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**The “New Traditional” in a Most Traditional Church:
How the Pandemic Has Reshaped American Orthodox Christian Churches
Part Two: What Do Lay People Think about It?**

Major Findings and Conclusions

This is the second report from the ongoing study which examines the long-term consequences of the pandemic for Orthodox Christian Churches in the USA. 2,015 lay members in American Orthodox parishes from all parts of the country participated in this second stage of the study. They shared what had happened in their congregations during the past two years and reflected on changes in their church attitudes and participation.

Each chapter describes recent transformations in some area of congregational life as seen by the ordinary church members including: religious and social attitudes of parishioners, worship attendance, overall involvement in the parish, trust in clergy and church hierarchy (Bishops, Metropolitans), the “online format” in church life, the looming problem of the faith formation of young people, major needs of American Orthodox churches, the generosity of members in their giving to parishes, and changes in the overall strength of congregations. Special attention was given to the “mysterious” surge in vitality experienced by 13% of American Orthodox parishes.

Each chapter can be read separately, depending on the interests of the reader.

All these subjects were also discussed in the first study report, which was based on a national survey of 370 Orthodox parish priests.¹ It should be noted that what we learned from the “people in the pews” was mostly (and, sometimes, remarkably) consistent with the opinions and information offered by their “shepherds,” the Orthodox clergy, in the first stage of the study. In this final chapter, we will merge and summarize what both priests and parishioners told us. The following major conclusions provide a very abbreviated synopsis of the many findings. We emphasize these in particular because they reflect significant trends that can powerfully affect the future of Orthodox Church life in America.

¹ The first study report can be accessed here:
<https://orthodoxreality.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/NewTraditionalInMostTraditionalChurchClergyReportReduced.pdf>

DEFINITIONS USED ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES:

- *Never Closing parishes:* parishes which remained open to congregants for in-person worship services throughout the pandemic
- *Intentionally Orthodox parishes:* parishes whose members “strongly agreed” that their parishes “expect members to strictly follow the practices of the Orthodox Church: weekly church attendance, fasting, confessions, participation in religious education, etc.”
- *Experimental parishes:* parishes whose members “strongly agreed” that their parishes are “always willing to try new things and meet new challenges”

I. Three Categories of Parishes Which Navigated through the Pandemic Most Successfully

Through the array of subjects explored on previous pages, we repeatedly saw that the same three categories of parishes had better success in continuing their ministries throughout the pandemic than did other Orthodox Christian congregations. These three categories are:

- “Never closing” parishes (22% of all US Orthodox parishes according to clergy survey, 17% according to laity survey)
- “Intentionally Orthodox” parishes (17% and 15%, respectively)
- “Experimental” parishes (12% and 13%, respectively)

These three categories not only adapted better, but even *improved* in various ways despite the challenges brought by COVID-19. When compared to pre-pandemic, they were much more likely to have grown in worship attendance, in overall involvement of members in the life of the parish beyond worship services, and in participation of children and teenagers in parish-based religious education. Also, more members in such congregations feel that they have grown significantly in their personal faith through the pandemic.

Some American Orthodox parishes “fit” into two (or even all three) categories simultaneously. Yet, overall the characteristics and “scenarios” of dealing with the pandemic of “never closing,” intentionally Orthodox,” and “experimental” parishes were quite distinct. Chapter 13 discussed in detail the different “paths” taken by these three types of parishes throughout the pandemic – each successful in its own way.

II. Changes in Worship Attendance and Overall Involvement of Church Members

During the past two years, most parishes suffered losses in total membership and, even more dramatically, in the number of people who attend liturgical services after the churches reopened for in-person worship. This conclusion coming from the pews (members) is consistent with data from the pulpit (clergy).

As measured by in-person worship attendance, the clergy survey revealed that a “typical” Orthodox parish lost 22% of its pre-pandemic “people in the pews” on a typical Sunday. In the survey of lay church members, about a quarter (23%) of parishioners reported that they now attend worship services less frequently than prior to the pandemic, and only 5% said “more often.”

Looking at engagement of parishioners from the clergy’s perspective, a “typical” (median) congregation shrank by 15% in regularly involved members (i.e., more than one out of seven pre-pandemic parishioners is missing). Lay survey respondents also reported a significant decline; when asked about their overall involvement in the parish beyond worship services, 39% indicated a decrease in participation, and only 27% reported greater involvement.

This generally negative trend was partially counterbalanced by two other findings.

First, some parishes experienced the opposite and grew substantially. 21% of all parishes witnessed growth in parishioners by more than 20%, and 17% of churches reported an increase in in-person worship attendance of more than 20%. And this growth was not random. The three categories of parishes listed above (“never closing,” “intentionally Orthodox,” and “experimental”) had significantly more members who increased their participation since the start of the pandemic. In addition, three other factors were associated with growth in members and attendance:

- Parishes have a high percentage of converts to Orthodoxy and/or are led by convert clergy
- Parishes do not offer services online
- Members of a parish were united in their views and preferences regarding pandemic-related policies and restrictions in the church

Second, from the numerous comments offered by the clergy, it appears that the losses in membership primarily affected marginally involved members, 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 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.”

III. The Area of Congregational Life Which Was Most Negatively Affected by the Pandemic

The single area of church life which suffered most from two years of the pandemic is faith formation of children and teenagers. Many of them ceased their participation in religious education offered by their parish.

According to Orthodox clergy survey, looking nationwide, a “typical” (median) parish is currently missing a quarter of its pre-pandemic students. In the survey of laity, 30% of parishioners with children reported either their complete withdrawal (16%) from parish-based religious education or a decrease (14%) in their participation. Further, one out of six parishes completely shut down their faith formation programs for young people with the start of the pandemic and have not yet resumed them.

Alongside this overall decline in young people’s involvement in religious education, some parishes witnessed the opposite trend. 14% of congregations reported a substantial growth (by more than +20%) in the number of students. The surveys of both clergy and laity revealed that two factors contribute significantly to greater participation of children and teenagers in religious education offered by a parish.

The first is the modality of learning. 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 a “virtual remote” participation is important for young people’s involvement in faith formation programs and activities.

These findings, supported by measurable statistics, were fully corroborated by the personal opinions of parish clergy and congregants. 56% of the priests believe that the online classes are damaging for engagement of young people in religious education. 86% of Orthodox parents expressed the view that the in-person format of religious education is a much better and more efficient way of learning for children and teens than online classes.

Two comments offered by the clergy summarize these conclusions: “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 in the 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.”

IV. The Future of the “Online Church” in American Orthodox Christian Congregations

During the pandemic, the online format was the only option for participation in worship and other activities in the vast majority of Orthodox parishes which were closed for in-person gatherings. As the pandemic continued, more and more parishioners became fully accustomed to “Zooming” into church from the comfort of home. For some of them, the online mode was increasingly seen not simply as safer, but also as more convenient and time-efficient.

After two years of experimentation, both clergy and members formed their opinions about remote versions of Orthodox services and parish life in general. About half the priests (46%) support online services, because they make it easier for more people to participate, and certain categories of parishioners can only attend this way. Slightly more than half either unconditionally reject online services as undermining the essence of Orthodox liturgical worship, or accept them only in the case of extraordinary circumstances. Compared to the clergy, more Orthodox laity (61%) are supportive of online services.

Although presently nearly two-thirds (63%) of the parishes continue to offer their services on the Internet, it does not appear that the online version of congregational life has a significant future in American Orthodox Churches. That is for two reasons.

First, while most Orthodox Church members in principle are supportive of keeping remote services as an option, the vast majority of them prefer physical church and actually attend in person. Only 7% worship mostly or exclusively online and only 1% would continue to do so if COVID-19 were not a concern at all. Orthodox parishioners also have a strong preference for the in-person mode when discussing spiritual and intimate matters (e.g., Sacrament of Confession, personal counseling) with their pastors. Even in the cases of religious education for adults and the parish’s business meetings, very few (only about 10%) would opt for an exclusively or primarily remote mode, although a mixture of online and in-person meetings is appealing for a greater number (about 40%) of people in the pews.

Second, data from the clergy survey show that in almost all areas of parish life, the virtual modality has had a rather negative impact on parishioners’ involvement. The online format has had an especially strong negative influence on parishioners’ participation in the Sunday Divine Liturgy and the involvement of young people in religious education.

Yet, there are a few “saving graces” that argue for keeping some measure of online options available. The study of clergy found that the online mode can be instrumental in maintaining a degree of engagement among those church members who are only marginally involved in a parish. Priests also reported that the online modality can potentially enhance two parish ministries: work with prospective converts and catechumens, and religious education for adults.

V. The Pandemic Affected Trust in Church Leadership and Decision Making in the Parishes

The pandemic tested the ability of parishes to make tough decisions under extraordinary and fast-changing circumstances. Difficult deliberations on safety protocols and new church policies were further complicated by the highly centralized administration which is characteristic of the Orthodox Church. It calls for strict obedience to hierarchs (Bishops, Metropolitans) and leaves little room for debate by the local congregation. However, the need for rapid and locally contextualized adaptations challenged this traditional model of waiting for a bishop to provide direction to his entire multi-state diocese.

As the pandemic evolved, it became clear that this model did not meet the unique circumstances and needs of the local congregations. While many parishes grudgingly accepted all directives of their reigning hierarchs, others simply took matters into their own hands and decided for themselves.

The consequences of these experiments with local independent decision making were numerous. From the survey of US parish clergy, we learned that nearly a quarter of the congregations had experienced conflicts with their ruling bishops. At the same time, this was also a powerful learning experience in effective congregational administration. Indeed, one-third of the priests (33%) reported that during the pandemic their parishes “became accustomed to making decisions locally and without waiting for guidance from the diocesan headquarters.”

The survey of lay church members further contributed to this picture of congregations becoming more independent in their decisions and more skeptical of their ruling hierarchs. First, it was found that people in the pews were much more satisfied with the leadership provided by their parish clergy than by the Bishops and Metropolitans. 43% of parishioners said that their “trust in a parish priest to make good decisions” had grown since the start of the pandemic, and only 24% reported a decline in confidence.

Conversely, trust in the hierarchs of the Church dropped: 40% of Orthodox Church members are now less confident in the ability of their Bishops and Metropolitans to make good decisions than they were pre-pandemic, and only 20% reported an increase in confidence.

Second, and even more importantly, parishioners feel that the opinions of all ordinary church members – not only church leadership – must be seriously taken into account when making decisions in future critical situations. 50% of congregants believe that “open deliberations with the entire parish” should be a “dominant or strong” source of authority in critical decisions made by a parish.

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

VI. Understanding the 13% of American Orthodox Parishes Which Surged in Vitality

The surveys of American Orthodox clergy and lay church members, conducted independently and two months apart from each other, revealed the same fact: about 12-13% of American Orthodox Christian congregations have experienced strong growth in overall vitality since the start of the pandemic. This boost in congregational vitality manifested itself in many measurable characteristics such as:²

- Overall membership growth which was accompanied by an even stronger increase in attendance at worship services
- Significant growth in adults’ involvement in religious education and – albeit to a lesser degree – in young people’s engagement in faith formation programs
- Increase in members’ giving to the parishes, which resulted in stronger congregational financial health as compared to pre-pandemic
- Members reported greater overall church participation beyond worship services
- Members reported significant growth in personal faith through the pandemic
- Members reported greater trust in their clergy’s ability to make good decisions and in fellow parishioners’ capacity to collaborate despite personal differences

² For in depth discussion and actual data, see chapter 13 of this report and chapter 11 of the report from clergy survey available at: <https://orthodoxreality.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/NewTraditionalInMostTraditionalChurchClergyReportReduced.pdf>

When we looked at various characteristics of the 13% of congregations which surged in vitality, a general picture emerged, with a number of features distinguishing them from other US Orthodox parishes:

- They have a higher percentage of members who are converts to Orthodox faith
- During the pandemic, these congregations focused on keeping worship services and other practices unchanged as much as possible. This was especially true for continuing in-person religious education classes for young people and not changing the way in which Holy Communion was administered
- These parishes found various ways to offer their members a strong sense of being supported during the pandemic
- In internal decision making, these congregations especially appreciate involving the entire parish community
- Their members tend to have conservative social and church-related attitudes
- Their members prefer parishes that “expect uniformity of belief and practices, where people hold more or less the same views” rather than parishes “where people have different views and openly discuss their disagreements”
- Their members tend to disapprove of online Orthodox worship services; these parishes are also less likely to offer the option to worship remotely
- Many of their members deny the danger of COVID-19 and the efficacy of vaccination

This description of the congregations which experienced strong growth in vitality presents an overall picture, but the reality is more nuanced. Most of the parishes with a surge in vitality since the start of the pandemic belong to one of the following categories:

- “Never closing”
- “Intentionally Orthodox”
- “Experimental”

The paths leading these three categories of parishes to much stronger vitality were in many respects different: especially when comparing “never closing” and “intentionally Orthodox” (more similar to each other) to “experimental” parishes. Chapter 13 of the full report examined this finding in great details.

In short, both “intentionally Orthodox” and “never closing” congregations tend to be smaller in size and have more members who are converts to the Orthodox faith. Their congregants generally show conservative social and church-related attitudes and prefer uniformity of beliefs and opinions in a parish. A clear majority of them deny the dangers associated with COVID-19 and the importance of vaccination.

Unlike the “never closing,” many “intentionally Orthodox” parishes ceased their physical worship gatherings. Yet, an overwhelming majority of congregations in both categories maintained in-person religious education classes for children and teenagers throughout the pandemic.

While both “intentionally Orthodox” parishes and “never closing” churches introduced online services, their members have an overwhelmingly negative opinion about remote participation in Orthodox worship.

Being larger in size than the “never closing” and “intentionally Orthodox,” the “experimental” congregations also have more cradle Orthodox members. Their parishioners are more inclined to tolerate diversity in opinions and display more liberal social and church-related attitudes when compared to congregants in the other two categories of parishes.

The manifestations of surge in vitality (listed at the beginning of this chapter) were present in all three categories, but some of them were more pronounced in some of these three parish types than in the others.

Both “intentionally Orthodox” and “never closing” congregations achieved impressive increase in membership and rise in the number of people attending their worship services as compared to pre-COVID. Both of them were effective in offering parishioners much-needed support during the pandemic. But between these two, members of “intentionally Orthodox” parishes experienced stronger growth in their personal faith and overall church involvement.

Compared to “intentionally Orthodox” and “never closing” churches, the “experimental” parishes had greater success in building more cohesive communities throughout the pandemic. Their members now have much greater optimism about their clergy’s and fellow congregants’ ability to make good decisions and work jointly across personal differences. They were also very successful in increasing the generosity of parishioners towards their churches.

The “experimental” parish communities took the dangers of COVID-19 seriously, and a vast majority ceased in-person services for some period of time. Yet, despite the absence of in-person gatherings, “experimental” congregations were as successful as “never closing” and “intentionally Orthodox” parishes in finding ways to provide their people with a strong sense of support throughout the pandemic.

When the pandemic retreated, parishioners in “experimental” congregations resumed in-person attendance to the same degree as congregants in the other two categories of parishes. At the same time, they acquired a greater appreciation for online services. Now, post-pandemic, the parishioners in “experimental” parishes are overwhelmingly in favor of maintaining the additional option to attend church remotely.

It should also be noted that among the three categories, the “experimental” parishes displayed the most robust correlation with a parish’s strong growth in vitality. That is, the willingness of a parish community to “try new things and to meet new challenges” was even more important for an upturn in vitality during the pandemic than a parish’s strong focus on Orthodox beliefs and practices, or its resolve to stay open for in-person services through the pandemic.

Where do we go from here? At this point, thanks to the input from 370 Orthodox Christian clergy and 2,015 lay church members, representing congregations from all parts of the country, we have been able to examine the variety of ways in which parishes responded to the pandemic and attempt now to discern their “new normal.” But the measurable survey data and statistics alone could never present a fully nuanced portrait of a local religious community – its unique journey through the COVID-19 crisis and aspirations to have a viable and vibrant future.

In the concluding stage of this study, we will follow up with a few selected congregations that sparkled in vitality throughout the pandemic. More specifically, we will identify parishes that have managed to thrive by developing creative adaptations both to their worship and their non-liturgical activities (e.g., religious education, small group ministries, and community outreach) *while retaining* what is core to Orthodoxy.

Through the so-called “portraiture” method, involving in-person visits, participant observation, interviews, and focus groups, we will explore their unique congregational cultures, personal stories of members, and the way individual parishioners interact among themselves and with their congregations.

The goal of this last coming phase of the study is to create nuanced “portraits” of each parish – narratives and stories that depict their journeys through the pandemic to greater strength. Our hope is that these narratives will help other congregations to better visualize successful strategies that they can use, or simply inspire them to find their own “best-fit” approach to post-pandemic recovery.

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 or via the contact form on the website, www.orthodoxreality.org.

We encourage you to share this report via social media with your parish communities as well as with Orthodox friends and relatives. And, of course, your feedback, comments, and suggestions are always welcome.