer than 50 people), medium (50-199), and large (200 or more). A “typical” median parish had 72 regularly participating parishioners with 50 people attending in person on a normal Sunday.

**Fig. 3 Percentage of Parishes by Three Size Levels**



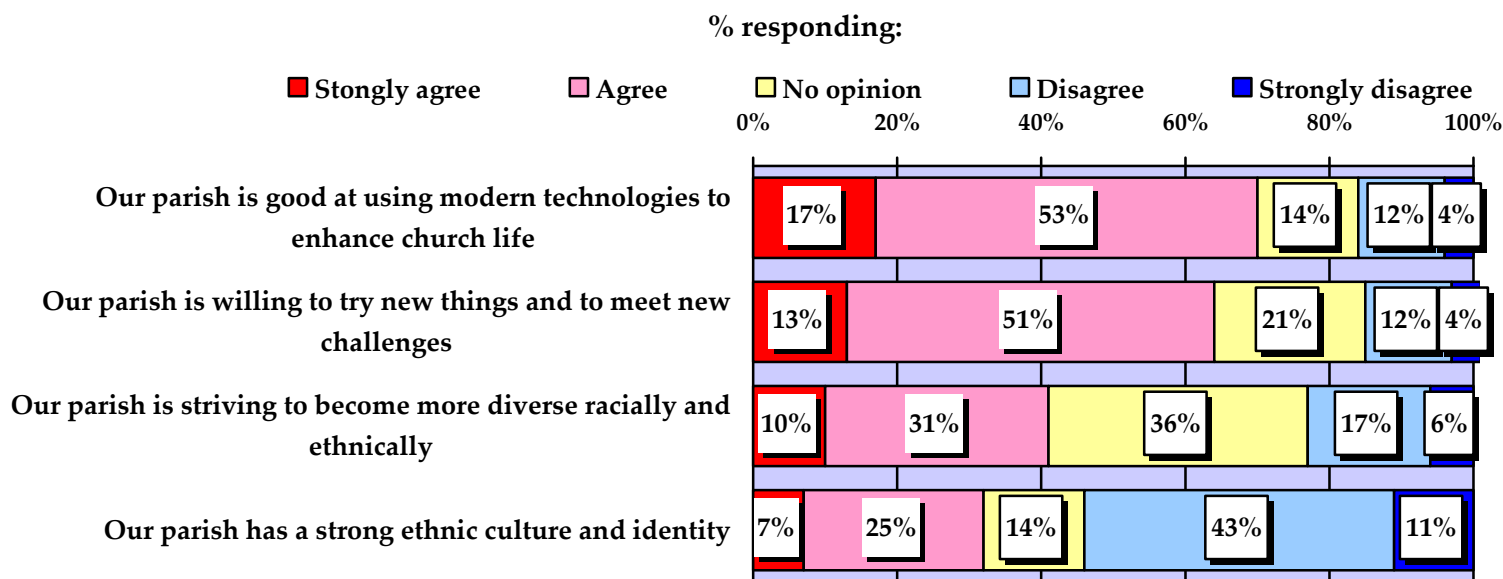
Besides variations in demography, parishes also have distinct traditions, communal cultures, and organization. Some cherish their ethnic origins and make a conscious effort to preserve their heritage and traditions, while others strive to be multicultural “all-American” parishes. Some embrace innovation and change, while others emphasize adherence to established practices and ways of doing things. Some parishes consider outreach to the local community among their top priorities, while others lead more insular lives with little connection to their neighborhoods. In short, each parish has a distinct combination of attributes which together create a unique local Christian community.

The questionnaire asked, “Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your parish?”

- ❖ Our parish is striving to become more diverse racially and ethnically
- ❖ Our parish has a strong ethnic culture and identity
- ❖ Our parish is always willing to try new things and to meet new challenges
- ❖ Our parish is good at using modern technologies to enhance church life

With regard to each statement, the respondents could say: "strongly agree," "agree," "no opinion/not sure" "disagree," or "strongly disagree." See Fig. 4.

**Fig. 4 “Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your parish?”**



Three comments should be made in relation to Fig. 4. First, a remarkably large number of parishes (70%) reported that they are “good at using modern technologies to enhance church life.” There is no comparable data from the pre-pandemic period, but it is likely that many of them have become technologically savvy as part of their adaptation to the changes brought by COVID-19.

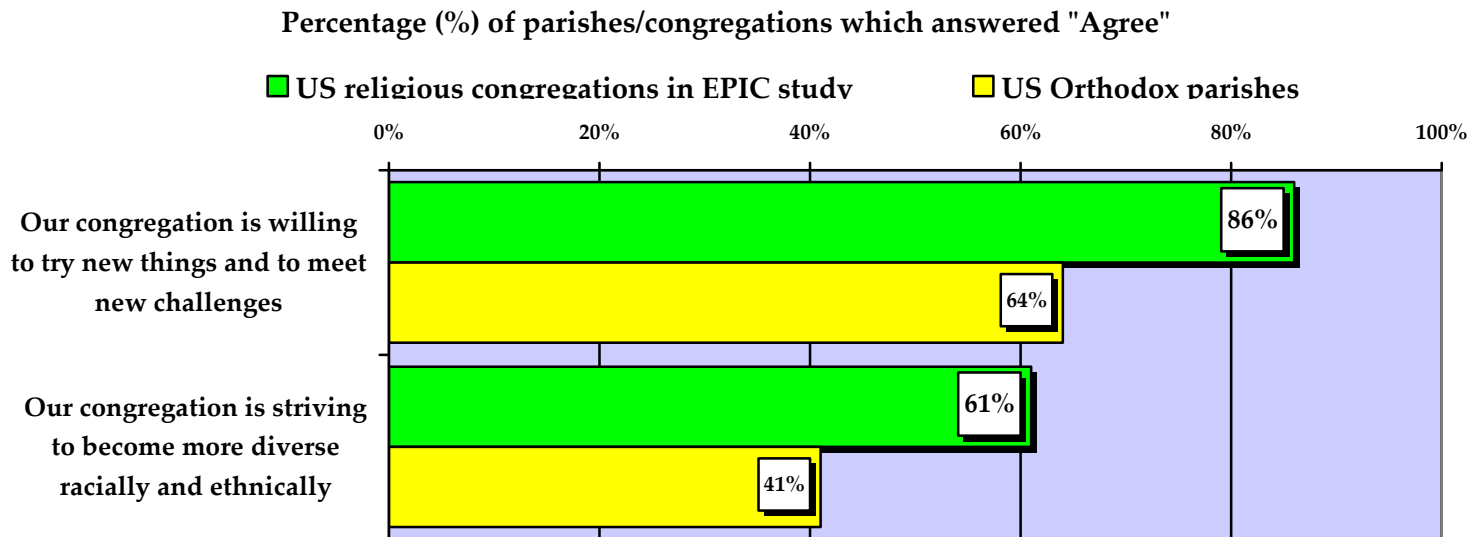
Second, there is a strong correlation between a parish’s agreement with the statement about “striving to become more diverse racially and ethnically” and the fact that such a parish experienced a significant influx of new members during the pandemic. The median percentage of new members in parishes that agreed with this statement is 10%, as compared to only 5% in parishes that disagreed.

Third, two statements shown in Fig. 4 were also offered to a representative sample of American religious congregations of many Christian denominations in the recent (November 2021) survey from the national study, *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations: Innovation Amidst and Beyond COVID-19 (EPIC)*.<sup>2</sup> As Fig. 5 shows, compared to other US religious congregations, Orthodox parishes are much less willing to try new ways of doing things or to make an effort to become racially and ethnically diverse.

<sup>2</sup> *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations: Innovation Amidst and Beyond COVID-19* is a five-year research project funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. and led by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. The focus of this expansive initiative is to research the possible changes and long-term implications of the pandemic for religious life across the United States. Data and report from November 2021 survey can be found at: <https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/research/national-survey-research/extraordinary-social-outreach-in-a-time-of-crisis>

**Fig. 5 Compared to Other Christian Congregations, Orthodox Parishes Are Less Experimental and Strive Less for Diversity among Members**

“Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your congregation?”



Which traditions and practices are strictly enforced and emphasized in Orthodox parishes and which are seen as optional? The questionnaire asked, “In your parish, how much emphasis is given to each of the following?”

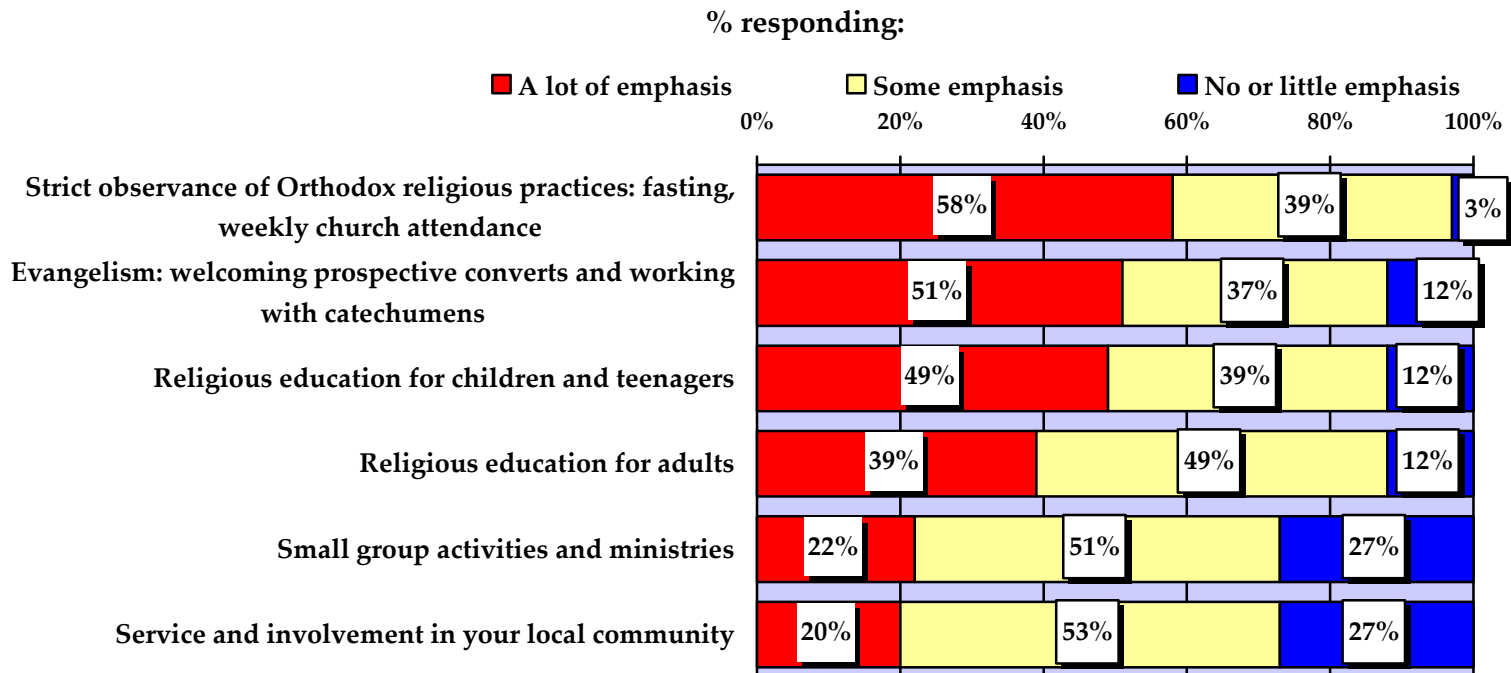
- ❖ Strict observance of Orthodox religious practices: e.g., fasting, weekly church attendance
- ❖ Orthodox evangelism: welcoming prospective converts and working with catechumens
- ❖ Religious education for children and teenagers
- ❖ Religious education for adults
- ❖ Small group activities and ministries
- ❖ Service and involvement in your local community: e.g., offering your parish facility for community events, food pantry, homeless shelter, etc.

With regard to each practice, the parishes could reply: "a lot of emphasis," "some emphasis," "no or little emphasis."

Fig. 6 shows that three aspects of church life are given a great deal of attention by at least half of the parishes: strict observance of Orthodox religious practices, Orthodox evangelism, and religious education for children and teenagers. Conversely, small group activities and ministries and service to the local community are seen as low priority by the vast majority of Orthodox parishes. Only one in five parishes places “a lot of emphasis” on these aspects of church life.

**Fig. 6 Orthodox Christian Religious Practices Are Seen as Very Important by Parishes. Small Group Ministries and Social Outreach Are Not.**

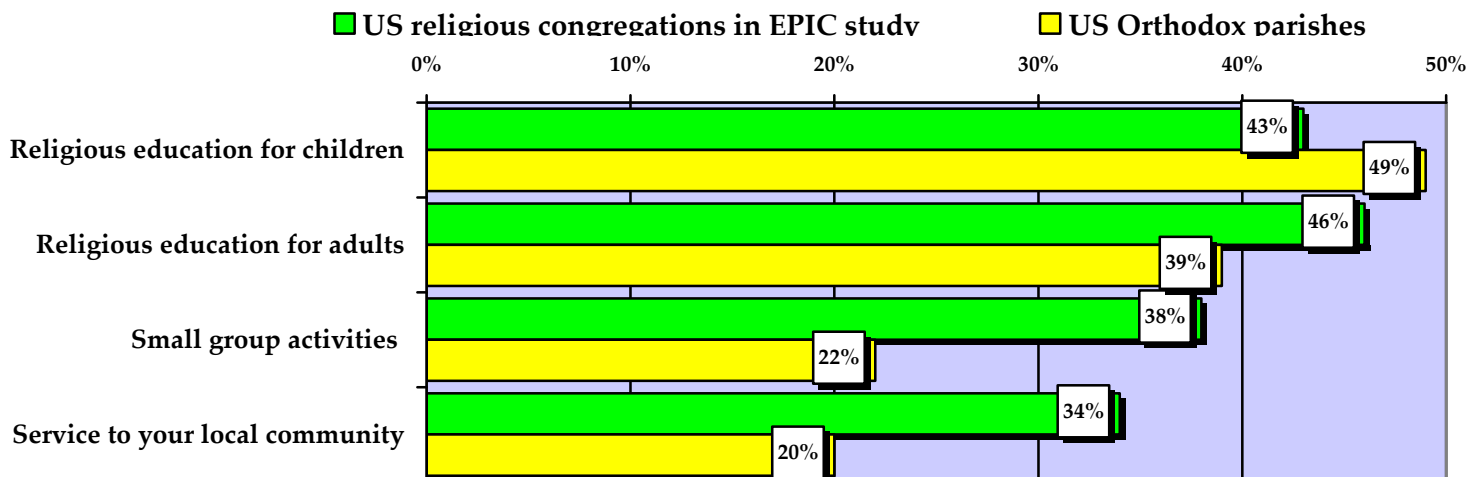
“In your parish, how much emphasis is given to each of the following?”



Comparable data from *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations* show some remarkable differences between Orthodox parishes and other religious congregations in their emphasis on various aspects of church life. Compared to other Christian communities, American Orthodox Churches are more focused on religious education of their young people, but pay less attention to continuing religious education for adults, small group activities, and service to their local communities. See Fig. 7.

**Fig. 7 “In your congregation, how much emphasis is given to each of the following?”**

Percentage (%) of parishes/congregations reporting: "A lot of emphasis"



Among the various aspects of church life presented in Fig. 6, four are especially indicative of how intentional a parish is to be a truly Orthodox Christian community: observance of Orthodox religious practices, Orthodox evangelism, religious education for young people, and religious education for adults.

17% of the parishes participating in the study indicated that they emphasize all these four aspects “a lot”. For the purposes of this study, we defined these parishes as “intentionally Orthodox” Later in this report, we will show that “intentionally Orthodox” parishes responded to the pandemic differently than all the other churches.

## **II. Church Closures, Deaths of Parishioners, Switching to Virtual Worship, and Conflicts in the Parishes**

### ***AMONG KEY FINDINGS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER:***

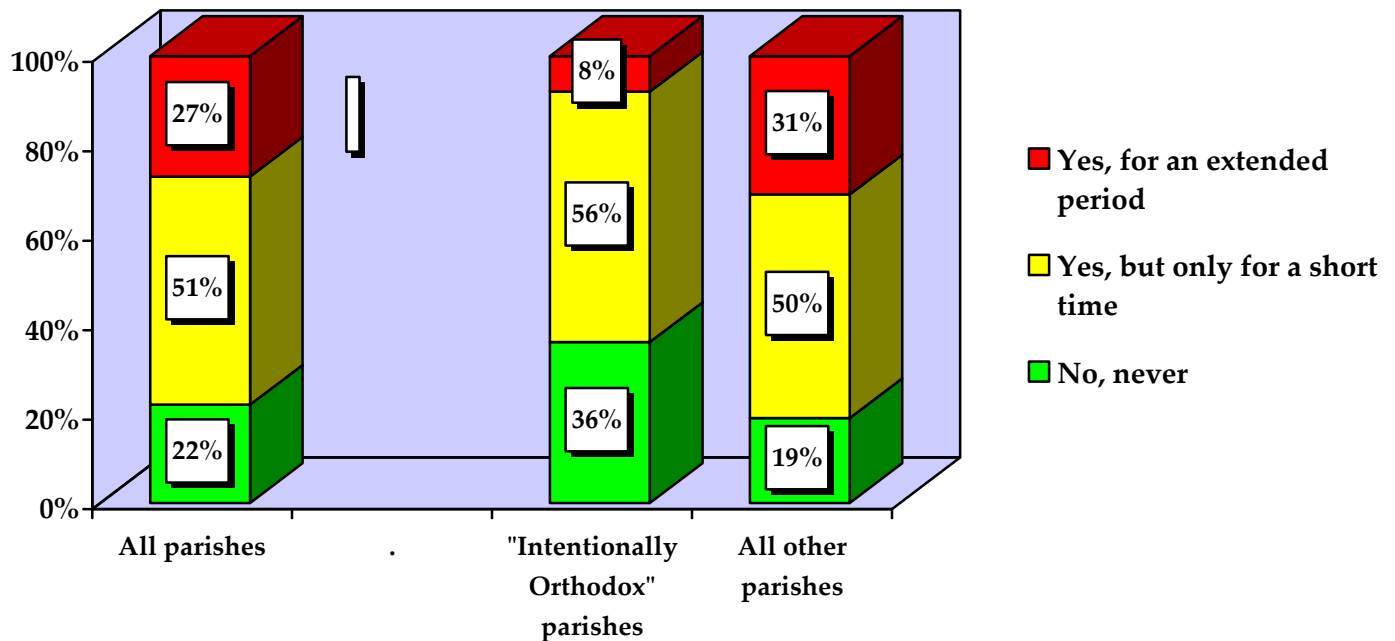
- More than one-fifth (22%) of US Orthodox parishes never closed their doors and continued in-person worship services throughout the pandemic, in comparison with only 7% of other American religious congregations which continued services uninterruptedly
- Today, 37% of American Orthodox parishes worship in-person only, while 63% also offer their services online. These numbers have not changed since May 2020
- About half the Orthodox clergy (46%) support online services, because they make it easier for more people to participate, and certain categories of parishioners can only attend this way. The other half of the priests either unconditionally reject online services as undermining the essence of Orthodox liturgical worship, or accept them under extraordinary circumstances only
- Nearly two-thirds (64%) of parishes with online services have many followers who live far away and are not part of their parish community, but watch their services on the internet
- The rates of deaths from COVID-19 are nearly three times higher among members of American Orthodox Churches than among the general US population. American Orthodox parishes also suffered more from COVID-related deaths than other Christian congregations
- A dominant majority of Orthodox parishes experienced either moderate (46%) or severe (14%) internal conflicts associated with the restrictions and new rules brought by the pandemic. In contrast, among other US religious congregations, only 22% reported moderate or severe conflict
- Wearing (or not wearing) masks in the church was the most frequent reason to trigger significant conflict in a parish, followed by the issues of continuation of in-person services/limiting the number of people in attendance, and changes in how Holy Communion was administered

Compared to other US religious congregations, many more Orthodox parishes never closed their doors even at the height of the pandemic and continued in-person worship services.

Fig. 8 shows more than one-fifth (22%) of US Orthodox parishes worshipped in person throughout the pandemic. To put these numbers into a broader context, nationwide only 7% of American religious congregations never ceased worshipping in person.<sup>3</sup> In the case of parishes which were characterized as “intentionally Orthodox” (for the definition of “intentionally Orthodox” parishes, see chapter 1), more than one-third never closed their doors.

**Fig. 8 Many Parishes Never Closed Their Doors for In-Person Services Through the Pandemic**

"Did your parish ever stop worshipping in person during the pandemic?"



Although nearly three-quarters (73%) of the parishes did not interrupt in-person worship or did so only for a short period, the vast majority of them, like other Christian denominations, began also live-streaming or posting recorded services. The national study, “The Pandemic and American Orthodox Parishes” found that already in early May 2020, nearly two-thirds of parishes (64%) offered the opportunity to partake in their liturgical lives online.<sup>4</sup> Besides catering to the needs of church members who preferred to self-isolate and stay home, many parishes also discovered that high-quality online services attracted new followers who – geographically – lived far away and would not otherwise have been able to “attend.”

<sup>3</sup> See the data from the ongoing national study, *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations* at: <https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/EPIC-Topical-Survey-2-Questionnaire-General-Frequencies.pdf>

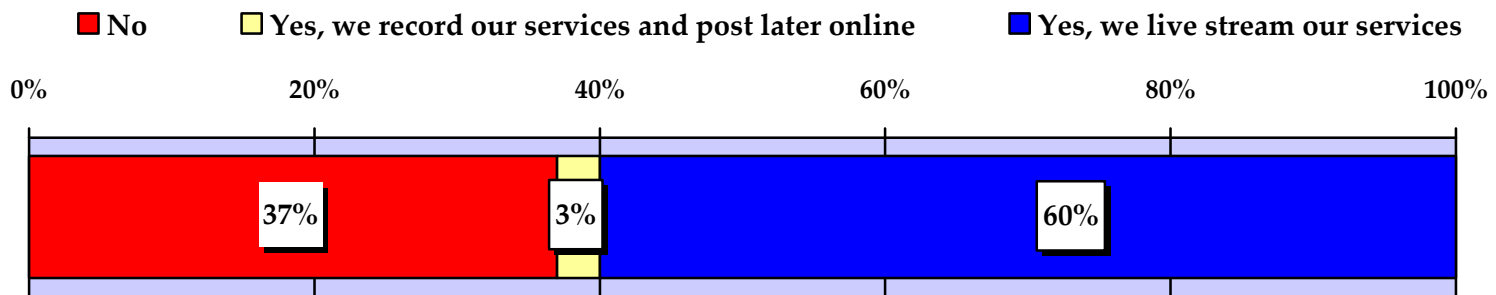
<sup>4</sup> The data and report from this study are available at: <https://orthodoxreality.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CoronavirusUSOrthodoxParishesReportFinal-1.pdf>



Now, after two years of experimentation with online services, two questions are crucial. The first is: “Currently, how many parishes offer option of worshipping with them remotely? Is the online presence in American Orthodox Churches continuing to grow, or did the process reverse itself, with parishes going back to an in-person mode only?” The second question is: “Overall, how do priests feel about offering Orthodox services online?”

Fig. 9 shows that today, 37% of American parishes worship in person only, while 63% also offer their services online. Comparing these numbers with May 2020 (36% in-person only, 64% also offering online worship), it is clear that the parishes made their decisions early in the pandemic. More than one-third of them decided at that time to remain “in-person” only, did so throughout the pandemic, and probably have no reason to go online now.

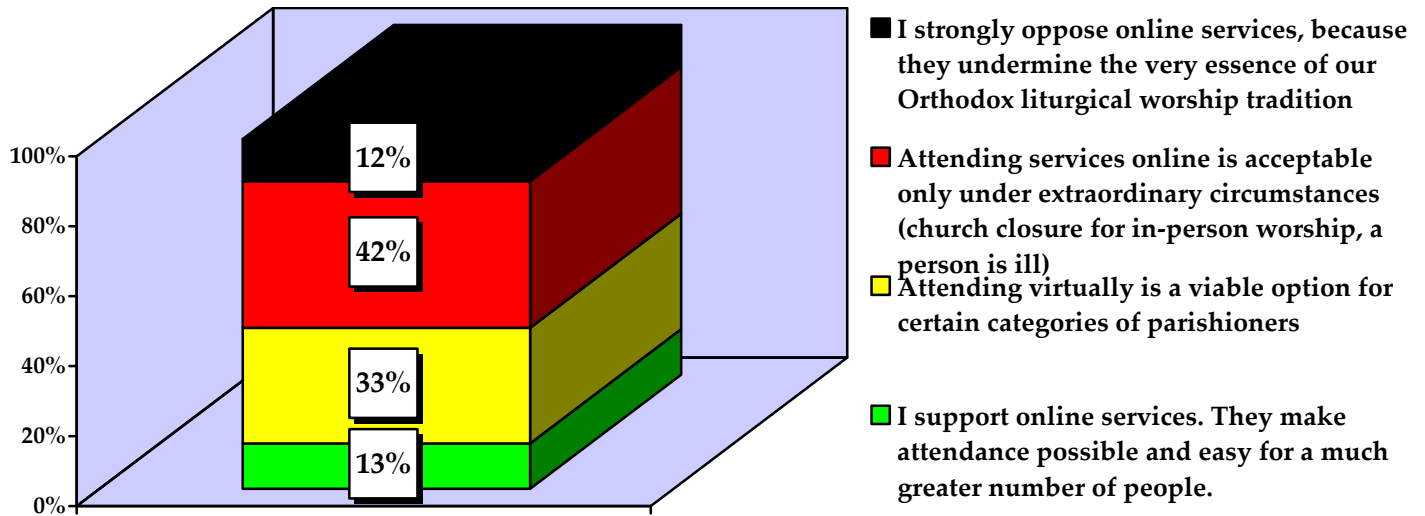
**Fig. 9 “Does your parish offer any option to attend its services online?”**



As for the clergy’s attitudes, American Orthodox priests are divided into two nearly equal “camps.” About half of them (46%) support online services, either because they make it easier for more people to participate, or because this is the only way for certain categories of parishioners to attend. The other half holds the opposite view. These clergy either unconditionally reject online services as undermining the very essence of Orthodox liturgical worship, or grudgingly accept them, but only under extraordinary circumstances. See Fig. 10.

**Fig. 10 Clergy Are Nearly Equally Divided Between Supporters and Opponents of Online Services**

“Which of the following best describes your opinion about offering online Orthodox services?”



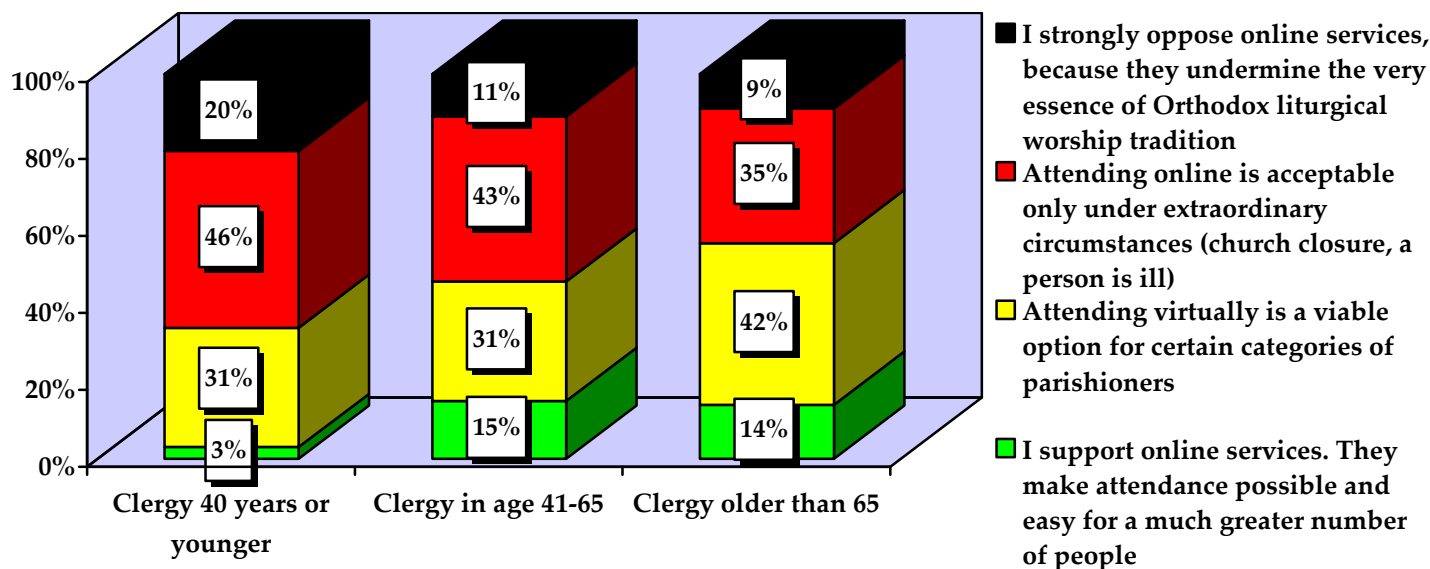
Three comments offered by the clergy about online worship services mirror their greatly varied positions.

From a clergyman whose parish live-streamed in the past but stopped: “I’m glad we did it, and know it really helped our community and far beyond. But I also know you cannot experience the holy mysteries on-line.” From a priest whose parish continues regular live-streaming: “Online services are a two-edged sword. They offer the sick, the snowed-in, or [those] unable to travel a chance to be edified by the sermon. But they also offer a false equivalence to some, suggesting that it is acceptable to ‘attend online’ rather than attending in person and participating in literal, tangible sacraments. They have evangelistic potential, but also the potential to hinder the spiritual growth of Orthodox Christians.” And finally: “Online services are going to become a way for guests to first visit digitally before physically attending. Some join us, because they like our “style” better than parishes in their area. So, thank God for the tech.”

One may think that the younger clergy would be more likely to embrace the new technologies that enable remote worship, but this is not the case. Fig. 11 shows that the percentage of younger priests (under 40 years old) who oppose online services is much higher than among older clergy (65+): 66% and 44% respectively.

**Fig. 11 Younger Clergy Are Stronger Opponents of Online Services than Older Priests**

“Which of the following best describes your opinion about offering online Orthodox services?”



Regardless of clergy opinions, two facts should be taken into consideration when thinking about the future of online services in American Orthodox Churches.

First, despite the reopening of churches, the downturn in COVID-19 cases and mass vaccination, 41% of the parishes with online services reported that they still have a significant number of parishioners who stay home, watch services on internet, and rarely – if ever – come to church. One can speculate that ceasing online services would force these members to resume in-person attendance. But it is also possible that they would simply drop altogether out of the life of the Church.

Second, nearly two-thirds (64%) of the parishes with online services indicated that many people who live far away and are not part of their parish community watch their services on the internet. One can argue that turning off online services would return these distant “members” to their nearby local parishes. Yet, it is also plausible that they found more inspiring preaching, a better choir, or more engaging clergyman in that far-away parish. Would such people become more involved in their home parishes if the possibility to “attend” a remote parish were taken away? Or would they too simply drop out altogether?

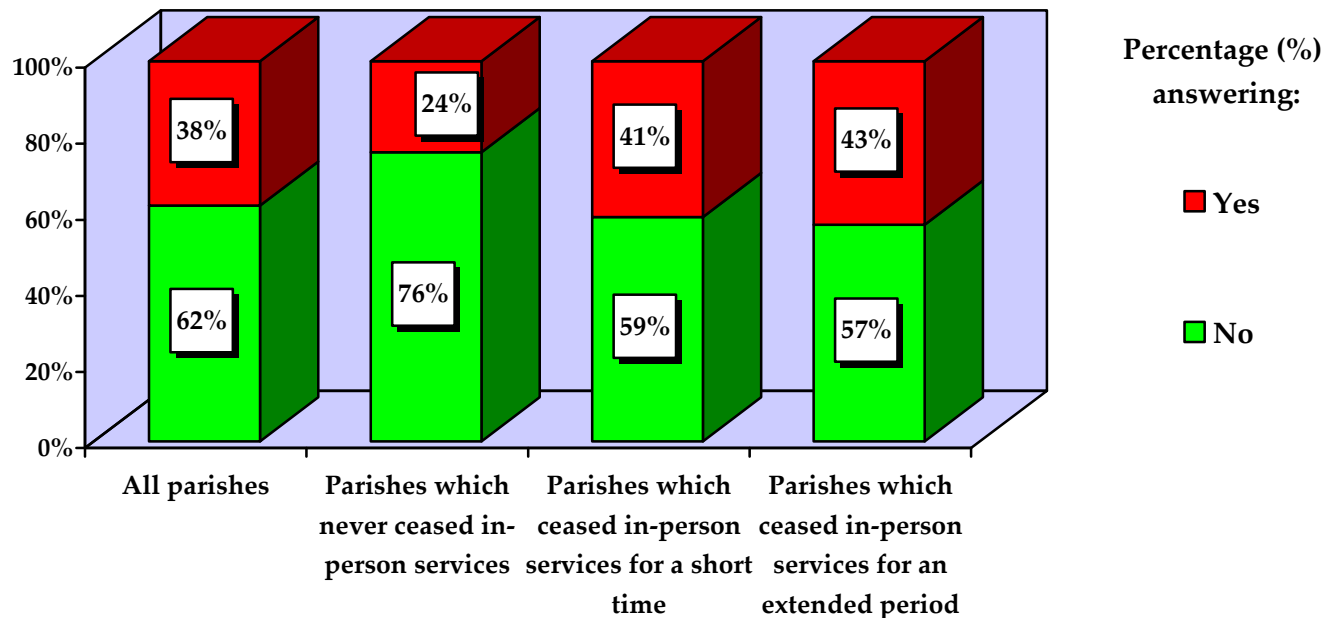
How deadly was the pandemic in the American Orthodox Christian community? Survey data show that the death toll in American Orthodox Churches was significantly greater than among the general US population or among other Christian religious congregations.

We compared the total pre-pandemic number of parishioners in participating parishes<sup>5</sup> with the number of their members who died of COVID-19 (as reported by the clergy). Based on these data, the rate of COVID-related deaths in American Orthodox parishes is almost three times higher than among the general US population: 0.81% and 0.28% respectively. Although church members tend to be older and have a higher probability of death from COVID-19 than the general population, this consideration alone does not explain such a massive discrepancy.

American Orthodox Churches also suffered more from COVID-related deaths than other Christian denominations. In the ongoing study, *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations*, only 28% of congregations in a representative national sample reported deaths of their members from COVID as compared to the 38% of American Orthodox parishes in which at least one parishioner died from COVID.

Surprisingly, those parishes which never interrupted in-person services were less affected by deaths of parishioners: only 24% of them lost members from COVID. In contrast, among parishes that were closed for some period of time, 40% reported deadly losses. See Fig. 12.

**Fig. 12 Parishes That Never Stopped Worshipping in Person Had Fewer Deaths of Parishioners**  
**"Have one or more of your parishioners died of COVID 19?"**



One might speculate that the parishes that remained open were located in areas less affected by the pandemic.

<sup>5</sup> This number was calculated based on the data on the number of Orthodox parish adherents gathered in the 2020 US Religion Census. More information is at: [www.usreligioncensus.org](http://www.usreligioncensus.org) and <https://orthodoxreality.org/latest/second-census-2020-of-american-orthodox>

Therefore, they would not have been forced to close their doors, while their members would have also been less exposed to the deadly virus. However, the survey data show exactly the opposite! At the time of administration of this survey, the following fifteen states had the highest per-capita cumulative (through the entire pandemic) COVID death rates:<sup>6</sup> MS, AZ, NJ, AL, OK, LA, TN, NY, MI, AR, WV, MA, PA, IN, GA. Out of all parishes that remained open, 56% were situated in these most deadly states.

The pandemic hit religious congregations not only with the deaths of their members and church closures. It also tore apart religious communities as internal conflicts surfaced regarding restrictions and new rules of attendance instituted in response to COVID-19. American Orthodox parishes were no exception: many struggled through dissent over such issues as: 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 survey asked whether a parish had any conflict regarding changes in church rules and policies associated with the pandemic and, if so, how severe this conflict had been.

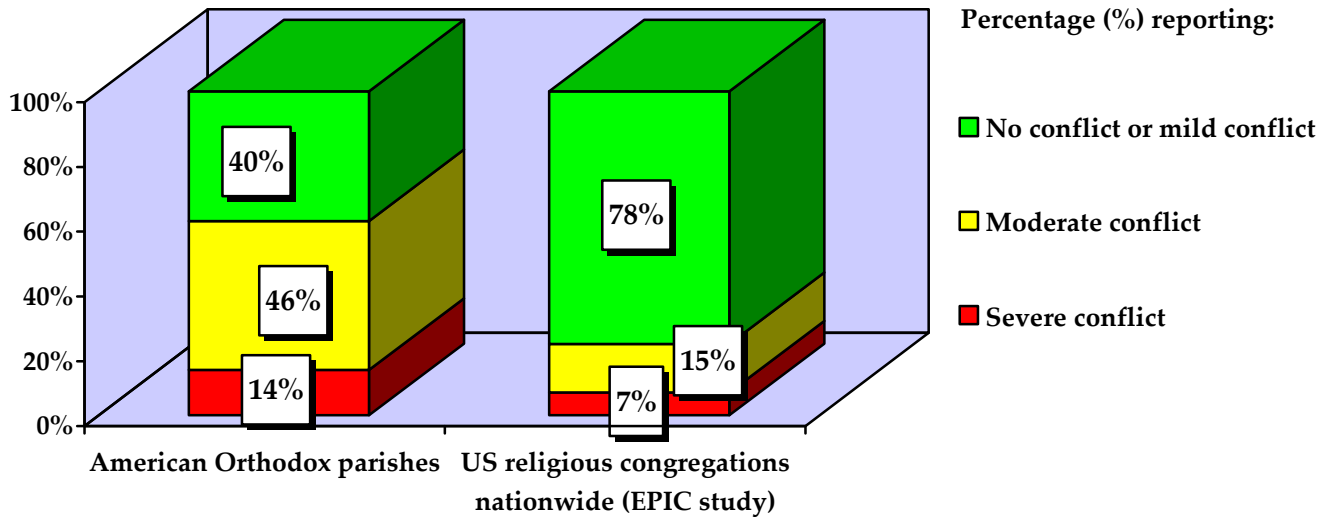
Fig. 13 shows that a dominant majority of Orthodox parishes experienced either moderate (46%) or severe (14%) conflict. Comparable data from the national study *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations* indicate that American Orthodox Churches were significantly more affected by internal disagreements than US religious congregations in general (only 22% of which reported moderate or severe conflict).

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<sup>6</sup> Source of data: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1109011/coronavirus-covid19-death-rates-us-by-state>

**Fig. 13 During the Pandemic, Orthodox Parishes Experienced More Internal Conflicts Than Other American Religious Congregations**

“Has your parish/congregation experienced conflict or dissent regarding changes in church attendance rules and policies associated with the pandemic?”



Notably, those parishes that were defined in the first chapter as “intentionally Orthodox” (parishes with strong emphasis on following rules and practices of the Orthodox Church) had fewer internal disagreements than all other parishes. Among the former, the majority (54%) lived through the pandemic with no or little conflict, in comparison with only 38% of the latter.

**Fig. 14 Intentionally Orthodox Parishes Had Less Internal Conflict During the Pandemic:**

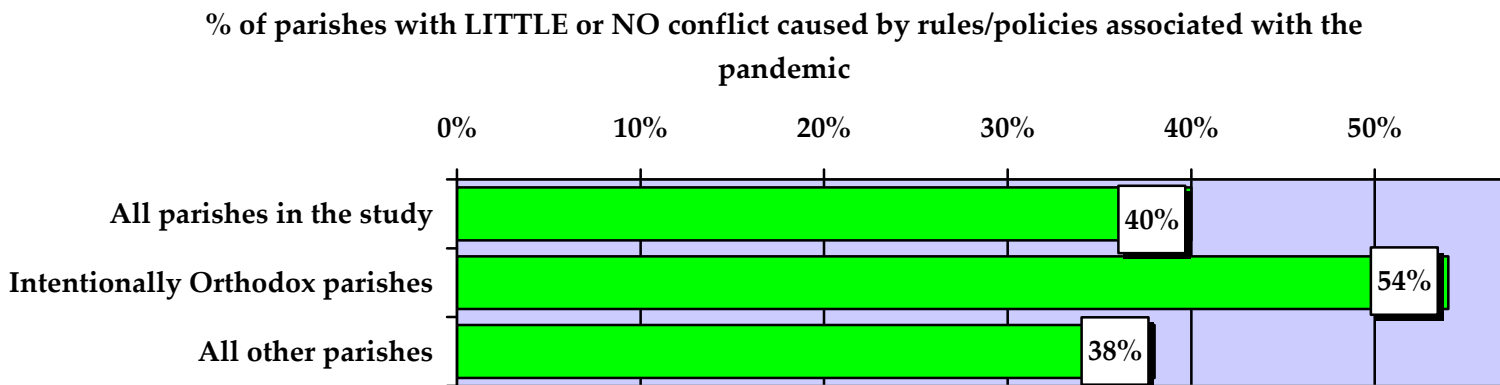
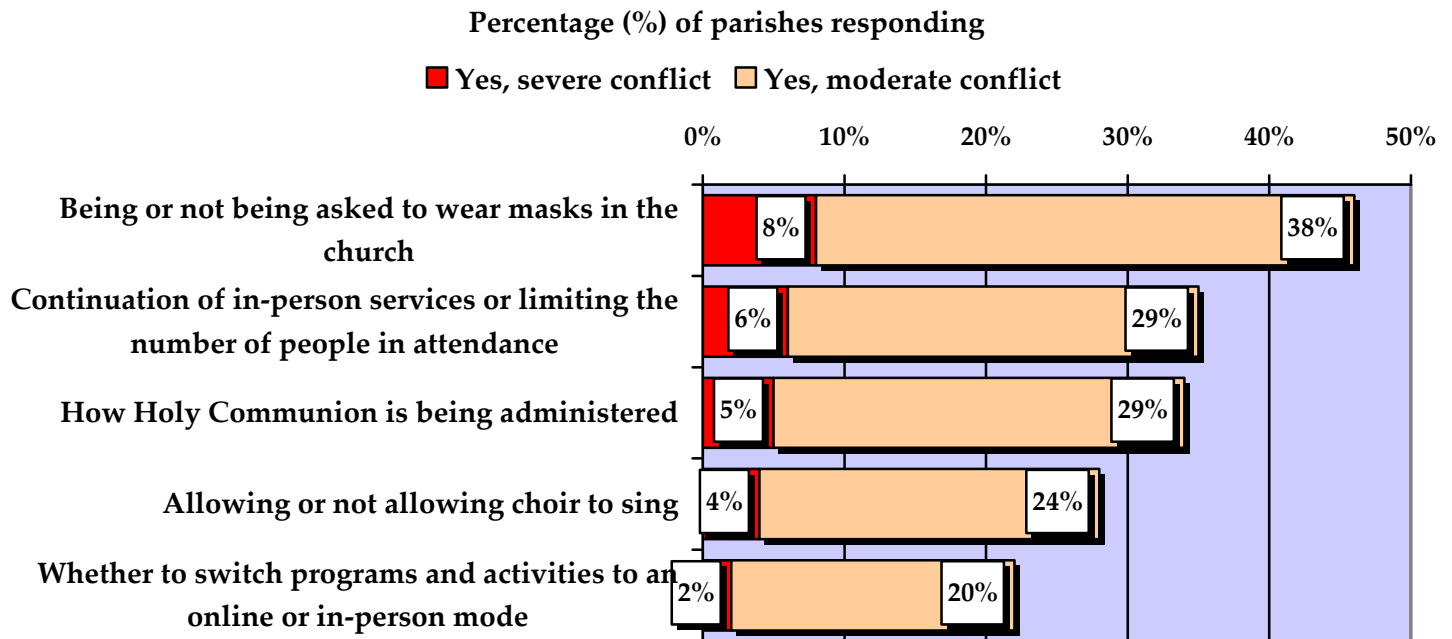


Fig. 15 shows that wearing (or not wearing) masks in the church was the most frequent trigger for significant conflict in a parish. Nearly half (46%) of the parishes had either severe or moderate disagreements related to this matter. More than one-third of the parishes had serious fights over the questions of continuation in-person services/limiting number of people in attendance (35% of parishes) and how Holy Communion was being administered (34%).

**Fig. 15 Wearing Masks in the Church Was the Most Common Reason for Conflicts in US Orthodox Parishes during the Pandemic**

“Has your parish experienced conflict or dissent regarding the following aspects brought by the pandemic?”



### III. The Sacrament of Holy Communion During the Pandemic: Are the Battles Over?

#### AMONG KEY FINDINGS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER:

- Compared to summer 2020, a significant number of parishes have reversed the changes in administering the Eucharist, which were previously introduced in response to the pandemic. Answering the question, “Is there any difference between how you administer Holy Communion now versus before the pandemic?, ” 70% of the clergy replied “No” versus only 47% in late July 2020.
- Those parishes which changed traditional way of administering Holy Communion (with one spoon from the common chalice for all people in the church) did so in an attempt to decrease the risk of COVID-19 transmission. However, they were not less affected by deaths of parishioners than parishes where members received Holy Communion in a traditional (pre-pandemic) manner.



- Among parishes that introduced changes in administering the Eucharist, the most common adaptation (34% of the parishes) has been to use one spoon per communicant, and sanitizing the spoons after each Liturgy. The least common adaptation has been to administer the Eucharist with disposable spoons, which are collected and discarded after each Liturgy. Only 4% of those parishes which introduced changes (or 1.2% of all Orthodox parishes) adhere to this practice.
- Many parishes still experience tensions and disagreements related to the administering the Holy Communion. This chapter offers an overview of the most common scenarios for such conflicts.

Holy Communion is the pivotal point of both Orthodox Christian worship and the personal religious lives of believers. This Sacrament has traditionally been administered with a single spoon and from a common chalice for all faithful present in the church. By the summer of 2020, with the rapid spread of COVID-19 and in the absence of vaccines, many church members became apprehensive about continuing to use a common spoon. A number of parishioners stopped receiving Holy Communion out of fear of contagion. To address this matter, some American Orthodox national church bodies, their dioceses, and individual parishes introduced various innovations and changes in administering the Eucharist. The most common adjustments were:

- Asking communicants to tilt their head back and open their mouths wide so that a priest could drop the sacred elements into the mouth without physical contact with the spoon. Communicants were told not to close their lips on the spoon.
- Administering Holy Communion with one spoon, but sanitizing it (with alcohol, boiling water, vinegar) between communicants
- Using several spoons, which were sanitized between communicants and used “in rotation” during administration of Holy Communion
- Using multiple spoons, one per communicant, which were collected and sterilized after each Liturgy and reused the following Sunday
- Using disposable spoons - one per communicant - which were collected and discarded (buried or burned) after each Liturgy

In addition to these most common approaches, some clergy experimented locally with many other ways of administering Holy Communion. While welcomed by some church members, these alterations in the most important Sacrament of the Orthodox Church were met with strong resistance by others. The main argument of those who opposed any changes were the teachings of the Church about the sacred character of the Holy Gifts, and the Eucharist being a divine remedy which cannot transmit any disease.

Overall, the issue caused great anxiety among both clergy and laity, resulting in heated discussions and tensions at all levels of Church life. As we saw in the previous chapter, 34% of the parishes experienced either moderate or strong internal conflicts over how Holy Communion was being administered. Some parishes had also serious conflicts with their bishops, because the universal guidelines on administering Holy Communion issued by a ruling hierarch for his entire diocese diverged from the preferences or needs of a particular local parish. In some parishes, clergy offered multiple ways of receiving the Eucharist in an attempt to cater to everyone's choices.

The national study, "COVID-19 and the Sacrament of Holy Communion in American Orthodox Parishes,"<sup>7</sup> found that by August 2020 only 47% of US Orthodox parishes continued to administer the Holy Communion in the same way as they had prior to the pandemic, while the majority had introduced some changes. What is the current situation in the parishes and opinions of clergy about administering this Sacrament under the new circumstances brought by the pandemic?

First, a significant number of parishes have reversed previously instituted changes and returned to the original way of administering the Eucharist. Answering the question, "Is there any difference between how you administer Holy Communion now versus before the pandemic?" 70% of the clergy replied "No" as compared to 47% in late July 2020.

Second, those parishes which were categorized as "intentionally Orthodox" in the first chapter (i.e., parishes that placed an especially strong emphasis upon various aspects of religious lives of their members) were no different from all other parishes in their approaches to administering the Holy Communion. Among both "intentionally Orthodox" and all other parishes, the same percentage either introduced some changes (30%), or continued to administer Holy Communion the same way as they had pre-pandemic (70%).

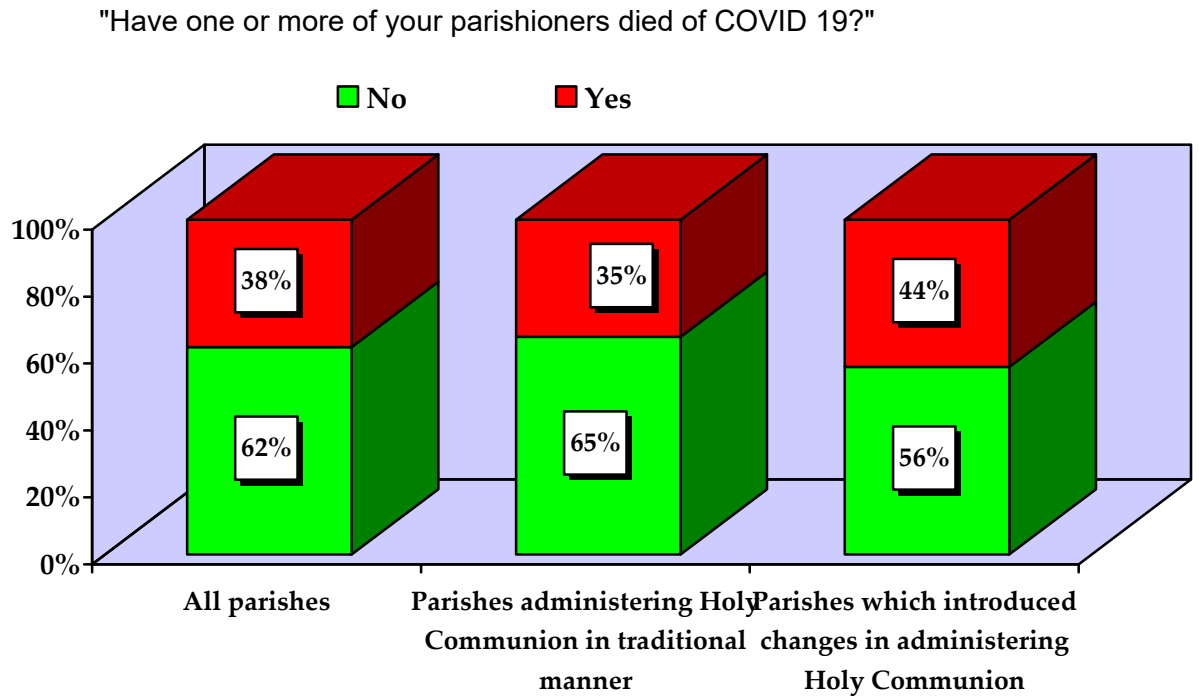
Third, parishes that instituted some changes did so in an attempt to decrease the risk of COVID-19 transmission. However, survey data indicate that they were ultimately *more* affected by the deaths of parishioners than were the parishes that continued to administer Holy Communion in a traditional (pre-pandemic) manner.

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<sup>7</sup> See the report at: <https://orthodoxreality.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/HolyCommunionDuringPandemicFinalReport1.pdf>

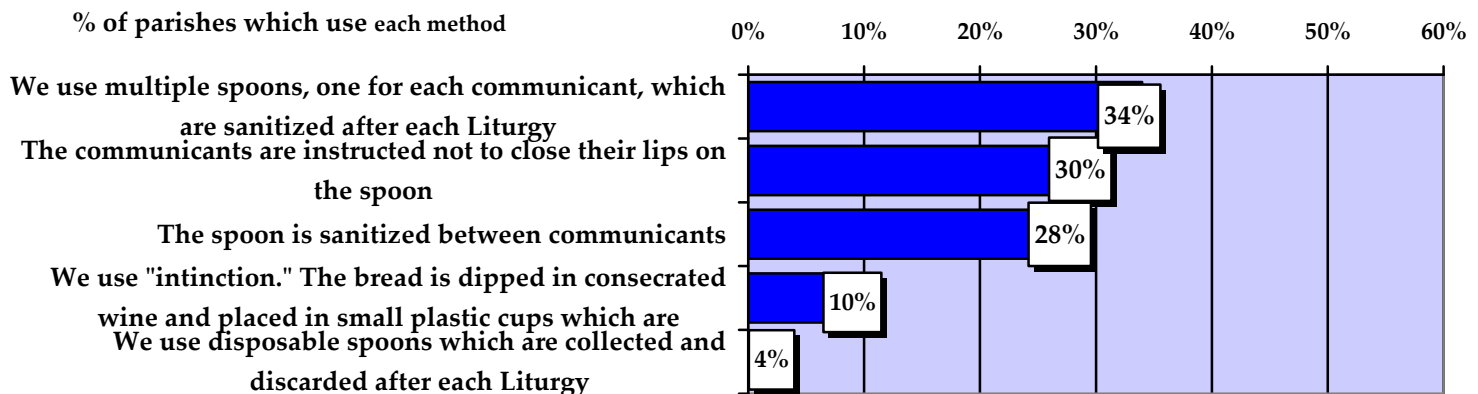
Fig. 16 shows that only 35% of the parishes with a traditional approach to Holy Communion reported parishioners dying from COVID-19 versus 44% of parishes that had introduced some adaptations.

**Fig. 16 Parishes That Administered Holy Communion in a Traditional Manner Were Less Affected by Deaths of Parishioners**



Fourth, Fig. 17 shows that among parishes which introduced some changes in administering the Eucharist, the most common adaptation (34%) is the use of multiple spoons, one for each communicant, which are then sanitized after each Liturgy. The least common is the practice of administering the Eucharist with disposable spoons which are collected and discarded after each Liturgy. Today, only 4% of parishes which introduced changes (or 1.2% of all Orthodox parishes) adhere to this practice.

**Fig. 17 Methods of Administering Holy Communion in Parishes Which Introduced Some Changes**  
(the sum of percentages in the chart exceeds 100%, because some parishes introduced multiple changes)



The new approaches to administering the Holy Communion in the parishes are not limited to the five options presented in Fig. 17. The survey offered clergy an option to respond, “some other approach,” and describe what they were doing. Here are several quotations from the priests who selected “some other approach:”

- Parishioners are no longer asked to kiss the chalice.
- Priest is to wear mask when distributing Eucharist. Antidoron is placed in little baggies.
- We (Armenian Church) place the blessed sacrament in their hands
- Bread is dipped in the chalice and placed on the tongue by hand of the priest. The hand is sanitized with 90% alcohol between families
- Instead of the mouth, we place the communion on the back of the hand. Communicants must sanitize their hands before and after receiving communion.
- When a new COVID wave is spiking in the community we go back to multiple spoons. If COVID rates are lower, we use one spoon.
- The bread dipped in the consecrated wine is placed upon the hand of the parishioner instead of placing directly to mouth.

The question in the title of this chapter was, “Are the battles over Holy Communion administration over?” The most severe conflicts are probably a thing of the past, but respondents’ comments show that there are still plenty of tensions related to the administration of Holy Communion. In some instances, these tensions reflect differences in position between a priest and his parishioners. Here is a quote exemplifying such a situation:

- During the beginning of pandemic until the church was fully open, we used multiple spoons. The parishioners loved it. And would still love doing it rather than going back to a single spoon. We went back to a single spoon. Some people do not come to chalice because of it.

In other cases, the divisions are among the factions within a parish community as in this situation:

- We were required for a period of several months to wash the spoon with grain alcohol and hot water between communicants. This scandalized some of the faithful. When we were no longer required to do this, and reverted to the traditional practice, others were then scandalized.

And yet in other instances, the parishes are not “happy” with the instructions received from their ruling bishops:

- We only can have parishioners keep mouths open, because the other spoon procedures were not allowed by Bishop

## IV. The Big Picture: the Pandemic and Changes in Parish Vitality

### **AMONG KEY FINDINGS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER:**

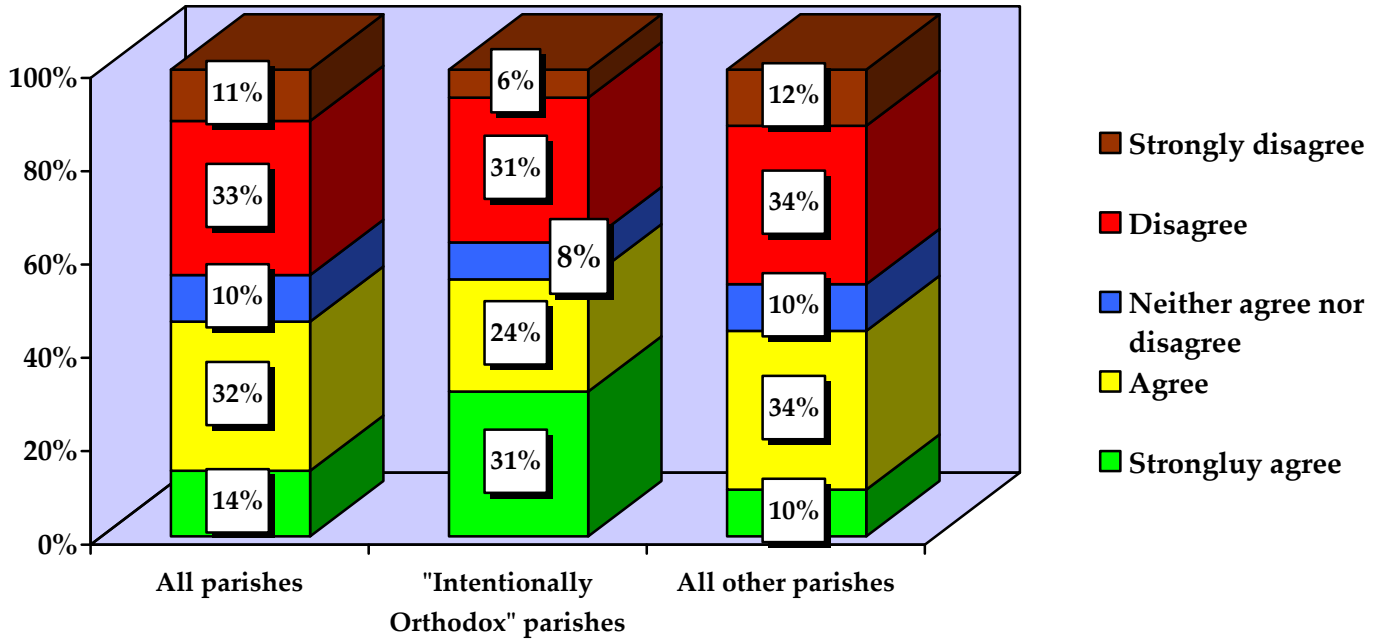
- Nearly half of the clergy “agreed” (32%) or “strongly agreed” (14%) that, “Despite the pandemic, the life of our parish continued without major disruption.” This percentage is especially high (55%) among parishes which were defined in the first chapter as being “intentionally Orthodox”
- Two areas of parish life were negatively affected by the pandemic especially strongly: overall engagement of parishioners and the involvement of young people in religious education. Nearly half of the parishes experienced a decline in these areas.
- On the positive side, the pandemic resulted in the growing generosity of church members. An absolute majority of parishes (56%) witnessed an increase in the average size of individual contributions. Unlike religious education for children and teenagers, the participation in religious education for adults has also slightly improved during the pandemic: 32% of the parishes reported growth in this area, versus 29% which experienced a decline
- The consequences of the pandemic were astoundingly different for the “intentionally Orthodox” and all other parishes. Unlike other parishes, the “intentionally Orthodox” parishes experienced not only higher monetary contributions, but also the increased involvement of their parishioners (both adults and young people) in all areas of church life, including religious education, small group activities, etc.
- Throughout the pandemic, roughly the same number of parishes either increased their overall vitality (36% of parishes) or, on the contrary, lost strength (35%). Compared to other parishes, two categories of churches were much more likely to grow in vitality: churches that never closed their doors for in-person worship (45% of them have grown in vitality) and “intentionally Orthodox” parishes (67%)

The last two years have tried parishes and clergy in many challenging ways. From concerns regarding parishioners’ health and safety to difficulties in adopting entirely new (for most parishes) technologies, from the pressing question of members’ engagement to the problem of speedy local decision-making in a highly hierarchical church, parishes have wrestled with a lot of complex issues. In this chapter, we will offer some initial glimpses into what the pandemic did to the overall vitality of parishes.

Not all parishes were equally affected by the pandemic. Nearly half the clergy “agreed” (32%) or “strongly agreed” (14%) that, “Despite the pandemic, the life of our parish continued without major disruption.” The percentage of communities which found ways to continue their ministries and programs was especially high (55%) among parishes that were defined in the first chapter as “intentionally Orthodox.” See Fig. 18.

**Fig. 18 Nearly Half the Parishes Continued their Ministries through the Pandemic without Major Disruption**

Do you agree with the statement, “Despite the pandemic, the life of our parish continued without major disruption”?

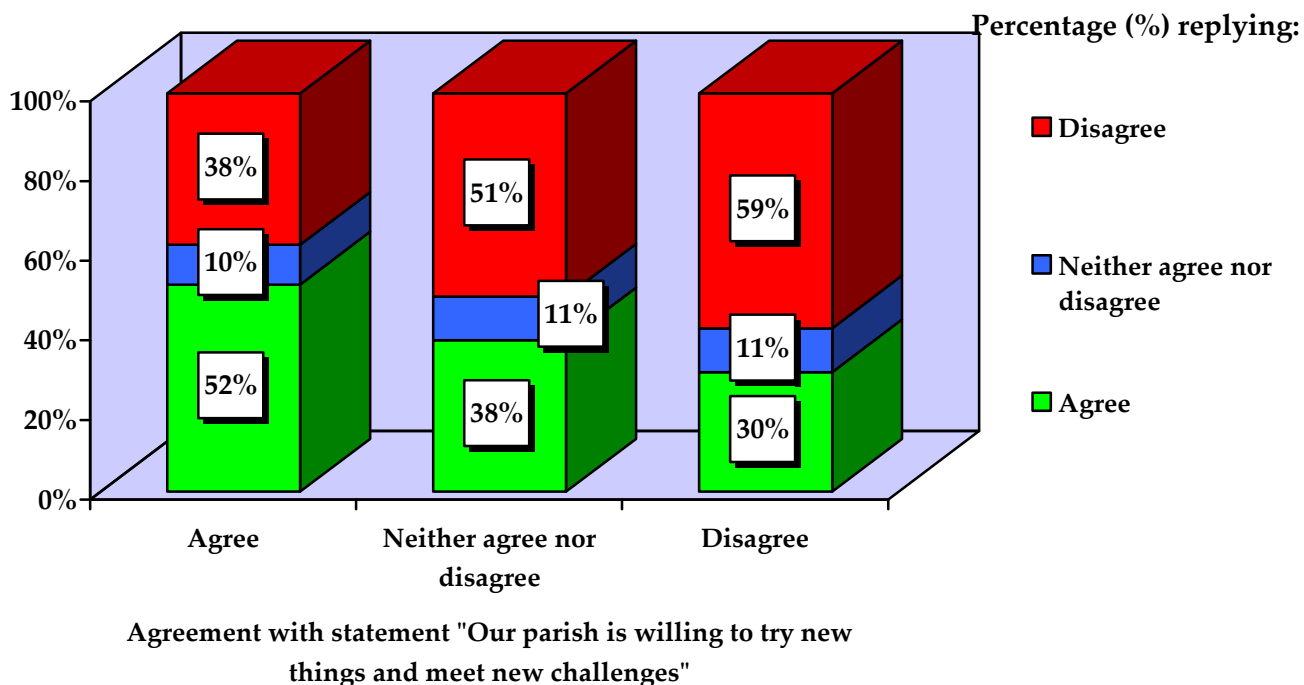


Besides being “intentionally Orthodox,” another factor which made a significant difference in the ability of the parishes to function under challenging circumstances was their openness to trying new ways of doing things. In chapter one, we found that 13% of the parishes “strongly agreed” and 50% “agreed” with the statement, “Our parish is always willing to try new things and to meet new challenges.” These parishes adapted to the new circumstances better than other parishes. See Fig. 19.

In other words, “without major disruption” does not mean “without any change.” Rather, quite the opposite: the willingness to introduce changes allowed parishes to continue their ministries and programs throughout the pandemic.

**Fig. 19 More Experimental Parishes Were More Successful in Continuing Their Ministries Through the Pandemic**

“Do you agree with the statement, ‘Despite the pandemic, the life of our parish continued without major disruption?’”



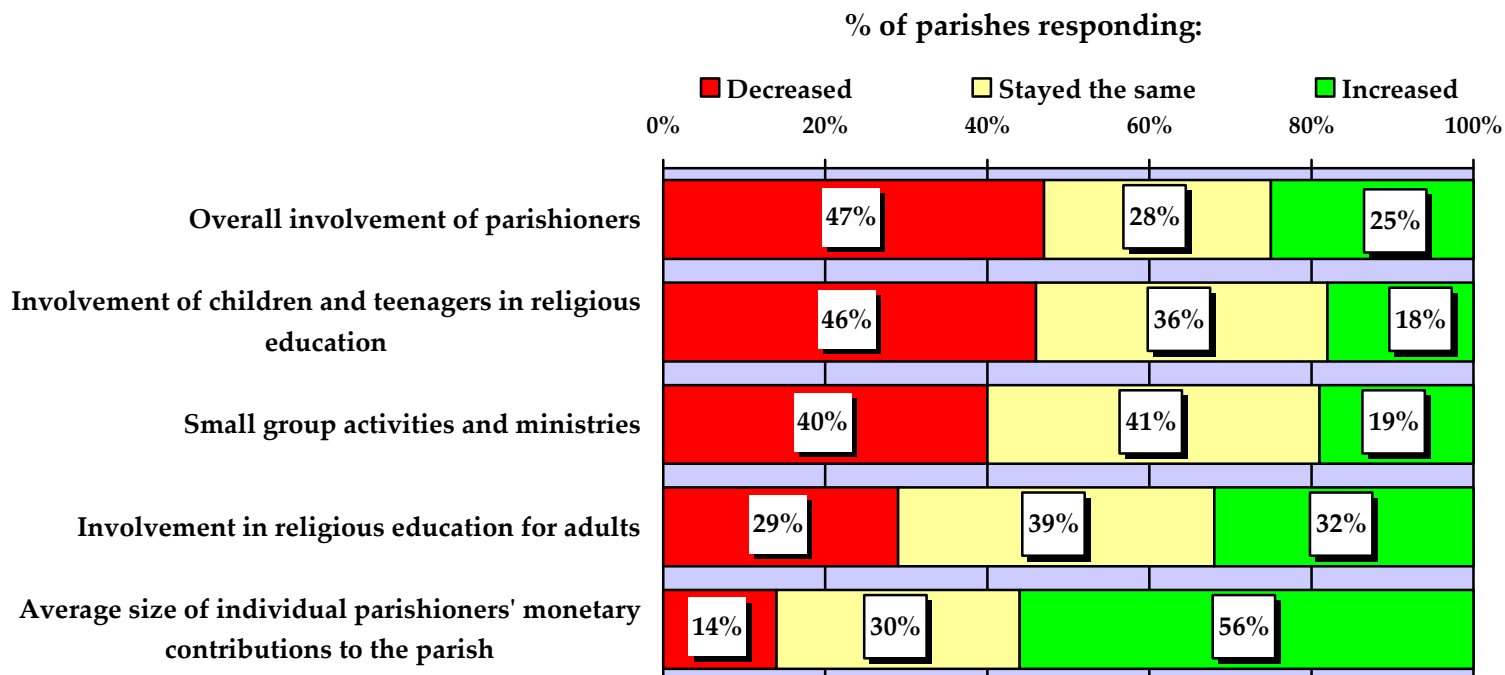
Although nearly half the parishes managed to continue their ministries throughout the pandemic without major disruption, they still suffer losses in the various aspects of their lives. And some of these areas were affected much more strongly than others. The questionnaire asked, “How have the following changed in your parish since the start of the pandemic:

- Overall involvement of parishioners in the parish
- Average size of individual parishioners’ monetary contributions to the parish
- Small group activities and ministries
- Involvement of children and teenagers in religious education
- Involvement in religious education for adults”

Fig. 20 presents a snapshot of to the effect of the pandemic on the lives of US Orthodox churches.



**Fig. 20** “How have the following changed in your parish since the start of the pandemic?”

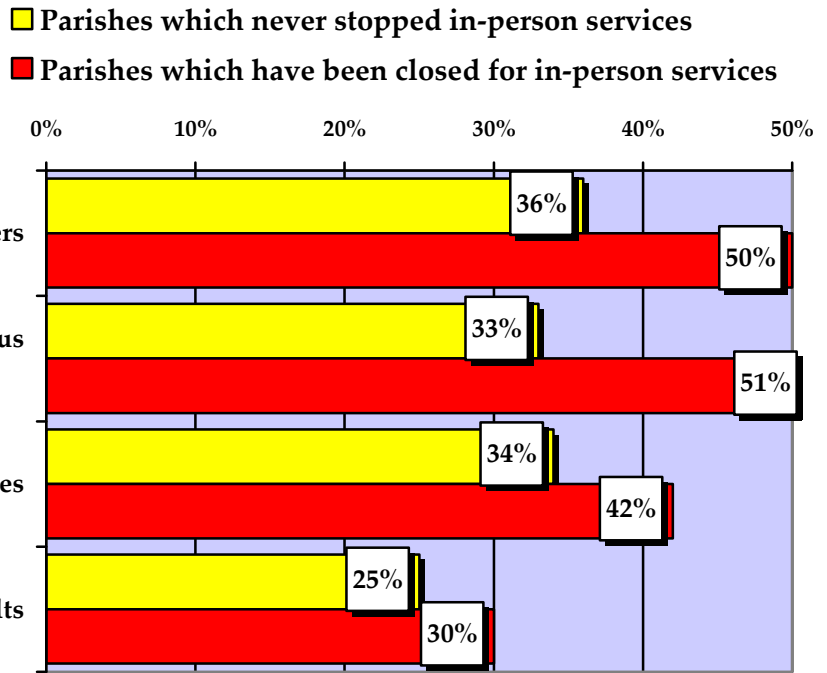


Two areas of parish life were especially affected by the pandemic: overall engagement of parishioners, and the involvement of young people in religious education. Nearly half the parishes experienced a decline in these areas. The decrease in participation in small group activities and ministries was also reported by a significant number (40%) of churches. Yet, on the positive side, the pandemic resulted in the growing generosity of church members. An absolute majority of parishes (56%) witnessed an increase in the average size of individual contributions. Also, unlike religious education for children and teenagers, participation in religious education for adults slightly improved during the pandemic: 32% of parishes reported growth in this area versus 29% which experienced a decline.

Which circumstance could possibly make a difference in the resilience of parishes to the crisis brought by the pandemic? Survey data show that two factors significantly helped some parishes deal with the challenges of the pandemic better than others. One was the fact that a parish had never closed its doors for in-person services (22% of all parishes). Compared to parishes that had been closed, a much smaller percentage of always-open churches reported a decline in overall involvement of parishioners and their participation in religious education and small group activities and ministries. See Fig. 21.

**Fig. 21 Parishes Which Continued In-Person Worship Through the Pandemic Were Less Affected by Decline in the Involvement of Parishioners**

Percentage (%) of parishes reporting a decline since the start of the pandemic in each of the following



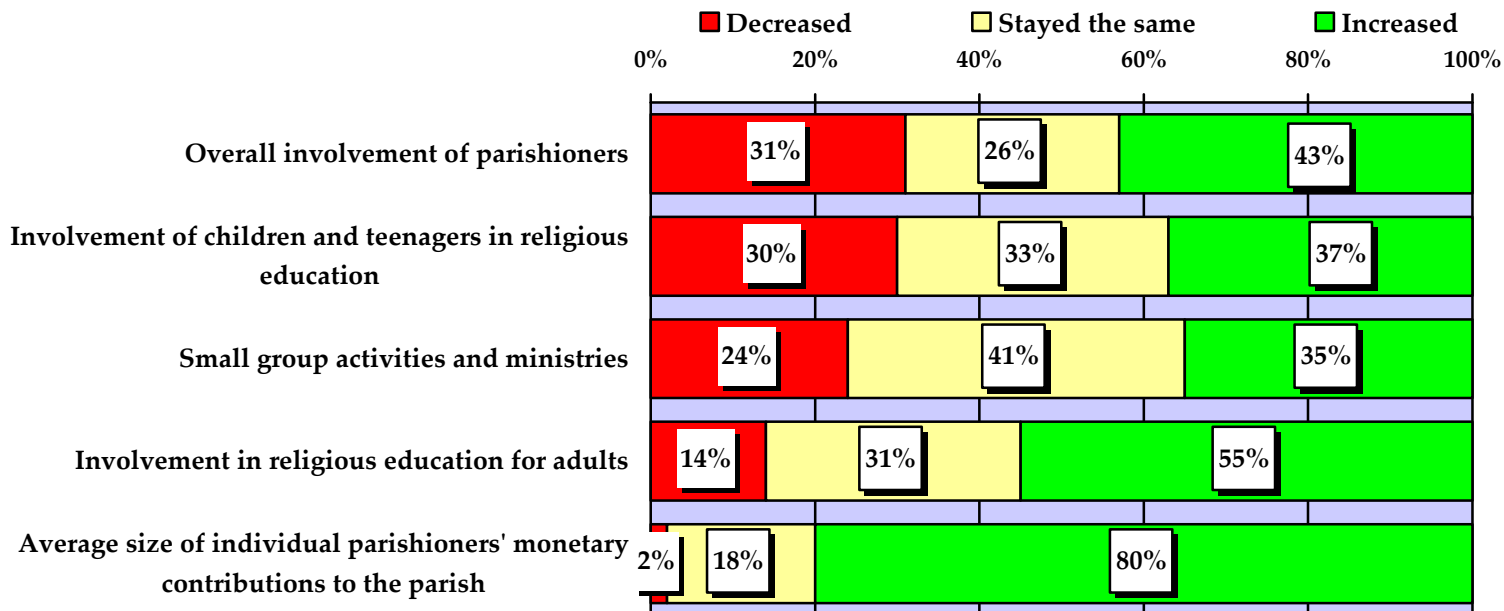
The second and most striking difference in the consequences of the pandemic was between “intentionally Orthodox” and all other parishes. In fact, it appears that during the past two years, life blossomed with renewed vigor in those parishes with a strong emphasis on various Orthodox Church requirements, traditions, and practices – the parishes which were defined as “intentionally Orthodox” in the first chapter.

Fig. 22 has two side-by-side charts which show that unlike other parishes, the “intentionally Orthodox” ones benefited not only from higher monetary contributions, but also experienced increased involvement of their parishioners (both adults and young people) in all areas of church life.

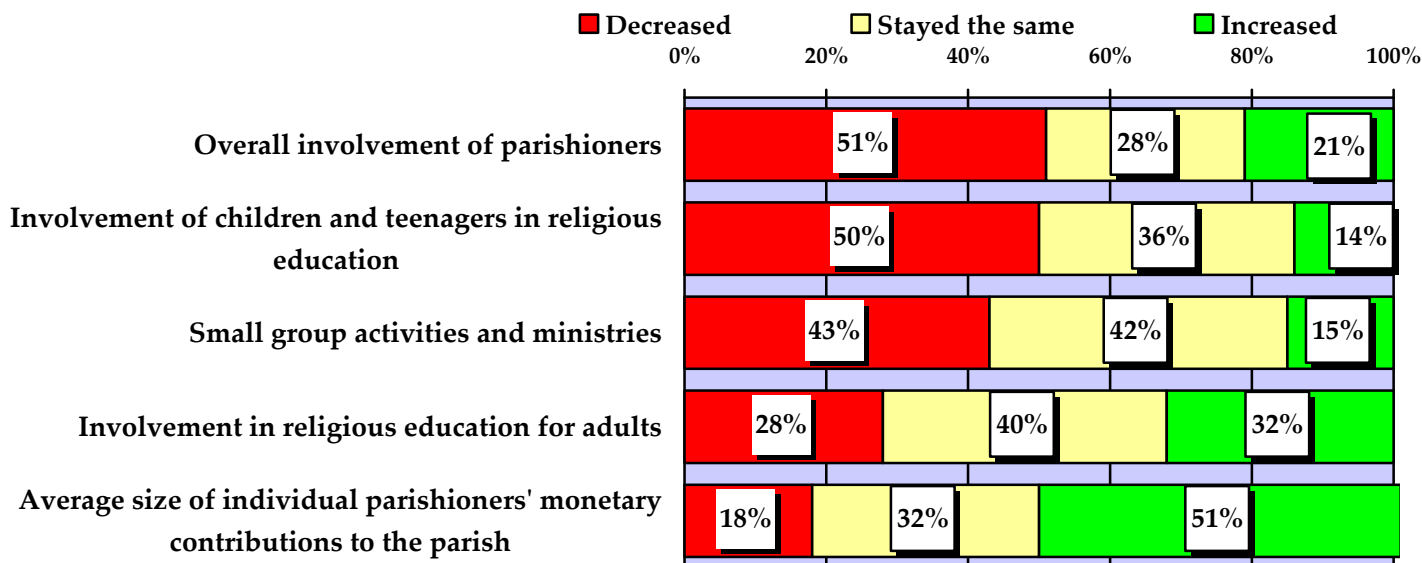
**Fig. 22 During the Pandemic, the “Intentionally Orthodox” Parishes Increased Involvement of their Members in All Areas of Church Life**

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

% of "INTENTIONALLY ORTHODOX" parishes responding:



% of ALL OTHER parishes responding

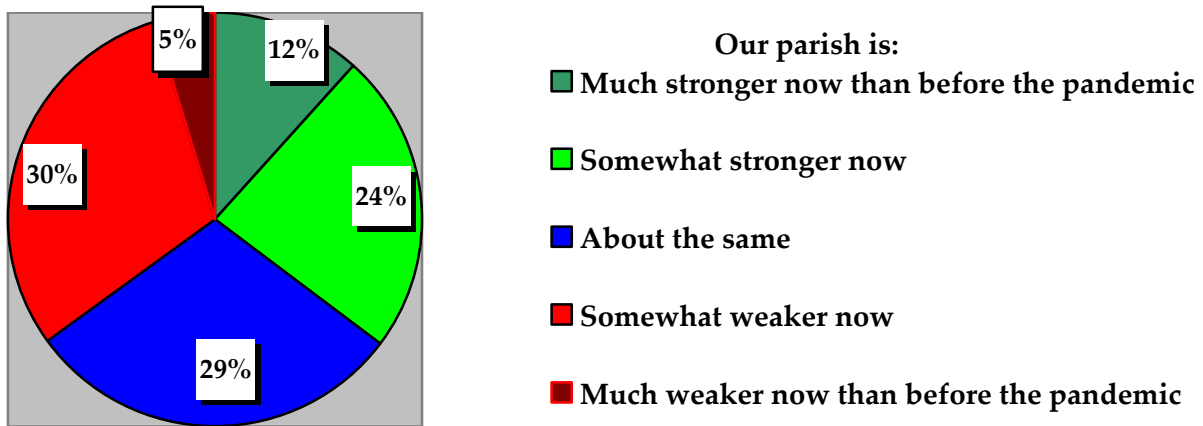


The vitality of a local parish is a complex phenomenon. The involvement of parishioners in worship services and other activities, their desire to take on various volunteer roles, the variety of ministries and programs, the quality of religious education for young people and adults, the financial health and growth in members – all these and many more are both criteria and contributors to the overall vitality of a parish.

We asked clergy: “All things considered, how would you compare the overall vitality and strength of your parish before the pandemic and now?” Fig. 23 shows that through the pandemic, roughly the same number of parishes have either become stronger (36%) or, on the contrary, declined in vitality (35%).

**Fig. 23 The Pandemic and Changes in Vitality of American Orthodox Parishes**

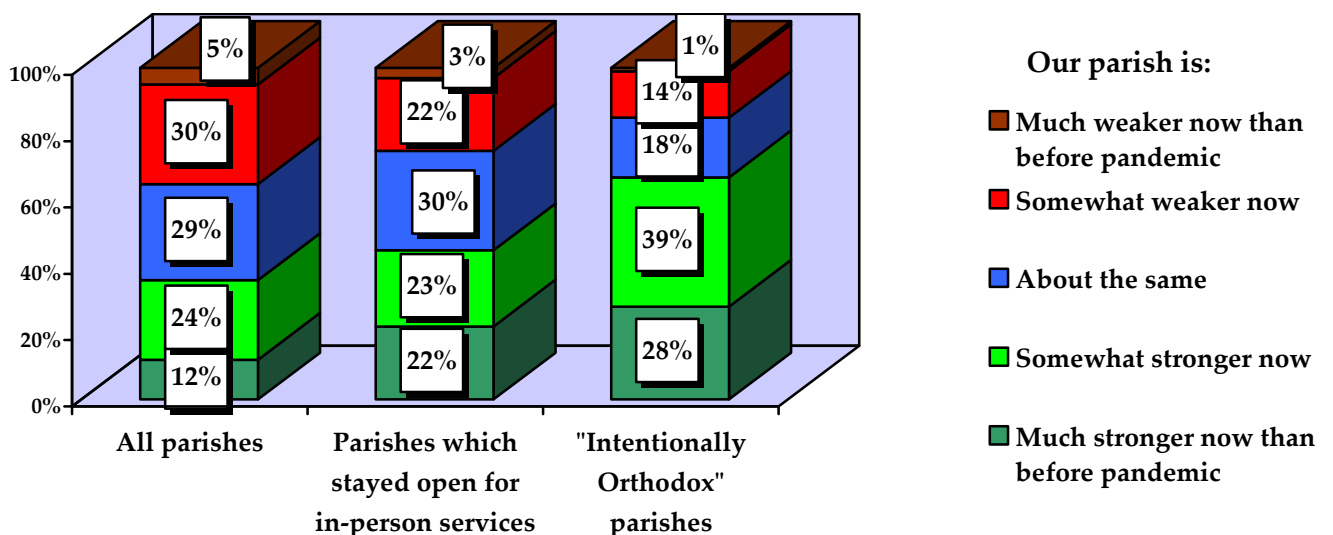
“All things considered, how would you compare the overall vitality and strength of your parish before the pandemic and now?”



Similar to positive changes observed in the involvement of parishioners, churches that never closed their doors for in-person worship and, especially, “intentionally Orthodox” parishes (whether or not they had ever closed their doors), were much more likely to grow in vitality than all other parishes. See Fig. 24.

**Fig. 24 Remaining Open for In-Person Worship and Being “Intentionally Orthodox” Helped Parishes to Grow in Vitality through the Pandemic**

“All things considered, how would you compare the overall vitality and strength of your parish before the pandemic and now?”



## V. Switching an Orthodox Parish to “Online Mode”: Blessing or Pitfall?

### **AMONG KEY FINDINGS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER:**

- Two parish ministries benefited from moving to an online format and experienced increase in participation: religious education for adults and work with prospective converts and catechumens.
- Conversely, switching to an online mode had an especially strong negative influence on parishioners’ participation in Sunday Liturgy, religious education for children, and youth activities and programs
- Compared to smaller churches, medium-sized and large parishes witnessed a stronger decline in parishioner involvement after moving their ministries and activities to online format

For those 78% of American parishes which closed their doors for some period of time, switching to an online mode both for worship and other aspects of parish life (small group activities, business meetings, religious education, work with catechumens) was the only option to function throughout the pandemic. But even in the parishes that continuously maintained in-person services, introducing an online mode for services and various ministries was often a necessity because of the many parishioners who decided to self-isolate and stay home.

This new “online version” of Orthodox parish life was first seen simply as a short-term emergency adaptation to help churches endure the crisis. But the pandemic lasted for over two years. Gradually, more and more clergy and parishioners became fully accustomed and proficient of “zooming in” for church activities from the comfort of home. The online option was increasingly seen by many not simply as safe, but also as convenient and time-efficient. This was especially true for activities scheduled on weekdays when working parishioners would otherwise be required to spend time driving to church.

As with other areas of social and business life in post-pandemic America, it is unlikely that Orthodox parishes will give up all the newly discovered tools and methods for remote church participation even if and when the pandemic has truly ended.

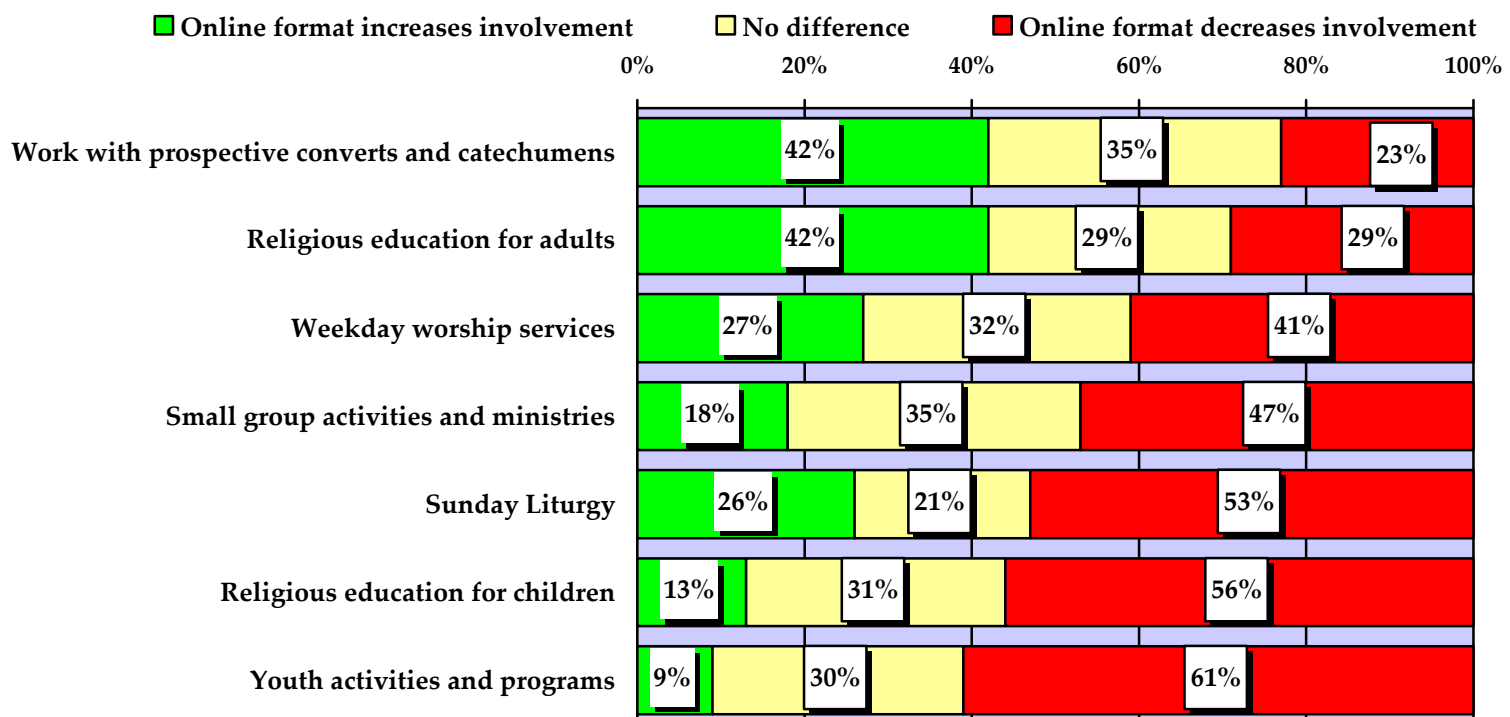
Based on the experiences of clergy throughout the past two years, we will try to assess the lasting effects - both positive and negative - of switching various church activities and ministries to an online mode. The survey asked: “Many parishes switched their activities from in person to virtual/online. Whether or not your parish offers the following activities, do you think that moving to an online format increases or decreases parishioners’ involvement?”

Fig. 25 shows how switching to a virtual format affects seven areas of parish life. The online mode can give a boost to two ministries: work with prospective converts and catechumens, and religious education for adults. In both instances, a plurality of clergy (42%) feel that the virtual option increases participation. But in all other areas of parish life, the virtual version of programs and activities has a rather negative impact on parishioners' involvement. Turning to an online version has had an especially strong negative influence on parishioners' participation in Sunday Liturgy, religious education for children, and youth activities and programs. An absolute majority of the clergy believe that the online format decreases involvement of members in these aspects of parish life.

**Fig. 25 Switching to Online Format Has Negative Impact on Most Parish Ministries**

“Do you think that moving the following activities to an online format increases or decreases parishioners' involvement?”

% of parishes responding:



Notably, the clergy from parishes that were able to continue in-person services throughout the pandemic and priests from parishes that closed their doors had similar opinions about the effects of switching to an online mode on parishioners' involvement. Similarly, there was also not much difference in opinion between clergy in parishes defined as “intentionally Orthodox” (see chapter 1) and priests in all other parishes.

However, the size of a parish plays a role in how strongly switching ministries and activities to an online format affects involvement of parishioners. Fig. 26 shows that, compared to clergy in small family-like parishes (fewer than 50 participants), more clergy in medium (50-199) and large (200 and more) parishes reported that switching various programs to an online format decreases the involvement of parishioners.

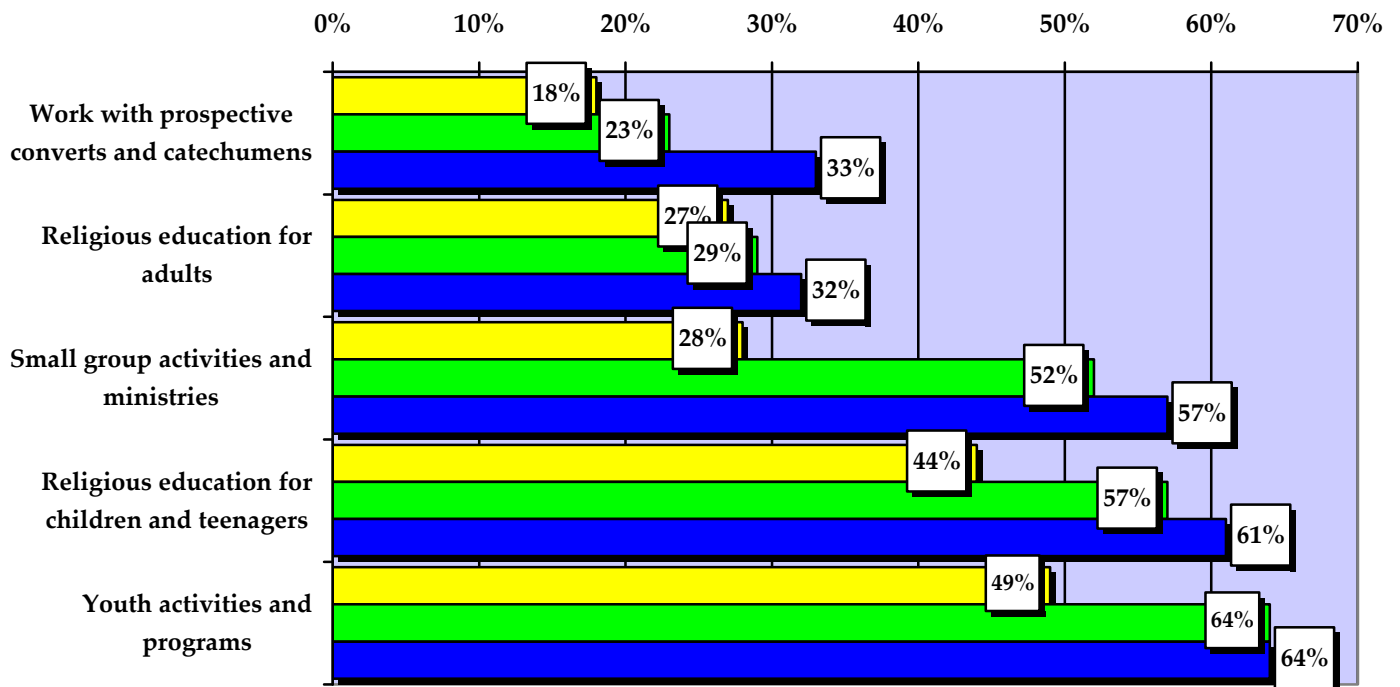
**Fig. 26 Bigger Parishes Suffer More from Switching Various Ministries and Activities to an Online**

**Mode:**

Percentage (%) of clergy reporting that moving the following activities online DECREASES parishioners' involvement

Size of a parish

■ Less than 50 regular participants   ■ 50-199 regular participants   ■ 200 and more regular participants



## VI. The Impact of the Pandemic on Parish Membership and Worship Attendance:

### Why Were Some Parishes Growing?

#### AMONG KEY FINDINGS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER:

- During the past two years, Orthodox parishes suffered significant losses in the number of regular participants and in the number of people attending worship services. If measured by the total number of regular participants, the size of a “typical” US Orthodox parish shrank by 15%. If measured by average in-person worship attendance, a “typical” Orthodox parish lost 22% of its “people in the pews” present in church on Sunday.

- Despite these general declines in American Orthodox Churches, some parishes have grown substantially. 21% of all parishes experienced more than 20% growth in regular participants, and 17% of parishes witnessed more than 20% increase in worship attendance.
- Parish growth in regular participants and worship attendance during the pandemic is especially closely associated with seven factors and characteristics. This chapter presents these characteristics and shows the importance of each.

The pandemic has shrunk many Christian congregations in the US, and the deaths of members was not the primary factor for this decline. Overall, fewer people currently regularly participate in their congregations or show up for in-person worship services than they did pre-pandemic. American Orthodox parishes are no exception from this trend.

The national study, *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC)*<sup>8</sup> found that a median size of a “typical” American congregation has decreased from 90 regular participants in 2019 to 60 at present. Similarly, between 2019 and now, a median in-person weekend worship attendance in a “typical” American congregation has dropped from 65 to 45 persons.

How do American Orthodox Christian Churches fit into this national picture? The survey asked two questions:

- How many people (including children) regularly participate NOW vs. BEFORE THE PANDEMIC in worship services or other activities in your parish: at least once a month and counting both in-person and online?
- What is the total (including children) average in-person attendance at your Sunday service NOW vs. BEFORE THE PANDEMIC?

Data provided by the clergy show that during the past two years, Orthodox parishes suffered significant losses in both the number of regular participants and in-person worship attendance. If measured by the change in number of all regular participants (at least once a month, both online and in-person, including children), the median percent-change is -15%. Put another way, in a “typical” parish, out of seven parishioners in 2019, one has dropped out of parish life as of the present. . Considering in-person worship attendance, the median percent-change was -22%. That is, since the start of the pandemic, a “typical” Orthodox parish lost more than one-fifth of its “people in the pews” present in church on Sunday.

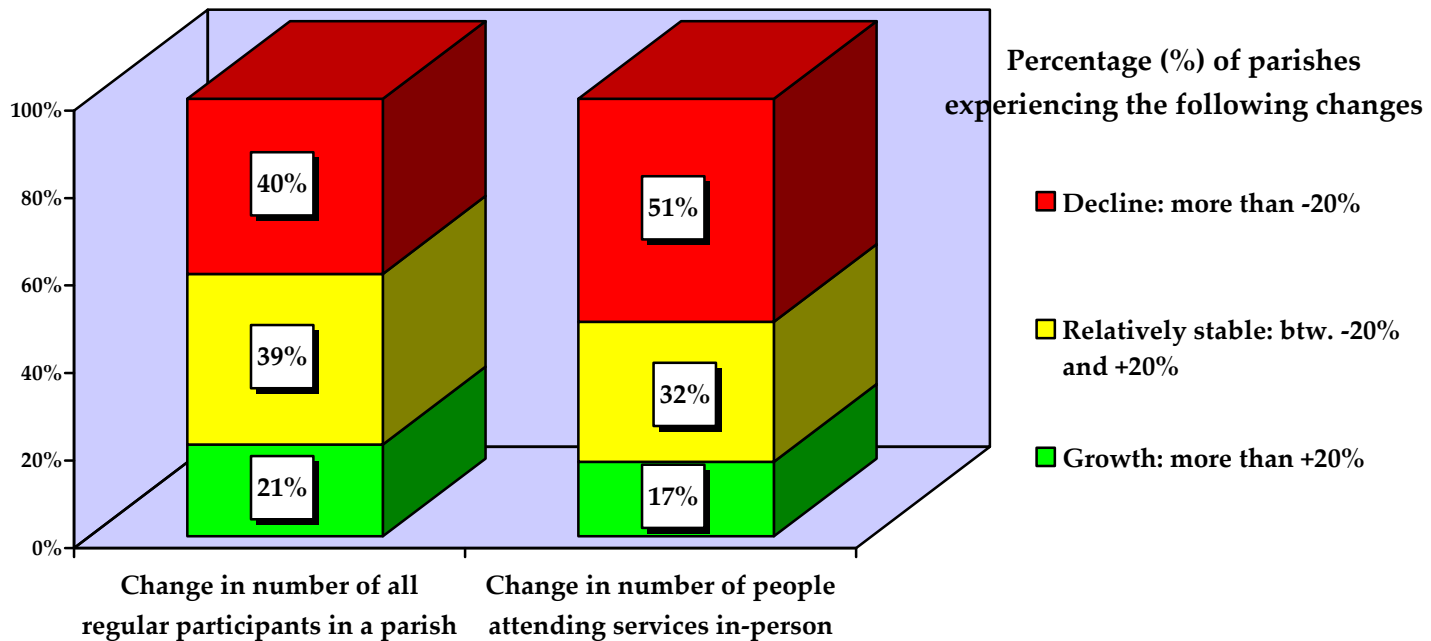
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<sup>8</sup> The report and survey data from EPIC study can be accessed at: <https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/research/national-survey-research/extraordinary-social-outreach-in-a-time-of-crisis>



These figures reflect the overall average situation in the US. The reality is much more nuanced, with some parishes having been nearly “killed” by the pandemic and others having grown substantially. Fig. 27 shows that 40% of all parishes experienced significant decline (by more than -20%) in regular participants, while only 21% of churches grew substantially and added more than 20% of regularly involved people. For in-person attendance, even more parishes suffered significant losses. More than half (51%) the parishes shrank by more than 20% in the number of people in the pews on Sunday, and only 17% reported growth of more than +20%.

**Fig. 27 Growth, Stability, and Decline Through the Pandemic:  
Percentage (%) of Parishes in Each Category**

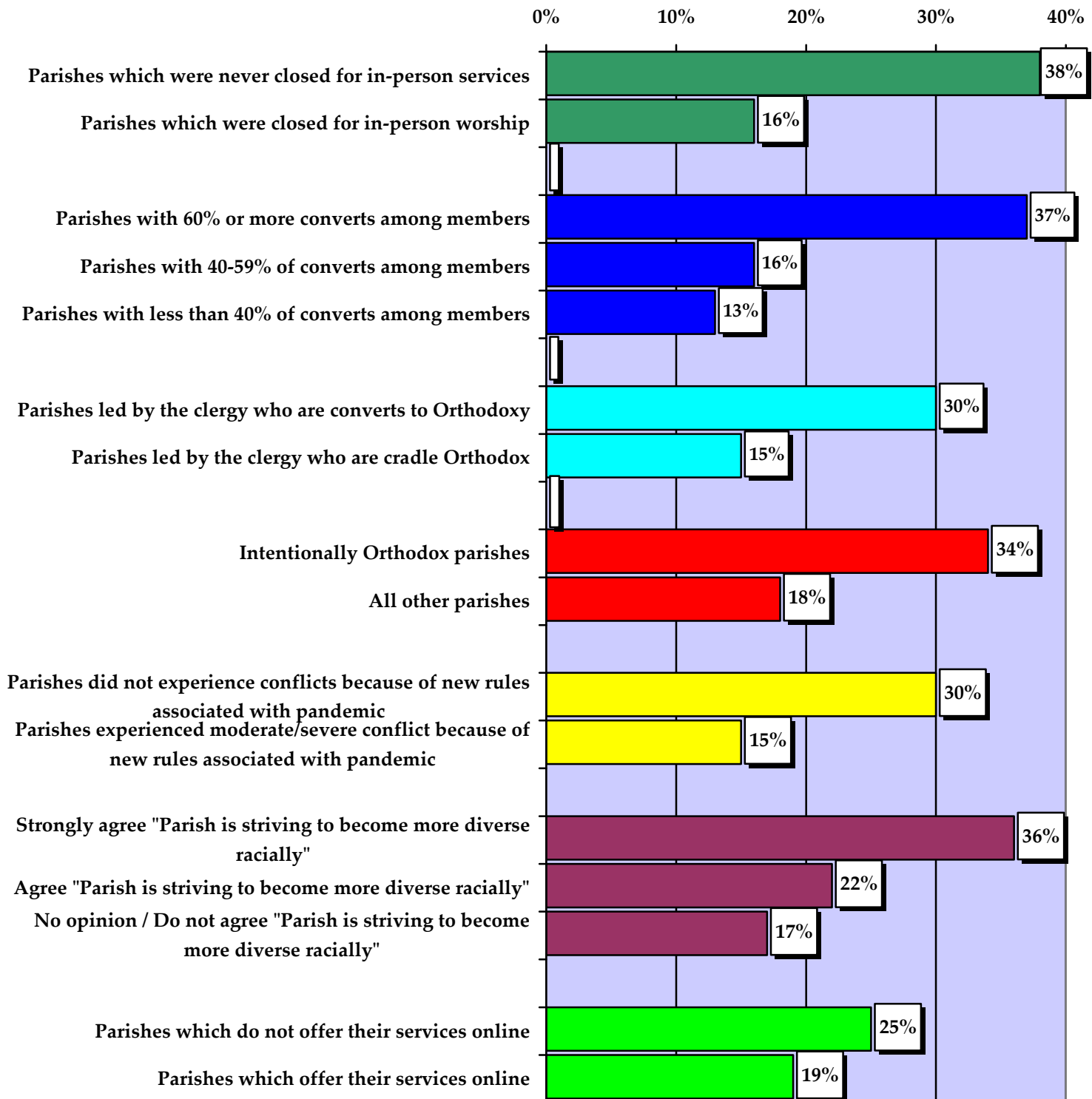


The important question is: what is behind these numbers showing either growth or decline? Which characteristics of parishes contribute to these trends? In short, the following categories of parishes were much more likely to grow both in regular participants and in-person worship attendance through the pandemic:

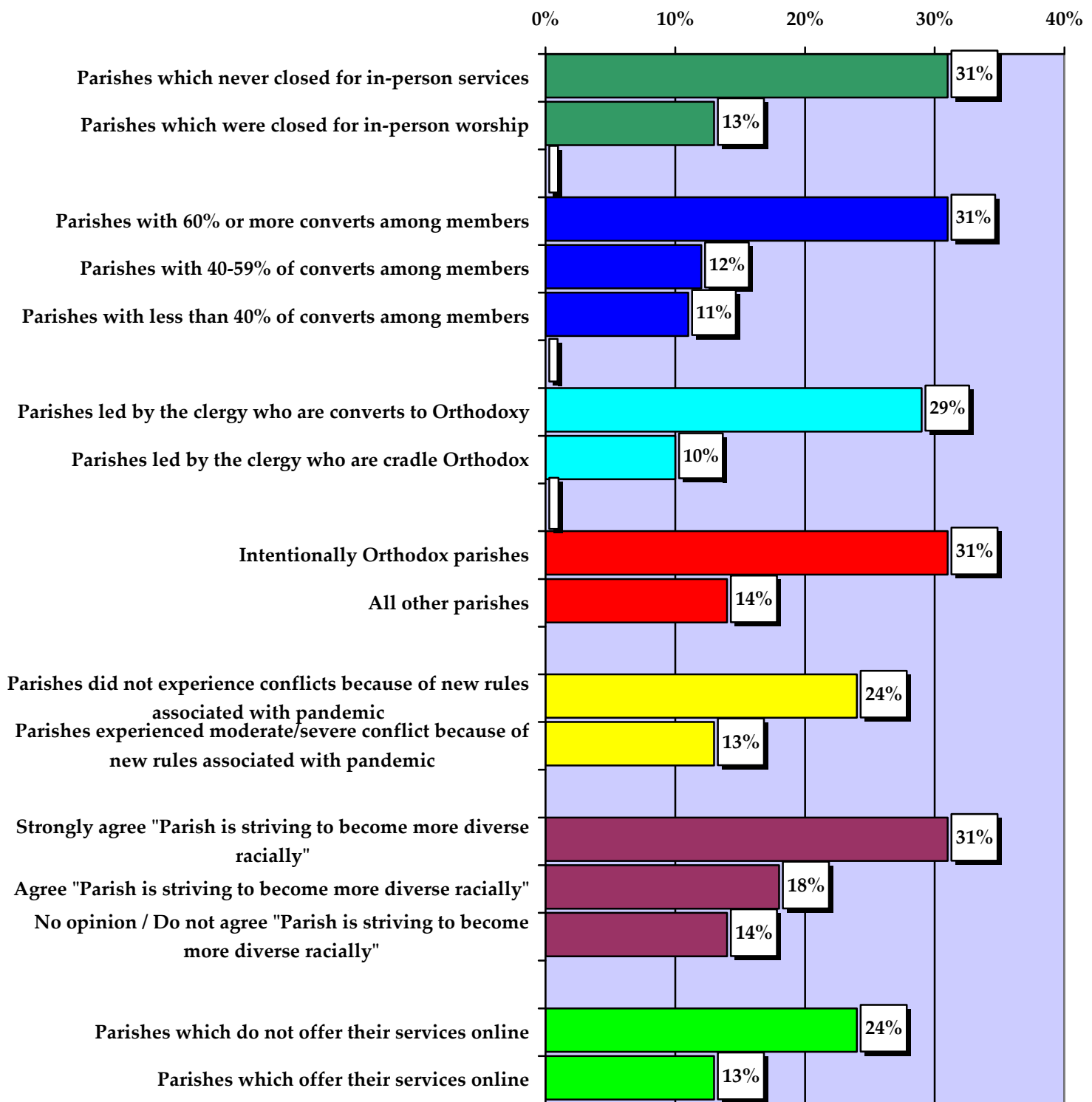
- Parishes that never closed their doors for in-person worship through the pandemic
- Parishes with a high percentage of converts to Orthodoxy among their members
- Parishes led by convert clergy
- Parishes that are “intentionally Orthodox” (for definition, see chapter 1)
- Parishes with greater unity among parishioners; i.e., they did not experience disagreements and conflicts among parishioners regarding new restrictions and rules of worship related to the pandemic
- Parishes that desire more racial/ethnic diversity in members; i.e., they “agreed” or, especially, “strongly agreed” with the statement, “Our parish is striving to become more diverse racially and ethnically.”
- Parishes that do NOT offer their services online

Fig. 28a and 28b show how different these categories of parishes were from all other parishes in their growth in regular participants and in in-person worship attendance.

**Fig. 28a Percentage of Parishes That Have Grown by More than 20% in Number of Regular Participants**



**Fig. 29b Percentage of Parishes Which Have Grown by More than 20% in Number of People Attending Services In-Person**



Clearly, each of these seven characteristics alone does not “guarantee” that a parish would grow through the past two turbulent years. However, they all contributed to a greater potential for growth, especially when a parish possessed several of these characteristics simultaneously.

## VII. The Pandemic and Religious Education in the Parishes

### **AMONG KEY FINDINGS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER:**

- During past two years, there was a significant decline in the involvement of children and teenagers in parish-based religious education. Overall and nationwide, a “typical” parish is currently missing a quarter of its pre-pandemic students. In contrast, participation of adult church members in faith formation programs remained stable throughout the pandemic.
- Presently, more than a quarter of American Orthodox parishes (26%) do not offer religious education for young people. 30% of parishes maintained their *in-person* classes for children and teenagers throughout the pandemic and never switched to an online mode. The remaining 44% responded to the pandemic by switching to an online format their religious education for young people and then mostly resumed in-person classes when the pandemic retreated.
- Despite the general decline in young people’s participation in religious education, one parish in seven (14%) witnessed the opposite trend: substantial growth (more than +20%) in students. For adults, about one-third of parishes (32%) reported growth in participation of more than +20%.
- The study identified seven parish characteristics that have a strong positive influence on the involvement of children and teenagers in religious education programs, and six factors that may boost participation of adults in continuing faith formation. These characteristics and factors are discussed in this chapter.
- The strength of parents’ faith, personality of a priest, uninterrupted participation in *in-person* worship services, and an *in-person* format for religious education classes are all crucial for strong engagement of young people in faith formation programs. For adult church members, the strength of their personal faith, intentionality of the entire parish community to be truly Orthodox, and the desire to try a new, more time-efficient, online learning format are the main driving factors for increasing involvement in religious education.
- The survey asked clergy: “Do you have any ideas about how to keep children and teenagers engaged in religious education despite all the changes and challenges brought by the pandemic?” The four strategies most commonly offered by the respondents are discussed in this chapter.

Religious education of young people and adult church members is the second most important area of life in any congregation after worship services. Furthermore, for a number of reasons, in American Orthodox Churches, the nurture of young people's faith is an issue of particular significance and concern.<sup>9</sup> The pandemic intensified these concerns and raised a new question: what is the impact of the long absence of youths from physical church, parish classrooms, and church-based activities on their religious formation?

Church closures, restrictions on social gatherings, and the desire of church members to self-isolate and stay home have shaken established routines of Sunday Schools and Bible classes. Parishes responded in a variety of ways. Some "hunkered down" and ceased all religious education activities while waiting for better times. Some moved all programs online. Some tried to keep things going and maintained in-person classes.

Survey data show that, while Orthodox parishes have now resumed more or less normal functioning, the damage to religious education caused by the pandemic is significant and lasting. And this is especially true for the faith formation of children and teenagers. Chapter 4 indicated that compared to pre-pandemic, nearly half of the parishes presently experience a decline in involvement of their young people in religious education. In chapter 5, we also saw that switching classes to an online mode may increase adults' participation in religious education, but it has a negative influence on involvement of children and teenagers. A strong majority of clergy (56%) feel that moving religious education to an online format hinders participation of young people

On the following pages, we will look at actual numbers and more deeply examine these issues. Most importantly, we will try to identify those best practices which allowed some parishes not simply to "retain" but also to boost their religious education.

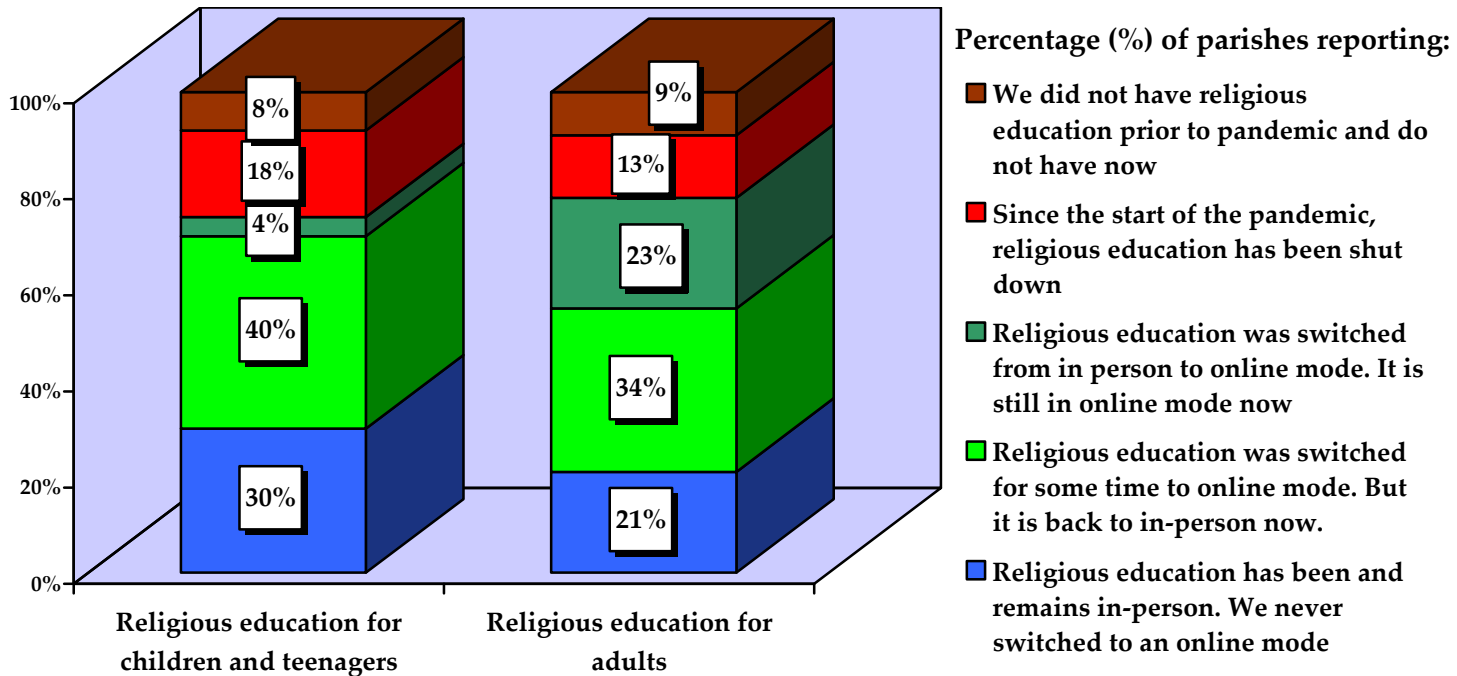
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<sup>9</sup> Alexei Krindatch, *The Orthodox Church Today: A National Study of Parishioners and the Realities of Orthodox Parish Life in the USA*, (Berkeley, CA: Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute, 2008), 75, <https://orthodoxreality.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/OrthChurchTodayFullReport.pdf>

Fig. 29 shows today's diverse approaches to the format of religious education in US Orthodox Churches.

**Fig. 29 Post-Pandemic Format of Religious Education Varies Greatly in American Orthodox Parishes**

“What best describes religious education for young people and adults in your parish now versus before the pandemic?”



Three major observations could be made. First, presently, in about a quarter of American Orthodox parishes, there is NO religious education for young people (26% of parishes) or adults (22%). Some of these parishes simply did not offer faith formation programs even before the pandemic, but in most cases their Sunday Schools and Bible classes were shut down during the pandemic and did not resume.

Second, a good number of parishes have managed to maintain their in-person religious education classes for children and teenagers (30% of parishes) and adults (21%) throughout the pandemic. These parishes never switched to an online mode.

Third, the plurality of parishes responded to the pandemic by switching their religious education for young people (44% of parishes did so) and adults (57%) to an online format. But when the pandemic retreated, the return to “normal” was different for these categories. In the case of children and teenagers, almost all parishes returned to in-person classes. For adults, about quarter of the parishes (23%) are still keeping an online format.

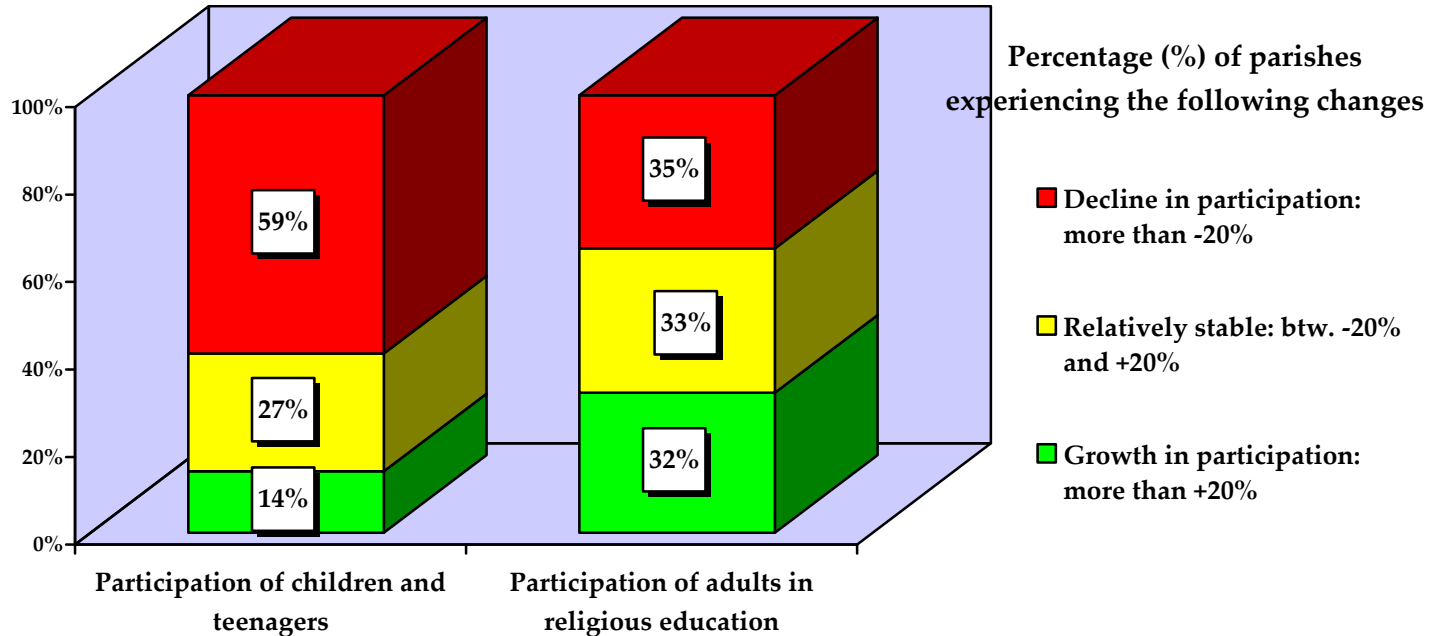
Parishes were asked for the number of young people (under 18) and adults participating in their religious education activities now and before the pandemic. In short, data show that during the past two years, there was a significant decline in the involvement of children and teenagers in parish-based religious education; however, participation of adult church members remained stable.

More specifically, between 2019 and now, the median percentage change in young people's involvement in parish's religious education is -25%. That is, a "typical" parish is presently missing a quarter of its pre-pandemic students in religious education classes. For adult religious education, the median percentage change is 0%. That is, nationwide, since the start of pandemic, there has been no change in the number of adult members participating in religious education.

These two figures reflect the overall national situation in American Orthodox Churches. The reality is more complex. Some parishes suffered much greater declines, while others managed to grow their religious education programs, with more participants than they had prior to the pandemic.

Fig. 30 shows that a dominant majority of parishes (59%) face the losses of more than -20% in the number of children and teenagers participating in religious education now versus pre-pandemic. Only one parish in seven (14%) witnessed the opposite trend - a substantial growth (more than +20%) in students. In the case of religious education for adults, the situation is different. About one-third of parishes (32%) reported growth in adults' participation by more than +20%, one-third (33%) had relatively little change, and slightly more than one-third (35%) of churches suffered a decline in participants by more than -20%.

**Fig. 30 Growth, Stability, and Decline in Involvement of Young People and Adults in Parish's Religious Education: Percentage (%) of Parishes in Each Category**



Is there anything special about the 14% of parishes which experienced substantial growth in the number of children and teenagers involved in religious education?

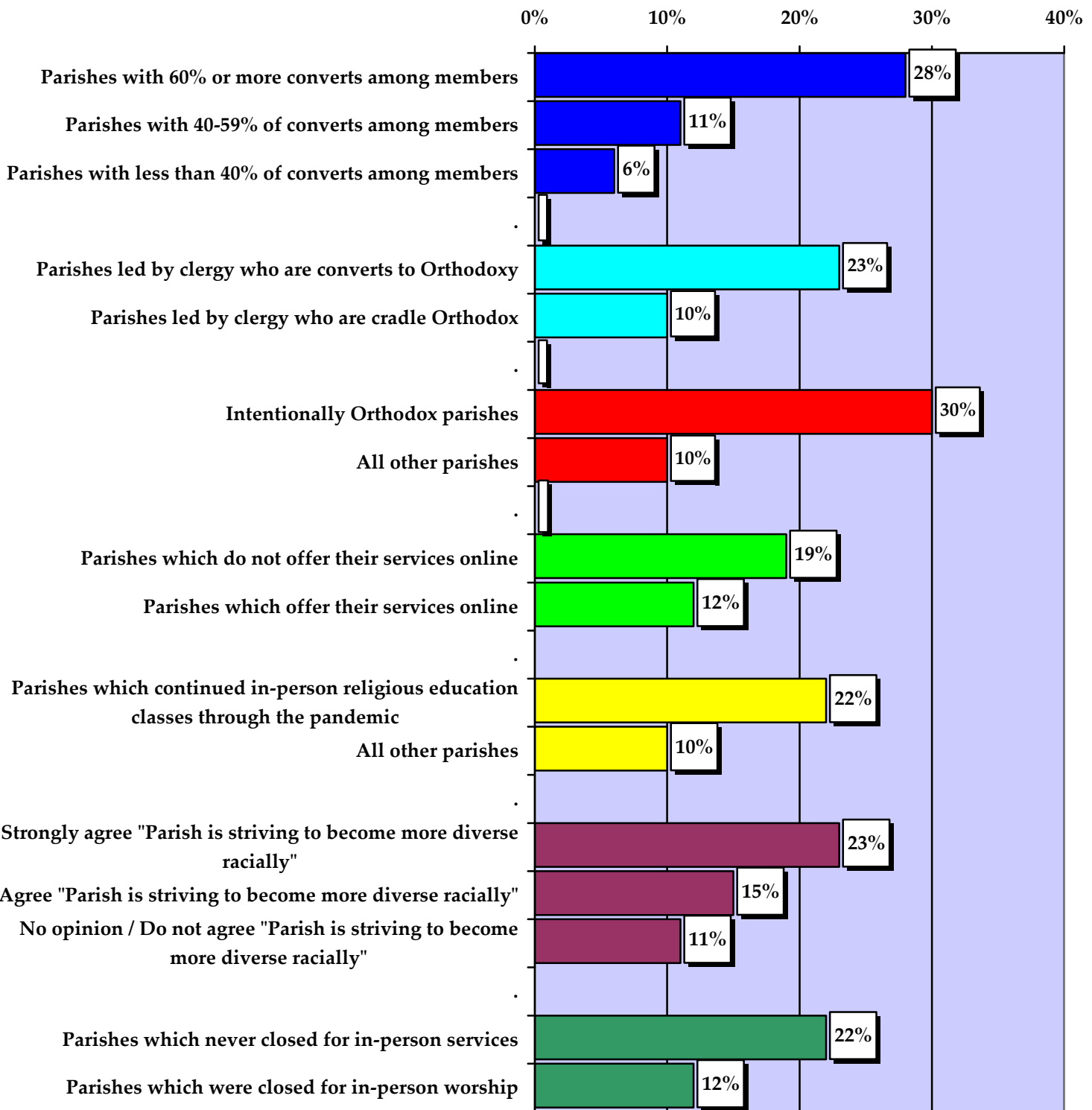
Survey data show a statistically strong correlation between an increase in young people's participation and seven characteristics of a parish. Listed in order of statistical significance, these seven characteristics are:

- The parish has a high percentage of converts to Orthodoxy among its members
- The parish is led by convert clergy
- The parish is intentionally Orthodox (for definition, see chapter 1)
- The parish does not offer worship services online
- Parish's religious education has been and has remained in-person. It was never switched to an online mode during the pandemic.
- The parish is intentional about becoming more racially/ethnically diverse in members; i.e., they "agreed" or, especially, "strongly agreed" with the statement, "Our parish is striving to become more diverse racially and ethnically."
- The parish never closed its doors for in-person worship through the pandemic

Fig. 31 shows how such parishes differ from all other parishes in terms of changes in young people's involvement in religious education.



**Fig. 31 Percentage of Parishes Which Have Grown by More than +20% in Number of Children and Teenagers Participating in Religious Education Programs**



Two comments could be made on Fig. 31. First, survey data fully confirm the observation by parish clergy (see chapter 5) that the modality of religious education – keeping classes in-person and not switching to online format – is important for young people’s engagement in faith formation programs.

However, it appears that the attitudes of parents towards the religious upbringing and the personal impact of a priest are even more important factors encouraging participation of children and teenagers in parish-based religious education. Indeed, there is a general agreement that converts to Orthodoxy are more intentional about church participation, following various Orthodox religious practices, and learning about their faith than cradle Orthodox. If this is true, then a high percentage of converts among parents and the fact that a parish priest is a convert to the Orthodox Church could explain greater involvement of young people in the parish's religious education.

Second, not only the in-person format of religious education, but also, continuous in-person attendance of services throughout the pandemic ("Parish has never closed its doors for in-person services") and currently ("Parish does not offer its services online") are equally significant for keeping children and teenagers engaged in parish's religious education. In other words, overall emphasis on "hands-on" church experience rather than offering a "virtual remote" option to participate turns out to be vital for young people's involvement in faith formation programs. A comment offered by one of the respondents supports this thesis: "Young people might be enjoying 'going to church' on their smartphones while multitasking, but are they truly worshipping on the tiny screens or rather, learning to minimize their faith?"

Notably, parish characteristics associated with adults' increased involvement in religious education during the pandemic are different in many ways from those with positive influence on young people's participation. Listed in order of their statistical significance, these characteristics are:

- The parish has a high percentage of converts to Orthodoxy among its members
- The parish is "intentionally Orthodox" (for definition, see chapter 1)
- The parish has unity and agreement among parishioners; i.e., they did not experience disagreements and conflicts among parishioners regarding new restrictions and rules of worship related to the pandemic
- The parish is led by convert clergy
- The parish is experimental and embraces innovations; i.e., they "agreed" or, especially, "strongly agreed" with the statement, "Our parish is always willing to try new things and to meet new challenges."
- Parish's religious education for adults was switched from in-person to online mode. It is still in online mode now

Fig. 32 shows how such parishes differ from all other parishes in terms of changes in adults' involvement in religious education.

**Fig. 32 Percentage of Parishes Which Have Grown by More than +20% in Number of Adults Participating in Religious Education Programs**

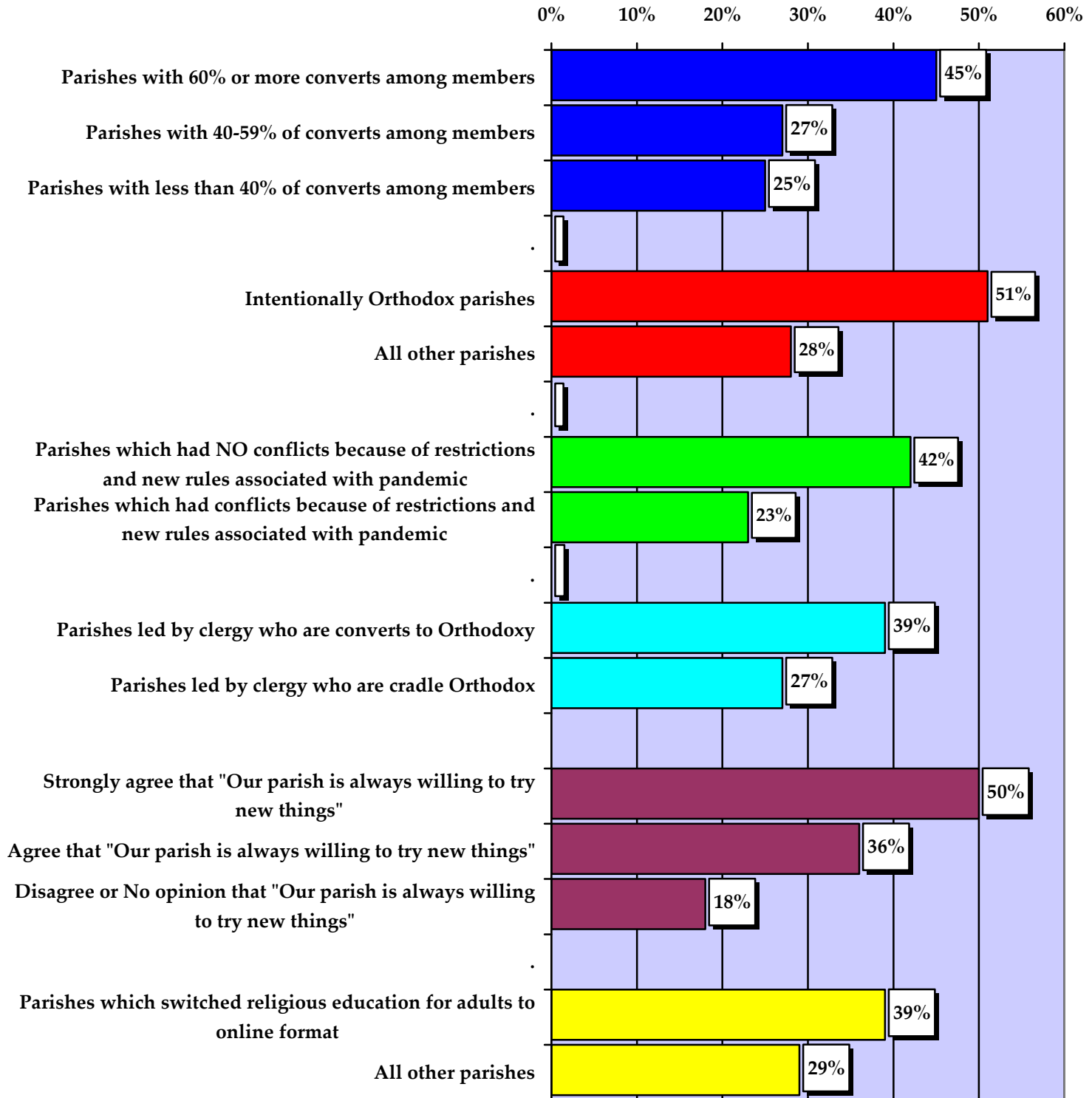


Fig. 32 permits several observations. First, the strength of faith of individual parishioners and the overall emphasis of the parish community on being “truly Orthodox” and adherence to various Church requirements, traditions, and practices are the two most influential factors for growth in adults’ involvement in religious education. As noted previously, there is a general agreement that converts to Orthodoxy are more intentional about following various Orthodox religious practices and learning about their faith than cradle Orthodox. If this is true, then a high percentage of converts among parishioners explains greater involvement of adult members in a parish’s religious education program. Similarly, if a parish community as a whole is “intentionally Orthodox” (as defined in chapter 1), it can better engage its members in continuing faith formation.

Second, the data support clergy’s observations (see chapter 5) that online religious education (instead of in-person classes) can encourage greater adult participation. This factor is reinforced, when a parish sees itself as “experimental” and willing to try new things; i.e., the new online mode of religious education.

Third and clearly divergent from young people, adult participation in religious education does not depend much on an unbroken - “hands on” church experience or on physical presence at worship services (instead of watching online). Unlike religious education for children and teenagers, the fact that a church has never been closed during the pandemic for in-person services and does not offer presently services online is NOT a factor in involvement of adults in a parish’s faith formation programs.

In summary, the survey data tell us that the strength of parents’ faith, personality of a priest, uninterrupted experience of *in-person* worship services, and *in-person* format of religious education are the most crucial factors in increasing the engagement of young people in faith formation programs. When it comes to adult church members, the strength of their personal faith, overall spirit of unity and intentionality of parish community to be truly Orthodox, combined with a desire to try the new, more time-efficient, online format of learning are the main driving factors in increasing their religious education involvement.

Given the importance of young people’s faith formation, the survey also asked clergy: “Do you have any ideas about how to keep children and teenagers engaged in religious education despite all the changes and challenges brought by the pandemic?” Priests’ responses were highly consistent with the survey findings discussed above.

First, by far the greatest number of answers focused on what clergy saw as the key element in young people's learning about their faith: not the parish's religious education programs, but the parents and their religious practices at home. Here are a few examples:

- The focus, regardless of pandemic, has to be on the family. If the family is not committed, no program is going to make a difference. So, teach and evangelize the parents and grandparents, and the children will largely follow.
- Their level of engagement in religious education at church depends on the level of engagement at home. If their parents and families are engaged, they will be engaged. If parents are less engaged, then no "program" can make up for that. Educate the adults.
- It all depends on the "first church" that is, the family and how parents raised their children.
- Religious education first comes from the home and families praying together, staying together, teaching the life of the Saints at home

Supporting this line of thought were responses from those clergy who provided parents with some educational resources to be used at home. For instance:

- I send seasonal newsletters to families with suggestions for connecting home practices to church life
- When church was shut down we had the children to do projects at home. Parents were also involved with their children. So, family activities to do a joint assignment is a way to engage in the learning about the Orthodox faith

The second largest group of answers was from clergy who wrote about the importance of in-person classes and meetings where young people can interact with one another and have much more fun. Here are examples:

- Keep meeting in-person as much as possible! We found that the kids especially appreciated in-person opportunities to gather (particularly when school was closed down.) Online was basically a failure.
- DO NOT PLACE THEM IN FRONT OF SCREENS! GET THEM INVOLVED IN IN-PERSON ACTIVITIES!
- Keep offering various things to gather them together

The third largest category of comments was about "learning through doing"; i.e., the clergy wrote that religious education in classes should be supported by participating in some actual church-based projects. For instance:

- Have some activities for kids beyond Sunday School: participate in service in the community as a group; have a social event as a group; etc.

- Involve them in various outreach ministries.
- Less classroom type activities and more opportunities for community building

Finally, a number of clergy wrote that the best way of learning about the Orthodox faith is through offering young people various active roles in worship services and generally in church. Here are examples:

- Make them more involved into church service, and explain that religious education is part of preparation for the liturgical activity.
- Give them a role in Church, make them feel needed and important. Give them a duty or job in worship
- Get them involved in singing, serving, bell ringing, etc. and they will be there for education events.

## VIII. The Pandemic and Social Outreach in American Orthodox Parishes

### **AMONG KEY FINDINGS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER:**

- Only one-fifth (20%) of Orthodox parishes considers social outreach into the local community as being one of their top priorities, in comparison with more than one-third (34%) among US religious congregations in general.
- The pandemic did NOT encourage Orthodox parishes to expand social outreach into their local communities. Only 16% of parishes have significantly increased their involvement in the local community during the pandemic in comparison with 54% among US religious congregations in general.
- Two categories of parishes stand out for their significant increase in social outreach during the past two years: parishes defined as “intentionally Orthodox” (chapter 1), and, especially, parishes that experienced strong growth in overall vitality since the start of the pandemic (chapter 5). This chapter offers a description of several inspiring and creative social projects that were initiated by the parishes during the pandemic and could be helpful to other churches.

The ongoing national study of American religious life, *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC)*, found that many congregations of various Christian denominations responded to the pandemic with a strong increase in social outreach into their local communities.<sup>10</sup> According to this study, since the pandemic began, more than half (54%) of US congregations started a new social ministry or expanded an existing one. How do American Orthodox parishes fit into this national picture of growth in social outreach during difficult times?

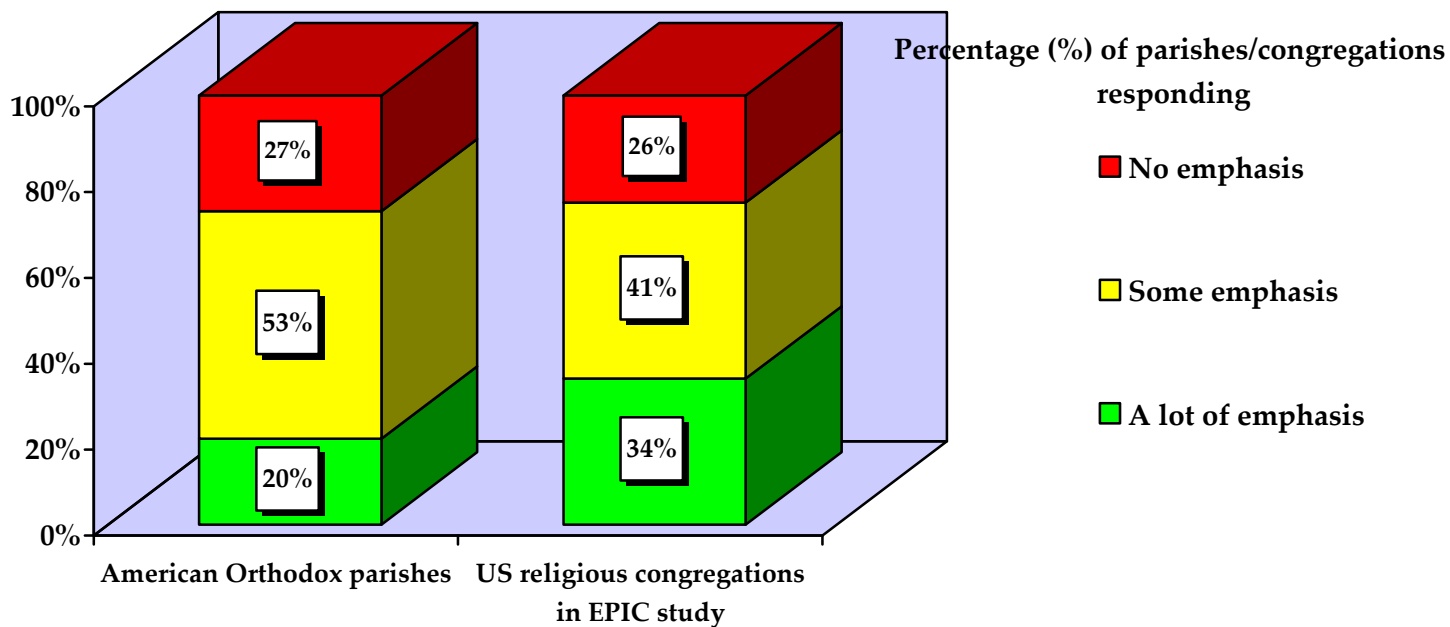
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<sup>10</sup> See the report and data at: <https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/research/national-survey-research/extraordinary-social-outreach-in-a-time-of-crisis>

The survey asked Orthodox clergy: “In your parish, how much emphasis is given to social service and involvement in your local community (e.g., offering your facility for community events, food pantry, homeless shelter, etc.)?” A similar question was asked in the EPIC study. Fig. 33 shows that only one-fifth (20%) of Orthodox parishes consider social outreach into the local community as one of their top priorities. In contrast, more than one-third (34%) of US congregations overall place a “great emphasis” on social services for their local community.

**Fig. 33 Orthodox Parishes Pay Less Attention to Social Outreach than Other American Religious Congregations**

“In your parish/congregation, how much emphasis is given to social service and involvement in your local community?”



Also, unlike the majority of US religious congregations, the pandemic did NOT encourage Orthodox parishes to increase social outreach into their local communities. The survey asked clergy: “Do you agree with the statement, ‘As a result of the pandemic, our parish has significantly increased its involvement in the local community?’” Fewer than one-sixth (16%) of the respondents agreed with this statement, while a plurality (46%) disagreed and 38% had no opinion.

Yet, two categories of parishes stand out clearly by their significant increase in social outreach during the pandemic. These are the parishes which were defined in chapter 1 as “intentionally Orthodox” (i.e., parishes with a strong emphasis on following various Church rules and practices) and, especially, parishes which reported strong growth in their overall vitality since the start of the pandemic (see chapter 4 for data on changes in parish vitality). See Fig. 34.

**Fig. 34 Parish's Growth in Vitality and Desire to Be Truly Orthodox Christian Community Are Associated with Greater Social Outreach**

“Do you agree with the statement ‘As a result of the pandemic, our parish has significantly increased its involvement in the local community?’”

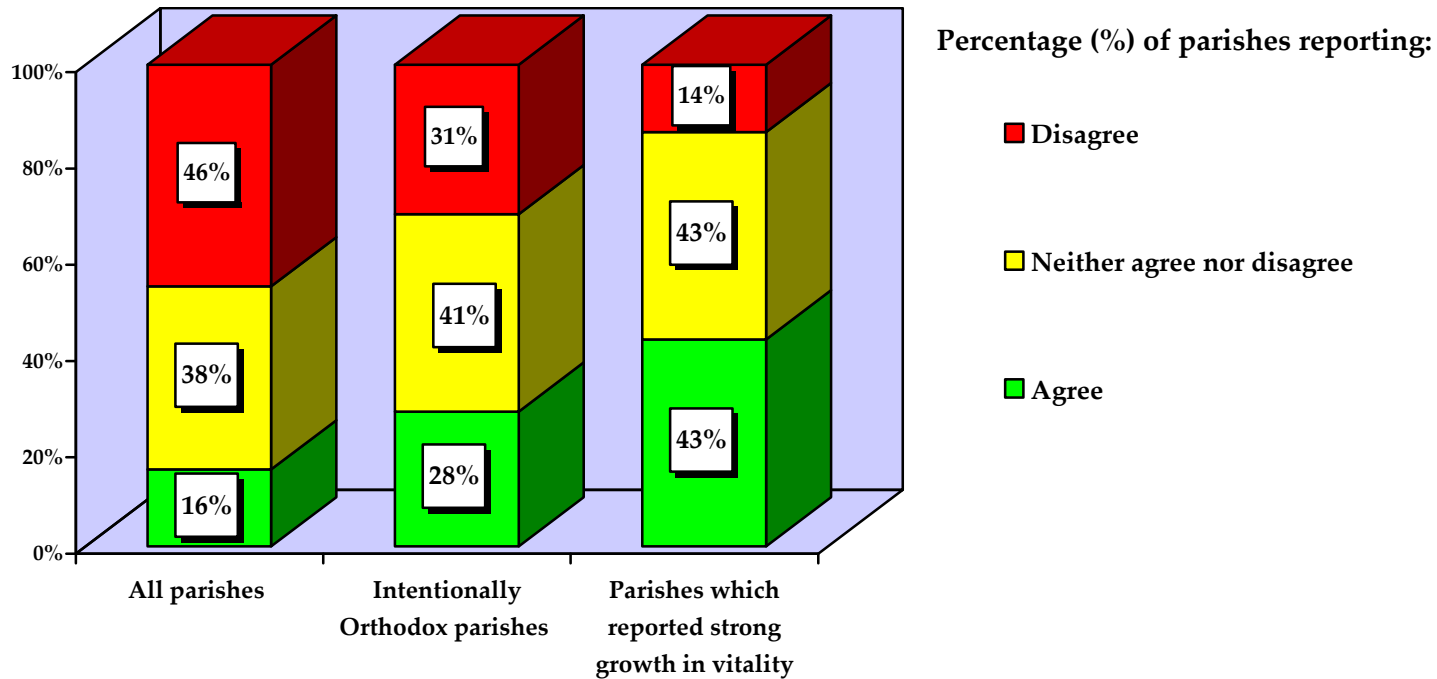


Fig. 34 offers two insights. First, a strong focus on living one’s Orthodox faith and the desire to be a genuine Orthodox Christian community (i.e., an “intentionally Orthodox” parish) includes reaching out into the local community.

Second, growth in a parish’s vitality goes hand-in-hand with strong involvement in the local community. And, perhaps, there is really no “cause” and “consequence” between these two. A parish becomes stronger and therefore has more resources and energy to devote to helping its local community. Simultaneously, parishes with stronger connections to their local communities become better known and appreciated by their “neighbors,” and therefore benefit more from what that community may offer.

In search of creative examples of Orthodox social outreach, the survey also asked whether the parish had begun any new community outreach or social service of which it is truly proud since the start of the pandemic. Here are answers from eight parishes describing their new social ministries, which perhaps can inspire other churches:

- We have built a Food Chapel for those in need. People come in, say a prayer, and take some food items. This chapel is built on the church's lawn and open 24/7. Our parishioners as well as people from the community bring in donations and those in need come in and partake of them.



- Our parish has roughly 10 acres of forest. Through the work of a few parishioners and with the support of the parish council and priest, our parish now offers there environmental education classes to children.
- During pandemic, we actually engaged into parish life much more parishioners by asking them to reach out to local families in need: much success!
- Our specialty are birthday gifts to children in institutional living situation – for the kids who cannot find foster home or abandoned
- Our outreach is to college students. We give them a “care package” of food, prayers and a spiritual message from the parish priest.
- During the height of the "lockdown" phase, our parish bought meals from restaurants and donated them to first responders and frontline workers: firemen, police stations, hospitals. We also purchased warm hats and gloves for hospital workers doing tests outside in the cold.
- We have grown greatly in the service for our community, particularly with regard to our parish food pantry and indigent ministry. The thing is that our parish stayed open while many of the mainline churches closed their doors for worship and shut down social services.
- A lot of things. Direct financial assistance to members of our community at large (rent payments, groceries, etc.). Setting temporary housing in our education building for families who are experiencing homelessness. Feeding program for people in need both locally and in Ecuador. Our feeding program in Ecuador provides over 85 family meal kits per week to the rural poor in Ecuador. We sent a full-time missionary from our parish to work at the orphanage of Saint Innocent's in Guatemala. Overall donations of time, talent, and treasure increased 30% since the pandemic began.

## IX. Decision Making and Conflicts with Bishops in the Parishes During the Pandemic

### **AMONG KEY FINDINGS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER:**

- When various new rules related to the pandemic were implemented in the churches, the guidance of ruling bishops affected decisions in the parishes more than anything else. 79% of parishes said that directives coming from their hierarchs had either a “dominant” or “strong” influence. Half the parishes (51%) have also taken CDC recommendations seriously into consideration. Only in a minority of parishes, the opinion of lay members (either the Parish Council or the entire parish community) was a significant factor affecting decisions about new rules related to the pandemic.
- In parishes led by priests who are converts to Orthodoxy and with a high proportion of converts among parishioners, guidance from the bishops had a much stronger influence on decisions during the pandemic than in the other parishes. In contrast, parishes with cradle Orthodox clergy and mostly cradle Orthodox members took more into consideration CDC recommendations and the viewpoint of the Parish Council than did parishes with convert clergy and mostly convert members.
- Nearly a quarter of the parishes (23%) experienced either significant (6%) or moderate (17%) disagreements with their ruling bishops during the pandemic.
- During the past two years, one-third of American Orthodox parishes (33%) have learned and become accustomed to making decisions locally and without waiting for directives from their bishops.

The pandemic tested the unity of parish communities and their ability to make difficult decisions under extraordinary circumstances. In chapter 2, we saw that a majority of parishes experienced significant internal conflict associated with the implementation of restrictions and new rules brought by the pandemic, such as wearing (or not wearing) masks in the church, continuation of in-person services, changes in methods of administering Holy Communion, etc.

A parish’s decision-making regarding these and many other issues was further complicated by the traditional model of administration for the Orthodox Church: strict hierarchical governance by the bishops with little room for debate by the local congregation. But the need for rapid and locally contextualized adaptations to the crisis challenged this traditional model of waiting for a bishop to decide what his multi-state diocese should do.

As the pandemic evolved, it has become clear that this hierarchical decision-making did not always meet the unique local circumstances and needs of each parish. Here is a comment coming from one of such parishes:

“To this point, priests have been front line essential workers. The bishops in practice thought that we are not. The bishops never had to defend their decisions of response to Covid-19 with reference to the canons and Holy Tradition other than saying we must be ‘obedient’ to them. We were faced with a departure from the norms of how we care for souls when facing death and the Bishops response is ‘because I said so’. That is not Orthodoxy that cultism.”

While many parishes grudgingly accepted all directives of the bishops, others simply took matters into their own hands and decided locally. This was especially true for changes in ways to deliver Holy Communion – the ritual and Sacrament of utmost importance for Orthodox Christians.<sup>11</sup>

Two questions will be addressed in this chapter. First, when introducing various new church policies and practices related to the pandemic, what were the major sources of authority which influenced a parish’s decision? Second, after the experience of responding independently and creatively to the crisis, will parishes further test their ability to make decisions locally, thus challenging traditional Orthodox hierarchical authority?

Fig. 35 offers an answer to first question. When various restrictions and new rules related to the pandemic were implemented, the guidance of ruling bishops affected decisions in the parishes more than anything else. 79% of parishes said that directives coming from their hierarchs had either a “dominant influence” (48%) or a “strong influence” (31%). In about two-thirds of the parishes (64%), the personal position of a clergyman had a significant impact (19% - “dominant influence,” 45% - “strong influence”). Half the parishes (51%) also took CDC recommendations seriously into consideration (15% - “dominant influence,” 36% - “strong influence”).

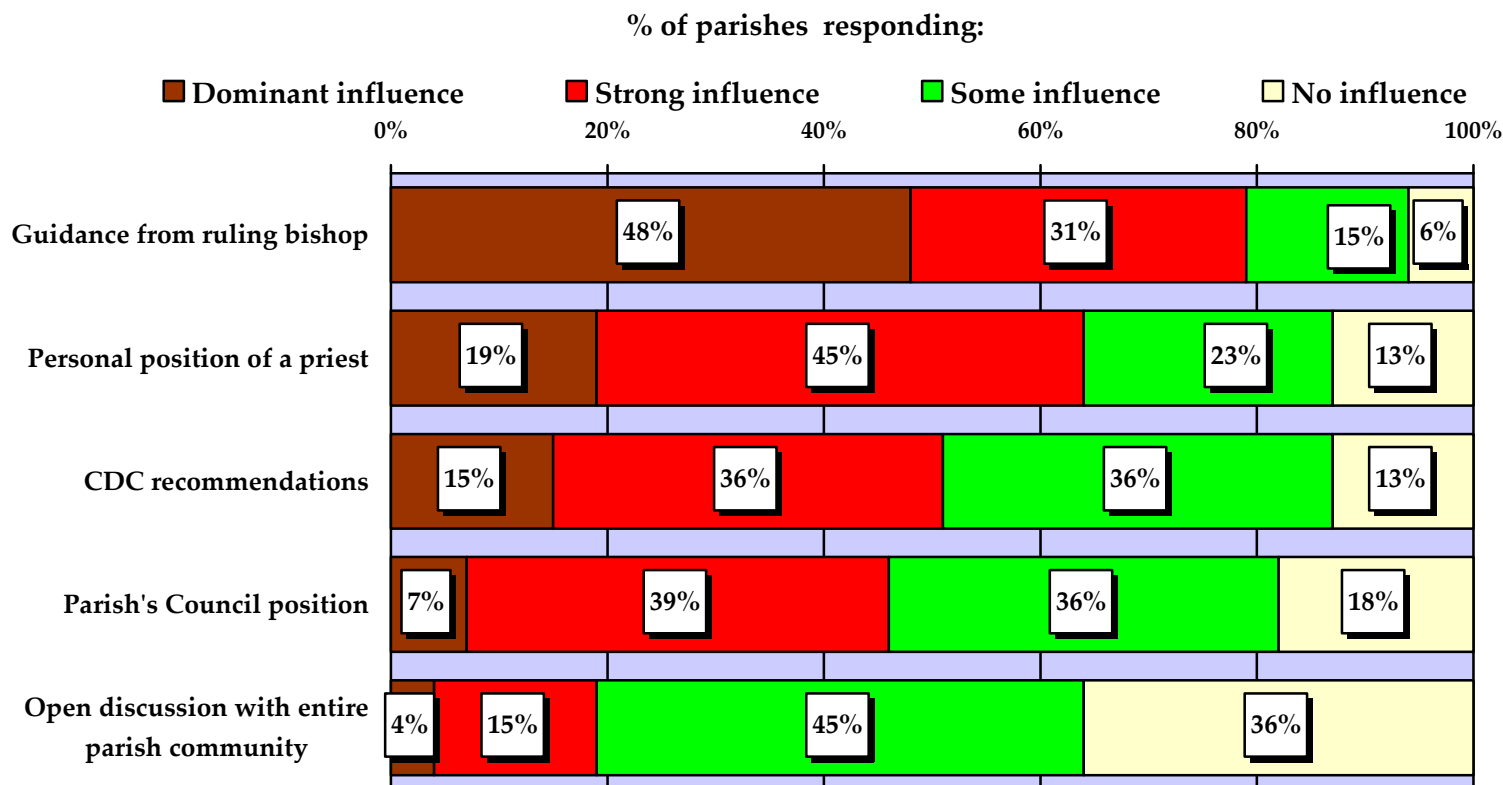
On the other hand, only in a minority of parishes was the opinion of lay members a significant factor affecting decisions about new rules. The position of parish council had serious impact on decision making in 46% of the parishes, but only 19% of the parishes based their decisions on open discussions with the entire parish community.

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<sup>11</sup> Alexei Krindatch, “Holy Communion during the Pandemic in American Orthodox Parishes,” <https://orthodoxreality.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/HolyCommunionDuringPandemicFinalReport1.pdf> See the Executive Summary, p. 2-3, for a brief overview of the results.

**Fig. 35 When Decisions Related to Pandemic Were Made, Overwhelming Majority of Parishes Followed their Bishops. Very Few Paid Attention to Opinions of Ordinary Parishioners**

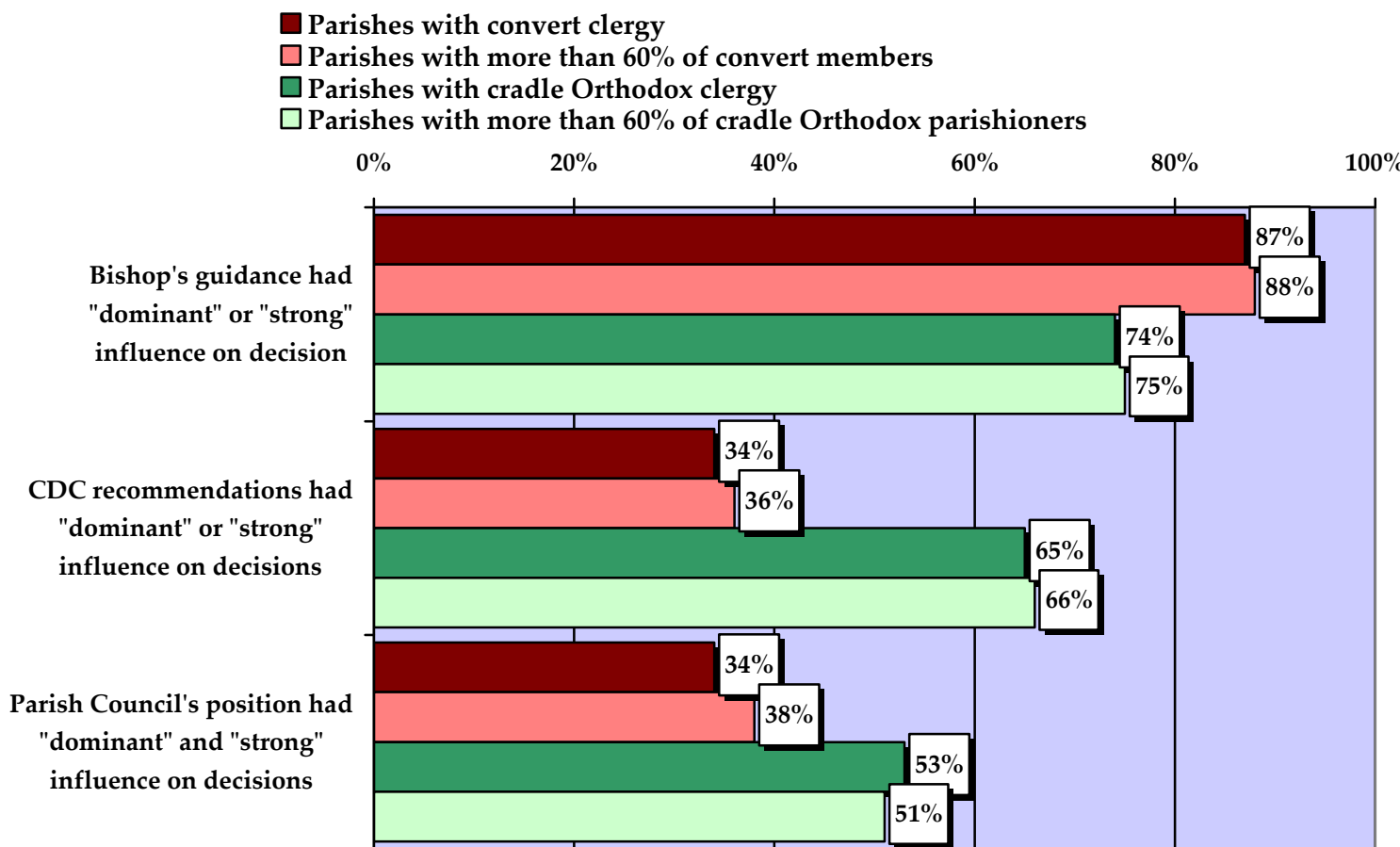
“When introducing various new church policies and practices related to the pandemic, how much did each of the following influence your decision?”



This general picture of decision-making in American Orthodox parishes during the pandemic had two notable exceptions.

First, parishes led by convert priests and with high proportion of converts among parishioners differed from parishes served by cradle Orthodox clergy with overwhelmingly cradle Orthodox members. In the former, guidance coming from the bishops had a much stronger influence than in the latter. In turn, the parishes with cradle Orthodox clergy and mostly cradle Orthodox members took CDC recommendations and the position of Parish Council more into consideration than did the “convert” parishes. See Fig. 36.

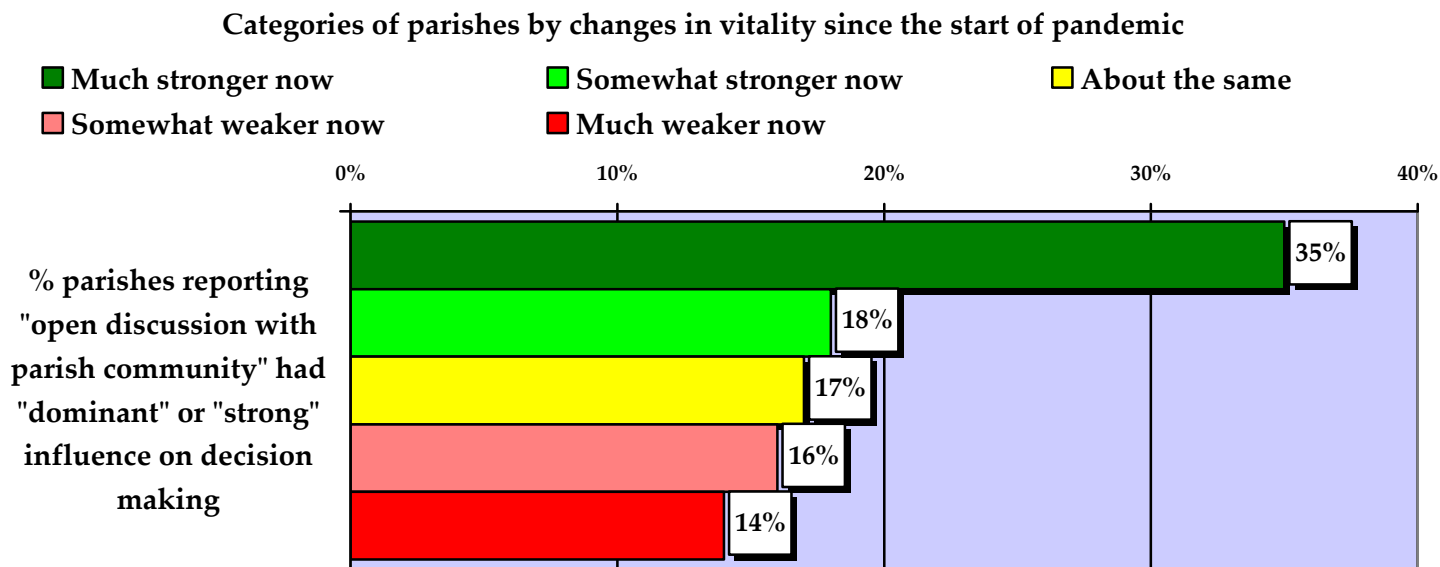
**Fig. 36** When Decisions Related to Pandemic Were Made, Convert Clergy and Members Listened More to the Bishops. Cradle Orthodox Priests and Members Paid More Attention to CDC and Parish Council Percentage (%) of parishes saying that the following sources of authority had a “dominant” or “strong” influence on their decisions



Second, the “open discussion with entire parish community” had little or no influence on decision-making in the overwhelming majority of parishes. But there was a remarkable exception from this general rule. In chapter 4, we saw that 12% of parishes had grown substantially in their overall vitality through the pandemic: and reported, “we are now much more stronger than before the pandemic.”

In these parishes, “open discussion with entire parish community” influenced decision-making much more than in all other parishes. See Fig. 37. That is, growth in overall parish vitality is closely associated with decision-making in which the entire parish community participates.

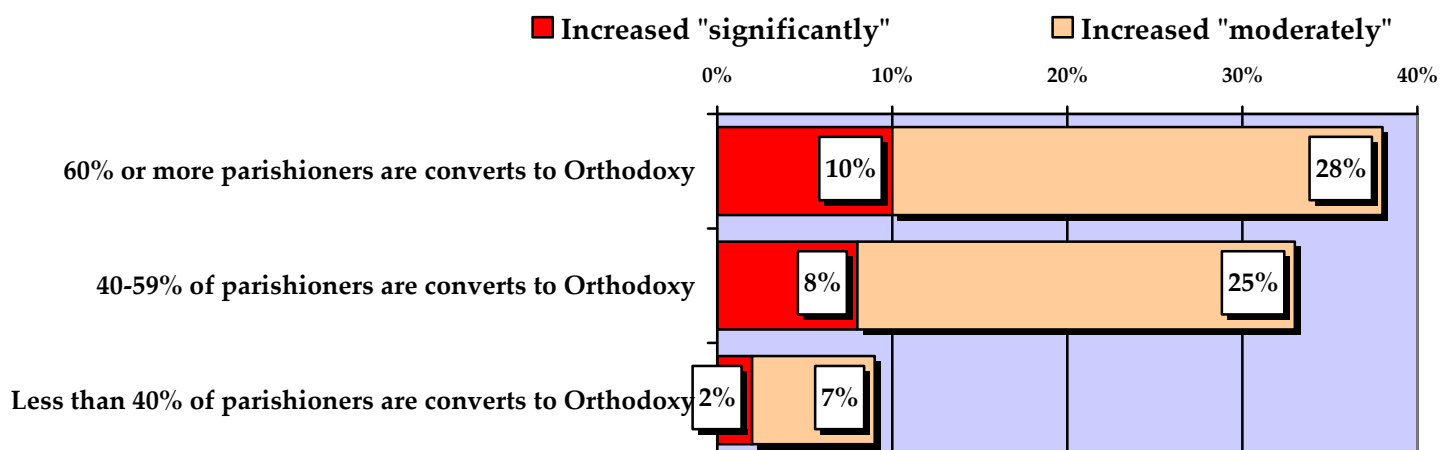
**Fig. 37 Growth in Parish’s Vitality Goes Hand-in-Hand with Participatory Decision-Making in a Parish**



Nearly a quarter of the parishes (23%) experienced tensions with their ruling bishops during the pandemic. 6% of churches reported that “disagreements between parish community and ruling hierarch” increased “significantly” and 17% said increased “moderately.” But some categories of parishes were affected by the conflicts with hierarchs more severely and others, less so. First, more parishes with predominantly convert parishioners had disagreements with their bishops than did parishes with mostly cradle Orthodox members. See Fig. 38.

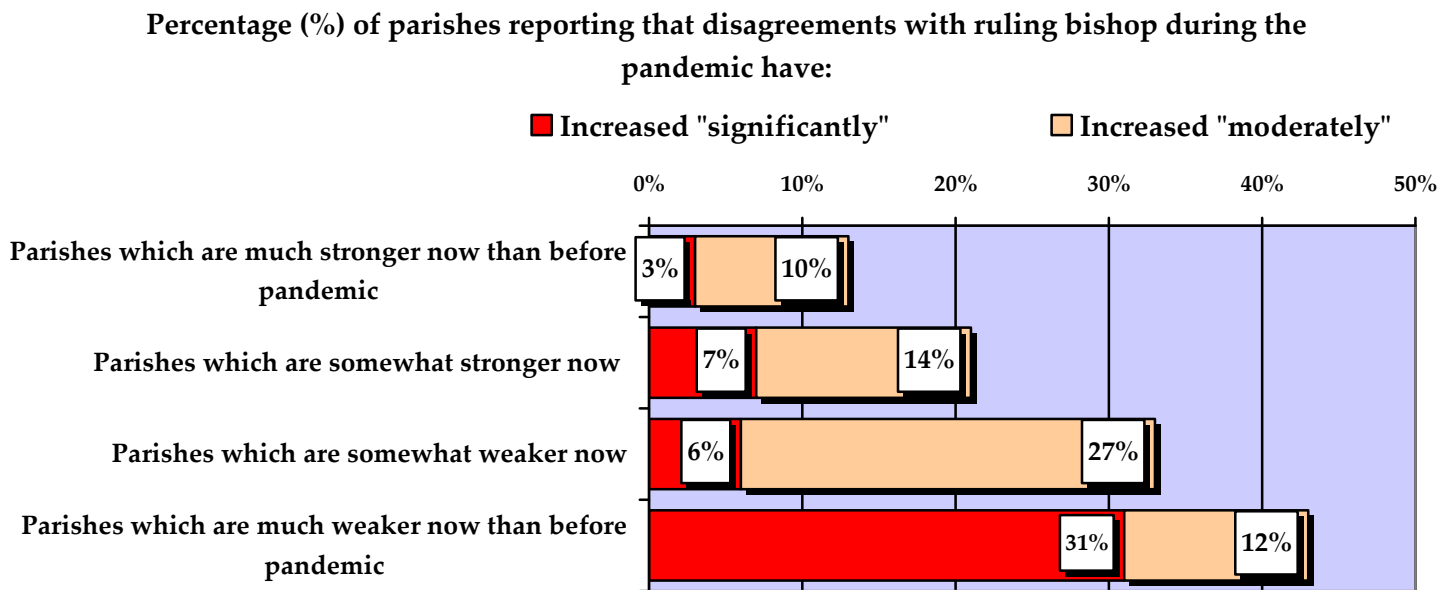
**Fig. 38 More Parishioners Who Are Converts to Orthodoxy – More Tensions with Bishops during the Pandemic**

Percentage (%) of parishes reporting that disagreements with ruling bishop during the pandemic have:



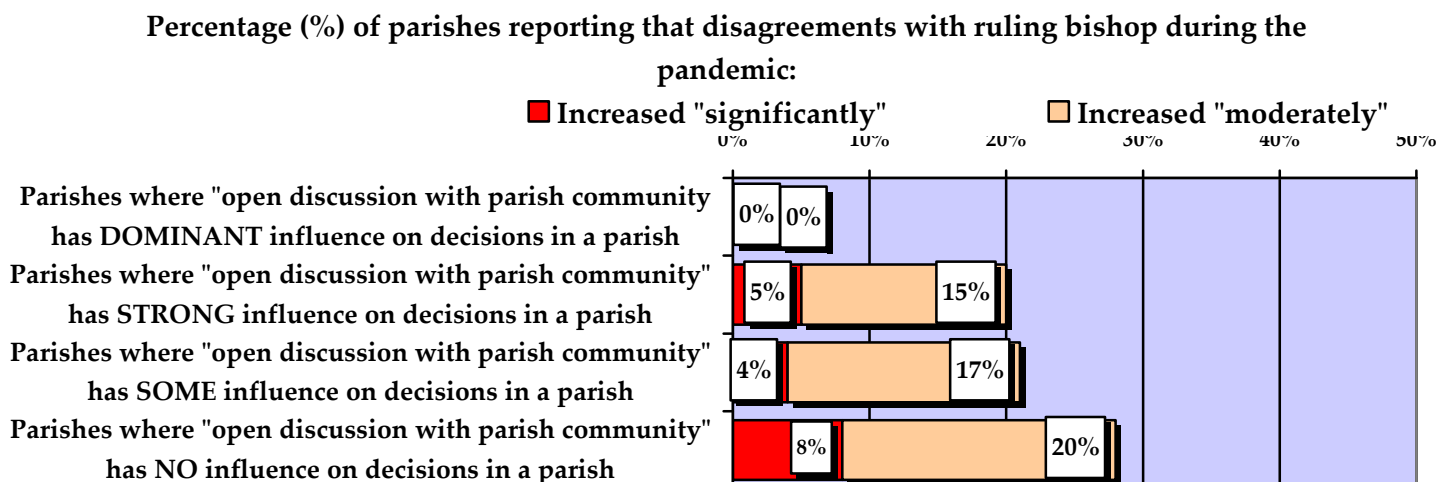
Second, parishes which have grown in vitality throughout the pandemic were less affected by conflicts with their hierarchs than other parishes. See Fig. 39. No surprise here: having peaceful and, possibly, supportive relations with the bishop contribute to the overall strength of a parish community.

**Fig. 39 Less Tensions with Bishops during the Pandemic – More Growth in Parish Vitality**



Finally, and perhaps most importantly, parishes that paid great attention to “open discussion with the entire parish community” in their decision-making had also much less tension with their ruling bishops. See Fig. 40. This suggests that the ability and desire to include everyone in the decision process can also help such parishes to negotiate issues and avoid disagreements with their hierarchs.

**Fig. 40 Good Collective Decision Making in Parishes – Less Tensions with Bishops during the Pandemic**

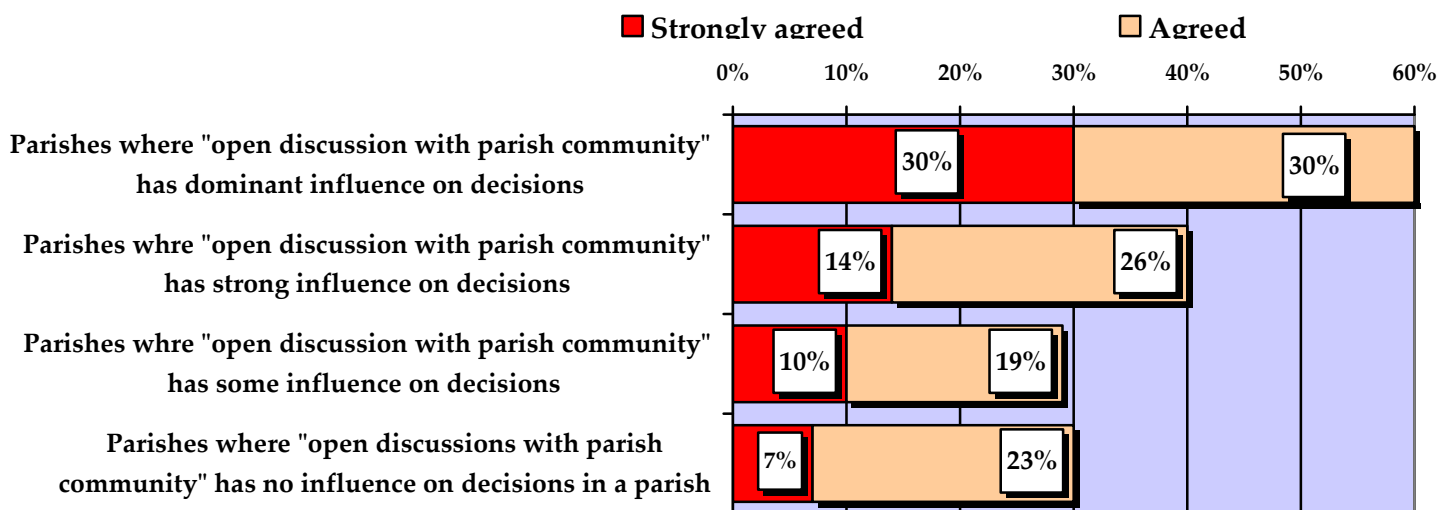


One-third of American Orthodox parishes (33%) have learned, over the past two years, how to make decisions by themselves and without directives from their bishops. Indeed, 9% of churches “strongly agreed” and 24% “agreed” with the statement, “Since the start of the pandemic, our parish became accustomed to making decisions locally and without waiting for guidance from diocesan headquarters.” Notably, this newly acquired ability of some parishes for independent decisions was not associated with increased conflicts with the bishop. In other words, parishes that agreed with this statement and parishes that disagreed were equally likely to report tensions with their hierarchs.

In fact, of all the parish characteristics, only one was correlated with their newly found decision-making independence. Parishes where “open discussion with the entire parish community” had a “dominant” or “strong” influence on decisions, were also much more likely to agree that, “Since the start of the pandemic, our parish became accustomed to making decisions locally and without waiting for guidance from diocesan headquarters.” See Fig. 41. That is, collective decision-making helps a parish community to find their own best solutions locally and independently.

**Fig. 40 Strong Collective Decision Making in Parishes – More Ability to Make Decisions Locally and Independently**

**Percentage (%) of parishes which AGREED with the statement "Since the start of the pandemic, our parish became accustomed to making decisions locally and without waiting for diocesan headquarters"**





## X. The Pandemic and Financial Health of the Parishes

### **AMONG KEY FINDINGS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER:**

- Since the start of the pandemic, the percentage of American Orthodox parishes reporting that their financial health is either “excellent” or “good” has decreased from 69% to 59%. Conversely, the percentage of churches saying that their fiscal health is either “in difficulty” or “tight” has grown from 31% two years ago to 41% presently. This trend was very similar to what the national EPIC study found for US religious congregations in general.
- Despite a general decline in the economic solvency of the parishes, there was also growth in the number of churches with “excellent” finances: from 17% two years ago to 28% presently.
- Three characteristics are strongly correlated with a parish becoming “excellent” in its financial health during the pandemic: an overwhelming majority of converts to Orthodoxy among members, increased overall involvement of parishioners throughout the pandemic, and growth in new members during the past two years.

As Americans wrestle with the economic consequences of the pandemic, job losses, and inflation, US religious congregations in general and Orthodox Christian parishes in particular also seem to have taken a slight financial hit. In chapter 4, we saw that the pandemic resulted in the growing generosity of church members. The majority of parishes (56%) witnessed an increase in the average size of parishioners’ individual contributions since the start of the pandemic, and only 14% reported that members gave less. Yet, despite this uptick in individual giving, the financial health of many parishes has worsened as compared to their pre-pandemic situation.<sup>12</sup>

The survey asked clergy: “How would you describe your parish’s financial health NOW versus TWO YEARS AGO, before the pandemic?” The same question was asked in the ongoing national study of US diverse religious congregations *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC)*.<sup>13</sup> Fig. 42 compares the responses to this question from American Orthodox parishes and US congregations in general.

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<sup>12</sup> The budgets of many parishes were negatively affected by the absence of various fund-raising events during the pandemic

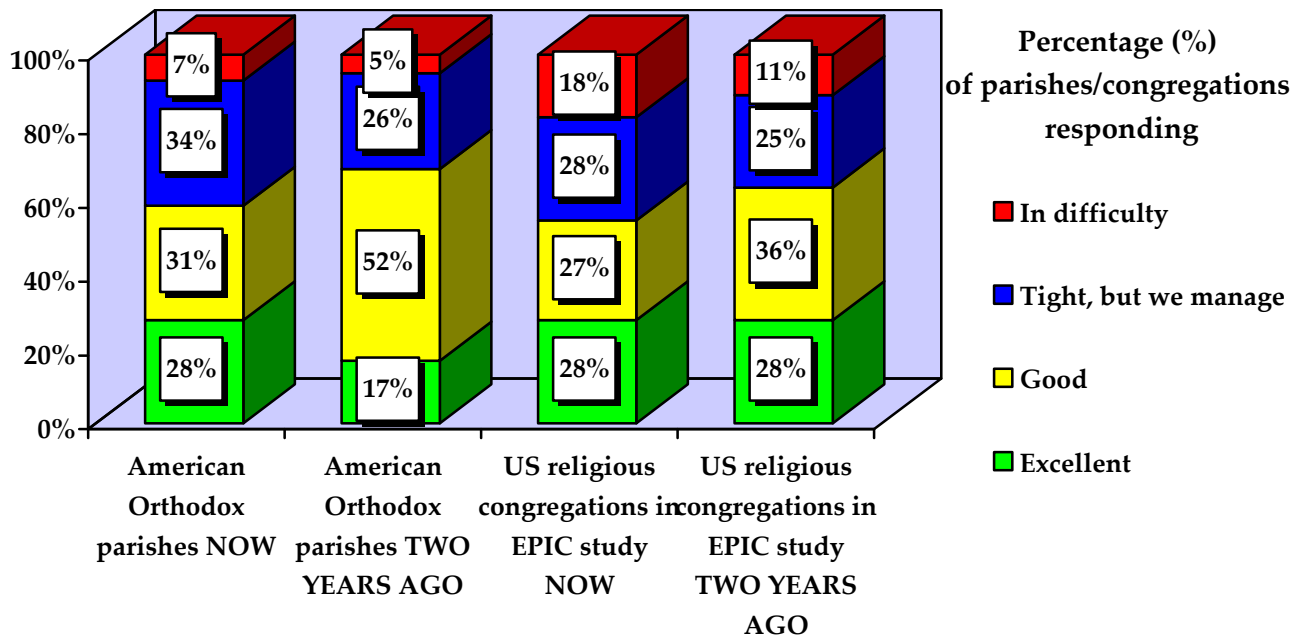
<sup>13</sup> Data and report can be accessed here:

<https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/research/national-survey-research/extraordinary-social-outreach-in-a-time-of-crisis>

A percentage of parishes reporting that their financial health was either “excellent” or “good” has decreased from 69% two years ago to 59% now. Conversely, the percentage of churches saying that their fiscal health is either “in difficulty” or “tight” has grown from 31% two years ago to 41% presently. In essence, one out of every ten Orthodox parishes (or 10%) moved from “excellent or good” to “tight or in difficulty. This trend was very similar for US religious congregations in general where 12% of churches experienced this downshift.

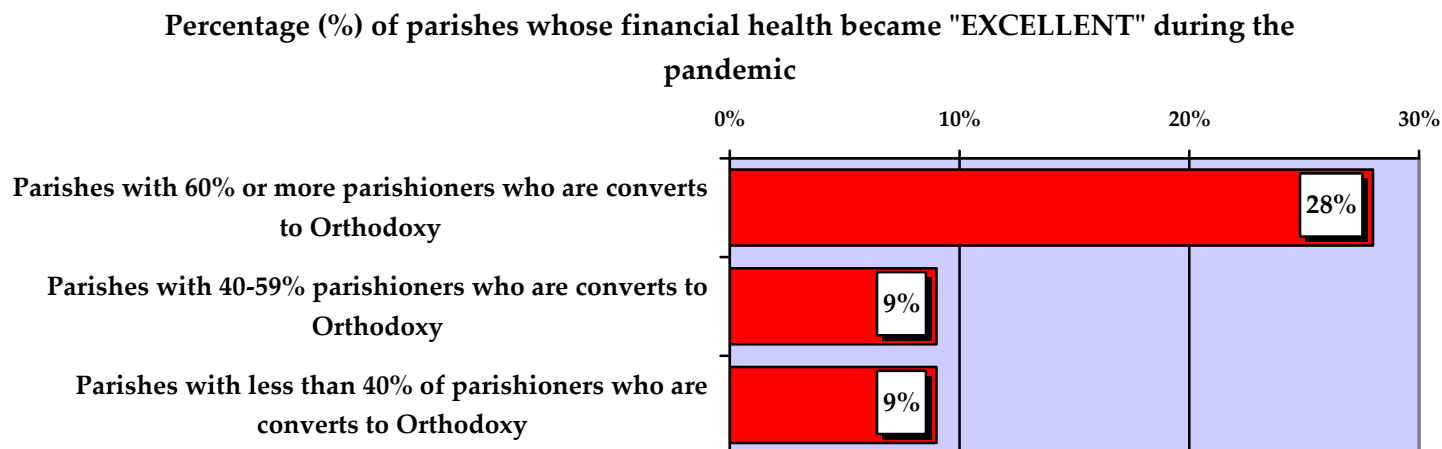
**Fig. 42 Overall, There Was a Slight Decline in Financial Health of the Parishes During Past Two Years**

“How would you describe your parish’s/congregation’s financial health NOW versus TWO YEARS AGO, before the pandemic?”



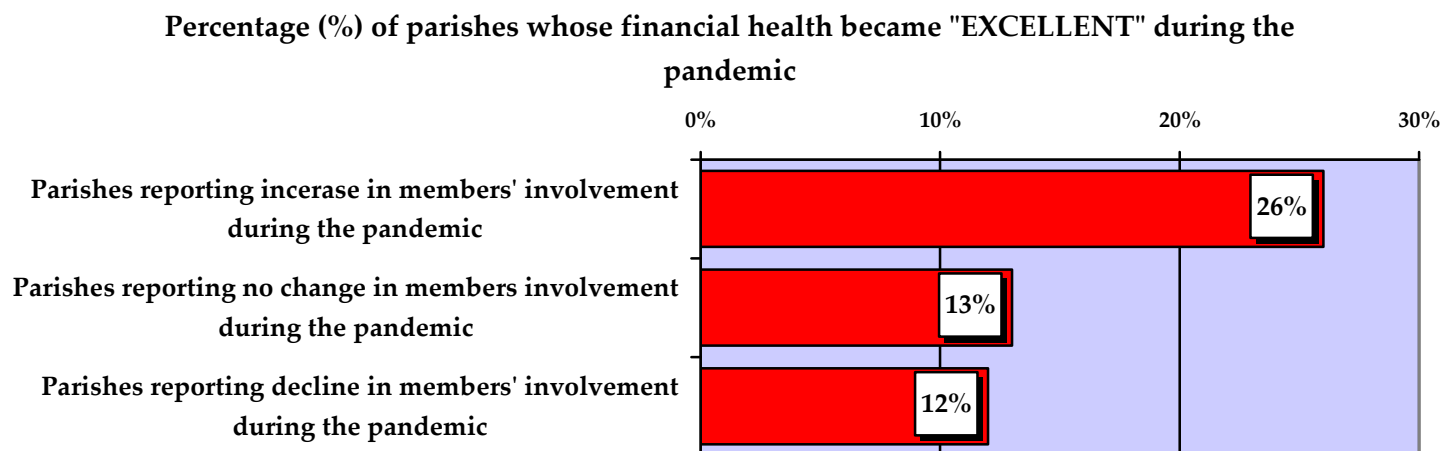
Yet, side-by-side with this general decline in the economic solvency of the parishes, there was also a remarkable growth in the percentage of churches reporting “excellent” finances: from 17% two years ago to 28% presently. In order to understand what contributed to this positive change, we looked at the distinct features of parishes whose finances have become “excellent” through the pandemic. Three statistically strong correlations emerged. First, parishes where converts to Orthodoxy constitute a majority of members were much more likely than all other parishes to have become “excellent” in their financial health through the pandemic. See Fig. 43.

**Fig. 43 More Converts to Orthodoxy among Parishioners – Greater Chances to Achieve “Excellent” Financial Health of a Parish**



Second, parishes which reported overall greater involvement of parishioners during the pandemic were also much more likely to become “excellent” in their financial health. Little surprise here: when people are more dedicated to the lives of their congregations, this also leads to greater financial commitment. See Fig. 44.

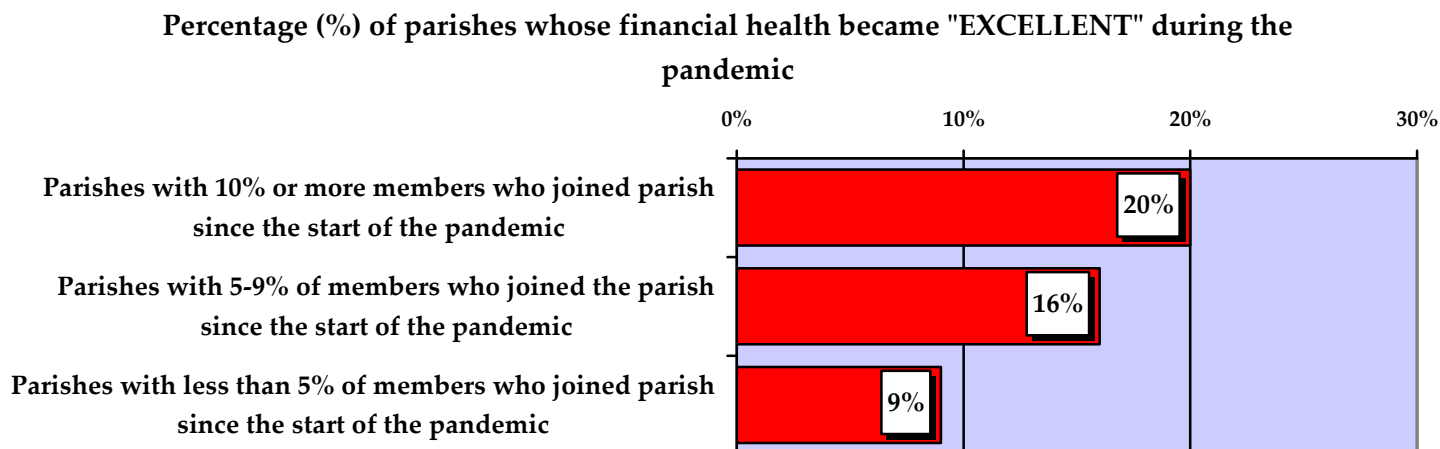
**Fig. 44 Growth in Involvement of Members – Greater Chances to Achieve “Excellent” Financial Health of a Parish**



Finally, parishes which attracted many new members during the pandemic<sup>14</sup> were also much more likely to become “excellent” in their financial health. See Fig. 45. This is also not surprising. More new people leads to more donations. In addition, new members may be more excited about their newfound spiritual homes and be willing to give generously.

<sup>14</sup> The median percentage of new members who joined during the pandemic was 5% in a “typical” Orthodox parish.

**Fig. 45 More New Members among Parishioners – Greater Chances to Achieve “Excellent” Financial Health of a Parish**



## XI. The Mysterious Twelve Percent: Parishes with Strong Growth in Vitality Throughout the Pandemic

### **AMONG KEY FINDINGS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER:**

- 12% of all parishes reported that, “Our parish is MUCH stronger now than before the pandemic.” Smaller parishes with high percentage of converts to Orthodoxy among members were more likely to experience strong growth in vitality during the pandemic. 76% of these parishes are also led by convert clergy.
- In summary, “strong growth” in vitality in these parishes includes:
  1. Both growth in the number of new members and greater involvement of existing (pre-pandemic) parishioners, which especially manifests itself in more frequent participation in in-person worship services
  2. A substantial increase in engagement of adults in learning about their faith and the ability of a parish to - at least - maintain the rate of young people’s participation in religious education during the pandemic
  3. Not only improvement of parish finances, but in many instances their full reversal from “tight or difficult” to “excellent or good”
  4. Finding new ways to get involved in their local community to a much greater extent than they had done pre-pandemic.

- The study looked at distinct characteristics of the parishes with strong growth in vitality. Compared to all other parishes, such churches:
  1. Placed great emphasis on keeping their worship services and other practices as unchanged as possible throughout the pandemic including in-person services, in-person religious education classes, and continuing the traditional way of administering Holy Communion (with one spoon from a common chalice)
  2. Pay more attention to collective decision-making, in which the entire parish community participates
  3. Are reluctant to offer their services online, consistent with the negative attitude of their clergy towards virtual Orthodox worship as undermining the very nature of the Orthodox liturgical tradition
- The survey asked clergy who reported strong growth in parish's vitality: "Please say a few words about the main reasons why you selected this answer?" Six aspects of growth in vitality showed up repeatedly in their responses. They are discussed in this chapter.

By the time this study began, we knew anecdotally that some parishes were emerging from the pandemic much stronger, having creatively adapted to changed realities and discovering new opportunities for their ministries. In chapter 4, we saw that 12% of the parishes actually reported, "Our parish is MUCH stronger now than before the pandemic." On the following pages, we will take a close look at these parishes which managed to thrive despite the pandemic and try to understand what lies behind their success stories. More specifically, three questions will be addressed:

- How does this reported substantial growth in vitality manifest itself in various measurable indicators such as change in membership, attendance at worship services, participation of young people and adults in religious education, finances, etc.?
- What are the distinguishing characteristics of parishes that emerged from the pandemic being much stronger than ever before?
- What are the "success stories" of these parishes? What did the clergy mean when they said, "Our parish is much stronger now"?

Table 2 offers a comparison of changes during the pandemic between those parishes which became much stronger (12% of all parishes) and all other parishes, including changes in membership, attendance at worship services, and participation of young people and adults in religious education. For each of these indicators, it

shows the median percentage change since the start of the pandemic. As a reminder, the “median” is the midpoint: in half of the parishes, this percentage is higher, while in the other half it is lower. Table 2 paints two portraits of changes: in a “typical” church which became much stronger versus a “typical” church among all other parishes.

**Table 2 Changes Throughout the Pandemic: Parishes Which Became “Much Stronger” versus All Other Parishes**

| Median percentage:   | Parishes which became “much stronger” | All other parishes |
|--|---------------------------------------|--------------------|
| % of new members who joined during the pandemic                                | 25%                                   | 5%                 |
| % change in the total number of regular participants <sup>15</sup> in a parish | +50%                                  | -17%               |
| % change in number of people attending in-person worship services              | +63%                                  | -26%               |
| % change in number of children and teenagers involved in religious education   | +50%                                  | -33%               |
| % change in number of adults involved in religious education                   | +117%                                 | 0%                 |

So, what happened to a “typical” church among those that became much stronger? Such a church grew by 50% in the number of all regular participants and nearly by two-thirds (+63%) in the number of people present physically in the church on Sunday. This also means that now, a greater percentage of all the parish’s regular participants attend on a weekly basis than pre-pandemic (because the percentage growth in attendance was greater than the percentage growth in all regularly participating parishioners). A quarter of the current regular participants (25%) are new to the parish: they joined during the past two years. Taking into account that such a parish grew by 50% in all regular participants, this growth was achieved not only because of “newcomers” (they added only +25%), but also because existing parishioners who had been only marginally involved pre-pandemic became more active now.

Considering religious education today compared to pre-pandemic, a “typical” parish from among those which became much stronger now has 50% more children and teenagers in its classes and it has more than doubled the number of adults (+117%) involved in the parish’s faith formation programs. Controlling for the increase in all regular participants (+50%), it appears that even parishes with strong growth in vitality only managed to maintain participation rates among young people, but they definitely grew in adult involvement in religious education. Remaining stable in participation of children and teens is essentially a success, when compared to the vast majority of churches that experienced dramatic shrinkage in young people’s involvement in religious education.

<sup>15</sup> The definition of “regular participants” was “participate in worship services or other activities in your parish at least once a month, counting both adults and children, both in-person and online.”

The simplified portrait of a “typical” church from among all other parishes (88% of all American Orthodox parishes) is quite different. This “typical” parish declined by 17% in the number of all regular participants (i.e., one in six active parishioners is missing), and it lost a quarter (-26%) of the people who had been present physically in the church on Sunday. This also means that a smaller percentage of all the parish’s regular participants now attend on a weekly basis than before the pandemic (because percentage losses in attendance were heavier than percentage losses in all regularly participating parishioners). 5% of parishioners are newcomers: they joined the parish during the past two years.

When it comes to participation in religious education, compared to pre-pandemic, this “typical” parish is now missing one-third (change of -33%) of its children and teenagers from its classes, but it did not change in the number of adults involved in the parish’s faith formation programs. Controlling for the overall decline in all regular participants (-17%), it means that there was an actual decrease in the degree of involvement of young people (because the negative change in their participation was greater than the negative change in the number of all regular participants).

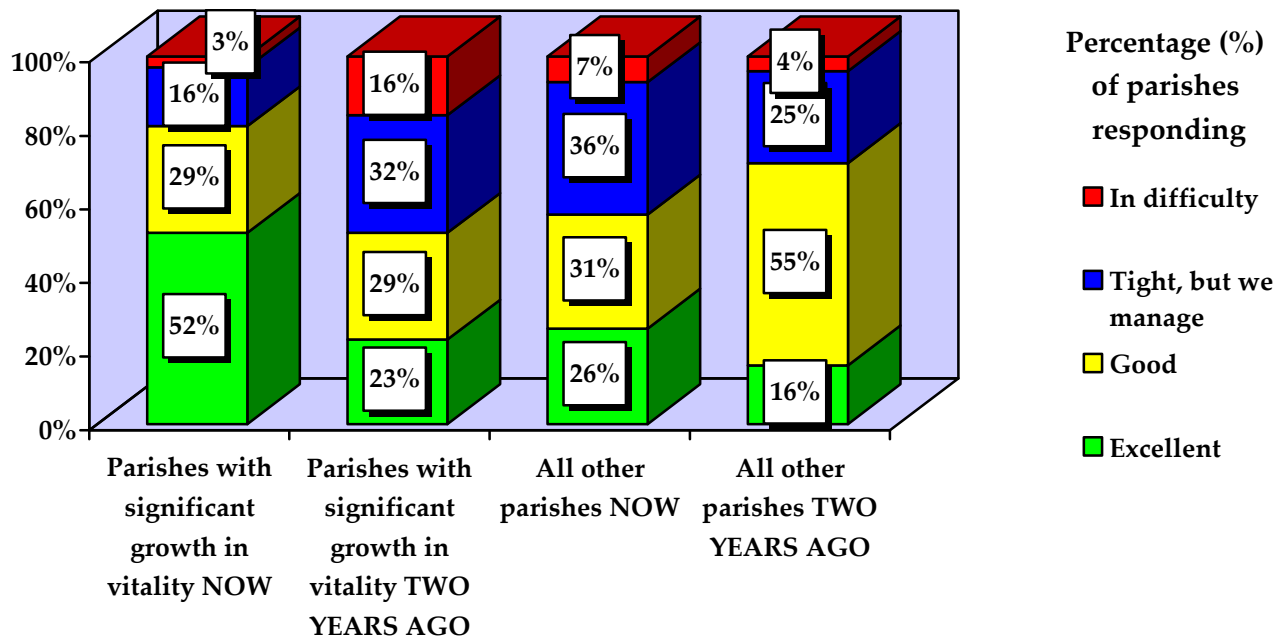
But when it comes to the changes in adults’ involvement in religious education, the situation is different. It appears that a “typical” church from “the other 88% of parishes” now has an increased degree of engagement of its adults in faith formation programs. Indeed, the number of all regular participants in such parish declined by 17%, yet the number of people in adult religious education classes remained stable (0% change).

Besides these measurable indicators, two other aspects add to the divergent picture of parishes with strong growth in vitality versus all other parishes. The first is the change in overall financial health.

Fig. 46 shows that now, post-pandemic, twice as many parishes with growth in vitality report “excellent” finances compared to all other parishes: 52% versus 26%. More importantly, changes in fiscal health during the past two years ran in opposite directions for parishes with strong growth in vitality versus all other churches. Among the former, the percentage of those with either “good” or “excellent” finances increased from 52% to 81%. Among all other parishes, there was a decline in the percentage of churches with sound financial health from 71% to 57%. Remarkably, before the pandemic, the financial situation in churches with strong growth in vitality was actually worse than in all other parishes. That is, many parishes with strong growth in vitality not simply “improved” their finances, but fully reversed from a “difficult or tight” situation to a “good or excellent” one.

**Fig. 46 Strong Growth in Parish’s Overall Vitality Includes Significant Improvement in Finances**

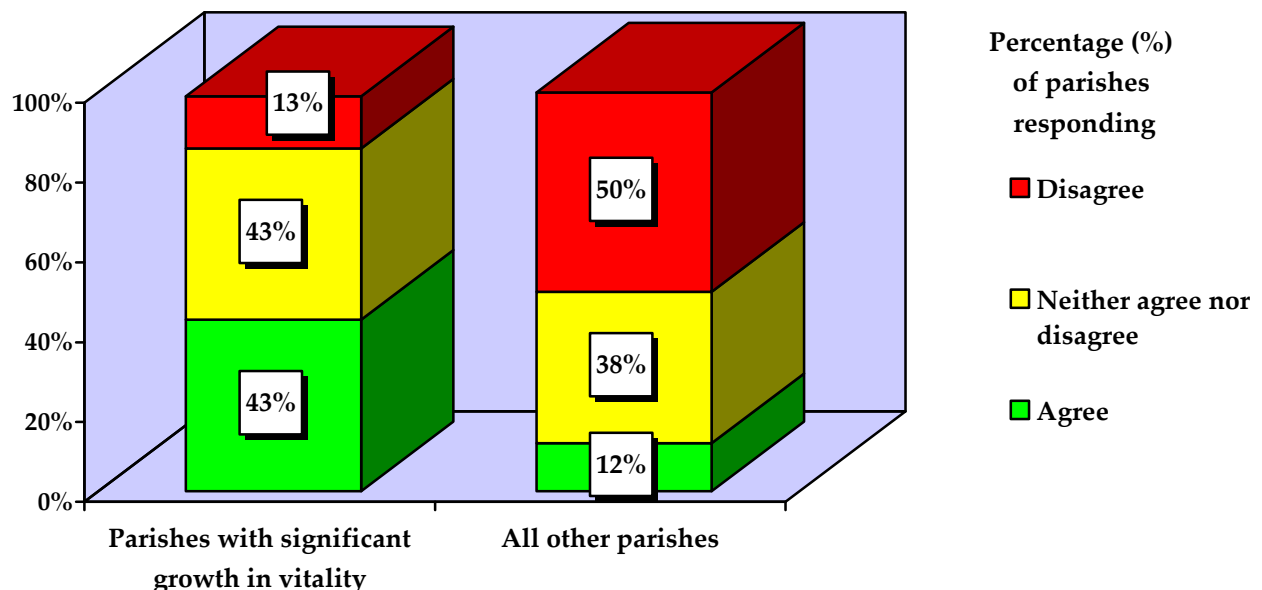
“How would you describe your parish’s financial health NOW versus TWO YEARS AGO, before the pandemic?”



Another difference between the two categories of parishes was in how they changed their involvement in the local community. See Fig. 47. 43% of parishes with growth in vitality reported a greater involvement in the local community in comparison with only 12% among all other churches.

**Fig. 47 Strong Growth in Overall Parish’s Vitality Often Means Much Greater Involvement in Their Local Community**

“Do you agree with the statement ‘As a result of the pandemic, our parish has significantly increased its involvement in the local community?’”





In summary, “strong growth” in vitality includes:

- Both growth in the number of new members and greater involvement of existing (pre-pandemic) parishioners, which especially manifests itself in more frequent participation in in-person worship services.
- A substantial increase in engagement of adults in learning about their faith and the ability of a parish to – at least – maintain the rate of young people’s participation in religious education during the pandemic
- Not only improvement of parish finances, but in many instances their full reversal from “tight or difficult” to “excellent or good”
- Finding new ways to get involved in their local community to a much greater extent than they had done pre-pandemic.

Are there any distinct characteristics which may have contributed to or at least accompanied a parish’s strong growth in vitality? Table 3 presents a comparison of distinctive demographic features of those parishes which became much stronger through the pandemic versus all other parishes. As in Table 2, for each characteristic, a median value is shown. The left column offers a simplified demographic portrait of a “typical” parish which became much stronger during the pandemic, while the right column presents a picture of a “typical” church from among all other parishes.

**Table 3 Distinct Characteristics of Parishes Which Become “Much Stronger” during the Pandemic versus All Other Parishes**

| Median values:   | Parishes which became “much stronger” | All other parishes |
|--|---------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Number of regular participants in a parish BEFORE the pandemic | 50                                    | 90                 |
| % of converts to Orthodox Church among parishioners            | 70%                                   | 35%                |
| % of clergy who are converts to Orthodox Church                | 76%                                   | 38%                |
| % of children and youth under 18 among all parishioners        | 27%                                   | 22%                |

In summary, smaller parishes were more likely to experience strong growth in vitality during the pandemic. The strong presence of converts to Orthodoxy among both members and clergy is another distinctive feature of parishes that grew significantly in vitality. A “typical” parish with strong growth in vitality has 70% of converts among parishioners versus 35% in all other parishes. Similarly, 76% parishes showing strong growth in vitality are led by convert clergy, as compared to only 38% among all other parishes. Finally, churches with strong growth in vitality are somewhat younger in members than all other parishes, but this difference is not

dramatic. In the former, the median percentage of young people under 18 is 27% of total regular participants versus 22% in the latter.

The distinctions between parishes that are growing significantly in their overall strength versus all other parishes are not limited to demography. These two categories of churches organize themselves and lived through the pandemic in different ways.

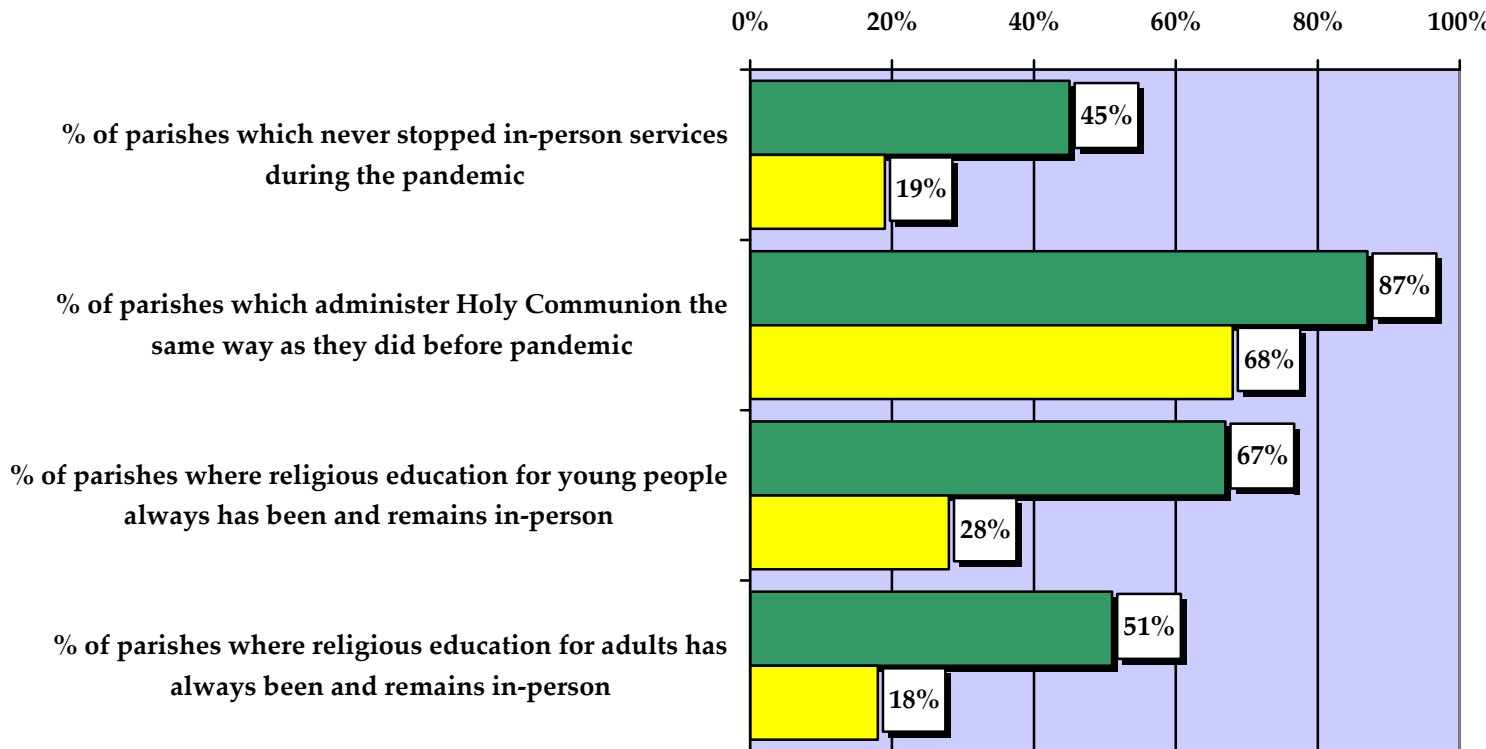
First, parishes that have grown substantially in vitality are much more likely to be “intentionally Orthodox” in their strict adherence to various Church requirements and practices (see definition of such parishes in chapter 1). At the same time, they are also more experimental and willing to try new ways of doing things if needed. Indeed, 42% of the parishes with strong growth in vitality are “intentionally Orthodox” and 33% of them “strongly agreed” with the statement “Our parish is always willing to try new things and to meet new challenges.” Among all other parishes, only 14% were “intentionally Orthodox, and just 10% “strongly agreed” they were always willing to try new things and meet new challenges.

Second, compared to all other parishes, the churches which have grown substantially in vitality pay much more attention to collective decision-making in which the entire parish community participates. 36% of them reported that “open discussion with the entire parish community” had a strong or dominant influence on their decisions about various pandemic-related matters, as compared to only 17% among all other parishes.

Third, compared to all other parishes, the churches with substantial growth in vitality placed great emphasis on keeping their worship services and other practices as unchanged as possible through the pandemic. Many more of them never closed their doors for *in-person* services, did not change the ways in which Holy Communion is administered, and continued *in-person* religious education classes for both young people and adults. See Fig. 48.

**Fig. 48 Large Number of Churches with Strong Growth in Vitality Did Not Change Their Worship Services and Religious Education Throughout the Pandemic**

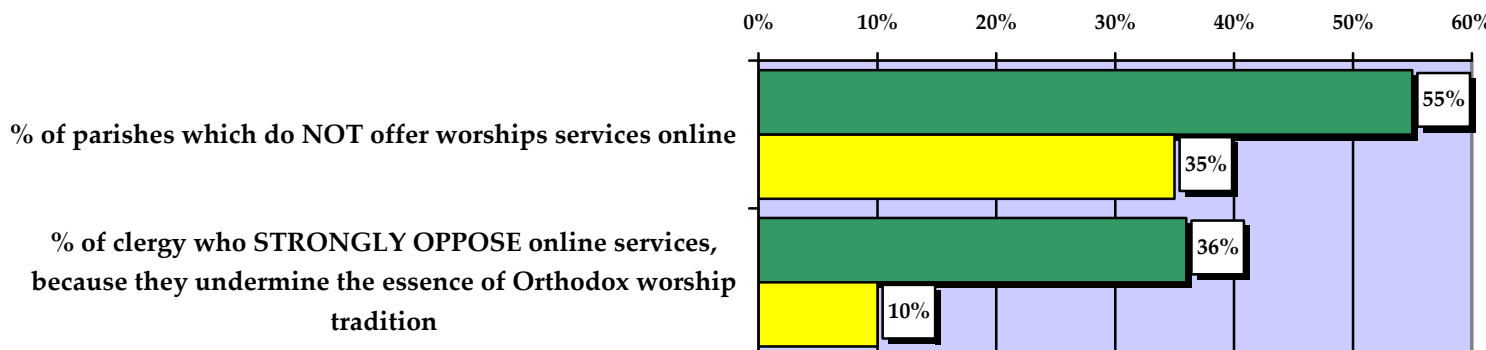
■ Parishes which reported "We are much stronger now than before the pandemic"    ■ All other parishes



Finally, compared to all other parishes, a smaller percentage of churches with substantial growth in vitality offer their members an option to watch services online, and a greater number of their clergy have very negative attitudes toward the possibility of participating in Orthodox worship virtually and remotely. See Fig. 49.

**Fig. 49 Compared to Other Churches, Parishes with Strong Growth in Vitality Are Reluctant to Offer Their Services Online**

■ Parishes which reported "We are much stronger now than before the pandemic"    ■ All other parishes



In summary, here is a simplified “typical portrait” of parishes which experienced strong growth in vitality during the pandemic. They are smaller churches, mostly with converts to the Orthodox Church among clergy and members. They are intentional about following various Church requirements and practices and appreciate a collective style of decision-making with their entire parish community. They paid serious attention to maintaining in-person worship services and in-person religious education classes through the pandemic, and they are reluctant to offer online services now. Yet, they are open to the possibility of trying new things in the life of a parish if needed.

In order to find more about individual success stories from the parishes with strong growth in vitality, the survey asked clergy: "Please say a few words about the main reasons why you said “much stronger” when comparing your parish's vitality now to before the pandemic?"

Predictably, most of the priests wrote about increase in the number of people participating in a parish and attending services. Sometimes this growth was astounding, with parishes doubling and tripling in size. But besides positive numerical changes, six other aspects of growth in vitality showed up repeatedly in responses.

The most frequent answers were about the fact that marginally involved members have left, but the truly engaged parishioners have become even more dedicated to the Church, thereby increasing the overall vitality of the parish. Here are two examples:

- The experience of the past couple of years increased the level of dedication among those who were already most active in the Church. Those who were nominally involved have stopped attending. Not that there is anything to celebrate with people not returning, but those who stayed have increased their "talent" and dedication profoundly.
- Most of the “dead wood” (Orthodox in name only) have left and now feel comfortable about not returning. These people were mainly trouble makers who wanted an ethnically centered YMCA. As a result of their departure, we have now only people who actually want to try their hand at true Orthodox Christianity.

The second most common pattern in responses was from parishes which never closed their doors and did not change anything in their worship practices. These parishes attracted many people with strong faith who were disgruntled with the implementation of various restrictions in their home parishes. Here are examples:

- With so many other parishes closing down, requiring masks, and limiting attendance, we grew exponentially since we did none of these things. We became a haven to those who felt alienated in their original parishes.
- We grew more than five-fold. A large part of it was due to the fact that we were open. We were not participating in the COVID hysteria, but rather following common-sense precautions. Another reason for the dramatic growth is that we are not streaming Liturgies and so in-person attendance has grown five-fold during the pandemic.

The third category of answers was about the fact that - because of challenges and uncertainties brought by the pandemic - more people now seek faith and answers to difficult questions. They found and joined the Orthodox Church and brought with them new energy.

- Many new people seeking faith have come because of the stress of the pandemic.
- I believe folks, faced with new difficult reality, became more faithful. Even while observing the necessary restrictions on attendance, inquirers flocked to us like never before.

The fourth pattern in responses was from the parishes which had been closed. When this happened, their members realized how important the Church was to them. After these churches reopened, their parishioners became much more dedicated than before.

- Before the pandemic, there was a kind of laxity and taking for granted the services. Once pandemic forced to close churches, people realized how important it is to have a liturgical life especially during trying times. Ever since, our parishioners do not want to lose that momentum and revitalized love for the church.

In the fifth category were answers about increase in the unity of the parish community, because parishioners have now learned how to address new needs and challenges together.

- We are now way more united after experiences on how to address difficult issues TOGETHER. We are now not afraid to look for new avenues for our mission.

Finally, a few clergy wrote about intensifying the religious lives of their parishes during the pandemic, which was met with positive response from the people in the pews.

- We have increased services during the week and we have had a great rise in interest from inquirers and a greater appreciation for church live. We now pay greater attention to living it to the fullest.

## XII. Six Great Concerns of the Parishes about their Post-Pandemic Future

### **AMONG KEY FINDINGS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER:**

The survey asked: “What are your biggest concerns brought by the pandemic for the future of your parish?”

Six major concerns surfaced frequently in the responses:

- There has been an overall decrease in church participation. After such a significant interruption, people have fallen out of the habit of attending services. Not all have returned to the churches after their re-opening. This trend especially affected marginally involved parishioners and young people.
- Significant number of members now view online participation in services as not just being an emergency measure, but rather, a full-fledged alternative to physical attendance. The clergy felt strongly that virtual worship can never provide full immersion in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church.
- The pandemic resulted in the increased politicization of church life which was based on disagreements about various restrictions and new rules in worship services brought by the pandemic. Some parishes split into hostile factions, creating rifts that will be very hard to heal, let alone to forget.
- The pandemic revealed how strongly secular authorities and government can interfere in the internal affairs of religious congregations by imposing various rules and restrictions on them.
- The prolonged social isolation left indelible imprints on people’s ability to socialize in person with one another.
- For many people, the pandemic is very far from being over, and they still fear for their health and safety.

We saw through this report that the crisis brought by the COVID-19 has shaken and, in some instances, even shattered, many areas of “normal” pre-pandemic parish life. By the time of writing this report (March 2022), however, most churches have been able to reopen for in-person services and other activities, vaccines have become widely available to everyone, and most restrictions (such as limiting the number of people in attendance, mask wearing, etc.) have been lifted. As society and religious congregations re-emerge from the pandemic, what are the major fears of the Orthodox clergy for the future of their parishes?

The survey asked: “What are your biggest concerns brought by the pandemic for the future of your parish?” Despite the variety naturally found in hundreds of individual responses, nearly all of them boiled down to six “big issues.” These six major concerns were nearly equally often voiced by the clergy (and, of course, many respondents mentioned several of them).

Predictably, one concern was the overall decrease in church participation. More specifically, clergy wrote that such a significant interruption, people have fallen out of the habit of attending services. Not all have returned to the churches after their re-opening. This trend especially affected marginally involved parishioners and young people. Here are examples of actual answers:

- “People have become used to staying home on Sundays and are not rushing to come back to Church for worship.”
- “Re-involvement of lapsed members who were marginal prior to the pandemic is a challenge. Teens also really suffered passively in this; they have become more glued to devices and their beds. Getting them out of this phase/stage has proven to be very difficult. Many parents also don't know how to manage it.”
- “The most troubling for me is the lack of predictability from a large group of parishioners. I never know if a new rise of cases or some other factor is going to make people vanish for a week, a month, or a few months, or forever etc. COVID has made people markedly less predictable. And it is very hard to tell if they ‘participate’ online and how they might feel about the state of life in the parish.”

The second and somewhat similar concern was about significant number of members now view online participation in services as not just being an emergency measure, but rather, a full-fledged alternative to physical attendance. The clergy felt strongly that virtual worship can never provide full immersion in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church. Here are examples:

- “There is a general breakdown in the fundamental understanding of what it means to be Orthodox and the need to be fully immersed in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church. Parents, kids, and teenagers have all gotten used to sitting at home on their electronic devices and it will take a very long time to re-program the damage that was done.”
- “I fear that we will fail to physically bring the faithful back to the sanctuary. Gathering together in the hall after worship is also important, because we can't forget that we can't pray for one another until we know one another.”
- “I feel challenged balancing continuing online services with in-person services and the fostering of community life.”

The third concern was expressed by clergy who wrote that pandemic resulted in the increased politicization of church life which was based on disagreements about various restrictions and new rules in worship services. Some parishes split into hostile factions, creating rifts that will be very hard to heal, let alone to forget. For instance:

- “There is a political dimension to this pandemic which may very easily tear a parish apart. My main challenge as a priest during this pandemic has been to continually work for the unity of the parish in the bond of peace.”
- “Social political divisions and strong healthcare related views have been a divisive force in a new way. Long-term friendships and pastoral relationships suddenly mean less than someone's views about ‘x’ or ‘y’ secondary matter. It's a symptom of how isolated we have become from each other.”
- “There is severe polarization of the church and introduction of conspiracy theories and political ideologies, touted by some on the internet. There are now two groups in the parish. One feels unloved and hurt, because other refused to be masked, would not honor physical separation, communion practices not modified, etc. Then the other group feels that the first is weak in faith, do not trust in God, are being influenced by outside political forces (and not by God). This has caused divisions (some within families) that will take a long to heal and to regain trust and love for each other.”

The fourth concern voiced by many was that the pandemic revealed how strongly secular authorities and government can interfere in the internal affairs of religious congregations by imposing various rules and restrictions on them. For instance:

- “I am now deeply concerned how big of a say government has in whether people can attend church services and in what manner.”
- “Continued ability of the government to use such situations to shut down our churches or to dictate how we conduct the Divine Liturgy. If, as we have been told numerous times, the Church and State are separate, then the State has no authority in dictating how our Sacraments are administered or how our services are conducted - regardless of reason.”
- “I worry about FUTURE ‘pandemics.’ I am afraid that if we shut down in-person worship again or require everyone to wear masks or to get a shot (God forbid!), then the people see the church leadership conforming in every way to any restrictions the government impose with ZERO resistance. I think many people will drift away from the Church, seeing it as a tepid organization no different than a worldly social club.”

The fifth pattern in responses was that the prolonged social isolation left indelible imprints on people's ability and desire to socialize in person with one another. Here are examples:

- “Lack of interconnectedness and social interaction left lasting wounds.”



- “I am extremely concerned with the impact of the COVID fear campaign on the greater population and on many parishioners. I believe many people have been psychologically traumatized. This trauma negatively influences the psychological health of individuals in regard to their willingness to gather as an incarnate community of believers in Christ.”
- “It is a challenge bringing people back to in-person communion with each other who have stayed away for one reason or another.”

Finally, a significant number of clergy wrote that, for many people, the pandemic is very far from being over, and they still fear for their health and safety. Here are examples:

- “Fear is still controlling about half of the parish. They are reluctant to be in person for fear of COVID-19 and the variants.”
- “There are a number of parishioners who have stopped coming to church as they are waiting for COVID to be ‘over’. It is unclear whether they will ever come back.”
- “People are not being comfortable when church is full.”

### **XIII. Not All Consequences of the Pandemic Were Bad:**

#### **Greatest Achievements of the Parishes throughout the Pandemic**

##### ***AMONG KEY FINDINGS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER:***

The survey asked: “Reflecting on the past two years, what is the parish most proud of in addressing various challenges and difficulties?” Five main themes emerged most often in answers to this question:

- The parish maintained a spirit of love and even grew in unity during the pandemic. This happened despite differences in parishioners’ opinions regarding the pandemic and the new church policies, or despite bishops’ decisions which a number of members found unsatisfactory.
- The parish did its very best to continue services and other ministries as “normally” as possible. Many of these responses also emphasized that the church was never closed for in-person services and did not change anything in its liturgical practices.
- The challenges of the pandemic have deepened the faith of parishioners and their dedication to church.
- Despite difficult times, the generosity of church members and their desire to support the church have increased significantly.
- The parish witnessed a great number of inquirers about the Orthodox Church and helped these people to find faith.

The pandemic exposed American Orthodox Churches to numerous challenges, disruptions, and problems. At the same time, the experience of responding to the crisis as a local Christian community and the unwavering desire to keep church life afloat were a source of pride and rejuvenation for many congregations. In order to learn more about these positive outcomes of the pandemic, the survey asked: “Reflecting on the past two years, what is the parish most proud of in addressing various challenges and difficulties?” From the many individual stories told by priests, five main themes emerged, and two of them were mentioned especially often.

One was that the parish maintained a spirit of love and even grew in unity during the pandemic. This happened despite differences in parishioners’ opinions regarding the pandemic and the new church policies, or despite bishops’ decisions which a number of members found unsatisfactory. Here are examples:

- “I am most proud that despite having different ideas about how we should engage with pandemic mitigation, our community remains united. Our brotherly love has overwhelmed the strident political and social fractures rampant in our country now.”
- “People were understanding and considerate of the bishop's rules about restrictions. Few people agreed with them, but they understood that this was unknown territory and gave him the benefit of the doubt. Only a few people ended up really angry. Also, people are accepting each other in terms of attitudes towards the pandemic, restrictions, the Church's response, etc.”
- “We remained a place of solace and healing for people. Throughout this pandemic experience, our parish functioned as a place of calm to provide stability for the families we service in the midst of the prevalent inconsistency in the world around us.”
- “The core of the parish has stuck together. We worshipped together outdoors in heat and cold for a year, and I believe will be stronger for having gone through all this together in the long run.”

The second most frequent subject in answers was that a parish did its very best to continue services and other ministries as “normally” as possible. In addition, many of these responses also emphasized that the church was never closed for in-person services and did not change anything in its liturgical practices. Here are a few quotations:

- “We stayed open with the exception when being told to close, and continued our programs with adjustments. We never stopped trying to educate or share in worship. In fact, we devised ways to bring people together and offered more services. It took a lot of work by everyone to operate as often as possible and within the parameters established by our governor.”

- “We never canceled or limited participation in Holy Liturgy. Our liturgical practices were not changed ONE bit during the pandemic, especially Holy Communion.”
- “We are proud of our ability to continue church services and spiritual life, effectively, unabated - even during the full shut down in 2020. I am proud of the strength of faith our parishioners have in regards to Holy Communion. I am also very proud of how many of our parishioners have increased their material support of the parish when other forms of income have been limited (bazaars, luncheons and other fundraising activities).”

In addition to these two most frequently mentioned subjects, many clergy wrote that the challenges of the pandemic served to deepen the faith of parishioners and their dedication to church. For example:

- “We viewed the pandemic as an opportunity to work towards strengthening the “home church” and personal spiritual quest.”
- “People have embraced better understanding and practice of liturgical worship, being more attentive and respectful of the Divine Liturgy.”
- “We have quadrupled the size of our choir and liturgical participation. Vespers on Wednesdays and Saturdays have gone from three to 35 people!”
- “The Pandemic helped everyone revisit their knowledge of what is dogma and what is simply ‘tradition’.”

Many clergy also wrote about the increased generosity of church members and their desire to support the church in difficult times as much as they possibly can. Here are some examples:

- “They gave above and beyond their pledges and normal tithes, allowing us to help people with bills, supplies, and food especially during periods of time when they were in quarantine.”
- “Maintaining a generous spirit. Providing not only for the parish but also raise thousands of dollars for a mission church overseas - during a pandemic.”

Finally, a number of priests wrote that their parishes witnessed an increase in inquirers about the Orthodox Church and helped these people to find faith. For example:

- “We saw a record number of new inquirers (mostly young people) during this period and now they are new Orthodox Christians. Last year we baptized more people than in the previous 24 years.”
- “We had a significant spike in catechumens, who are now very committed and generous.”

## Five Major Takeaways and Our Next Steps

This is the first report from the continuing three-stage study. It examines the recovery of American Orthodox parishes from the COVID-19 crisis and the possible long-term consequences of the pandemic for Orthodox Churches in the USA. Thirteen chapters of the report offer information and insights about significant changes in various areas of church life as seen by Orthodox parish clergy.

In essence, 370 Orthodox priests participating in this study shared with us all what happened in their congregations during the past two years: gains and losses of members, changes in sacramental worship and involvement in their local community, challenges of switching church life into an “online” mode, the looming problem of faith formation of young people, internal conflicts in the parishes and tensions with ruling bishops, greatest achievements of the past two years, and major fears for the future.

Special attention in this report was also given to the “mysteriously” strong growth in vitality that 12% of all parishes experienced despite and even because of the pandemic. *Each chapter can be read separately, depending on the interest of a reader in a particular subject.*

These five major conclusions provide a very abbreviated summary of just a few of the many findings. We emphasize those five because they can most seriously affect the future of Orthodox Church life in America.

I. During the past two years, most parishes suffered losses in the total number of parishioners and, even more dramatically, in the number of people who attend liturgical services now that their churches have reopened for in-person worship. A “typical” (median) parish shrank by 15% in regularly involved members (i.e., more than one out of seven pre-pandemic parishioners is missing). If measured by average in-person worship attendance, a “typical” Orthodox parish has lost 22% of its pre-pandemic “people in the pews.” But this generally negative trend was partially counter-balanced by two positive changes.

First, some parishes experienced opposite trend and have grown substantially. 21% of all parishes witnessed growth in parishioners by more than 20%, and 17% of the churches reported an increase in in-person worship attendance by more than 20%. And this growth was not random. This study (see chapter 6) discussed seven particular characteristics and factors which are closely associated with and contribute to a significant increase in members and worship attendance.

Second, from the numerous comments offered by the clergy, it appears that in many instances only marginally involved members left, while the core parishioners not only stayed, but became even more dedicated and generous to their churches. Those priests who grasped and accepted this change have actually benefited from the new reality. As one priest indicated: “The experience of the past couple of years increased the level of dedication among those who were already most active in the Church. Those who were nominally involved have stopped attending. Not that there is anything to celebrate with people not returning, but those who stayed have increased their ‘talent’ and dedication profoundly.”

**II.** The single area of church life most negatively affected by the pandemic is faith formation of children and teenagers. Many of them ceased their participation in religious education offered by their parish. Nationwide, a “typical” (median) parish is currently missing a quarter of its pre-pandemic students. The situation is further aggravated by the fact that about one-fifth of the parishes completely shut down their faith formation programs for young people with the start of the pandemic and have not yet resumed them.

Despite this overall decline in young people’s participation in religious education, one in seven parishes (14%) witnessed the opposite trend: substantial growth (by more than +20%) in the number of students. In chapter 7, this study looked at distinct characteristics of these parishes and at factors contributing to greater participation of children and teenagers. Some of these factors (such as certain demographic characteristics) might be impossible to replicate in other parishes, but there are at least two that should be taken very seriously into practical consideration.

The first is the modality of religious education. Maintaining in-person religious education classes and not switching to an online format is important for young people’s engagement in faith formation programs. The second factor – statistically even more significant – is continuous and consistent in-person attendance of young people at worship services. In other words, strong emphasis on “hands-on” church experience rather than offering a “virtual remote” option to participate is important for young people’s involvement in faith formation programs and activities.” Overall, clergy emphasized the importance of the swift return to in-person religious education, and in no way prolonging virtual activities, as they have been found to be quite disengaging for young people.

These findings, supported by measurable statistics, were fully corroborated by the comments offered by the clergy. Here are two examples: “Keep meeting in-person as much as possible! We found that the kids

especially appreciated in-person opportunities to gather. Online class was basically a failure,” and, “Make them more involved into church service, and explain that religious education is part of preparation for the liturgical activity. Get them involved in singing, serving, bell ringing, etc. and they will be there for education events.”

**III.** During the pandemic, the new “online option” for participation in worship services and other church activities was discovered and became widespread in American Orthodox Churches. Chapters 2 and 5 discussed this subject in detail. Presently, nearly two-thirds (63%) of the parishes offer their services on the internet. The online version of Orthodox parish life was initially seen simply as a short-term emergency adaptation to help churches endure the crisis. But the pandemic lasted for over two years. Gradually, more and more clergy and parishioners have become fully accustomed to “zooming in” for various church activities from the comfort of their homes. Most importantly, the online modality has increasingly been seen by many parishioners not simply as safer, but also as a convenient and time-efficient option.

Today, American Orthodox clergy are divided into two nearly equal camps, each with a different opinion about online services. Half of them support virtual worship participation, and not only because this is the only viable way that certain categories of parishioners can attend.

These clergy argue that online services open the door for more people in their parish to participate. This “positive” group also indicates that online services attract new followers who live far away and watch their services on the internet, even though they are not part of their parish community. The other half of the priests, either unconditionally reject online services as undermining the very essence of the Orthodox liturgical worship tradition, or accept them only in highly limited circumstances (e.g., church closure).

The study found that the online modality can potentially enhance two parish ministries: work with prospective converts and catechumens, and religious education for adults. But in all other areas of parish life, the virtual version of programs and activities has had a rather negative impact on parishioners’ involvement. Survey data indicate that the online version has had an especially strong negative influence on parishioners’ participation in Sunday Liturgy, the involvement of children and teenagers in religious education, and youth activities and programs.

**IV.** The pandemic tested the ability of parishes to efficiently make various difficult decisions (e.g., church closures, new rules of attendance, ways of administering Holy Communion) under extraordinary and fast-changing circumstances. This challenge was further complicated by the traditional model of administration in

the Orthodox Church - the strict hierarchical governance by bishops, which often leaves little room for debate by the local congregation. But the need for rapid and locally contextualized adaptations to the crisis was not always compatible with waiting for a bishop to decide what his entire multi-state diocese should do. As the pandemic evolved, it became clear that some of hierarchs' decisions did not meet the unique local circumstances of each parish. While many parishes grudgingly accepted such directives, others took matters into their own hands and decided for themselves.

The aftermath of these local and independent decisions was twofold. On one hand, nearly a quarter of the parishes experienced either significant or moderate conflicts with their ruling bishops during the pandemic. On the other hand, for many parishes, this was a powerful learning experience in effective decision-making. Indeed, one-third of the parishes (33%) reported that during the pandemic they "became accustomed to making decisions locally and without waiting for guidance from the diocesan headquarters."

Notably, this newly acquired ability of some parishes for independent decisions was closely associated with the fact that in such parishes "discussion with entire parish community" was often an important part of the process.

The question that remains open is: "After the experience of responding independently and creatively to the crisis, will parishes further test their ability to make decisions locally, thereby challenging traditional Orthodox hierarchical authority?"

**V.** Despite the many challenges and difficulties brought by the pandemic, one in eight American Orthodox parishes (12%) witnessed strong growth in their overall vitality. Chapter 11 focused on this phenomenon.

This boost in vitality reported by the clergy manifested itself in many areas of church life. Along with overall membership growth, there was an even stronger increase in attendance at in-person worship services. The existing (pre-pandemic) members became more involved in their parish. In the area of faith formation programs (even controlling for the overall increase in membership) these parishes grew significantly in the degree of adults' involvement. They also managed to at least retain pre-pandemic rates of participation in religious education among young people. In terms of parish finances (see chapter 10), in many instances, these parishes experienced not simply an improvement but a full reversal from a "tight or difficult" situation to an "excellent or good" one.



In addition to such statistically measurable characteristics, clergy in these 12% of parishes also explained in their own words why they thought that their churches had become “much stronger” throughout the pandemic. Their varied stories and insights are offered in chapter 11.

The study looked at various characteristics of these parishes which could contribute to their success stories and strong growth in vitality. Some of these attributes were demographic and not directly transferable to other parishes. But a number of their distinct features can offer good insights and help other churches to become more vital.

In summary, parishes with substantial growth in vitality are very intentional about following various Orthodox Church requirements and religious practices. In their internal decision-making, they appreciate a collective style in which the entire parish community is involved. Compared to all other parishes, during the pandemic, churches with strong growth in vitality focused more on keeping their worship services and other practices as much as possible unchanged. Many of them never closed their doors for in-person services, did not change the way in which Holy Communion was administered, and continued in-person religious education classes for both young people and adults throughout the pandemic. These parishes were and are reluctant to offer worship services online. And yet, they are wide open to the possibility of trying new things in the life of their parish if needed.

In the following stages of this study, we will follow up with congregations that grew in vitality throughout the pandemic, to see how their lives evolve, in the context of the resumption of “normal” services, ministries, and activities in other Orthodox churches around them.

At this point, thanks to the input from 370 Orthodox Christian clergy, representing congregations from all parts of the country, we have been able to paint a picture of the variety of ways in how parishes responded to the pandemic and how they now attempt to discern their new “normal” future. So far, however, we have heard only the perspectives of clergy. The next crucially important step of this study will be to listen to the “people in the pews” – ordinary Orthodox parishioners – and learn from them how the pandemic has changed the lives of their congregations.

Whether you are a clergyman or a lay member, we have a question for you: “Would you be willing to help with such an inquiry in your parish – to elicit your parishioners’ opinions on how the pandemic changed their



religious lives and how they envision the future of the Church?" If so, please communicate via email to [orthodoxdata@usreligioncensus.org](mailto:orthodoxdata@usreligioncensus.org) or via the contact form on the website, [www.orthodoxreality.org](http://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, your feedback, comments, and suggestions are always welcome.

# Questionnaire used in the survey of Orthodox parish clergy

## The Impact of the Pandemic on American Orthodox Parishes

1. How well does each of these statements describe your parish? (Check one on each line)

|   | Strongly disagree     | Disagree              | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree                 | Strongly agree        |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| During the pandemic, our parish became accustomed to making decisions locally and without waiting for guidance from the diocesan headquarters | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Since the pandemic, our parish has found and embraced new opportunities for ministry  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Despite the pandemic, the life of our parish has continued without major disruption   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| As a result of the pandemic, our parish has significantly increased its involvement in the local community                                    | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

2. All things considered, how would you compare the overall vitality and strength of your parish before the pandemic and now?

|  |                            |                       |                              |  |
|--|----------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|--|
| Our parish is much weaker now than before the pandemic | We are somewhat weaker now | We are about the same | We are somewhat stronger now | Our parish is much stronger now than before the pandemic |
| <input type="radio"/>                                  | <input type="radio"/>      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>        | <input type="radio"/>                                    |

3. Please say a few words about main reasons you selected this answer when comparing your parish's vitality now to before the pandemic

A few questions about the unique context of your parish community

4. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your parish? (Check one on each line)

|   | Strongly disagree     | Disagree              | No opinion / Not sure | Agree                 | Strongly agree        |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Our parish is striving to become more diverse racially and ethnically     | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Our parish has a strong ethnic culture and identity                       | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Our parish is always willing to try new things and to meet new challenges | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Our parish is good at using modern technologies to enhance church life    | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

5. In which state is your parish located?

Select the state from the drop-down menu

State:

6. What is your Orthodox Church jurisdiction?

Select from the drop-down menu

Orthodox Church jurisdiction:

7. **Before the pandemic**, how many people (including children) regularly participated (at least once a month) in worship services or other activities in your parish? About:

8. **Currently**, how many people (including children) regularly participate in worship services or other activities in your parish at least once a month (**counting both in-person and online**)? About:

9. Of the current regular participants (the number from previous question) how many are:

Children and youth (ages 0-17):

Senior adults (ages 65 and older):

10. Of the current regular participants how many are of the following ancestries:

Asian

Black or African American

Hispanic or Latino

European or Middle Eastern

11. The primary language used in worship services in your parish is:

- English
- Some other language
- About evenly mixed between English and another language(s)

12. In your parish, how much emphasis is given to each of the following? (Check one on each line)

|  | No or little emphasis | Some emphasis         | A lot of emphasis     |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Strict observance of Orthodox religious practices: e.g., fasting, weekly church attendance   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Service and involvement in your local community: e.g., offering your parish facility for community events, food pantry, homeless shelter | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Religious education for children and teenagers   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Religious education for adults   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Orthodox evangelism: welcoming prospective converts and working with catechumens   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Small group activities and ministries  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

13. Of all regularly participating adults, what **percent (%)** would you estimate:

Are converts to Orthodox Church (%)

Joined the parish since the start of the pandemic (%)

Volunteer regularly at the parish (%)

About changes brought by the pandemic

14. Did your parish ever stop worshipping in person due to the pandemic?

- Yes, for an extended period
- Yes, but only for a short time
- No, never
- None of the above

If you selected "none of the above," please explain:

15. Have one or more of your parishioners died of COVID-19?

- No
- Yes

If "yes," approximately how many?

16. **Before the pandemic (2019)**, what was the total (including children) average attendance at your Sunday service? About:

17. **Currently**, what is the total (including children) average in-person attendance at your Sunday service? About:

18. How have the following changed in your parish since the start of the pandemic? (Check one on each line)

|   | Increased significantly | Increased moderately  | No change             | Decreased moderately  | Decreased significantly |
|---|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Overall involvement of parishioners in the parish                                 | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>   |
| Average size of individual (per parishioner) monetary contributions to the parish | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>   |
| Disagreements between parish community and your ruling hierarch                   | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>   |
| Small group activities and ministries   | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>   |
| Involvement of children and teenagers in religious education                      | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>   |
| Involvement in religious education for adults                                     | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>   |
| Number of parishioners experiencing financial hardships                           | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>   |

19. How would you describe your parish's financial health now versus two years ago, before the pandemic? (Check one on each line)

|   | Excellent             | Good                  | Tight but manageable  | In difficulty         | In serious difficulty |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Your parish's financial health <b>now</b>                 | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Your parish's financial health <b>before the pandemic</b> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

20. Does your parish offer any option to attend its services online?

- No
- Yes, we regularly record our services and post later online
- Yes, we regularly live-stream our services
- None of the above

If you selected "none of the above," please explain:

21. Do you have a significant number of parishioners who attend mostly online and rarely if ever come to church?

- No
- I do not know
- Yes

If "yes," please give your best estimate of the percentage (%) of parishioners who attend mostly online and rarely if ever come to church. About (%):

22. Do you think that many people who are not part of your parish and live far away watch your services online?

- No, I don't think so
- I do not know
- Yes



About changes in religious education in your parish

23. What best describes religious education for **children and teenagers** in your parish now versus before the pandemic?

- Since the start of the pandemic, religious education for children and teenagers has been essentially shut down
- Religious education for children and teenagers was switched from in-person to online mode. It is still in online mode now
- Religious education for children and teenagers was switched for some time from in-person to online. But it is back to in-person now
- Religious education for children and teenagers has been and remains in-person. We never switched to an online mode
- Any other answer

If you selected "other", please describe

24. What best describes religious education for **adults** in your parish now versus before the pandemic?

- Since the start of the pandemic, religious education for adults has been essentially shut down
- Religious education for adults was switched from in-person to online mode. It is still in online mode now
- Religious education for adults was switched for some time from in-person to online. But it is back to in-person now
- Religious education adults has been and remains in-person. We never switched to an online mode
- Any other answer

If you selected "other", please describe

25. Counting both in-person and online classes, how many children and teenagers are now involved in religious education **versus** before the pandemic?

Number of children and teenagers participating in religious education NOW

Number of children and teenagers participating in religious education BEFORE the pandemic

26. Counting both in-person and online classes, how many adults are now involved in religious education **versus** before the pandemic?

Number of adults participating in religious education NOW

Number of adults participating in religious education BEFORE the pandemic

27. Do you have any ideas about how to keep children and teenagers engaged in religious education despite all the changes and challenges brought by the pandemic?

About lasting consequences of the pandemic

28. Which of the following best describes your opinion about offering online Orthodox services?

- I support the introduction of online services. They make attendance possible and easy for a much greater number of people
- Attending virtually is a viable option for certain categories of parishioners
- Attending services online is acceptable only under extraordinary circumstances: e.g., church is closed for in-person worship, a person is ill, etc.
- I strongly oppose online services, because they undermine the very essence of our Orthodox liturgical worship tradition
- None of the above

If you selected "none of above," please explain:

29. Have you begun any new community outreach or social service program since the start of the pandemic **of which you are truly proud**? If yes, please tell us a bit about these efforts.

30. Many parishes switched their activities from in-person to virtual/online. Whether or not your parish offers the following activities, do you think that moving to an online format **increases or decreases** parishioners' involvement in them? (Check one on each line)

|  | Online format increases involvement | No difference         | Online format decreases involvement | No opinion            |
|--|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Weekday worship services                       | <input type="radio"/>               | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>               | <input type="radio"/> |
| Sunday Liturgy                                 | <input type="radio"/>               | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>               | <input type="radio"/> |
| Religious education for adults                 | <input type="radio"/>               | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>               | <input type="radio"/> |
| Religious education for children               | <input type="radio"/>               | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>               | <input type="radio"/> |
| Youth activities and programs                  | <input type="radio"/>               | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>               | <input type="radio"/> |
| Work with prospective converts and catechumens | <input type="radio"/>               | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>               | <input type="radio"/> |
| Small group activities and ministries          | <input type="radio"/>               | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>               | <input type="radio"/> |

31. Overall, when introducing various various new church policies and practices related to the pandemic, how much did each of the following influence your decisions? (Check one on each line)

|  | Dominant influence    | Strong influence      | Some influence        | No influence          |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Personal position of a priest in this parish | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Guidance from ruling hierarch                | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Parish Council's position                    | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| CDC recommendations                          | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Open discussion with entire parish community | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

32. Has your parish experienced conflict or dissent regarding any of the following aspects brought by the pandemic? (Check one on each line)

|   | No conflict or mild conflict | Moderate conflict     | Severe conflict       |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Being (or not being) asked to wear masks in church                                | <input type="radio"/>        | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Allowing (or not allowing) choir to sing  | <input type="radio"/>        | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| How Holy Communion is being administered  | <input type="radio"/>        | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Continuation of in-person services or limiting the number of people in attendance | <input type="radio"/>        | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Whether to switch programs and activities to online or in-person mode             | <input type="radio"/>        | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

33. Is there any difference between how you administer Holy Communion now versus before the pandemic?

- No  
 Yes

34. Please select all items that apply to how you currently administer Holy Communion:

- The communicants are instructed not to close their lips on the spoon
- The spoon(s) is/are sanitized between communicants
- We use multiple spoons, one for each communicant, that are sanitized after each Liturgy
- We use disposable spoons which are collected and discarded after each Liturgy
- We use "intinction." The bread is dipped in consecrated wine and placed in small plastic cups which are distributed among parishioners

Any other approach to or changes in how you administer Holy Communion. Please describe.

35. What are your biggest concerns brought by the pandemic for the future of your parish?

36. Reflecting on the past two years, what would you say the parish is most proud of in addressing various challenges and difficulties?

**And finally, just two questions about you**

37. What is your age? Years:

38. Are you a "cradle Orthodox" or a convert to the Orthodox Faith?

- Cradle Orthodox  
 Convert to the Orthodox Faith

39. Thank you for your help. Last question. So far we asked only parish leadership about the impact of the pandemic. But the opinions of ordinary parishioners are also important. Would you be willing to help conduct a similar survey among your parish members?

- Yes  
 No

40. If you are willing to help, please provide your name and best contact information

Your name

Your email address

Your phone number