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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?**

#### **Executive Summary**

This is the second report from an ongoing study examining the lasting consequences of the pandemic for Orthodox Christian Churches in the USA. Its core question is: how has the pandemic transformed the Orthodox Church that many think of as “the original ancient Christian Church that never changes”?

2,015 lay Church members from all parts of the country participated in the second stage of the study via an online survey. The first stage of the study and first report were based on a national survey of 370 Orthodox parish clergy, which was conducted in February 2022,<sup>1</sup> two months prior to the survey of laity. What we learned from the people in the pews was remarkably consistent with the opinions and information offered by their shepherds, the Orthodox priests. Among many questions, special attention was given to a “mysterious” surge in vitality experienced by 13% of American Orthodox parishes despite or even because of the pandemic.

This project 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. The following major subjects are discussed in the report:

- ❖ Changes in members’ involvement in the parishes, their personal faith, and attitudes towards the Church.
- ❖ Factors leading to growth in participation in some congregations versus the widespread decline experienced by most other parishes
- ❖ Decline in participation in religious education for children and teenagers
- ❖ Possible future of the “online mode” in the lives of American Orthodox parishes
- ❖ Impact of the pandemic on parishioners’ giving to their congregations
- ❖ Most common scenarios of upsurge and downfall in parish communities during the past two years

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<sup>1</sup> The first study report can be accessed here:

<https://orthodoxreality.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/NewTraditionalInMostTraditionalChurchClergyReportReduced.pdf>

- ❖ Greatest post-pandemic needs of the parishes and their major fears for the future
- ❖ Changes in overall parish vitality and distinctive features of the 13% of congregations manifesting a surge in vitality throughout the pandemic
- ❖ Three different paths to powerful growth in congregational vitality

The study was conducted in cooperation with the national research initiative, *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations: Innovation Amidst and Beyond COVID-19*. This made it possible, for several topics, to compare the consequences of the pandemic for US Orthodox Churches with those of other Christian denominations.

A few examples of key findings are given below.

- ❖ Three categories of Orthodox congregations navigated through the pandemic most successfully:
  - *Never Closing parishes*, which remained open to congregants for in-person worship services throughout the pandemic
  - *Intentionally Orthodox 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*, whose members “strongly agreed” that their parishes are “always willing to try new things and meet new challenges”

These three categories not only adapted better, but even *improved* in various ways despite all challenges. 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, 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.

- ❖ 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. About a quarter (23%) of parishioners reported that they now attend services less frequently than prior to the pandemic, and only 5% said “more often.” When asked about overall involvement in the parish, 39% indicated a decrease in participation, and only 27% reported greater involvement. But some parishes experienced the opposite and grew substantially in members and attendance. Three factors were associated with this growth:
  - Having a high percentage of converts to Orthodoxy among members or being led by convert clergy
  - Not offering services online

- Having parishioners united in their views and preferences regarding pandemic-related policies and restrictions in the church
  
- ❖ The area of church life which suffered most from the pandemic is faith formation of children and teenagers. Many young people stopped participating in religious education offered by their parish. 30% of parishioners with children reported either their complete withdrawal (16%) from parish-based religious education or a decrease (14%) in participation. One out of six parishes completely shut down faith formation programs for young people with the start of the pandemic and have not resumed them. But some parishes witnessed the opposite trend. Two factors contributed significantly to greater participation of children and teenagers in religious education in such parishes:
  - The first is the modality of learning. Maintaining in-person classes and not switching to an online format is crucial for young people's engagement in faith formation programs.
  - The second factor – statistically even more significant – is consistent in-person attendance of young people at worship services.
  
- ❖ About half the Orthodox priests (46%) support offering services online, because this makes it easier for more people to participate, and certain categories of parishioners can only attend this way. Slightly more than half the clergy 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 keeping online services as an option.
  
- ❖ Presently, nearly two-thirds (63%) of the parishes continue to offer their services on the Internet, but it does not appear that an “online version” of congregational life will flourish in American Orthodox Christian Churches. That is for two reasons.
  - While most Church members in principle are supportive of keeping remote services as an option, the vast majority of them prefer physical church and attend in person. Only 7% worship mostly online and only 1% would continue to do so if COVID-19 was not a concern at all.
  - Data show that virtual modality has had a strong negative impact on members' 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 activity. It was 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. Also, the online modality can potentially enhance two parish ministries: work with prospective converts and catechumens, and religious education for adults.

- ❖ COVID-19 affected trust of parishioners in Church leadership. During the pandemic, people in the pews were much more satisfied with the guidance provided by their parish clergy than by the hierarchs (Bishops and Metropolitans). 43% of parishioners reported “their trust in a parish priest to make good decisions” had grown since the start of the pandemic, and only 24% reported a decline. 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.
  
- ❖ The surveys of American Orthodox clergy and laity, conducted three months apart from each other, revealed the same fact: about 12-13% of American Orthodox Christian parishes have experienced strong growth in vitality since the start of the pandemic. This boost in congregational vitality manifested itself in many measurable characteristics that are presented in this report. Congregations which surged in vitality have a number of distinct - from other US Orthodox parishes - features:
  - They have a higher percentage of members who are converts to Orthodox faith.
  - During the pandemic, they 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
  - They offered their members a strong sense of being supported during the pandemic.
  - These congregations aspire to involve the entire parish community in internal decision-making.
  - 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.

Yet, even among these parishes there were noteworthy variations, and some of above features made more of a difference for rise in vitality than others. All these factors and more are discussed in the report.

If you have any comments or questions, please send email to [orthodoxdata@usreligioncensus.org](mailto:orthodoxdata@usreligioncensus.org)