

by Alexei Krindatch ([www.orthodoxreality.org](http://www.orthodoxreality.org))

## 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?

*“I feel that a sense of spiritual need was lost by many, following the forced separation from gatherings at our religious home. While church was closed, many have convinced themselves that their life does not need or depend on the Sunday Divine Liturgy and that there are other more important things to do on a Sunday morning than to ‘sit in church’.”*

*“The pandemic has strengthened our commitment and love for our church and God. We would not let the pandemic keep us away from our prayers and our church. If we could not be there in person, we were there virtually and most importantly we were there spiritually.”* Written comments submitted by parishioners participating in the study

Executive Summary	p. 2
Introduction: About This Study	p. 6
I. People in the Pews and Their Parishes	p. 8
II. Religious and Social Attitudes of American Orthodox Christians: A 15-Year Contrast	p. 14
III. Church Life during the Pandemic and What Parishioners Believe about COVID-19	p. 28
IV. How the Pandemic Changed Involvement of Members in Parishes, Their Personal Faith, and Attitudes towards the Church	p. 33
V. Tough Lessons of Conflict and Decision Making in Parishes during the Pandemic	p. 41
VI. The Pandemic’s Biggest Victim: Religious Education for Children and Teenagers	p. 46
VII. Does the “Online Church” Have a Future in American Orthodox parishes?	p. 52
VIII. The Pandemic and Changes in Parish Vitality	p. 60
IX. Seven Scenarios of Upsurge and Seven Scenarios of Downfall in Parish Communities	p. 66
X. How the Pandemic Has Changed Financial Giving to a Parish	p. 73
XI. Building a Post-Pandemic Future: What Parishes Need and What They Fear	p. 79
XII. Beneficiaries of the Pandemic: the 13% of Parishes with an Upsurge in Vitality	p. 88
XIII. Three Paths to Powerful Growth in Congregational Vitality: How Do they Differ?	p. 94
XIV. Major Findings and Conclusions	p. 107
Appendix: Questionnaire Used in the Survey of Laity	p. 118

## 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
- ❖ 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

---

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

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 religious education 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) or via the contact form on the website, [www.orthodoxreality.org](http://www.orthodoxreality.org).

## Introduction: About This Study

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 faith community to another, depending on the nature of a particular religious tradition and unique local 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.

The core question addressed in this study is: "How has the pandemic transformed the Orthodox Christian Church in the USA, a religious institution that many adherents think of as 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 Orthodox Christian congregations emerged from the crisis stronger than ever, having creatively adapted to new realities while carefully preserving what is core to Orthodox Christianity?"

Two years of the pandemic revealed that American Orthodox Christian parishes responded to the crisis in a variety of ways. They demonstrated marked differences in ability to adapt to the new circumstances in *ways that were acceptable to their local communities of the faithful*. Adaptations provoked by COVID-19 became a source of pride and rejuvenation for some congregations. But elsewhere, sudden changes caused conflict, because they ignored the unique context of a particular parish and were perceived as betraying what was truly essential for Orthodoxy. In yet other congregations, the members and clergy were united in their resolve to *not change* anything in the lives of their parishes and simply carried on through the pandemic as if it did not exist.

This study is comprised of three stages. The first report was published in April 2022.<sup>2</sup> It was based on a national survey conducted in the two preceding months and discusses the perspectives of Orthodox parish clergy from all across the USA.

---

Alexei Krindatch ([akrindatch@aol.com](mailto:akrindatch@aol.com)). "The New 'Traditional' in a Most Traditional Church."

This second report was drawn from a survey of a nationwide sample of ordinary church members, immediately following the first stage. It examines the reflections of the laity on the effect of the pandemic on the lives of their congregations and gives us insight into the possible future of the Orthodox Church in the USA.

The third and final stage will focus on several individual congregations that have thrived and surged in vitality throughout the pandemic. Through in-person visits, participant observation, and interviews with priests and members, we will create “portraits” of each parish – the stories that depict their journeys to greater strength during this challenging period. All reports can be found at: <https://orthodoxreality.org/coronavirus-and-american-orthodox-parishes>.

On the following pages, we address a variety of questions: “Did the pandemic affect the personal religious beliefs and practices of ordinary church members, their overall church involvement, and participation of their children in faith formation programs? How did their trust in church leadership and satisfaction with their parishes change? What do ordinary parishioners think about new online forms of church participation? What are their major concerns regarding the future of their congregations?” These are just a few examples. Finally, we will decipher the success factors of those parishes which managed to thrive and surge in vitality during the past two years despite, and perhaps even because of, the challenges brought on by the pandemic.

This report is based on an online survey of 2,015 Orthodox Christian lay church members from all parts of the country. Data were gathered April 5 – May 5, 2022. A number of survey questions were open-ended, allowing respondents to freely share their personal stories and thoughts.

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 approaches to renewal that can inspire other Churches.

If you would like to offer a comment, ask a question, or indicate specific issues related to the pandemic’s impact on Church life that should be examined, please send your inquiry to [orthodoxdata@usreligioncensus.org](mailto:orthodoxdata@usreligioncensus.org).

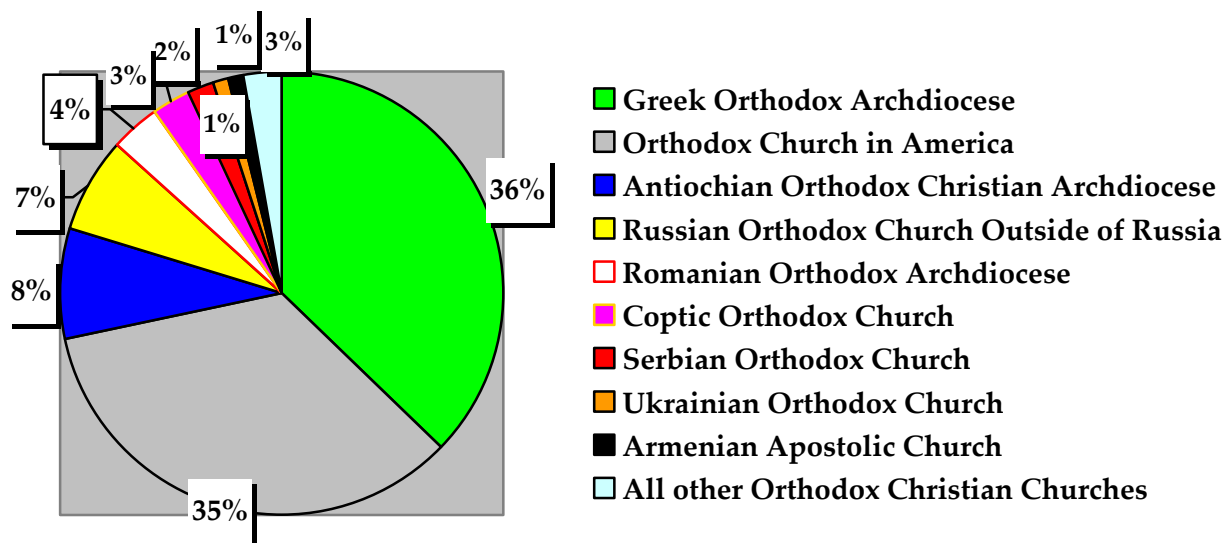
## I. People in the Pews and Their Parishes

### KEY FINDINGS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER:

- ❖ Converts to Orthodoxy attend worship services more frequently than cradle Orthodox parishioners,<sup>3</sup> (73% attend weekly vs. 53%), and they obey Orthodox fasting rules more seriously (24% follow fasting rules “strictly” vs. 17% for cradle Orthodox).
- ❖ Younger (under age 35) church members practice their faith more intensely than middle-aged (35-64 years) or older (65+) parishioners. Compared to middle-aged and older parishioners, a greater percentage of them attend worship services weekly and more strictly obey Orthodox fasting rules.<sup>4</sup>
- ❖ The pandemic resulted in an increased number of “soul searchers” who discovered and joined the Orthodox Church during the past two years.
- ❖ 15% of the respondents “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.” For this study, these parishes were defined as “intentionally Orthodox.”
- ❖ Compared to other American Christian congregations, Orthodox parishes are less willing to try new ways of doing things and strive less to become diverse racially and ethnically.

2,015 Orthodox Christian Church members participated in this study and completed an online questionnaire. The survey was administered April 5 - May 5, 2022. The study participants represented nine national Orthodox Church bodies. See Fig. 1.

**Fig. 1 Orthodox Church Affiliation of the Study Participants**



<sup>3</sup> Those baptized as infants or children

<sup>4</sup> This finding also held true when looking separately at generational differences for converts and for cradle Orthodox. Although this result may seem unexpected because so many young people drop out of the Church, it appears that those who remain are especially devout in their practice.



Geographically, respondents were spread all across the United States. See Fig. 2. It should be noted that the geography of participants in the study accurately mirrors (except for overrepresentation of Colorado) the actual geographic distribution of Orthodox Christian church members in the USA.

**Fig. 2 Geographic Distribution of the Study Participants**

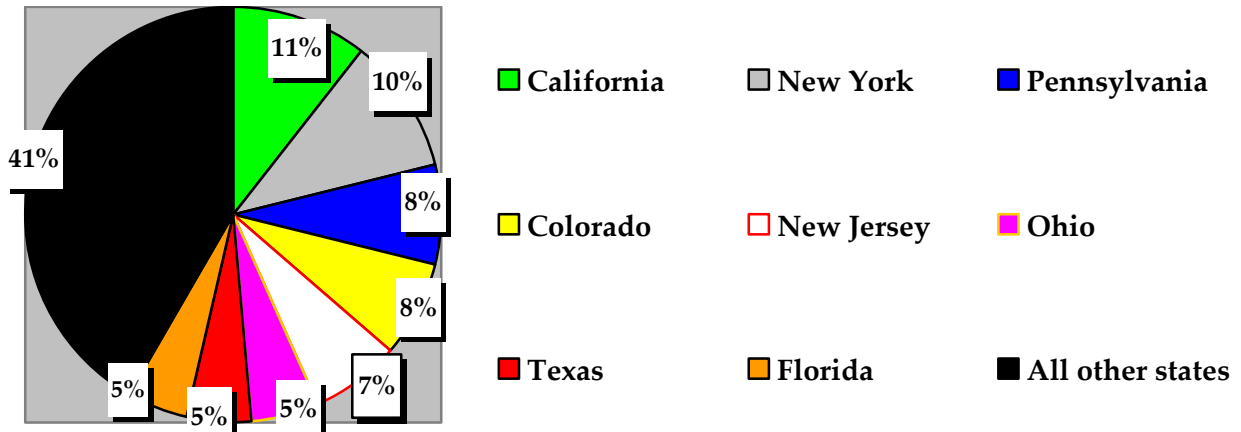


Table 1a offers an overview of demographic characteristics of the study participants. Table 1b provides information on their participation in the life of the Church.

**Table 1a Demographic Characteristics of Orthodox Church Members Participating in the Study**

	Gender: Men / Women	Age: under 35 / 35-64 / 65+	Education level: High school / Some college / College or advanced degree
Percentage	45% / 55%	16% / 52% / 32%	4% / 15% / 81%

**Table 1b Religious Characteristics of Orthodox Church Members Participating in the Study**

	Religious Upbringing: “Cradle” Orthodox <sup>5</sup> / Converts to Orthodox Church	Frequency of church attendance: Occasionally / Once a month / 2-3 times a month / Weekly	Observance of fasting rules: <sup>6</sup> Not much or partially / Mostly / Strictly	Joined current parish since the start of the pandemic
Percentage	48% / 52%	12% / 8% / 17% / 63%	32% / 48% / 20%	8%

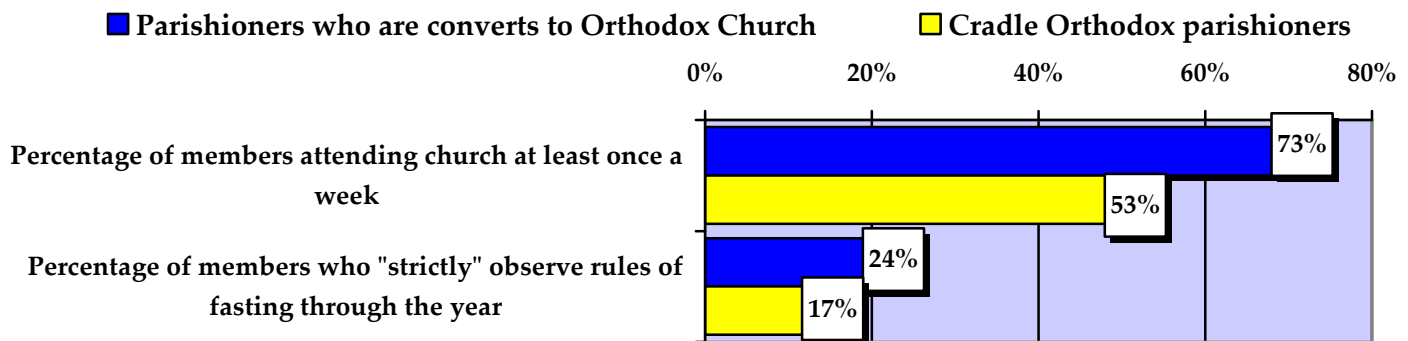
Table 1b shows that 63% of study participants attend services weekly and 20% “strictly” observe the rules of fasting through the year. 15% of study participants reported both weekly church attendance and strict following of Orthodox fasting requirements. For the purposes of this study, we will define these 15% as “strictly observant Orthodox Church members.” In the following pages, we will see if their Church experiences during the pandemic were different from those of other study participants.

<sup>5</sup> “Cradle Orthodox” – those baptized as infants or young children

<sup>6</sup> The respondents were asked: “How seriously do you observe the rules of fasting during Great Lent and through the year?”

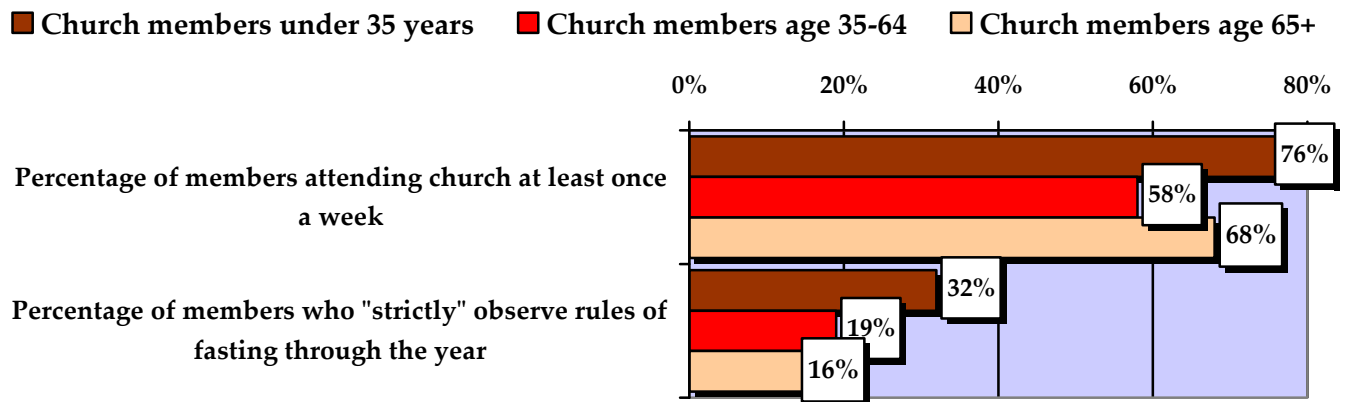
Three further observations should be made with regard to the data in Tables 1a and 1b. First, about half (52%) the study participants were converts to Orthodox Church, while the other half (48%) were cradle Orthodox - i.e., lifelong members of the Orthodox Church. Fig. 3a shows that, compared to cradle Orthodox parishioners, converts to Orthodoxy attend worship services more frequently (73% attend weekly vs. 53% of cradle Orthodox), and they obey Orthodox fasting rules more seriously (24% follow fasting rules “strictly” vs. 17% of cradle Orthodox).

**Fig. 3a Converts to Orthodoxy Go to Church More Often and Obey Fasting Rules More Strictly than Cradle Orthodox Members**



The second – and somewhat surprising – observation is that younger (under 35) church members practice their faith more intensely than the middle-aged (35-64 years) or older (65+) parishioners. Fig. 3b shows that, compared to middle-aged and older parishioners, a greater percentage of younger church members attend worship services weekly and strictly obey Orthodox fasting rules.<sup>7</sup>

**Fig. 3b Younger Parishioners Go to Church More Often and They Obey Fasting Rules More Strictly than Middle-Aged and Older Church Members**

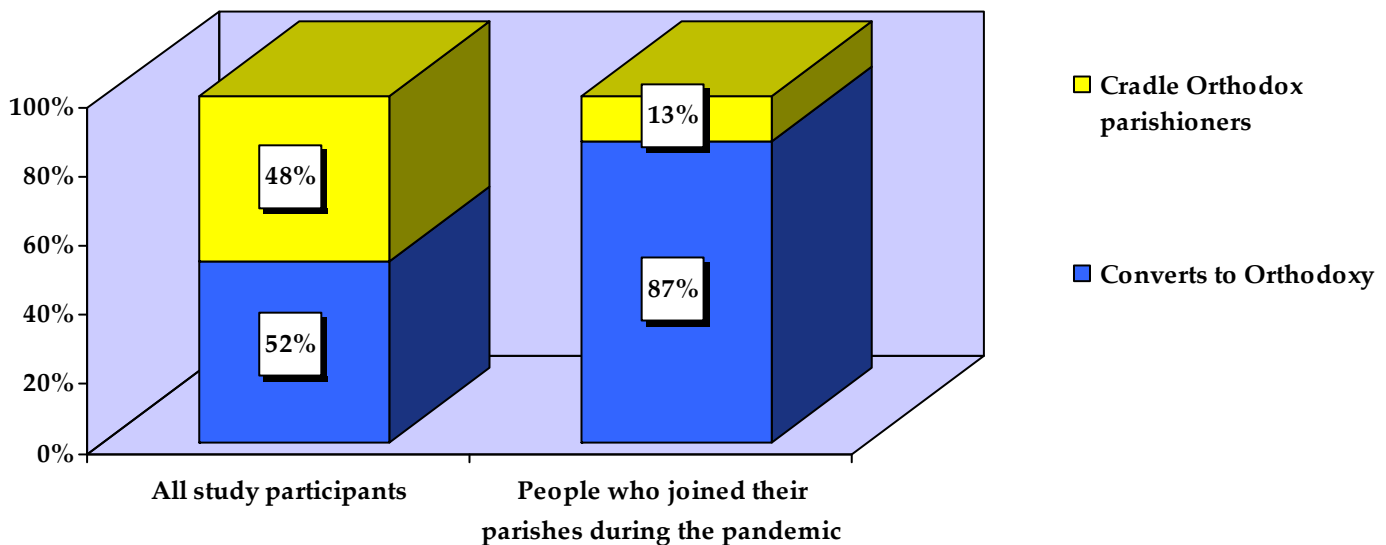


<sup>7</sup> This finding also held true when looking separately at generational differences for converts and cradle Orthodox.

This finding appears counterintuitive, because most Orthodox parishes struggle with attracting (or even retaining) young members. However, there is no contradiction here. Indeed, many young people drop out of Church altogether, but those who stay – as data show - follow Orthodox rules and practices more consistently than their older fellow parishioners.

The last observation is about the 8% of the study participants who joined their parishes during the pandemic. Some of these new members simply left one parish and joined another. But others are people who discovered Orthodoxy and became Orthodox Christians during the pandemic. Many clergy participating in the first stage of this study<sup>8</sup> indicated that the pandemic increased the number of “soul searchers” who joined the Orthodox Church during the past two years. Fig. 4 indirectly confirms this trend. Among the 8% of study participants who joined their parishes during the pandemic, converts to Orthodoxy (not necessarily newly converted during the pandemic) account for 87%, which is disproportionately high compared to their percentage (52%) among all study participants.

**Fig. 4 Many People Who Joined Parishes in the Last Two Years Are Converts to Orthodox Church**



Each religious congregation has its own distinct internal culture, traditions, and ways of doing things. Some Orthodox parishes cherish their historic immigrant origins and make a conscious effort to preserve their ethnic culture, while others strive to be multicultural “all-American” parishes. Some embrace innovation and change, while others adhere to established practices and traditions. Some consider outreach to the local community among their top priorities, while others lead more insular lives with little connection to their neighborhoods.

<sup>8</sup> See the report at: <https://orthodoxreality.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/NewTraditionalInMostTraditionalChurchClergyReportReduced.pdf>

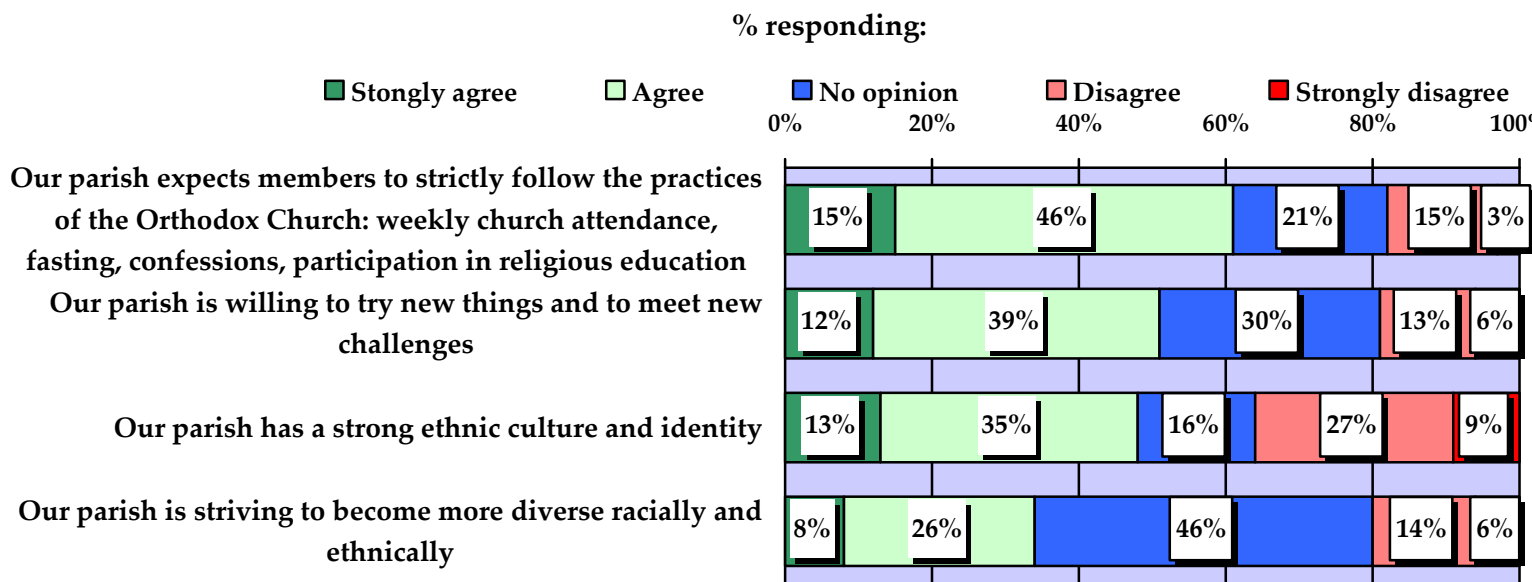
In short, each parish has a distinct combination of attributes which together create a unique local Christian community.

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

- ❖ Our parish expects members to strictly follow the practices of the Orthodox Church: weekly church attendance, fasting, confessions, participation in religious education, etc.
- ❖ Our parish is always willing to try new things and to meet new challenges
- ❖ Our parish has a strong ethnic culture and identity
- ❖ Our parish is striving to become more diverse racially and ethnically

With regard to each statement, the respondents could say: "strongly agree," "agree," "no opinion/not sure" "disagree," or "strongly disagree." See Fig. 5.

**Fig. 5 “Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your parish?”**



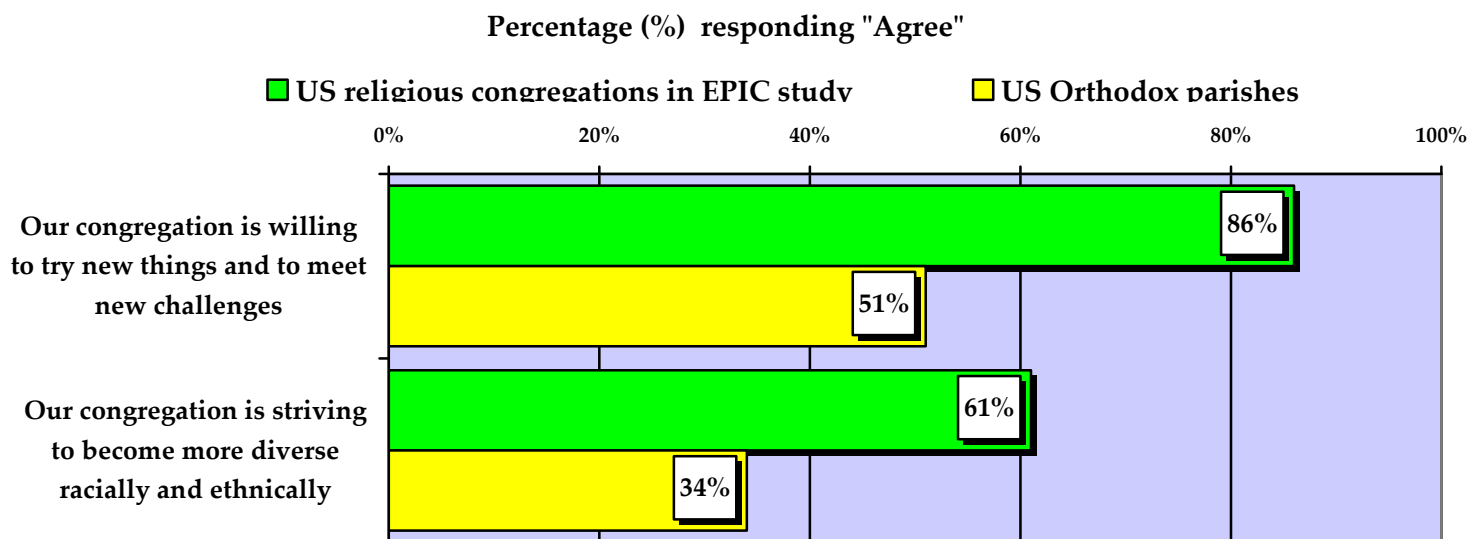
Two comments should be made in relation to Fig. 5. First, 15% of the respondents “strongly agreed” that their parishes “expect members to strictly follow the practices of the Orthodox Church: weekly church attendance, fasting, confessions, participation in religious education, etc.” For the purposes of this study, we defined these parishes as being “intentionally Orthodox.” Similarly, 12% of study participants “strongly agreed” that their parishes are “willing to try new things and to meet new challenges.” Again, for this study, these parishes were classified as the most “experimental.” When discussing many subjects and questions, we will see that both the “intentionally Orthodox” and “experimental” parishes responded to the crisis brought on by the pandemic differently from all other congregations.

Second, the two statements shown in Fig. 5 were also offered to a representative sample of American religious congregations in the recent (November 2021) national study, *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations: Innovation Amidst and Beyond COVID-19 (EPIC)*.<sup>9</sup>

Fig. 6 shows that, 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.

**Fig. 6 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?”



<sup>9</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>

## II. Religious and Social Attitudes of American Orthodox Christians: A 15-Years Contrast

### **DEFINITION USED IN THIS CHAPTER:**

- *Strictly Observant parishioners*: parishioners who attend church weekly and report that they strictly follow Orthodox fasting requirements

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

- ❖ In 2007, three-quarters (72%) of Orthodox Church members preferred parishes that required uniformity of belief and practice and where congregants held the same views. Fifteen years later, today half (50%) of the church members favor parishes that tolerate diversity of belief and practice, in which people openly discuss their different views on Church life.
- ❖ About half of the Orthodox Church members feel that they and their parish priests should have more influence on the selection of hierarchs of the Church (Bishops, Archbishops, Metropolitans).
- ❖ Both in 2007 and 2022, only 3 in 10 Church members support the idea of women being ordained as deacons. However, unlike 2007, there is now a “gender gap” in opinions: 34% of women feel that they should be allowed to be ordained to the diaconry as compared to only 20% of male parishioners.
- ❖ Only 13% of American Orthodox parishioners think that, “In order to be more engaging and participatory, Orthodox worship services should be more modern.”
- ❖ Between 2007 and 2022, the percentage of Orthodox Church members who support the right of LGBTQ people to have civil marriages has grown from 33% to 45%.
- ❖ In 2007, nearly half (46%) of all parishioners believed that, “Children need to be exposed to a variety of religious differences so they can make informed choices as adults.” Today only one-fifth (20%) of Orthodox Church members support this idea.
- ❖ Younger parishioners (under 35), converts to Orthodoxy, and “strictly observant” members are much less supportive of innovations in the Church, greater pluralism of opinion in a parish, and legal status for LGBTQ marriages. These three categories of church members also place greater importance on the predominance of Orthodox beliefs and morals over the norms of behavior widely accepted in society at large.

The two years of the pandemic resulted in many adjustments and transformations in American church life. When a local religious community is forced to change, and members need determine on how to proceed, their personal attitudes toward religious and social matters come to the fore in the process of decision making.

Before venturing into the main subject of this report – the long-term consequences of the pandemic for US Orthodox Christian Churches – in this chapter we will examine the personal opinions of Orthodox Church members as they relate to Church life or to broader social matters. In particular, three subjects will be explored:

- Democracy and pluralism in the Orthodox Church
- Innovation and change in the Orthodox Church
- The Orthodox Church in relation to the broader American society

Most questions discussed in this chapter were also examined in the 2007 national study of American Orthodox Christian laity titled, *The Orthodox Church Today*.<sup>10</sup> This provides a unique opportunity to compare current church-related and social attitudes of Orthodox parishioners with their opinions and preferences fifteen years ago.

### **IIa. Democracy and Pluralism in the Orthodox Church**

The notions of “democracy” and “pluralism” may seem incompatible with the general image of Orthodox Christianity. Indeed, the administrative structure of the Orthodox Church is highly centralized. Church hierarchs (Bishops, Metropolitans, etc.) are accorded a high level of unconditional authority, while the laity and parish clergy have relatively little say in decision making. In many respects, Church life is organized according to “indisputable” traditions and rules. The survey shed some light on the question: “What do American Orthodox church members think about democracy and pluralism in the Church?”

First, we asked respondents whether they prefer parishes in which all members are expected to hold the same views and to follow the same practices, or whether they favor congregations which tolerate diversity in opinion and encourage open discussions on potentially contentious aspects of Church life.

Fig. 7 shows substantial changes since 2007 in the attitudes of laity towards two very different types of parishes. Fifteen years ago, nearly three quarters (72%) of American Orthodox parishioners had a preference for congregations that required uniformity of belief and practice, where people held the same views. Quite differently, today half (50%) favor parishes that tolerate diversity of beliefs and practices, where members openly discuss their different views on Church life.

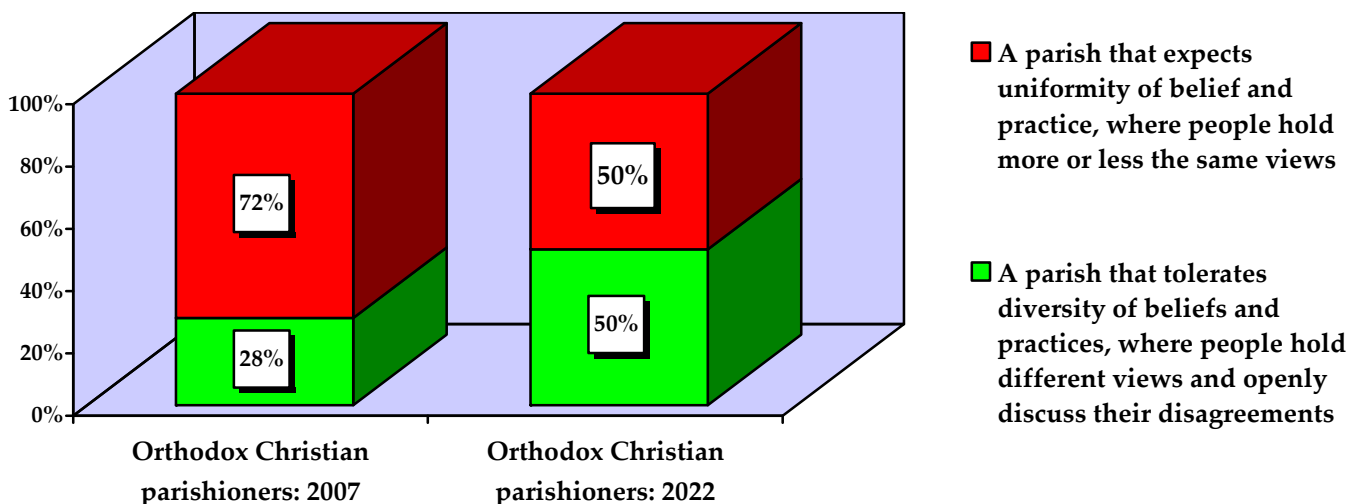
---

<sup>10</sup> Krindatch, A. 2008. *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. Available at: <https://orthodoxreality.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/OrthChurchTodayFullReport.pdf>

**Fig. 7 Compared to Fifteen Years Ago, Many More Church Members Now Prefer Parishes**

**Which Tolerate Diversity in Views, Beliefs, and Practices**

“What type of parish do you prefer?”



Unlike most other American Christian denominations, in the Orthodox Church, laity and rank-and-file clergy have relatively little say in significant decisions about the life of the Church. Instead, the power is vested in the office of the hierarchs (Bishops, Archbishops, Metropolitans).

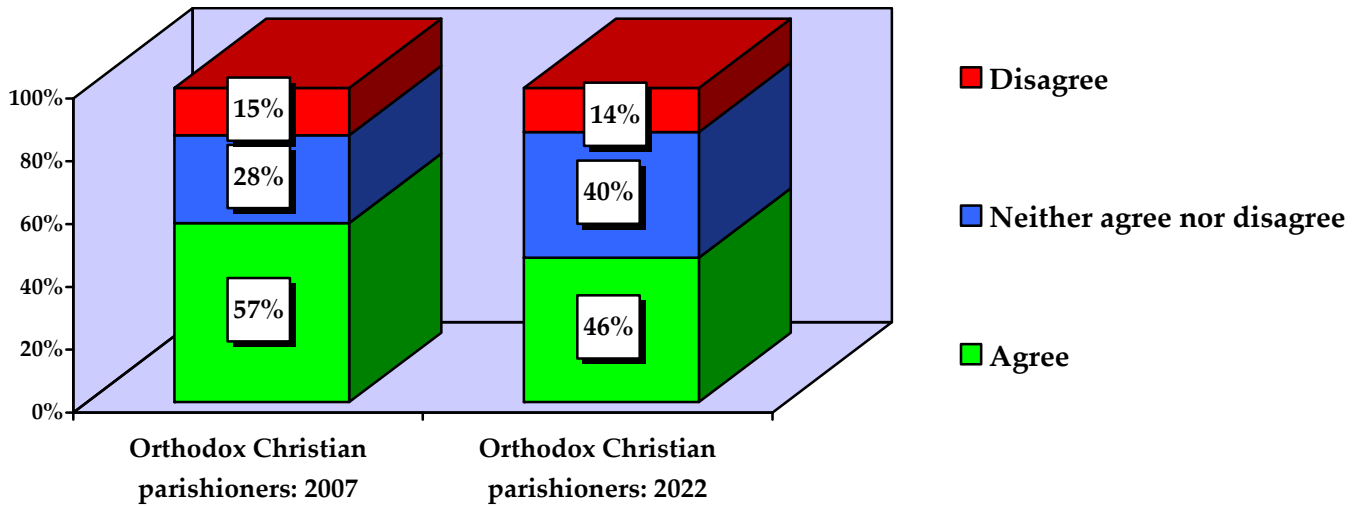
Consequently, the process of selecting bishops is important. While this procedure varies somewhat from one American Orthodox Church to another, neither laity nor parish clergy have much influence on the election of bishops. In both 2007 and 2022, the surveys asked whether church members agree that, “It is a good idea for Orthodox laity and parish clergy to be more involved in the selection of Bishops/Metropolitans.”

Fig. 8 shows that today fewer church members (46%) support this idea than in 2007 (57%), but the percentage of those parishioners who clearly oppose this suggestion has been and remains very small: 14-15%. Hence, about half of Orthodox Church members continue to feel that they and their parish priests should have more influence on the selection of bishops.



**Fig. 8 About Half of the Orthodox Church Members Feel that They Should Have Greater Influence on the Selection of Bishops. Very Few Oppose this Idea.**

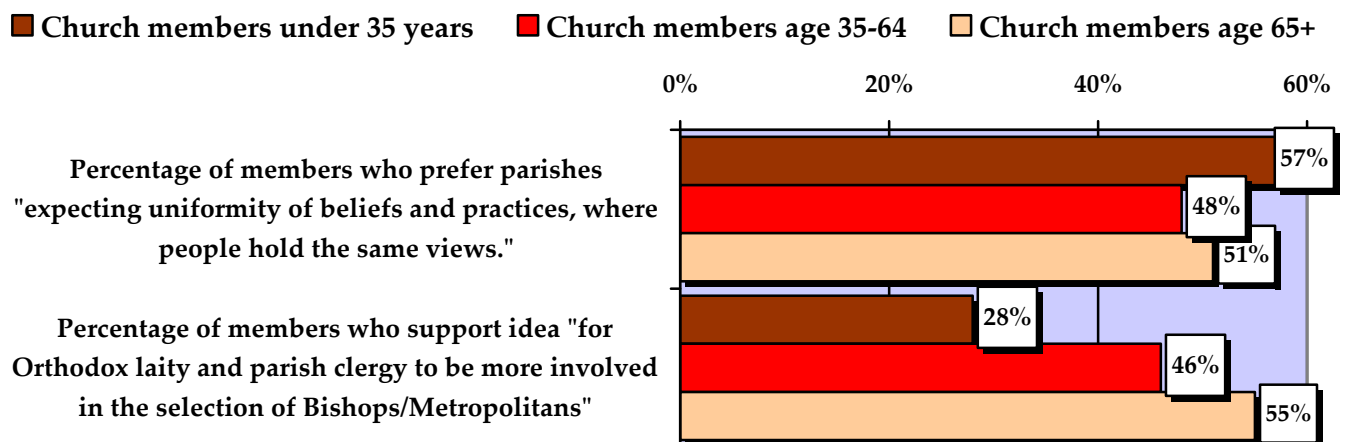
Do you agree or disagree with the statement: "I think it is a good idea for Orthodox laity and parish clergy to be more involved in the selection of Bishops/Metropolitans"



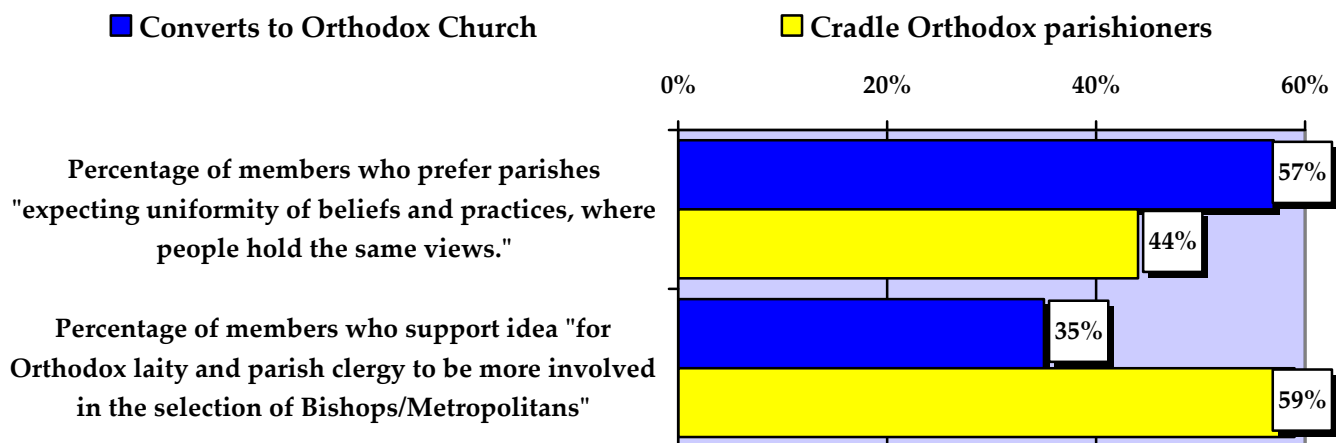
Figs. 7 and 8 present overall attitudes of all Orthodox Church members. Yet three categories of parishioners expressed significantly different opinions about pluralism in a local parish and the process of electing bishops.

Younger parishioners (under 35 years), converts to Orthodoxy, and "strictly observant" Church members have a greater preference for parishes which expect uniformity in beliefs and practices, and they are significantly less in favor of the idea that Orthodox laity and parish clergy should be involved in the selection of Bishops/Metropolitans. See Figs. 9a-9c.

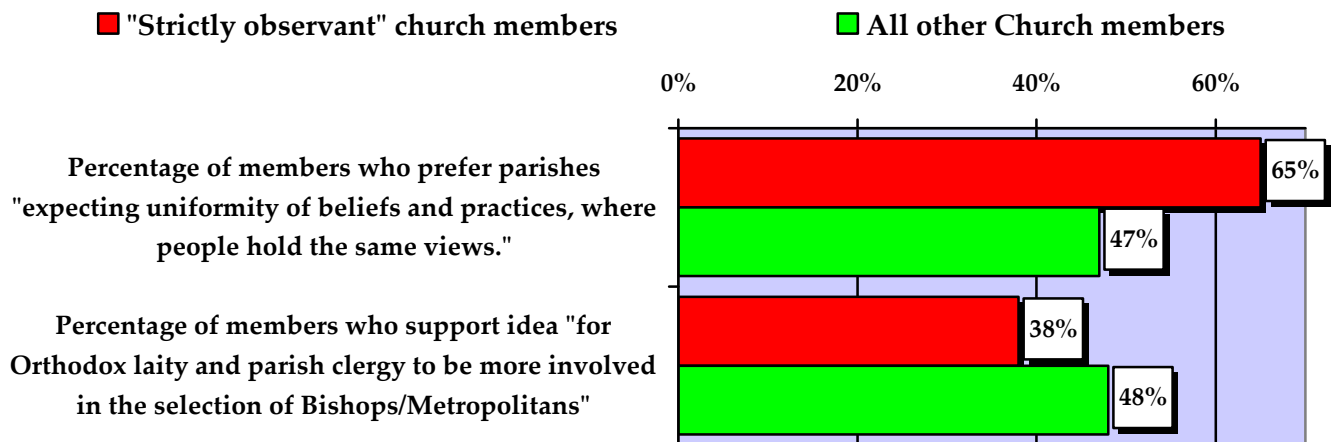
**Fig. 9a Younger Parishioners Prefer Parishes which Expect Uniformity of Members in Beliefs and Practices. They Are Also Less in Favor of Laity's Involvement in the Selection of Bishops**



**Fig. 9b Compared to Cradle Orthodox, Converts to Orthodoxy Prefer Parishes which Expect Uniformity of Members in Beliefs and Practices. They Are Also Less in Favor of the Laity's Involvement in the Selection of Bishops**



**Fig. 9c Compared to Other Parishioners, "Strictly Observant" Church Members Prefer Parishes which Expect Uniformity of Members in Beliefs and Practices. They Are also Less in Favor of the Laity's Involvement in the Selection of Bishops**



In conclusion, today American Orthodox Church members are divided into two nearly equal camps. About half support greater involvement of the laity in the selection of bishops, and favor parishes which tolerate diversity in beliefs and practices among members. The other half either oppose or are indifferent to the laity's participation in the selection of bishops, and prefer parishes where members hold the same views. The age, religious upbringing (converts vs. cradle Orthodox), and strictness in obeying Church practices are three major factors affecting the attitudes of parishioners regarding variety of viewpoints in a local parish community and the process of electing bishops.

## I Ib. Innovation and Change in the Orthodox Church

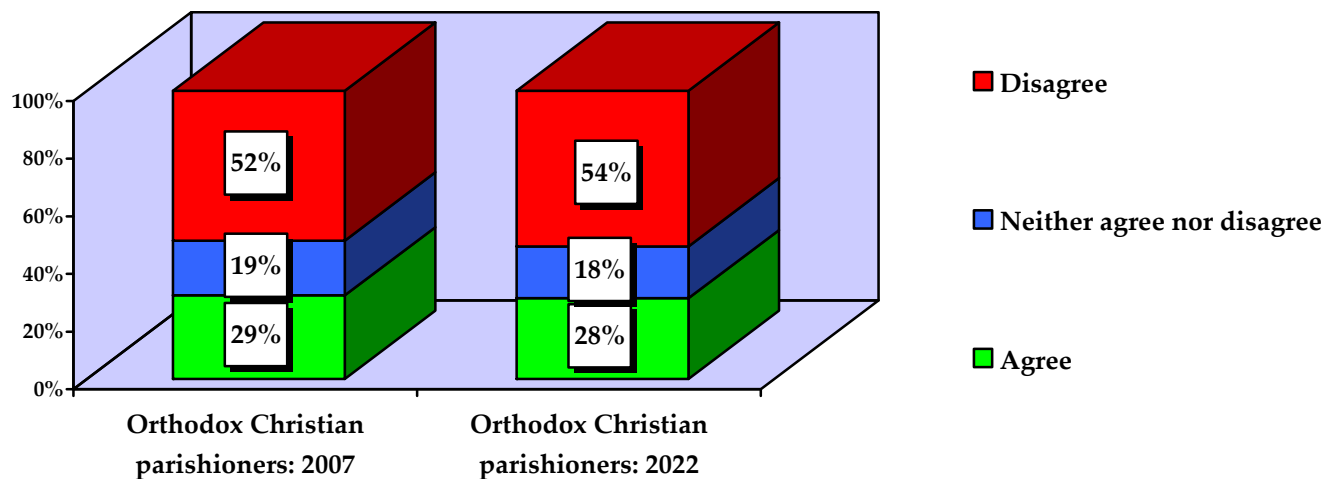
Finding a balance between established traditions and the need to adapt to changing social realities and local contexts is difficult for all religious communities. Because of the strong emphasis on continuity and tradition, this is especially challenging for the Orthodox Church – “the Church that never changes.” Do ordinary people in the pews prefer to keep the Church just as it has always been, or do they promote change in American Orthodox Christianity? We explored opinions of laity on two particularly controversial subjects related to innovations in the Orthodox Church:

- Ordination of women
- Modernization of the ancient Orthodox worship services

Today in the Orthodox Church worldwide, all levels of ordained ministry (deacons, priests, bishops) are reserved exclusively for men. However, until the Middle Ages, the Orthodox Church **did have** a female deaconate.<sup>11</sup> Even if many American Orthodox Church members do not know this fact, they are probably aware that most US Christian denominations give women the same opportunity as men to serve as clergy. We asked respondents whether they would support or oppose the ordination of women, at least as deacons. A similar question was asked in the 2007 study, *The Orthodox Church Today*.

**Fig. 10a** The Idea of Women Serving in Ordained Ministry as Deacons Has Little Support among Orthodox Church Members

Do you agree or disagree with the statement: “Women should be allowed to serve in the ordained ministry, at least as deacons”



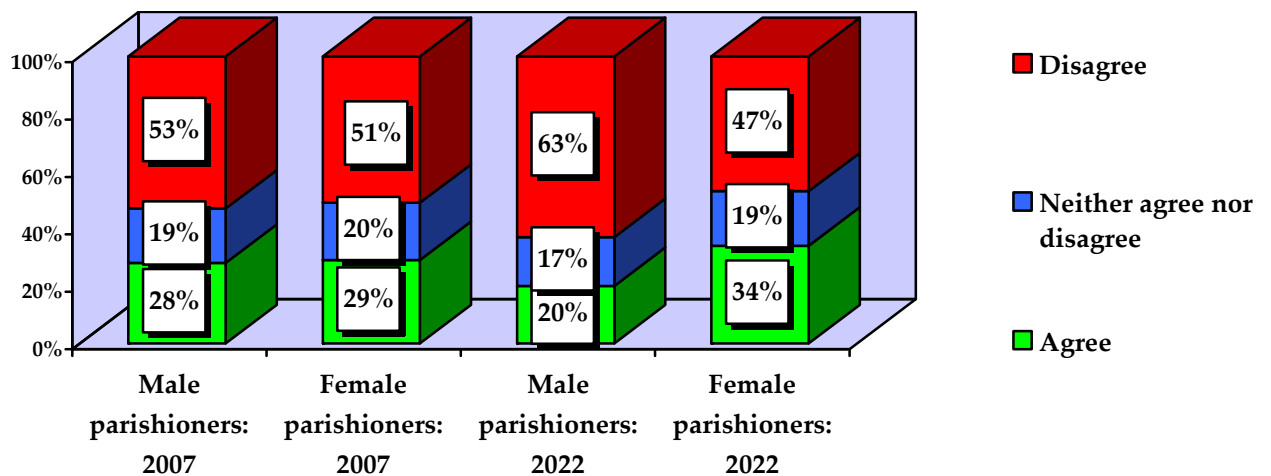
<sup>11</sup> In fact, in 1988, the Pan-Orthodox Conference on the Role of Women called for reestablishment of this practice.

Fig. 10a shows that an overwhelming majority of American Orthodox parishioners do not want to see women serving in ordained ministry. Fewer than 3 in 10 respondents would support women becoming deacons. This was true in 2007, and the picture did not change in 2022.

However, the picture in Fig. 10a becomes more nuanced when looking separately at the opinions of male and female parishioners. Fig. 10b shows that, back in 2007, Orthodox men and women were fairly uniform in their opinions about female deaconate. In contrast, fifteen years later, in 2022, a clear “gender gap” has emerged. More than one-third of female Church members feel that women should be allowed to be ordained as deacons, as compared to only one-fifth of male parishioners.

**Fig. 10b Unlike Fifteen Years Ago, Today the Idea of Women’s Ordination Has Greater Support among Female than Male Parishioners**

Do you agree or disagree with the statement: “Women should be allowed to serve in the ordained ministry, at least as deacons”



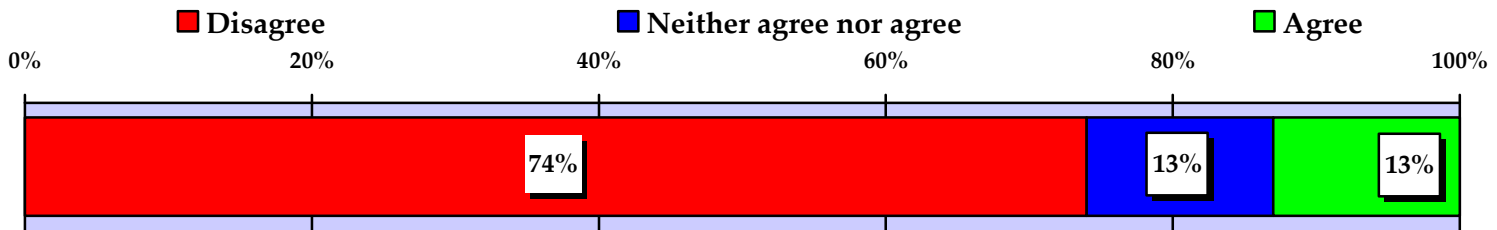
The unyielding resolve to remain the “only original” Christian church, by retaining both the teachings and rituals of ancient Christianity, is a fundamental feature of the Orthodox Church. Consequently, the Church is intentionally change-resistant when it comes to worship services. A formal liturgy (sometimes in the vernacular and sometimes in an ancient language), chanting/choral singing, rich clergy vestments, veneration of icons, lighting candles, and various elaborate sacred rituals remain a hallmark of Orthodox Christianity.

Yet one can ask the question: “In 21<sup>st</sup> century America, with most Christian denominations constantly modernizing their worship practices, do American Orthodox Christians think that their services should also become more contemporary?”

Fig. 11 shows that only a small minority (13%) of American Orthodox parishioners think that, “In order to be more engaging and participatory, Orthodox worship services should be more modern.”

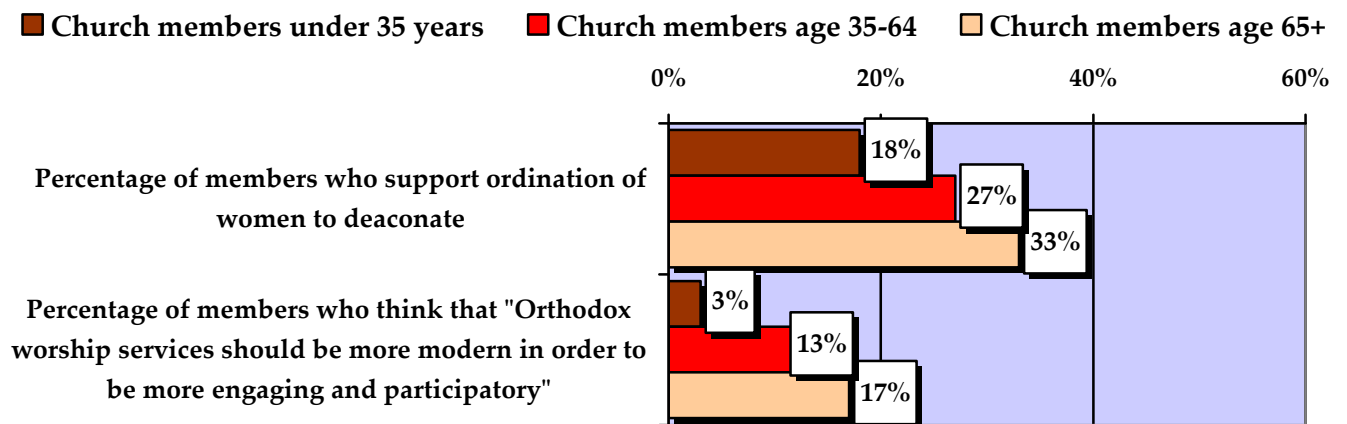
**Fig. 11 An Overwhelming Majority of Orthodox Church Members Do Not Support the “Modernization” of Orthodox Christian Worship Services**

Do you agree or disagree with the statement: “in order to be more engaging and participatory, Orthodox worship services should be more modern”

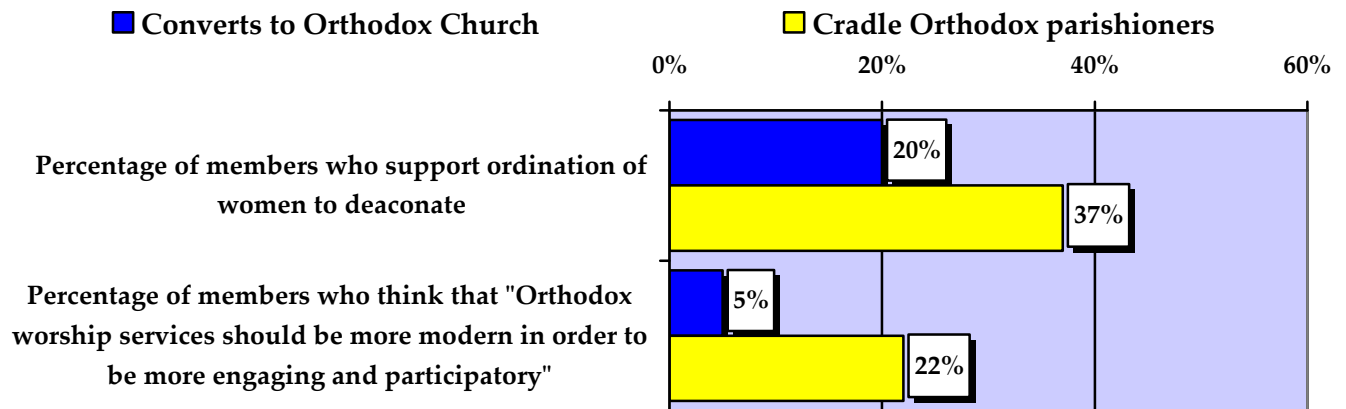


Similar to what we have seen in the previous section on *Democracy and Pluralism in the Church*, the same three categories of parishioners are also much more “change-resistant” when it comes to ordination of women to the deaconate or modernization of Orthodox worship services. These are: younger parishioners (under 35 years), converts to Orthodoxy, and “strictly observant” Church members. See Figs. 12a-12c.

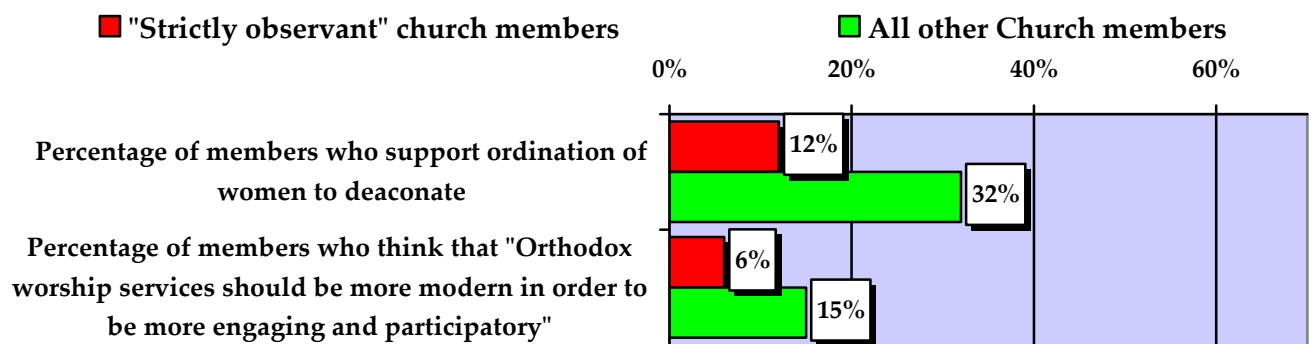
**Fig. 12a Compared to Older Church Members, Younger Parishioners Are Even Less Supportive of Ordination of Women to the Deaconate and “Modernization” of Orthodox Worship Services**



**Fig. 12b** Compared to Cradle Orthodox, Converts to Orthodoxy Are Even Less Supportive of Ordination of Women to the Diaconate and “Modernization” of Orthodox Worship Services



**Fig. 12c** Compared to Other Parishioners, “Strictly Observant” Church Members Are Even Less Supportive of Ordination of Women to the Diaconate and “Modernization” of Orthodox Worship Services



In summary, today only a fraction of American Orthodox parishioners are in favor of offering women a greater role in the ordained ministry, or of modernizing Orthodox worship services. Younger church members, converts to Orthodoxy, and strictly observant parishioners are especially strong opponents of such reforms.

### IIC. The Orthodox Church in Relation to the Broader American Society

Until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Orthodox Christians in the US saw themselves as a community which, in many ways, existed apart from mainstream American society. The strong ethnic culture of Orthodox parishes founded by Greeks, Russians, Serbians, Romanians, and other immigrants had been reinforced by new waves of immigration from the Old World and by internal Church policies aimed at preservation of language and traditions brought from overseas. The word “diaspora” was commonly accepted to describe Orthodox Christian communities vis-a-vis the American society in which they lived.

Today, the vast majority of Orthodox Church members are second-, third-, or fourth-generation Americans. They recognize and appreciate their varied ethnic ancestries, but great many identify themselves as “simply American” and pursue lifestyles that are indistinguishable from their non-Orthodox neighbors and fellow citizens. Also, in many parishes, converts to Orthodoxy who were raised without any Orthodox “ethnic roots” comprise a significant or even dominant segment of the membership.

These shifts in demographics have altered the way in which Orthodox faithful relate to American society at large. The Orthodox scholar and former dean of the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Theological school, Fr. Thomas FitzGerald, writes, “In sharp contrast to the lack of interest in societal issues during the early periods of Orthodox Church development in America, the Orthodox in recent decades have demonstrated far greater interest in the challenges facing America today” (FitzGerald 1998: 128).<sup>12</sup> New social and cultural patterns in America have now a much greater influence on US Orthodox Christians. Similarly, the strong notion of religious pluralism which is ingrained in American society combined with the availability of many options in the US “religious market,” have become more attractive for and invite many American Orthodox to adopt an attitude of religious *relativism*.<sup>13</sup>

We asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with three statements, which also had been offered to participants in the 2007 study, *The Orthodox Church Today*:

- How a person lives is more important than whether she/he is an Orthodox Christian
- Children need to be exposed to a variety of religious differences so they can make informed choices as adults
- Even if homosexuality is wrong, the civil rights of LGBTQ people - including legal status for "same-sex couples" - should still be protected

The first statement, “How a person lives is more important than whether he or she is an Orthodox Christian,” suggests that commonly accepted norms of morality and behavior are more important than personal religious beliefs and practices.

---

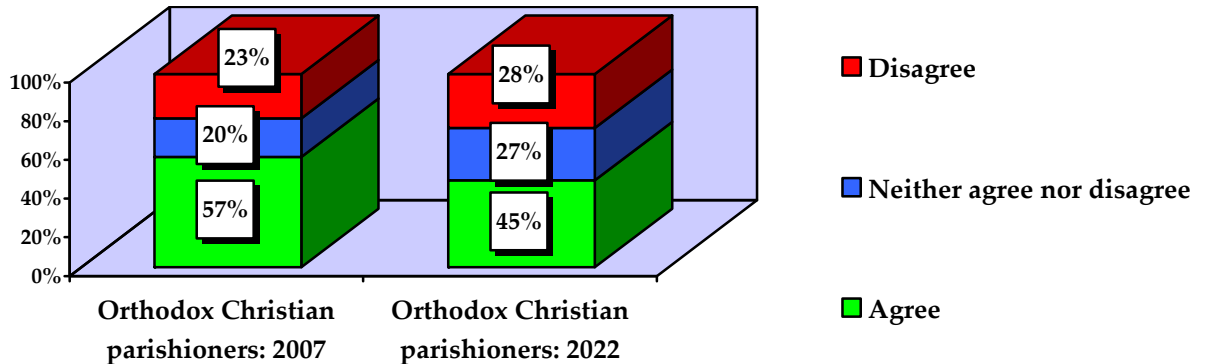
<sup>12</sup> FitzGerald, Thomas. 1998. *The Orthodox Church*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger.

<sup>13</sup> We define religious and cultural *relativism* as an approach that all religions and cultures are equally good and that no one religious or cultural traditions tradition has priority over another.

Fig. 13 shows that between 2007 and 2022, the share of the Orthodox Church members who shared these attitudes has diminished significantly: from 57% to 45%.

**Fig. 13 Compared to Fifteen Years Ago, Fewer Orthodox Church Members Feel that Commonly Accepted Societal Norms Should Prevail Over Their Orthodox Beliefs and Practices**

Do you agree or disagree with the statement: “How a person lives is more important than whether she/he is an Orthodox Christian”

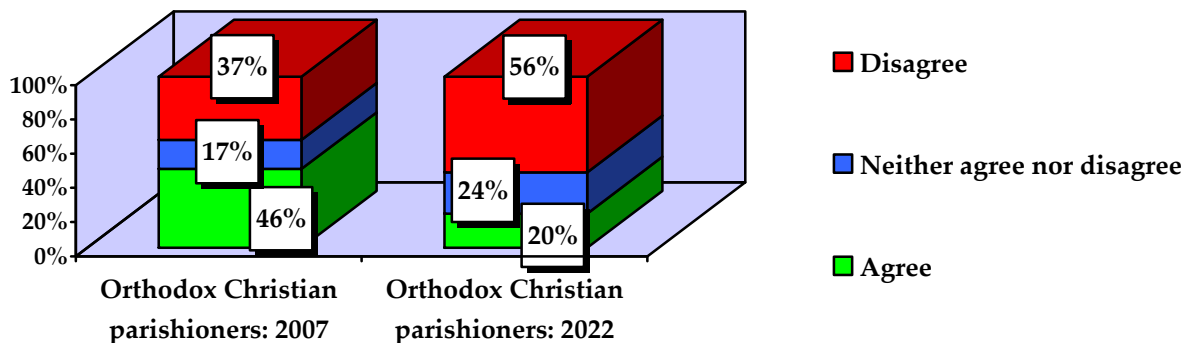


Is it possible that the increasingly blurred notion of what is “moral” and “immoral” and growing acceptance of various alternative lifestyles in American society has made some church members wary of being tolerant of behaviors which do not fit into Orthodox Christian morality?

The next statement, “Children need to be exposed to a variety of religious differences so they can make informed choices as adults,” voices an idea that children should be familiar with and experience for themselves the mosaic of American faith communities. Fig. 14 shows that in 2007, nearly half (46%) of Orthodox Church members shared this approach, but today only one-fifth (20%) of them favor the intentional exposure of their children to American religious diversity.

**Fig. 14 Compared to Fifteen Years Ago, Fewer Orthodox Church Members Support the Exposure of Their Children to American Religious Diversity**

Do you agree or disagree with the statement: “Children need to be exposed to a variety of religious differences so they can make informed choices as adults”





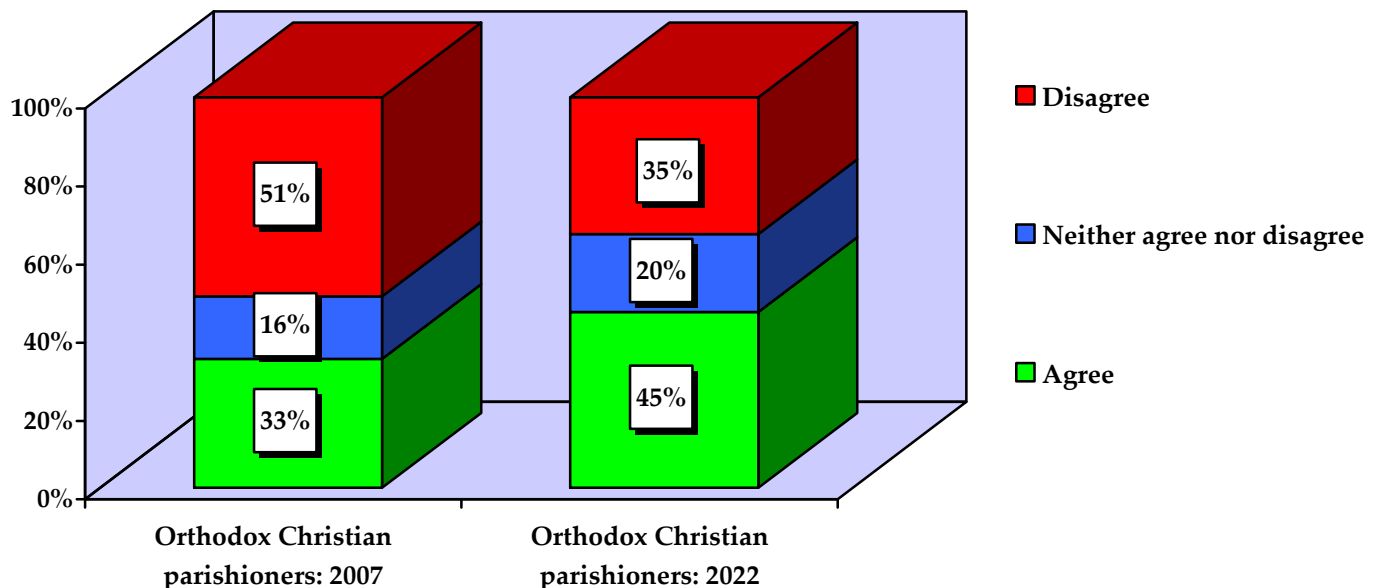
Again, is it possible that the intense “marketing” by many independent churches and various non-Christian groups, as well as the ever-increasing religious diversity of American society, have made Orthodox Christians more inclined to limit the experience of their children to the more traditional Orthodox Church?

The last statement – “Even if homosexuality is wrong, the civil rights of LGBTQ people - including legal status for ‘same-sex couples’ - should still be protected” - touches on a very sensitive issue. On one hand, same-sex marriages are legal in all 50 states and widely accepted by Americans as a societal norm.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, many Orthodox parishes in America have LGBTQ members. While the acceptance of the LGBTQ parishioners may vary from one parish to another, the official position of the Orthodox Church remains unwavering: homosexuality and other “non-traditional” sexual preferences are considered sinful, incompatible with the teachings of the Church.

Fig. 15 shows that between 2007 and 2022 the percentage of Orthodox Church members supporting civil marriages of LGBTQ people has grown significantly: from 33% to 45%. Only one-third (35%) of Orthodox parishioners oppose the legal status of same-sex marriages (the remaining 20% are undecided).

**Fig. 15 Compared to Fifteen Years Ago, More Orthodox Church Members Support the Idea of Legal Marriages for LGBTQ Couples**

Do you agree or disagree with the statement: “Even if homosexuality is wrong, the civil rights of LGBTQ people - including legal status for ‘same-sex couples’ – should still be protected”

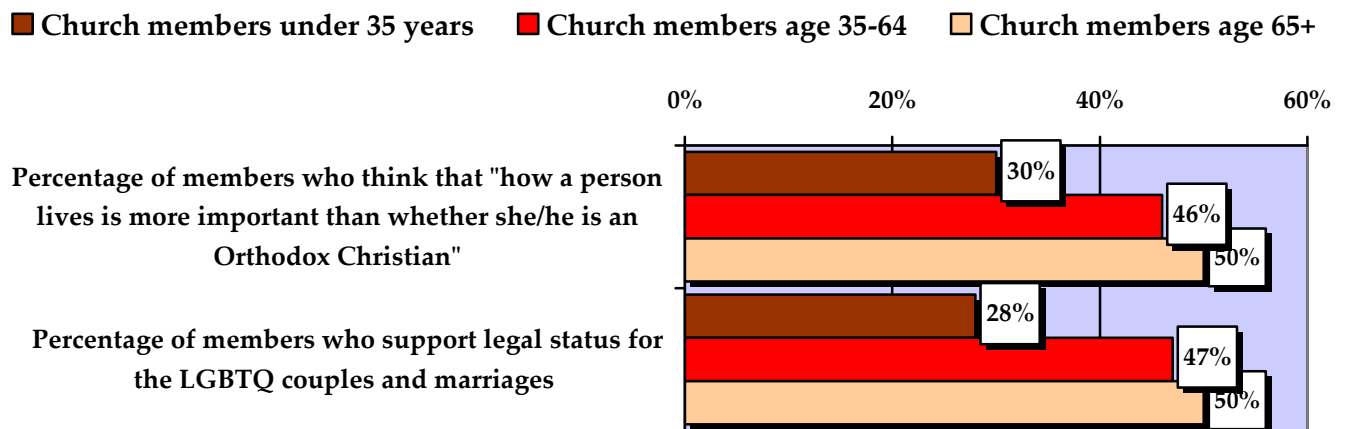


<sup>14</sup> In Pew Research Center polling in 2004, Americans opposed same-sex marriage by a margin of 60% to 31%. In 2019, the picture changed dramatically, with 61% of respondents favoring same-sex marriages and 31% rejecting them.

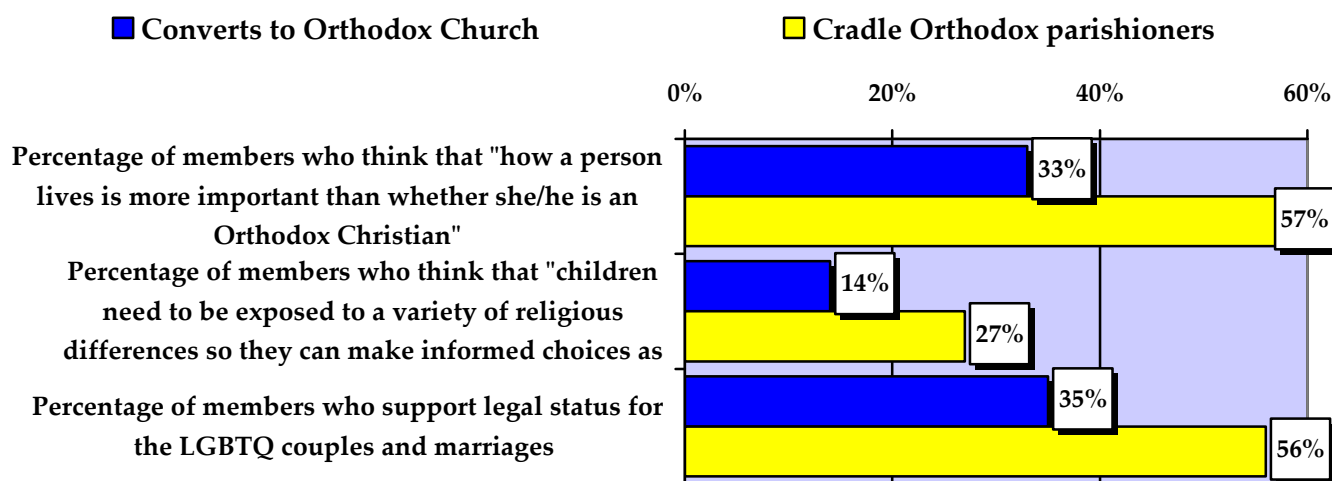
This fact appears to contradict the previous finding: the belief of Church members that Orthodox teachings and morality are more important than the norms of behavior widely accepted in society. But in reality, this is not as counterintuitive as it may seem. Indeed, increasing numbers of Orthodox parishioners may agree with civil marriage for LGBTQ people in society at large outside the Church, but this does NOT mean that they would be willing to change the teachings of the Orthodox Church on this matter.

Consistent with findings in the sections on *Democracy and Pluralism in the Church* and *Innovation and Change in the Orthodox Church*, younger parishioners (under 35), converts to Orthodoxy, and “strictly observant” Church members were significantly less in favor of affording LGBTQ couples the status of a legal marriage than all other Church members. These three categories were also less willing to accept the idea that, “How a person lives is more important than whether he or she is an Orthodox Christian.” In addition, converts to Orthodoxy and “strictly observant” Church members were significantly less receptive to the idea of intentional exposure of children to religious differences “so they can make informed choices as adults.”

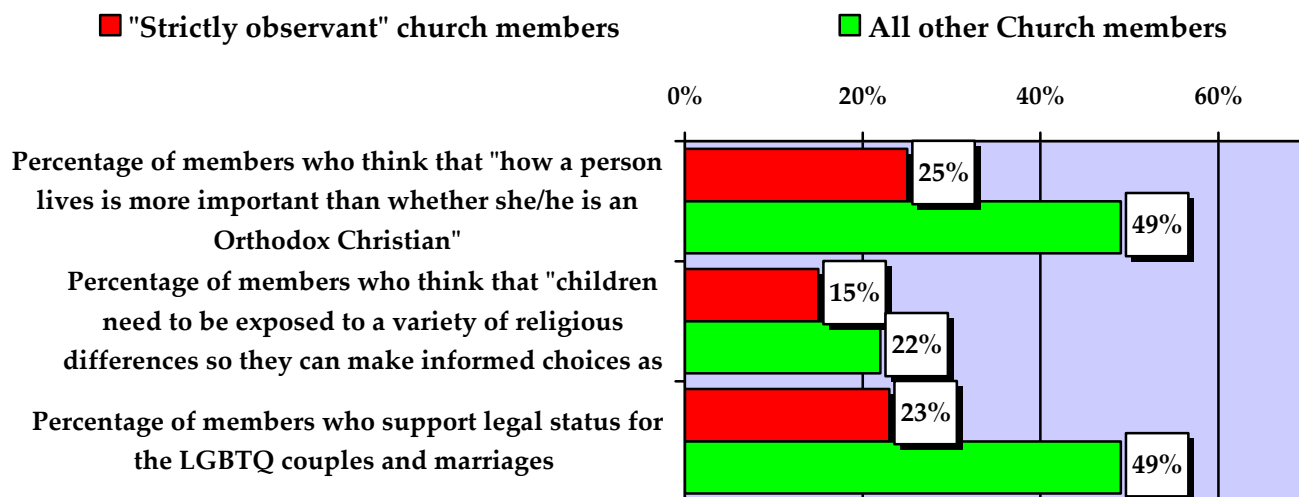
**Fig. 16a** Compared to Older Church Members, Younger Parishioners Do Not Believe that Being Simply a “Good Person” Is More Important than Being “Orthodox Christian.” They Are also Less Supportive of Legal Marriage Status for LGBTQ couples



**Fig. 16b Compared to Cradle Orthodox, Converts to Orthodoxy Do Not Believe that Being Simply a “Good Person” Is More Important than Being “Orthodox Christian.” They Are Also Less Supportive of Intentional Exposure of Children to Religious Diversity in Society and Legal Marriage Status for LGBTQ Couples**



**Fig. 16c Compared to Other Parishioners, “Strictly Observant” Church Members Do Not Believe that Being Simply a “Good Person” Is More Important than Being “Orthodox Christian.” They Are Also Less Supportive of Intentional Exposure of Children to Religious Diversity in Society and Legal Marriage Status for LGBTQ Couples**



The main lesson from this chapter is that differences in personal attitudes of American Orthodox Church members toward the Church and society are closely associated with three factors: their age, religious upbringing, and their intensity in practicing the Orthodox faith. Overall, younger parishioners (under 35), converts to Orthodoxy, and “strictly observant” members are less supportive of innovations in the Church, greater pluralism in a parish, and the legal status for LGBTQ marriages. These three types of parishioners also place greater importance on the preeminence of Orthodox beliefs and morals over the norms of behavior widely accepted in society at large.

### III. Church Life during the Pandemic and What Parishioners Believe about COVID-19

#### DEFINITIONS USED IN THIS CHAPTER:

- *Strictly Observant parishioners*: parishioners who attend church weekly and report that they strictly follow Orthodox fasting requirements
- *Never Closing parishes*: parishes which remained open to congregants for in-person worship services throughout the pandemic
- *Intentionally Orthodox parishes*: parishes in which 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 in which members “strongly agreed” that their parishes are “always willing to try new things and meet new challenges”

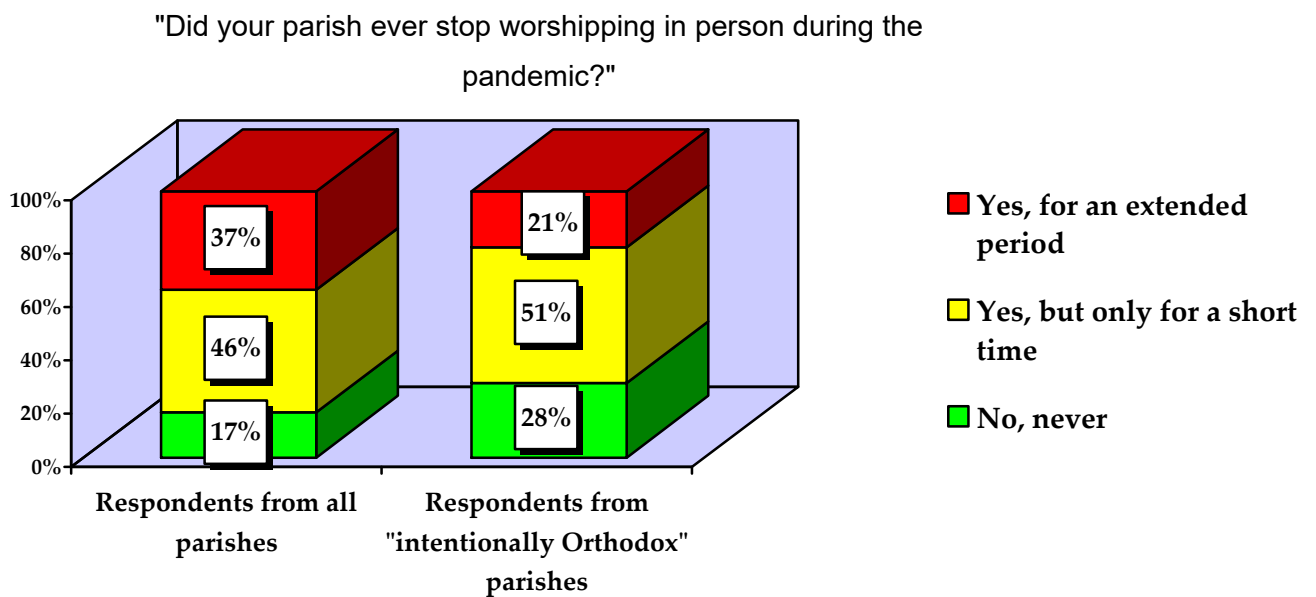
#### KEY FINDINGS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER:

- ❖ 17% of parishioners reported that their churches never closed doors for in-person worship services throughout the pandemic
- ❖ Nearly two thirds (63%) of parishioners are satisfied with how their congregations adapted to the pandemic and felt supported by their parishes. This satisfaction was especially high among the members of “intentionally Orthodox” parishes, of parishes that never closed for in-person services, and of the most “experimental” parishes (parishes that “strongly agreed” with the statement, “Our parish is always willing to change and meet new challenges”)
- ❖ Only 15% of parishioners felt that their parishes “should have taken MORE SAFETY MEASURES in response to the pandemic”
- ❖ More than one-third of the Orthodox Church members do not believe in the danger of COVID-19 (35% of the respondents) and in the efficacy of anti-COVID vaccination (37%).
- ❖ The percentage of those who dismiss the danger of COVID-19 and do not believe in importance of vaccination was significantly higher among five categories of parishioners: members of parishes which never closed for in-person services, members of “intentionally Orthodox” parishes (definition in chapter 1), converts to Orthodoxy, “strictly observant” parishioners (definition in chapter 1), and young people under 35.

How complete was the “lockdown” of Church life in the American Orthodox Christian community during the pandemic? To what extent were the parishes able to continue their services and ministries? What do parishioners think about the danger of COVID and importance of vaccination? These are the questions discussed in this chapter.

17% of study participants reported that their parishes never stopped worshipping in person throughout the pandemic. Among members from parishes that were defined as “intentionally Orthodox,” more than one-quarter (28%) said their churches never closed their doors.

**Fig. 17 Many Parishes Never Closed Their Doors for In-Person Services Through the Pandemic**



Furthermore, even though the majority of parishes were closed for in-person services (at least, for some time) and were affected by various restrictions imposed by secular authorities and the ruling bishops, many of them found ways to continue their major ministries and programs. More than half of study participants either “agreed” (31%) or “strongly agreed” (20%) that, “Despite the pandemic, the life of our parish continued without major disruption.”

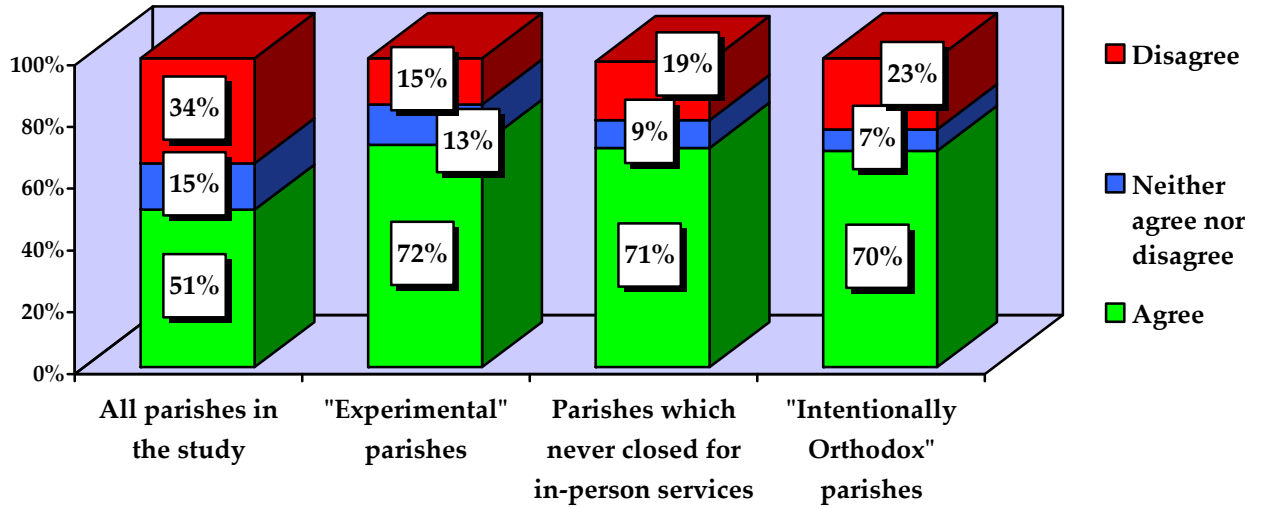
Fig. 18 shows that these three categories of parishes were especially successful in continuing their ministries throughout the pandemic:

- Parishes which were never closed for in-person services
- Parishes that were defined as “intentionally Orthodox”
- Parishes that were defined as “experimental” parishes

**Fig. 18** “Experimental,” “Never Closing,” and “Intentionally Orthodox” Parishes

**Were Especially Successful in Continuing their Ministries throughout the Pandemic**

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

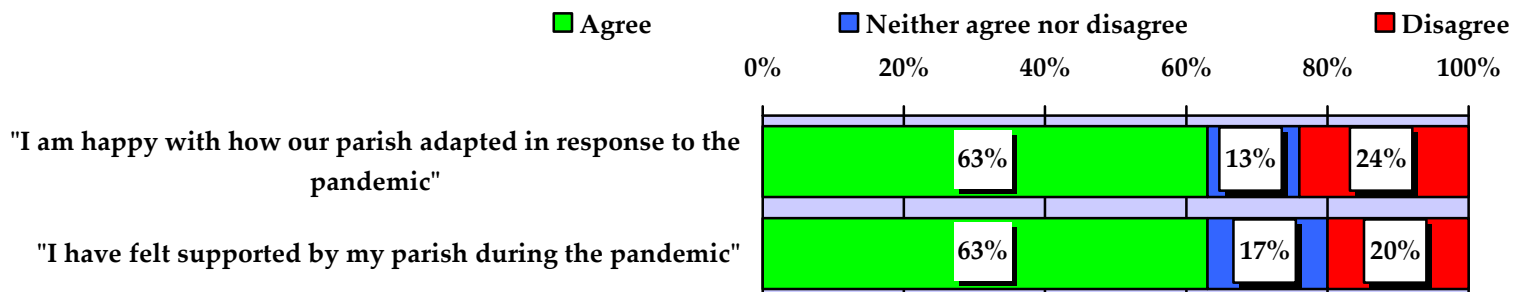


The ability of a parish to function during the pandemic was affected by the various anti-COVID safety protocols. Limitations on the number of people in the church, social distancing at worship services, wearing masks, prohibition of the kissing of icons in veneration, changes in administering Holy Communion, and full closure of the church were among the measures implemented by many but not all congregations.

The crucial question is: “Overall, were church members satisfied with how their parishes – each in its own unique way - responded to the new circumstances?” Fig. 19 shows that nearly two-thirds of parishioners approved of the policies adopted by their parishes: 63% of them agreed with the statement, “I am happy with how our parish has adapted in response to the pandemic.” The same percentage of members said that they “felt supported by their parishes during the pandemic.”

**Fig. 19** An Overwhelming Majority of Members Felt Supported by their Parishes and Were Satisfied with their Respond to the Pandemic

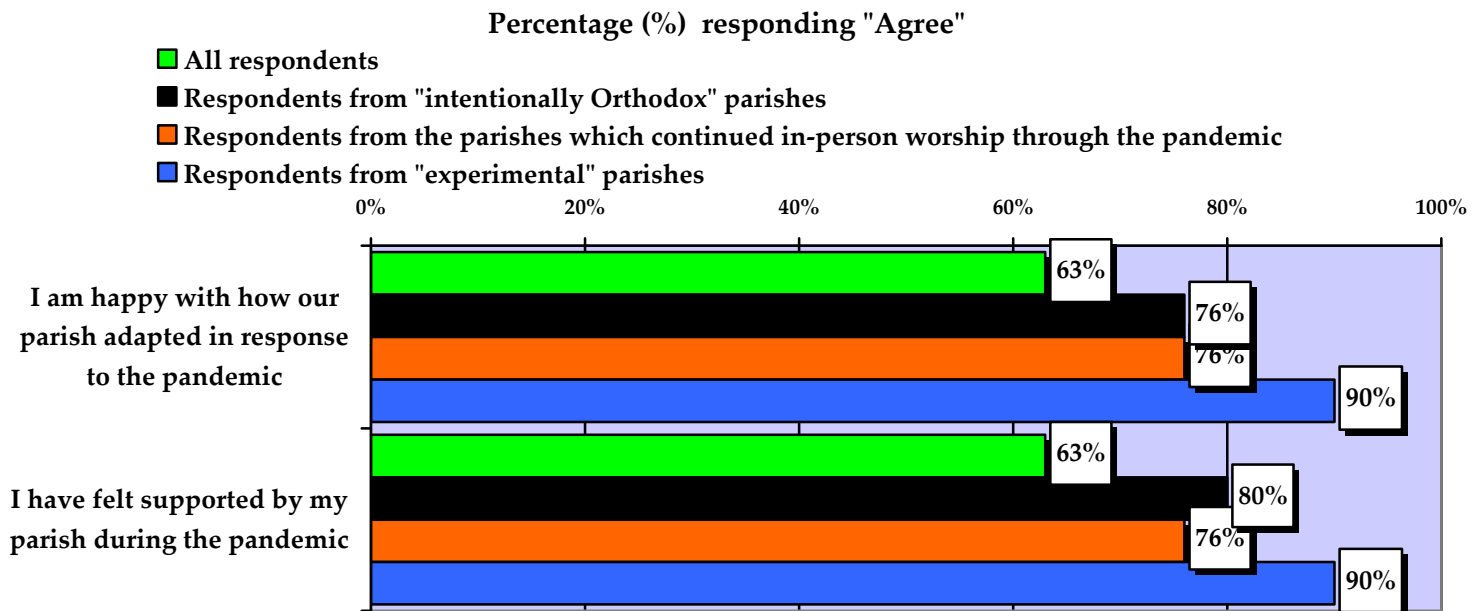
Do you agree with the following statements?



Satisfaction with support coming from the parishes and with their adaptation to the new circumstances was especially strong among members of “intentionally Orthodox” congregations, the “never closing” churches, and the most “experimental” parishes. See Fig. 20.

**Fig. 20 Members of “Intentionally Orthodox” Parishes, Churches with Continuing In-Person Services, and the Most “Experimental” Parishes Were More Satisfied with Response of their Congregations to the Pandemic**

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



When asked if their parishes “should have taken MORE SAFETY MEASURES in response to the pandemic,” only 15% of the study participants responded “yes.” This small percentage of parishioners who preferred having stricter safety protocols was similar for church members in various age categories, for those in “intentionally Orthodox” and all other parishes, and for parishioners from both churches that closed and those that remained open throughout the pandemic.

The overwhelming satisfaction with safety measures in parishes, however, should be further examined in the context of two questions: “How seriously did American Orthodox Church members perceive the danger of the COVID-19? Do they believe in vaccination against COVID-19?”

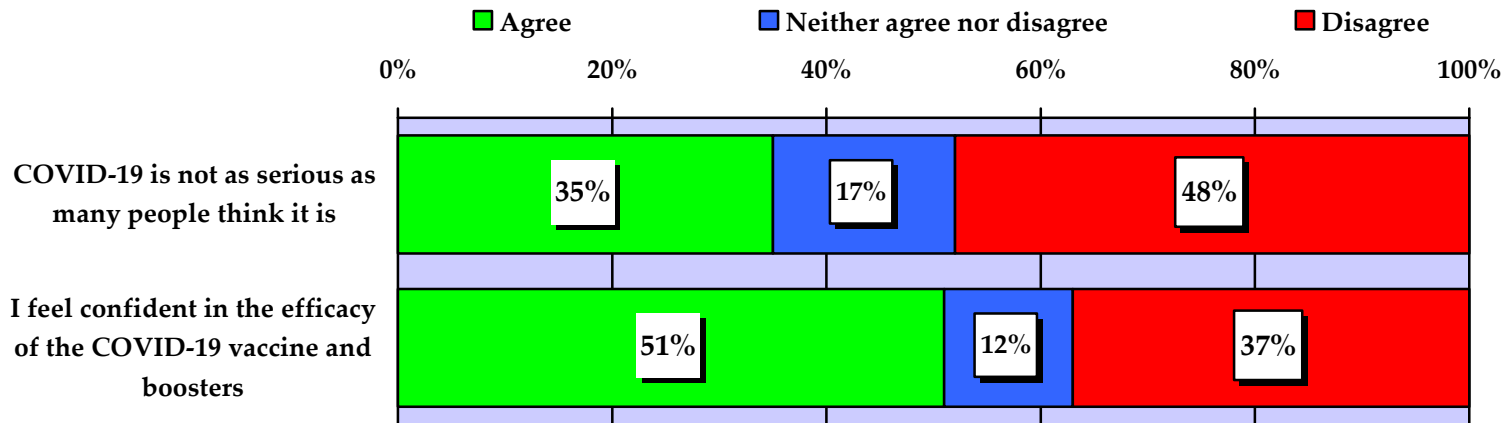
The survey asked: “Do you agree or disagree with the statements:

- ‘COVID-19 is not as serious as many people think it is’
- ‘I feel confident in the efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccines and boosters?’”

Fig. 21 shows that more than one-third of parishioners do not believe in the danger of COVID-19 (35% of the respondents) or in the efficacy of anti-COVID vaccination (37%).

**Fig. 21 More than One-Third of Orthodox Church Members Do Not Believe in the Danger of COVID-19 or the Efficacy of Vaccination**

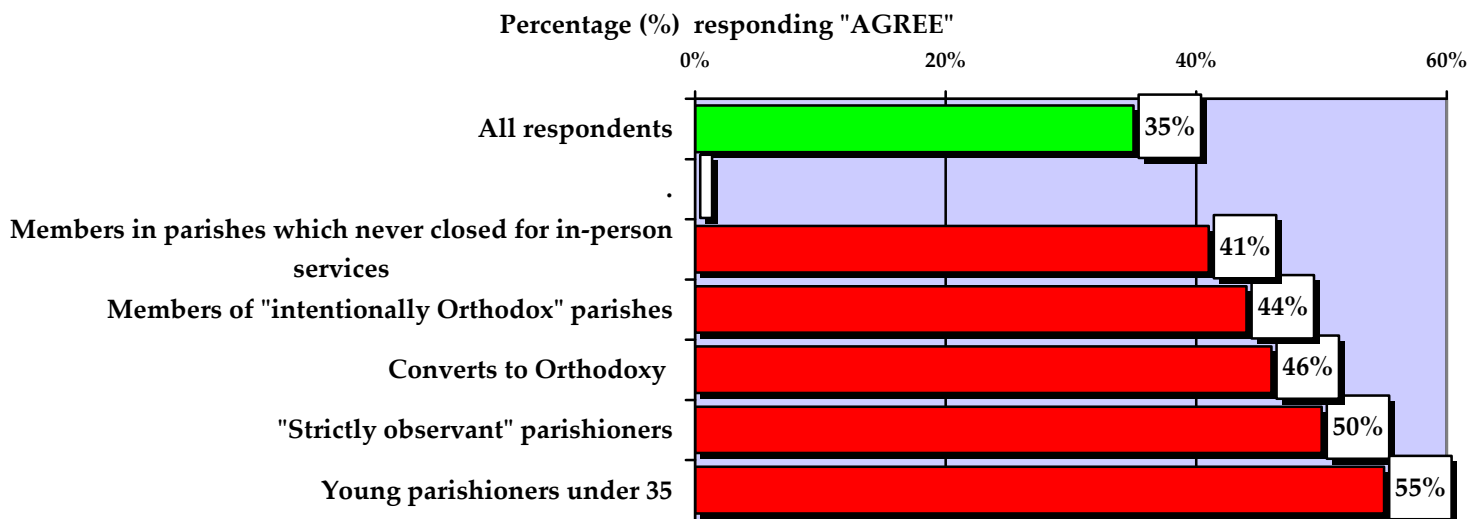
Do you agree with the following statements?



The percentage of those who dismissed the danger of COVID-19 and do not believe in vaccination was significantly higher among five categories of parishioners: members of “never closing” parishes, members of “intentionally Orthodox” parishes, converts to Orthodoxy, “strictly observant” parishioners, and young people under 35.

**Fig. 22 Five Categories of Church Members who Are Less Likely to Believe in the Danger of COVID-19**

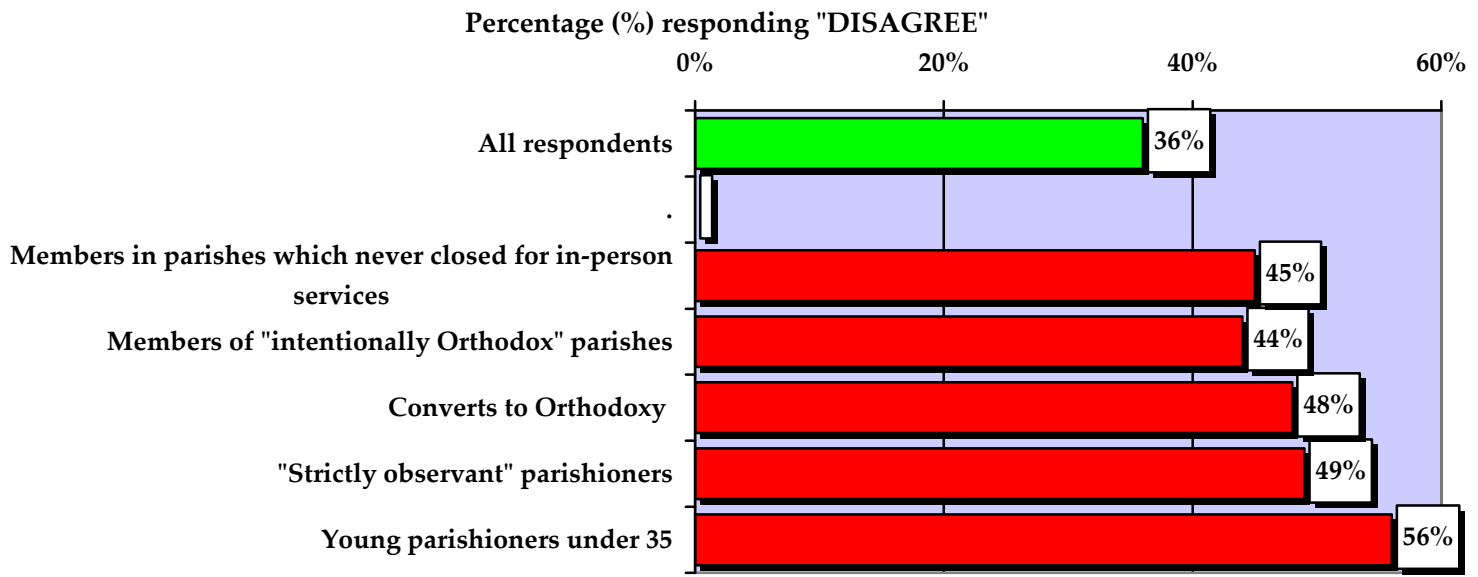
Do you agree with the statement: “COVID-19 is not as serious as many people think it is?”





**Fig. 23 Five Categories of Church Members who Are Less Likely to Believe in Efficacy of Vaccination**

Do you agree with the statement: "I feel confident in the efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccine and boosters?"



In conclusion, the strong majority of Church members feel that their parishes did their best to navigate through the pandemic. They were satisfied with parishes' overall adaptation to the new circumstances, with the support coming to them from their parish communities, and with the anti-COVID safety measures that had been taken.

At the same time, this finding must be understood in light of the fact that a significant number of parishioners do not believe in the danger of COVID and the importance of vaccination.

#### IV. How the Pandemic Changed Involvement of Members in Parishes, Their Personal Faith, and Attitudes towards the Church

##### DEFINITIONS USED IN THIS CHAPTER:

- *Strictly Observant parishioners*: parishioners who attend church weekly and report that they strictly follow Orthodox fasting requirements
- *Never Closing parishes*: parishes which remained open to congregants for in-person worship services throughout the pandemic
- *Intentionally Orthodox parishes*: parishes in which 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 in which members “strongly agreed” that their parishes are “always willing to try new things and meet new challenges”

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

- ❖ About a quarter (23%) of Orthodox parishioners now attend worship services less frequently than they did prior to the pandemic, and only 5% reported that they attended “more often.” When asked about their overall involvement in the parish beyond worship services, 39% indicated a decrease in participation, while 27% reported greater involvement.
- ❖ In three categories of parishes, significantly more church members *increased* their overall participation since the start of the pandemic. These parishes are:
  - Parishes that never closed their doors for in-person worship through the pandemic
  - “Intentionally Orthodox” parishes
  - “Experimental” parishes
- ❖ 43% of parishioners reported that their “trust in a parish priest to make good decisions” has grown since the start of the pandemic, and only 24% reported a decline in confidence. Conversely, trust in the hierarchs of the Church (Bishops, Metropolitans) has dropped: 40% of Orthodox Church members are now less confident in the ability of their hierarchs to make good decisions than they were pre-pandemic, and only 20% reported an increase in confidence.
- ❖ 50% of the study participants said that they had grown in their personal faith during the pandemic. Members of three types of parishes *and* three categories of parishioners were much more likely to grow in their personal faith than all other church members:
  - Types of Parishes
    - Never closed their doors for in-person worship through the pandemic
    - “Intentionally Orthodox”
    - “Experimental”
  - Categories of Parishioners
    - “Strictly observant”
    - Younger (under 35 years old)
    - Lower education level (no college degree)

In many ways, the weakening or strengthening of a local religious community depends on the changes in engagement of its members. Put simply, it is hard to imagine a truly viable congregation without members attending regularly, growing in faith, participating in various church-based activities, and feeling enthusiastic about their congregation’s future.

This chapter will look at the crucial question: “How has the pandemic changed the attendance and overall involvement of our study participants, as well as their attitudes towards various church-related matters?”

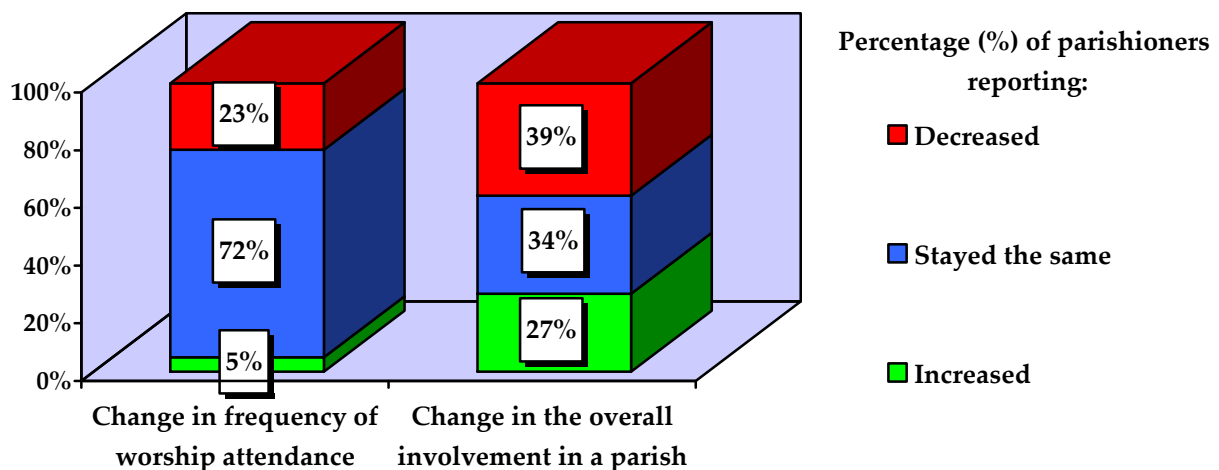
The regularity of church attendance is commonly used as an indicator of members’ involvement in a congregation. At the same time, while attendance is an important indicator of participation in a church, engagement in the life of a parish is not limited to worship services.

Therefore, the survey asked two questions:

- “How often did you attend worship services at your current parish PRIOR to the pandemic? And, how often do you NOW attend worship services at your parish: either in-person or online?”
- “BEYOND SIMPLY ATTENDING WORSHIP SERVICES, how has your overall involvement in the life of your parish changed since the start of the pandemic?”

Fig. 24 shows the changes both in attendance at worship services since the start of the pandemic and in the overall involvement in a parish. Both measures show a general decline in church participation by a significant number of parishioners.

**Fig. 24** Change in the Frequency of Worship Attendance vs. Change in the Overall Involvement of Orthodox Church Members in Their Parishes Since the Start of the Pandemic



As measured by worship attendance, about a quarter (23%) of them attend less frequently now than they did two years ago, and only 5% participate in worship services more often. Looking at changes in overall involvement, the gap between those who reduced and those who increased their participation in a parish is somewhat smaller: 39% vs. 27%.

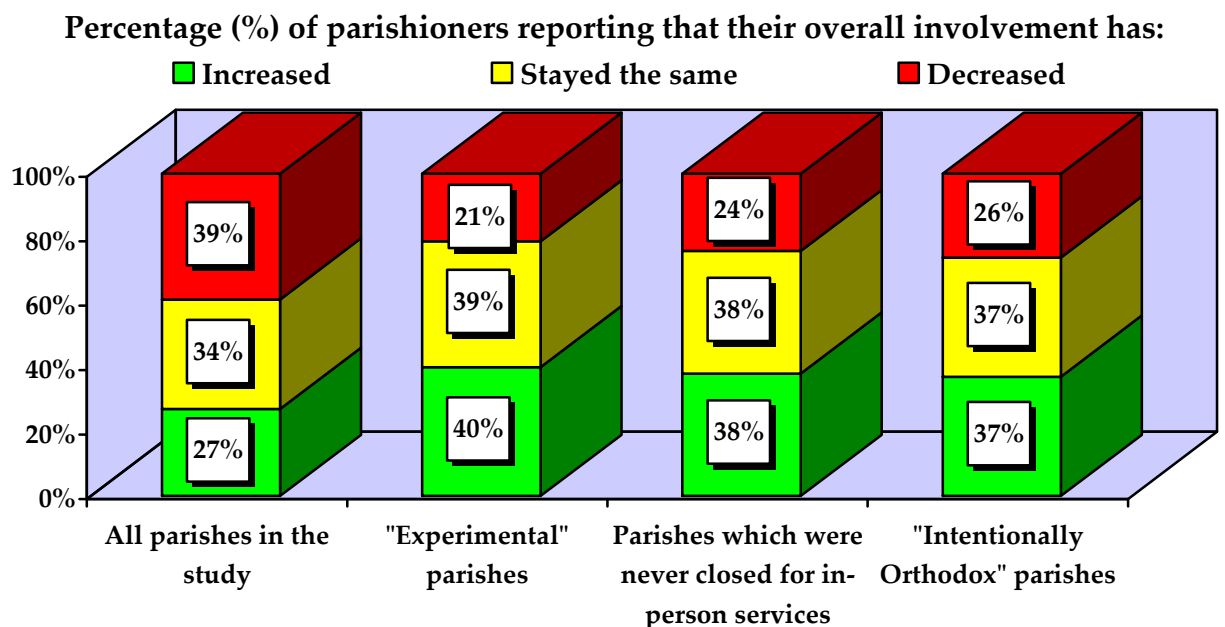
Are there any particular categories of parishes in which significantly more church members *increased* their overall participation since the start of the pandemic as compared to the national average? Fig. 25 shows that three categories of parishes are quite different in this regard from a “typical” American Orthodox congregation:

- “Experimental” parishes
- Parishes which never closed their doors for in-person worship through the pandemic
- “Intentionally Orthodox” parishes

In these three categories, significantly more members reported increasing their overall involvement in a parish.

**Fig. 25 Three Categories of Parishes with Greater Overall Involvement of Members Since the Start of the Pandemic**

“BEYOND SIMPLY ATTENDING WORSHIP SERVICES, how has your overall involvement in the life of your parish changed since the start of the pandemic?”



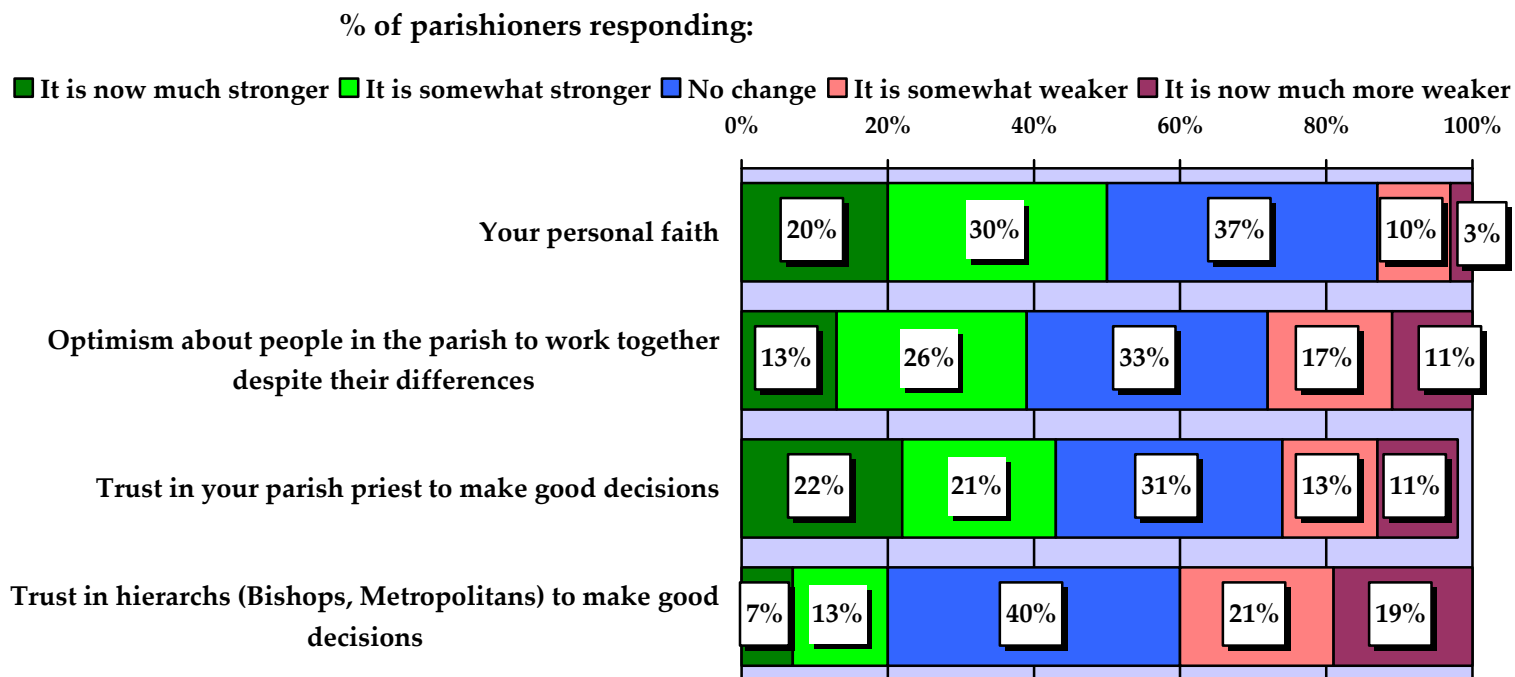
The experience of the pandemic had an impact not only on church members’ involvement in the parish, but also on their attitudes toward a number of church-related matters. We asked study participants: “As a result of the pandemic, how did each of the following change:

- Your personal faith
- Your trust in hierarchs (Bishops, Metropolitans) to make good decisions
- Your trust in your parish priest to make good decisions
- Your optimism about people in the parish to work together despite their differences?”

Fig. 26 shows that in the aftermath of the pandemic, many more people grew in personal faith (50%) than become disillusioned in Orthodox Christianity (13%). The pandemic also resulted in parishioners significantly increasing their confidence in the wisdom of their priests: 43% said that their “trust in [their] parish priest to make good decisions” had grown, and only 24% reported a decline in confidence.

The feelings about the ability of people in a parish to work in concert despite personal differences are more mixed: 39% of respondents are now more optimistic about their fellow parishioners, while 28% feel disappointed in this regard.

**Fig. 26** “As a result of the pandemic, how did each of the following change?”



Finally, Fig. 26 shows that the trust of the Orthodox laity in the hierarchs of the Church (Bishops, Metropolitans) has dropped significantly during the past two years. 40% of Orthodox Church members are now less confident in the ability of their hierarchs to make good decisions than they were pre-pandemic, and only 20% report an increase in confidence.

Two additional comments should be made about the changes in attitudes shown in Fig. 26. First, there is a very strong positive correlation between two pairs of changes in attitudes:

- Change in trust of a parish priest to make good decisions AND change in optimism about people in the parish to be able work together despite their differences
- Change in optimism about ability of people in the parish to work together despite their differences AND change in personal faith of the respondents

As Fig. 27 shows, the ability of people in a parish to work jointly during the crisis and despite their differences is highly dependent on the ability of parish priest to make good decisions.

**Fig. 27 Ability of People to Work Jointly in the Parish Despite Personal Differences is Highly Related to**

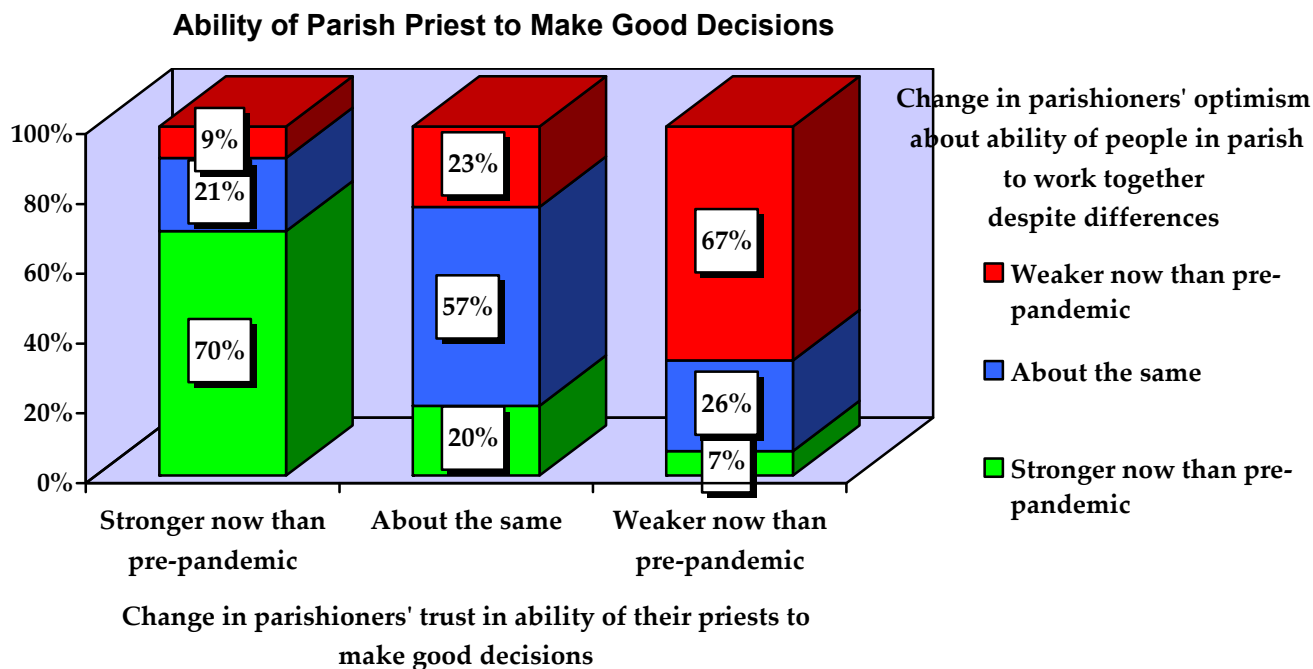
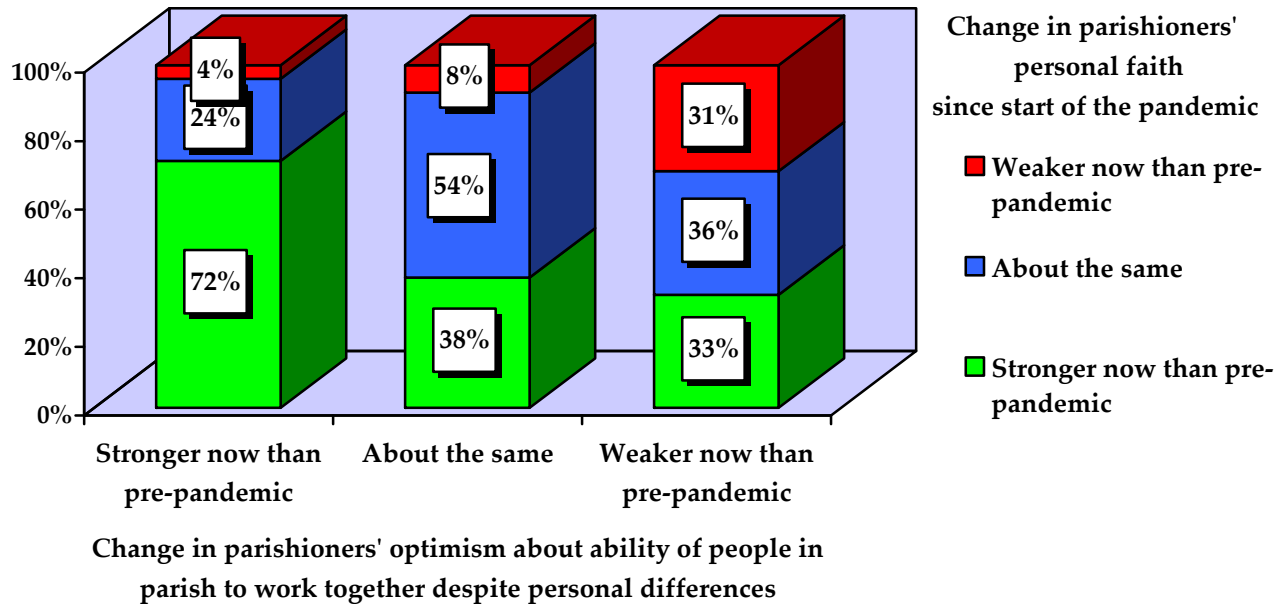


Fig. 28 demonstrates that increased optimism about the ability of the fellow parishioners to work jointly despite their personal differences had a positive effect on personal growth in faith during the pandemic.

**Fig. 28 Growth in Personal Faith of Orthodox Church Members during the Pandemic Is Closely Related to their Growth in Optimism about Fellow Parishioners to Work Jointly Despite Differences**



The second, and, perhaps, most important observation, is about the change in personal faith of Orthodox Church members through the pandemic.

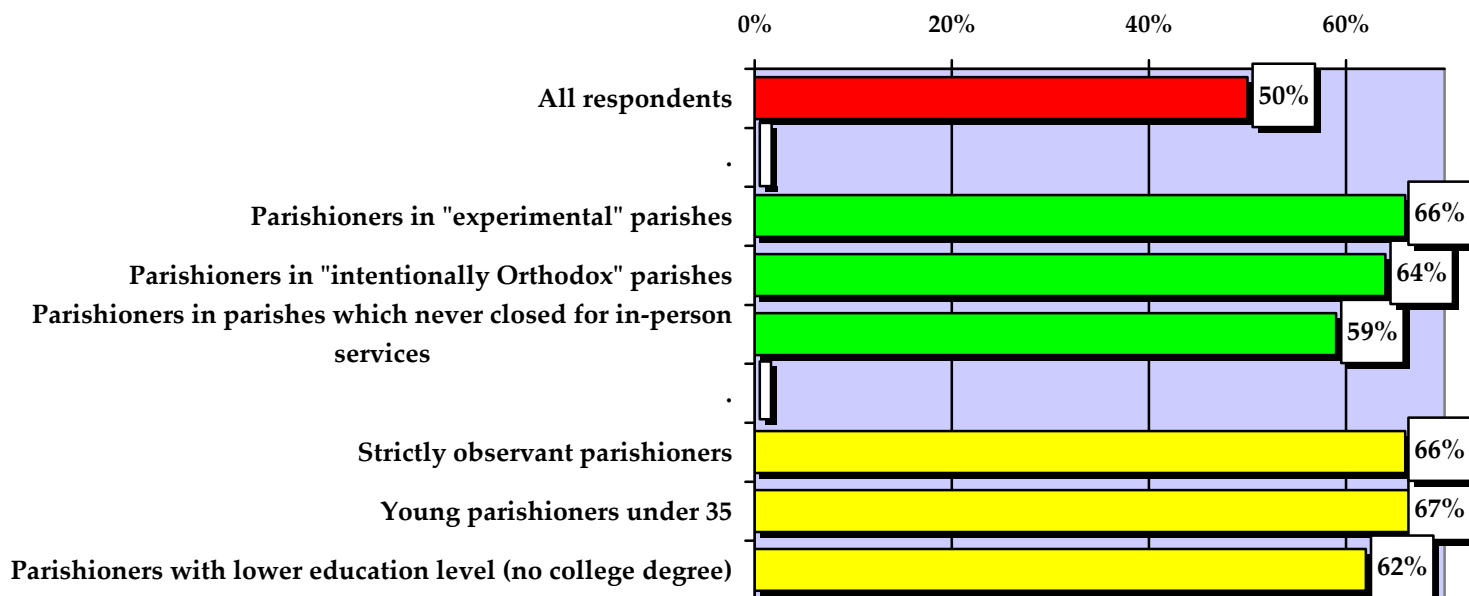
Fig. 29 shows that members of three types of parishes *and* three categories of parishioners were much more likely to grow in their personal faith than all other church members:

- Types of Parishes
  - “Experimental” parishes
  - “Intentionally Orthodox” parishes
  - Parishes which never closed their doors for in-person worship through the pandemic
- Categories of Parishioners
  - “Strictly observant”
  - Younger (under 35 years old)
  - Lower education level (no college degree)

**Fig. 29 Strong Growth in Personal Faith in Three Categories of Parishes and among Three Categories of Church Members**

Do you agree with the statement: "COVID-19 is not as serious as many people think it is?"

Percentage (%) of parishioners reporting that their personal faith is STRONGER NOW than before the pandemic



Three major lessons can be drawn from this chapter. First, the pandemic affected various aspects of religiosity of Orthodox Church members very differently. A great number of them (50%) have grown in *personal faith*. But, at the same time, both overall involvement of parishioners in their parishes, and their attendance at worship services, have declined significantly. This poses a question for future investigation: why there is a widening gap between growth in personal Orthodox faith and diminishing participation in church life?

Second, going through the pandemic has affected differently the trust of Orthodox Church members in two levels of church leadership. Parishioners have now more confidence in their local parish clergy, but notably less trust in their ruling hierarchs (Bishops, Metropolitans) than before the pandemic.

Third, when compared to other Orthodox congregations, three categories of parishes navigated through the pandemic much more successfully. Their members both became more involved in the parish *and* grew strongly in personal faith. These three categories are:

- "Experimental" parishes
- "Intentionally Orthodox" parishes
- Parishes which never closed their doors for in-person worship through the pandemic



## V. Tough Lessons of Conflict and Decision Making in Parishes during the Pandemic

### **DEFINITIONS USED IN THIS CHAPTER:**

- *Strictly Observant parishioners*: parishioners who attend church weekly and report that they strictly follow Orthodox fasting requirements
- *Never Closing parishes*: parishes which remained open to congregants for in-person worship services throughout the pandemic
- *Intentionally Orthodox parishes*: parishes in which 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 in which members “strongly agreed” that their parishes are “always willing to try new things and meet new challenges”

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

- ❖ More than one-third of study participants reported that their parishes experienced either a significant (11%) or a moderate (25%) increase in conflicts and dissent during the pandemic.
- ❖ Two categories of parishes had *fewer* disagreements among members in the past two years. These were the parishes that never closed their doors for in-person services, and the “experimental” parishes.
- ❖ During the pandemic, in 79% of parishes, directives coming from hierarchs (Bishops, Metropolitans) had either a “dominant” or “strong” influence on how a parish’s decisions were made. Today, post-pandemic, only 57% of ordinary parishioners think that directives from Bishops and Metropolitans should have a “dominant” or “strong” influence on the parish’s decision making in future critical situations.
- ❖ Church members feel that the opinions of all ordinary parishioners must be taken more into account when making decisions in future critical situations. During the pandemic, discussions with the parish community had a “dominant” or “strong” impact on decision making in only 19% of congregations. Presently, 50% of church members feel that open deliberations with the entire parish should be a “dominant” or “strong” source of authority in critical decisions made by a parish.

The pandemic assaulted religious congregations not only with deaths of their members and closures of their churches. It also provided a rigorous test of the unity of parish communities and their ability to make difficult decisions under extraordinary circumstances.

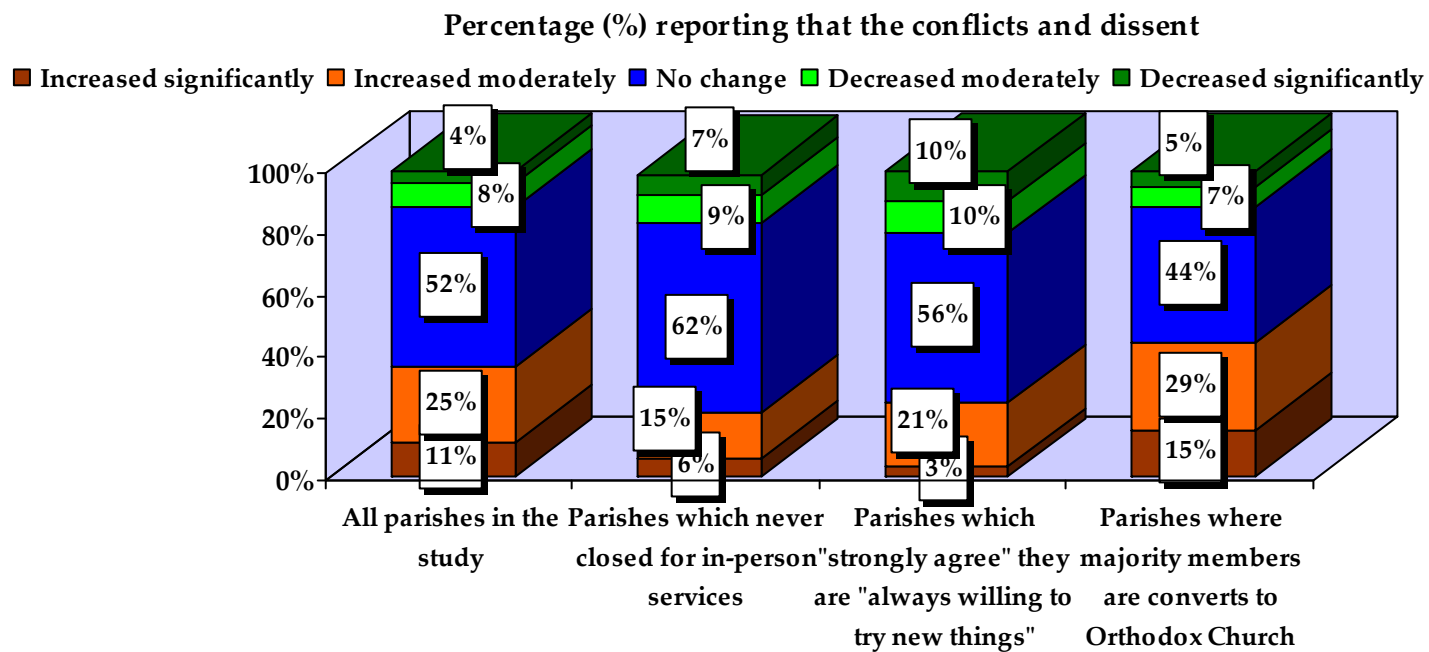
The survey asked parishioners: “How have the conflicts and dissent in your parish changed since the start of the pandemic?” Fig. 30 shows that over one-third of study participants reported either significant (11%) or moderate (25%) increase in conflicts and dissent.

Notably, two categories of parishes lived through the pandemic more peacefully and with fewer disagreements among members. These were the “never closing” and the “experimental” parishes. On the opposite end, parishes in which a majority of members were converts to the Orthodox Church witnessed a higher level of conflict and dissent.

**Fig. 30 Never Closing Doors for In-Person Services and Being an “Experimental” Parish Helped Diminish Conflicts during the Pandemic.**

**Having Many Converts among Members Had the Opposite Effect.**

“How have the conflicts and dissent in your parish changed since the start of the pandemic?”



What might explain these differences? Is it possible that those parishes that never closed their doors were initially cohesive communities; i.e., their members were uniformly desiring to continue church life unchanged through the pandemic? Is it also possible that members of more “experimental” parishes have always been open to trying new things and, therefore, more tolerant of diversity in opinions, as it surfaced during the pandemic? As to the higher level of conflict in convert-populated parishes, is it possible that their more intentional approach to studying and practicing the Orthodox faith also resulted in more heated disagreements between varying viewpoints on pandemic-related matters? These are open questions for further examination.

During the pandemic, difficult deliberations in parish communities on safety protocols and new church policies were further complicated by the model of administration which is typical for the Orthodox Church. This model calls for strict obedience to hierarchs (Bishops, Metropolitans) and leaves little room for debate by a congregation. But the sudden need for rapid and locally contextualized adaptations challenged this traditional model of waiting for a bishop to decide what his multi-state diocese should do.

As the pandemic evolved, it became clear that this highly centralized decision making did not meet the unique circumstances and needs of each parish. While many parishes grudgingly accepted all directives of their reigning hierarchs, others simply took matters into their own hands and decided by themselves, either quietly sidestepping orders or openly confronting their Bishops and Metropolitans. This was especially true for changes in ways to deliver Holy Communion – the sacrament of utmost importance for Orthodox Christians.<sup>15</sup>

Now, post-pandemic, the question is: “During the past two years, what did church members learn about various sources of authority which *should* influence a parish’s decisions in times of crisis such as the pandemic?” The comparison of data from the first survey of the Orthodox parish clergy and the current survey of lay members offers a unique opportunity to address this question.

In the first survey, American Orthodox priests were asked: “When introducing various new church policies and practices during the pandemic, how much did each of the following influence your decision?” The survey of Orthodox laity asked: “Based on your parish’s experience of dealing with the pandemic, in future critical situations, how much *should* each of the following influence the decisions that the parish makes?” The same five sources of authority were given in both surveys:

- Guidance from a ruling hierarch (Bishop, Metropolitan)
- Personal position of a priest
- Parish Council’s position
- Recommendations of secular authorities and experts
- Open discussion with entire parish community

The two charts in Fig. 31 allow to compare the level of *actual influence* of each source of authority during the pandemic from the perspective of clergymen, and the level of their *desirable influence* for possible future critical situations from the perspective of lay church members.

---

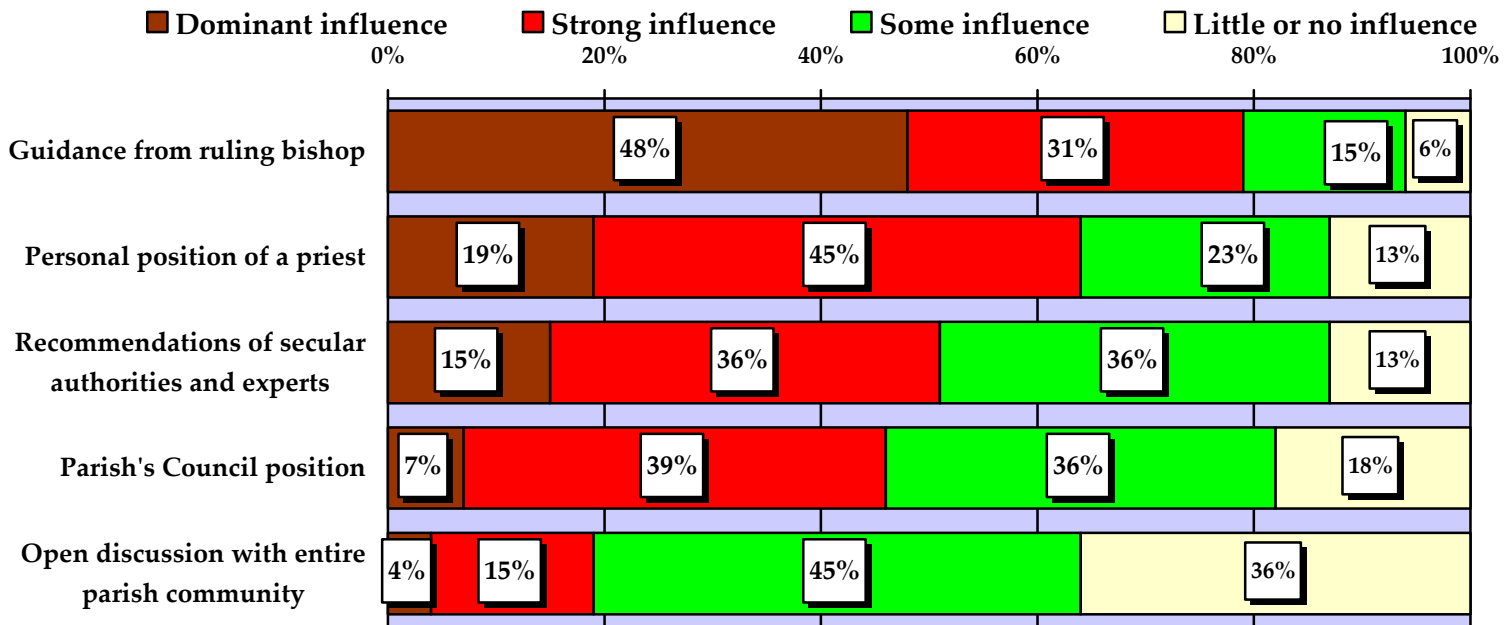
<sup>15</sup> Alexei Krindatch, “Holy Communion during the Pandemic in American Orthodox Parishes,” <https://orthodoxreality.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/HolyCommunionDuringPandemicFinalReport1.pdf> See the Executive Summary, p. 2-3, for a brief overview of the results.

**Fig. 31 Five Sources of Authority in Parish's Decision Making:**

**their Actual Influence on Decisions during the Pandemic vs. the Level of their Desirable Influence in Possible Future Critical Situations**

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

% of clergy responding:



“Based on your parish’s experience of dealing with the pandemic, in the future critical situations, how much *SHOULD* each of the following influence the decisions that the parish makes?”

% of parishioners responding:

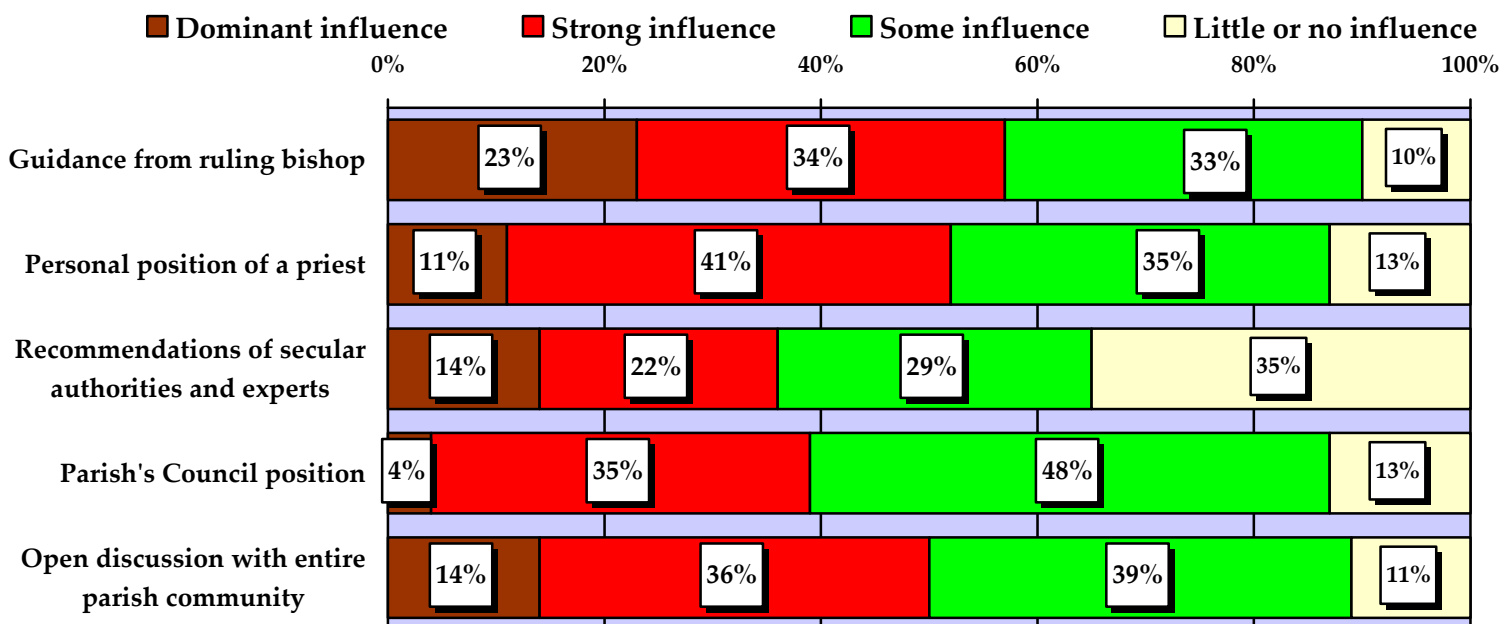
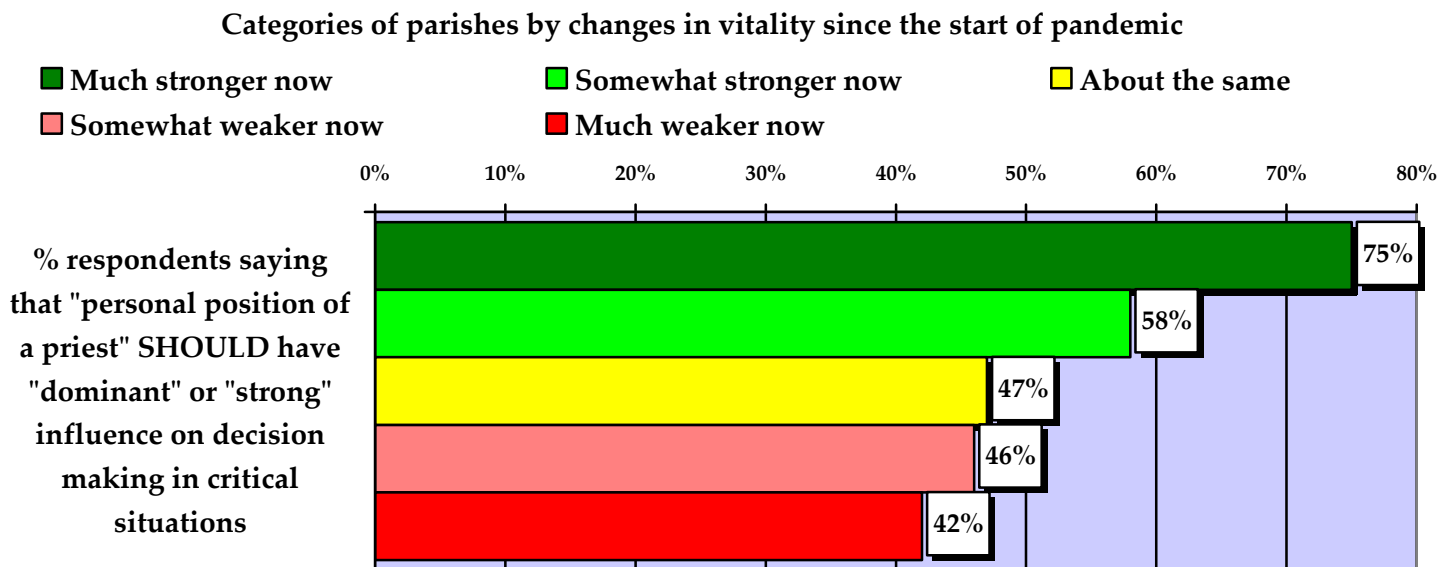


Fig. 31 shows that when various new rules were implemented, the guidance of ruling hierarchs affected decisions in the parishes more than anything else. 79% of clergy said that directives coming from their hierarchs had either a “dominant influence” (48%) or a “strong influence” (31%). The laity’s experiences during the pandemic made them less willing to accept such strong impact of hierarchs on decision making in a congregation: only 57% of ordinary parishioners think that directives from Bishops and Metropolitans should have a “dominant” (23%) or “strong” (34%) influence in future critical situations.

The level of personal authority exercised by parish priests during the pandemic was also too high from the perspective of the people in the pews. Fig 31 shows that in about two-thirds of the parishes (64%), the personal position of a clergyman had a significant impact on decision making during the pandemic (19% - “dominant influence,” 45% - “strong influence”). Today, only slightly more than half of the lay respondents feel that their pastors should have a “dominant” (11%) or “strong” (41%) influence in future critical situations.

There is an interesting deviation from this pattern. One particular category of parishioners desires a much higher level of their clergy’ influence on the parish’s decisions. In chapter 5, we saw that 13% of study participants reported that their congregations “are now much stronger than before the pandemic.” A significantly higher percentage of respondents from these parishes (75%) feel that the “personal position of a priest” should have a “dominant” or “strong” influence on decisions in future critical situations. See Fig. 32.

**Fig. 32 Growth in Parish’s Vitality Goes Hand-in-Hand with Trust of Parishioners in their Clergy’s Ability to Make Good Critical Decisions**



The most plausible explanation is that parishioners observed and appreciate the strong impact of the wise decisions made by clergy on growth in parish's vitality. This resulted in a much greater trust in their priests' decision-making skills for future critical situations.

When it comes to the role of the secular authorities in critical congregational decision making, parishioners think that these agencies should also have less influence. As Fig. 31 demonstrates, during the pandemic, the decisions in more than half of the parishes (51%) were seriously influenced by secular authorities (15% - "dominant influence," 36% - "strong influence"). Today, only slightly more than one-third of parishioners (36%) believe that their recommendations should have a "dominant" (14%) or "strong" (22%) influence.

In contrast, church members indicated that their own voices - the opinions of all ordinary parishioners - must be heard more and taken into account when making decisions in future critical situations. During the pandemic, open discussions with the entire parish community had a "dominant" or "strong" impact on decision making in only 19% of the parishes. Now 50% of church members feel that deliberations involving all parishioners should be a "dominant" or "strong" source of authority in a parish's future critical decisions.

## **VI. The Pandemic's Biggest Victim: Religious Education for Children and Teenagers**

### ***DEFINITIONS USED IN THIS CHAPTER:***

- ***Strictly Observant parishioners:*** parishioners who attend church weekly and report that they strictly follow Orthodox fasting requirements
- ***Never Closing parishes:*** parishes which remained open to congregants for in-person worship services throughout the pandemic
- ***Intentionally Orthodox parishes:*** parishes in which 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 in which members "strongly agreed" that their parishes are "always willing to try new things and meet new challenges"

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

- ❖ The vast majority (86%) of Orthodox parents have a strong preference for their children being in in-person religious education classes (and not online classes), because "this is a better and more efficient way of learning for children and teens."

- ❖ A quarter (27%) of American Orthodox parishes maintained their *in-person* classes for children and teenagers throughout the pandemic and never switched to an online mode. About half (48%) responded to the pandemic by switching their religious education for young people to an online format, and then mostly resumed in-person classes when the pandemic retreated. The remaining 25% of parishes do not offer any religious education for children and teenagers.
- ❖ 30% of parishioners with children reported either the complete withdrawal of their children (16%) from parish-based religious education or a decline (14%) in their participation in the past two years. Only 12% said that their children are now more involved in religious education than prior to the pandemic.
- ❖ Parishes that maintained in-person classes through the pandemic (never switching to an online format) were much more successful in retaining or even increasing the level of young people’s participation in religious education.
- ❖ Three types of parishes were more successful in growing involvement of children and teenagers in religious education programs during the past two years. These are:
  - “Never closing” parishes
  - “Intentionally Orthodox” parishes
  - “Experimental” parishes

Faith formation of youths is one of the most important goals of any religious congregation. For several reasons, in American Orthodox Christian Churches, the nurture of young people’s faith is an issue of particular concern.<sup>16</sup> The pandemic intensified this concern and raised a new question: how did the long absence of children and teenagers from physical church and parish classrooms affect their involvement in religious education?

Church closures, restrictions on social gatherings, and the desire of church members to isolate themselves for safety during the pandemic all have shaken the established routines of Sunday Schools. Some parishes “hunkered down” and ceased religious education altogether while waiting for better times. Some moved their programs online. Others tried to keep things going as before and maintained in-person classes.

---

<sup>16</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>

The first report of this study was based on the national survey of Orthodox parish clergy conducted in February 2022.<sup>17</sup> It revealed that - compared to pre-pandemic - nearly half of the parishes have experienced a decrease in involvement of young people in religious education. Overall and nationwide, a “typical” (median) parish is currently missing a quarter of its pre-pandemic Sunday school students.

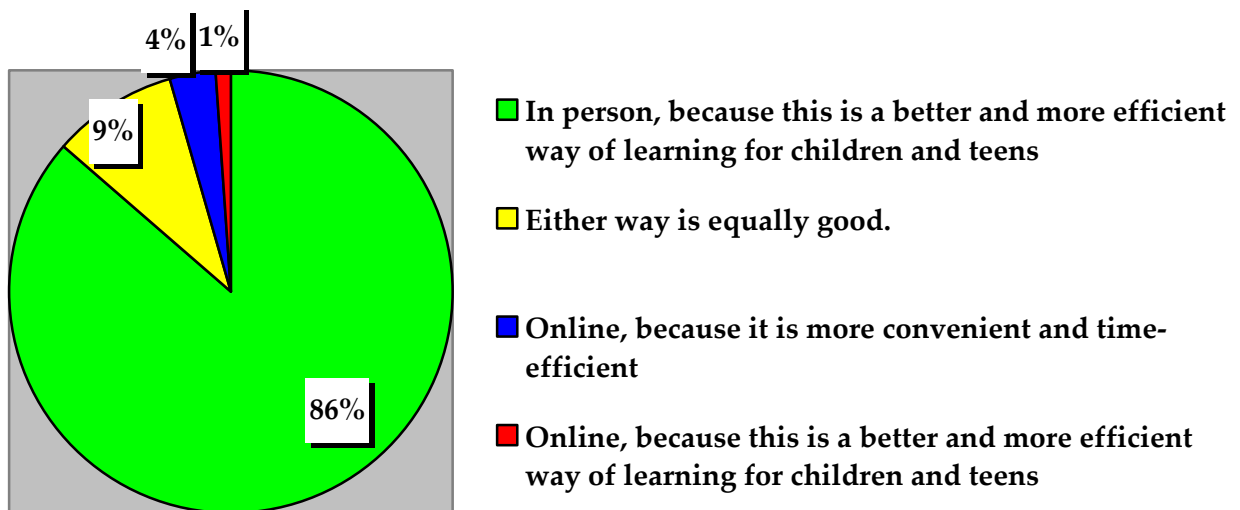
Most importantly, it was found that *switching classes to an online mode might have been used as an emergency adaptation, but overall, it has had a negative influence on the participation of children and teenagers in religious education.*

In this chapter, we will look at the consequences of the pandemic for young people’s participation in religious education through the eye of their parents – the members of US Orthodox parishes.

One third (32%) of the study participants were people with children under 18 living at home. Fig. 33 shows that the opinions of Orthodox parents about the preferable modality of religious education for their children (in-person or online classes) fully confirmed the findings from the study of the Orthodox parish clergy.

**Fig. 33 Parishioners Have Strong Preference for In-Person Religious Education Classes for their Children**

“If you had the choice and if COVID-19 were not a concern, would you prefer for your children to participate in religious education classes in person or online?”



<sup>17</sup> The first study report can be accessed here: <https://orthodoxreality.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/NewTraditionalInMostTraditionalChurchClergyReportReduced.pdf>

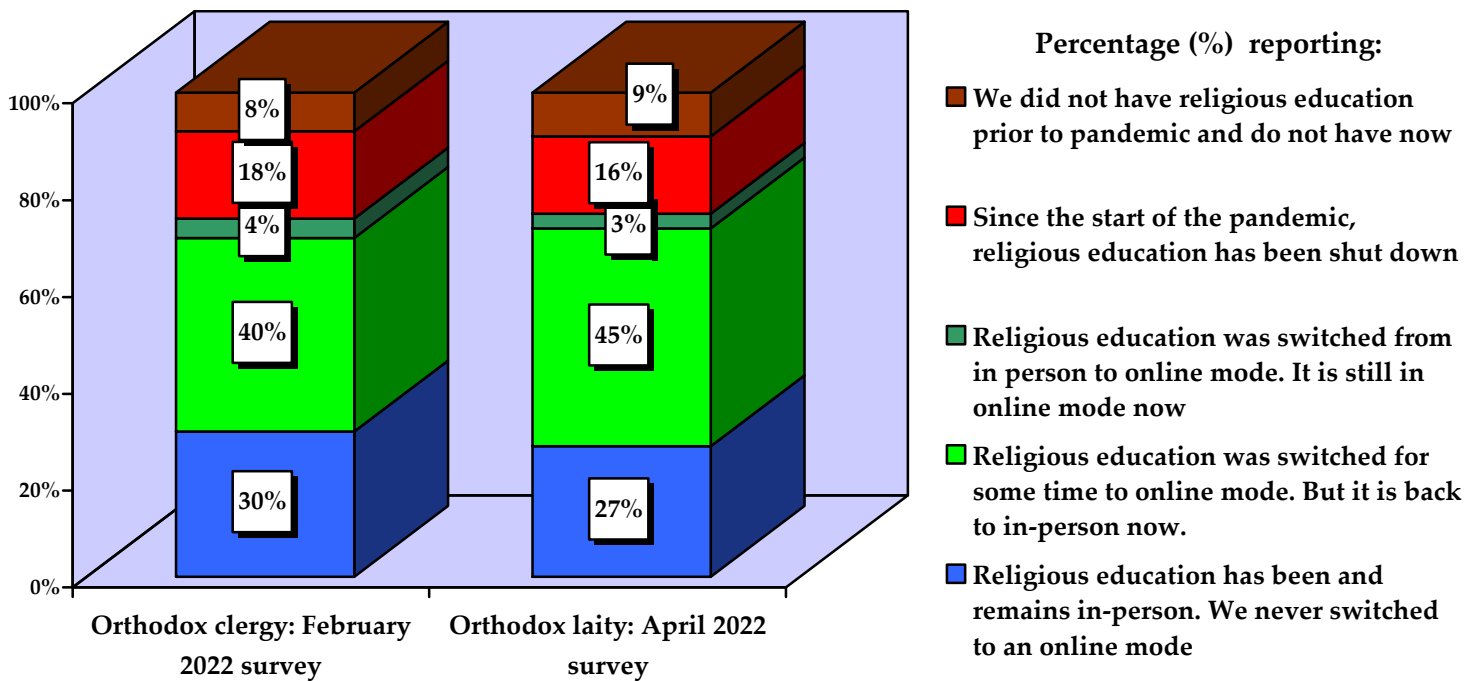


The vast majority (86%) of Orthodox parents have a strong preference for their kids being in in-person religious education classes, because “this is a better and more efficient way of learning for children and teens.”

The survey also asked Orthodox parents: “Which best describes religious education for children and teenagers in your parish now *vs.* before the pandemic?” The same question was included in the national survey of Orthodox clergy conducted two months earlier, in February 2022. Fig. 34 shows that the answers of priests and lay parishioners to this question were very similar.

**Fig. 34 Format of Religious Education for Children and Youth During and After the Pandemic Varies Greatly in American Orthodox Parishes**

“Which best describes religious education for children and teenagers in your parish now versus before the pandemic?”



Three major observations can be made based on parishioners’ responses. First, in a quarter (25%) of American Orthodox parishes, there is presently no religious education for young people at all. Some of these congregations did not offer religious education even before the pandemic, but in most cases their Sunday Schools were shut down during the pandemic and did not resume.

Second, on the opposite side, a quarter of the parishes (27%) managed to maintain their *in-person* religious education classes throughout the pandemic. They never switched to an online mode. Third, half the parishes (48%) responded to the pandemic by switching their religious education for young people to an online format.

But when the pandemic retreated, almost all of them returned to in-person classes. Today, only 3% of parishes are still keeping an online format.

Parents were further asked: “Which best describes the participation of children and teenagers in your household in religious education?” Fig. 35 shows the answers for all respondents<sup>18</sup> and also separately for parishes that continued in-person religious education throughout the pandemic and parishes that switched their classes to an online mode. In the overall picture, the damage to faith formation of young people caused by the pandemic is significant. 30% of parents reported either the complete withdrawal of their children (16%) from parish-based religious education or a decline (14%) in their participation in the past two years. Only 12% said that their children are now more involved than prior to the pandemic.

**Fig. 35 Parishes which Maintained in-Person Religious Education Classes through the Pandemic Were More Successful in Retaining and Increasing the Number of Students**

“Which best describes the *participation* of children and teenagers in your household in religious education?”

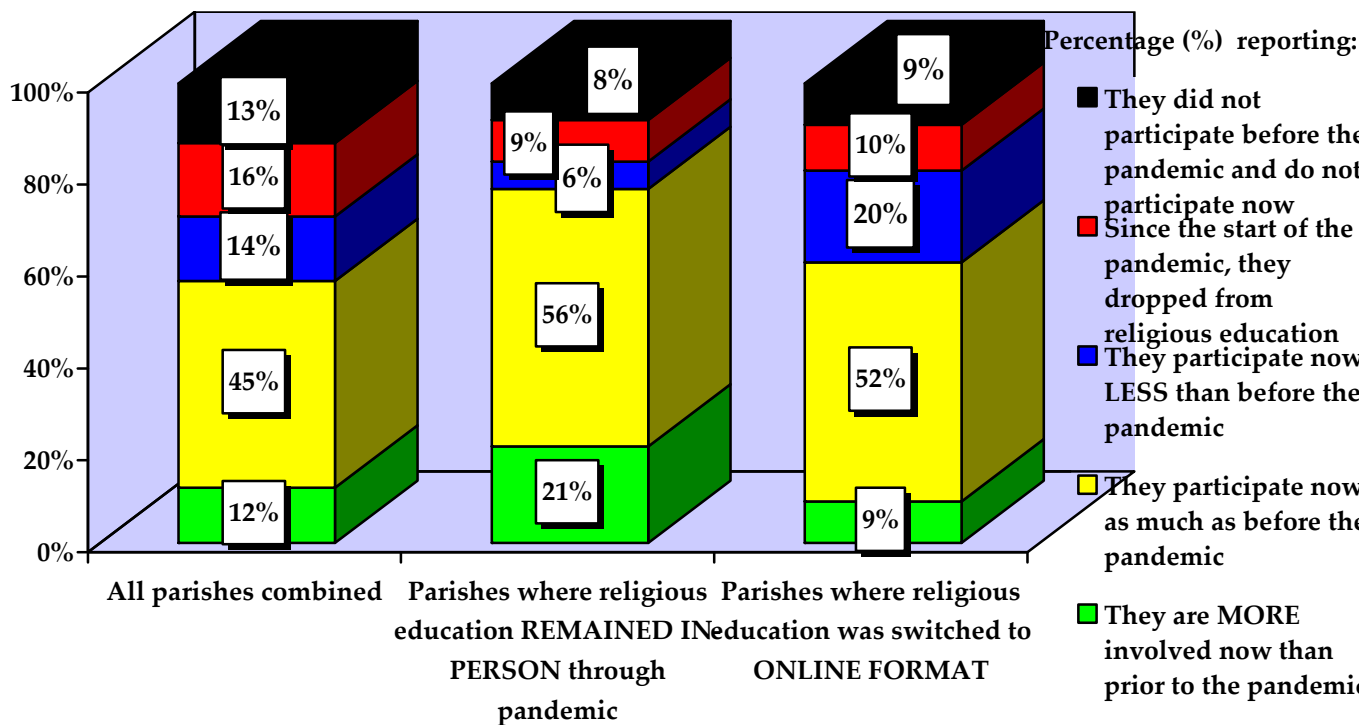


Fig. 35 also shows that keeping classes in-person rather than switching to an online mode helped parishes to retain or even increase participation of young people in faith formation programs. More than three-quarters of respondents (77%) in parishes that maintained in-person religious education through the pandemic said that their children are now either more involved (21%) or participate as much as they did pre-pandemic (56%).

<sup>18</sup> Including respondents from the parishes which never offered religious education or ceased their programs at the beginning of the pandemic and never resumed

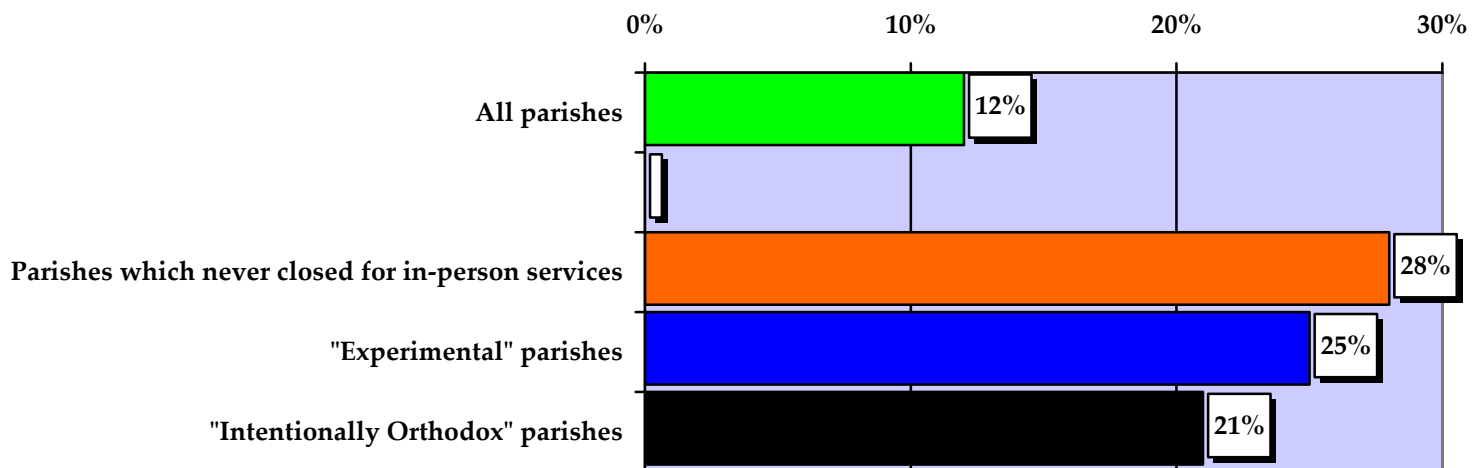
In contrast, in parishes that switched classes to an online format, only 61% of parents reported either an increase (9%) or the same level (52%) of participation of their children.

While the in-person format of classes is important for keeping children and teenagers involved, it is not the only factor that had a significant influence on changes in young people’s participation in religious education through the pandemic. There is a strong positive correlation between an increase in young people’s participation in religious education and three types of the parishes. In order of statistical significance, these three types of the parishes are:

- The parishes which never closed their doors for in-person worship through the pandemic
- “Experimental” parishes
- “Intentionally Orthodox” parishes

Fig. 36 shows greater success of such parishes in growing involvement of young people in religious education.

**Fig. 36 Percentage of Parishioners Who Reported that Their Children Are Now More Involved in Religious Education than They Were before the Pandemic**



Two comments can be made about Fig. 36. First, not only the in-person format of religious education, but also, continuous in-person attendance at services throughout the pandemic (“Parish has never closed its doors for in-person services”) are significant for keeping children and teenagers engaged in a parish’s religious education. In other words, an overall emphasis on maintaining a “hands-on” church experience rather than relying upon a “virtual remote” option to participate is vital for young people’s involvement in faith formation programs.

Second, the willingness of a congregation to think creatively and try new things (i.e., the fact that a parish is “experimental”) is as important for maintaining or increasing young people’s engagement in religious education as the overall emphasis of a parish on strictly following Orthodox Church rules and practices (i.e., the fact that a parish is “intentionally Orthodox”).

In summary, the most crucial factors in fostering the engagement of young people in faith formation programs through the pandemic were: the uninterrupted experience of *in-person* worship services, maintaining *in-person* religious education, a parish’s strong focus on being truly Orthodox in its religious practices, and the willingness of the congregation to experiment and try new approaches.

## VII. Does the “Online Church” Have a Future in American Orthodox Parishes?

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

- ❖ 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 either unconditionally reject online services as undermining the essence of Orthodox liturgical worship, or accept them under extraordinary circumstances only.
- ❖ Compared to the clergy, more Orthodox *parishioners* (61%) are in favor of online services. While an absolute majority of them are supportive of keeping online services as an option, only a quarter of members themselves use the opportunity to worship remotely, including 7% who attend either exclusively or primarily online.
- ❖ Overall, the online mode of church life has little appeal for Orthodox Church members. If given a choice and assuming the danger of COVID is gone, no more than 15% of parishioners would participate either remotely or in a mix of online and in-person formats in the main worship services (Sunday Liturgy), confessions, or private counseling with a priest. Only in two areas of parish life – religious education for adults and the parish’s various business meetings – would a significant percentage of parishioners opt for a *mixture* of online and in-person participation.
- ❖ Younger parishioners (under 35) have a stronger preference for in-person participation in all areas of church life than middle-aged (35-64) and older (65+) church members.
- ❖ Members who are only marginally involved in their parishes are much more likely to make use of online services.

As shown in chapter 3, 17% of study participants reported that their parishes never stopped in-person services throughout the pandemic. For the remaining 83% of respondents whose parishes closed their doors, going online for worship and other aspects of parish life (small groups, business meetings, religious education, work with catechumens) was the only option to keep their church functioning. Even in parishes that continued worshipping in person, introducing an online option for services and various ministries was often a necessity because of restrictions on public gatherings (e.g., number of people) and the many parishioners who decided to isolate themselves and stay home.

At first, this new online version of Orthodox parish life felt very awkward. But the pandemic lasted for over two years. Gradually, more clergy and parishioners became accustomed to and proficient in “Zooming” for church activities from the comfort of home. For some of them, the online option was increasingly seen not simply as safer, but also as more convenient and time-efficient.

Today the question is: after resuming in-person worship services and other church activities, will American Orthodox parishes give up the newly discovered tools that enable remote church participation? This chapter will address this issue by looking at opinions and preferences of lay church members. The data from the first study’s report - based on the information provided by the clergy<sup>19</sup> - will make it possible to compare the thoughts of parishioners and their priests on the future of the online mode in the Orthodox Church.

Like other Christian congregations, at the outbreak of the pandemic, Orthodox parishes quickly learned to livestream or post online recorded services. According to the national study, “The Pandemic and American Orthodox Parishes,” by early May 2020, nearly two-thirds of parishes (64%) were already offering their services online.<sup>20</sup> Based on the data from the survey of Orthodox parish clergy conducted in February 2022, 37% of American parishes now 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 appears 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 change this now.

---

<sup>19</sup> The first study report can be accessed here:

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

<sup>20</sup> The data and report from this study are available at:

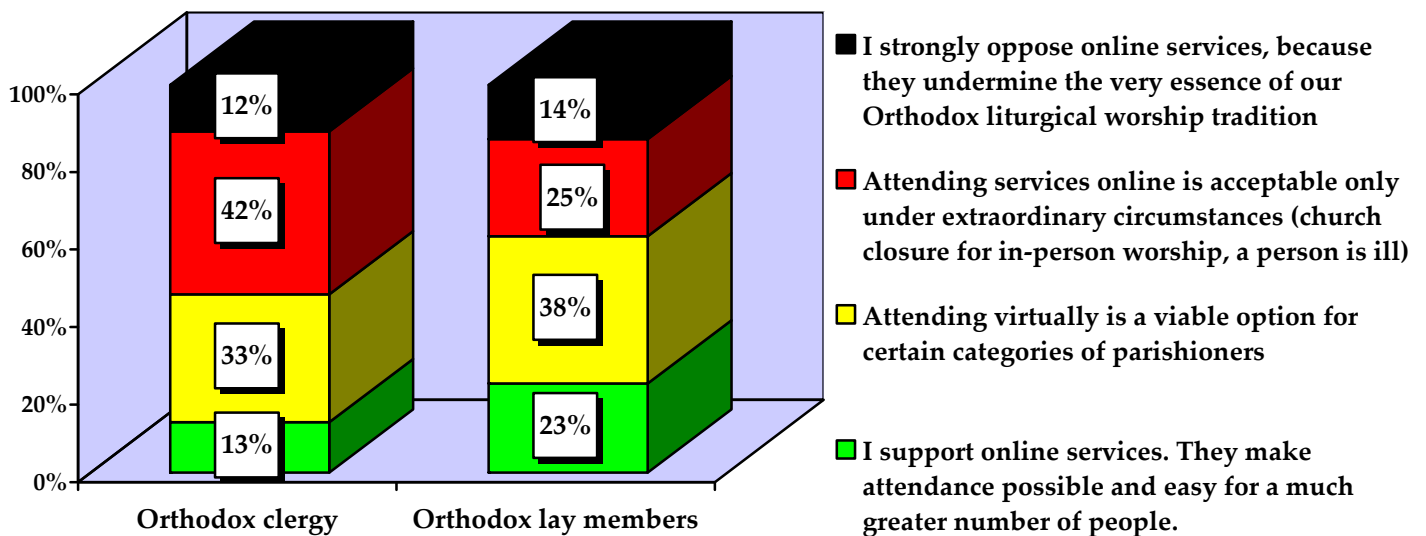
<https://orthodoxreality.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CoronavirusUSOrthodoxParishesReportFinal-1.pdf>

The surveys of both Orthodox clergy and laity asked the same question: “Which of the following best describes your opinion about offering online Orthodox services?” Fig. 37 shows that American Orthodox *priests* are divided into two nearly equal “camps.” Almost half of them (46%) support online services, either because it is easier for more people to participate, or because this is the only way for certain categories of parishioners to attend. Slightly more than half (54%) hold 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.

Orthodox *parishioners* are more in favor of online services than their pastors. A clear majority of them (61%) support the option to worship remotely, either because this makes it easier for more people to participate, or because this is the only way for certain categories of parishioners to attend.

**Fig. 37 American Orthodox Laity Are More in Favor of Online Services than Orthodox Clergy**

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



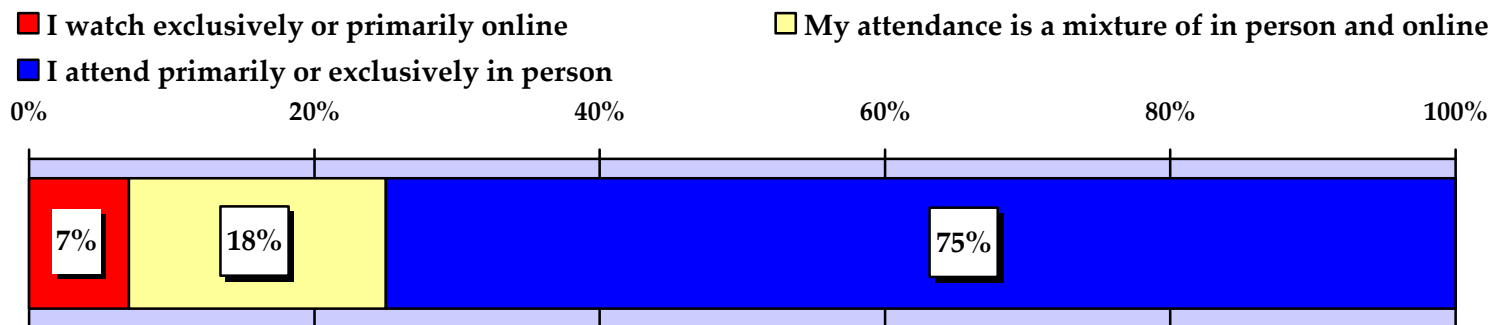
While an absolute majority of Orthodox parishioners seem to be supportive of keeping online services as an option *in principle*, several facts suggests that the future of this innovation in the Orthodox Church is limited.

First, the survey asked, “How do you currently participate in worship services?”<sup>21</sup> Fig. 38 shows that today only a quarter of Orthodox Church members use the opportunity to worship remotely at all, and only 7% of them attend either exclusively or primarily online. When these 7% were asked why they had decided to attend church mostly online, nearly all quoted continuing health concerns related to COVID-19 rather than

<sup>21</sup> The question was asked only of parishioners in those parishes that offer online services on a regular basis

convenience or personal preference. It appears that the future of online services is primarily related to further developments in the pandemic.

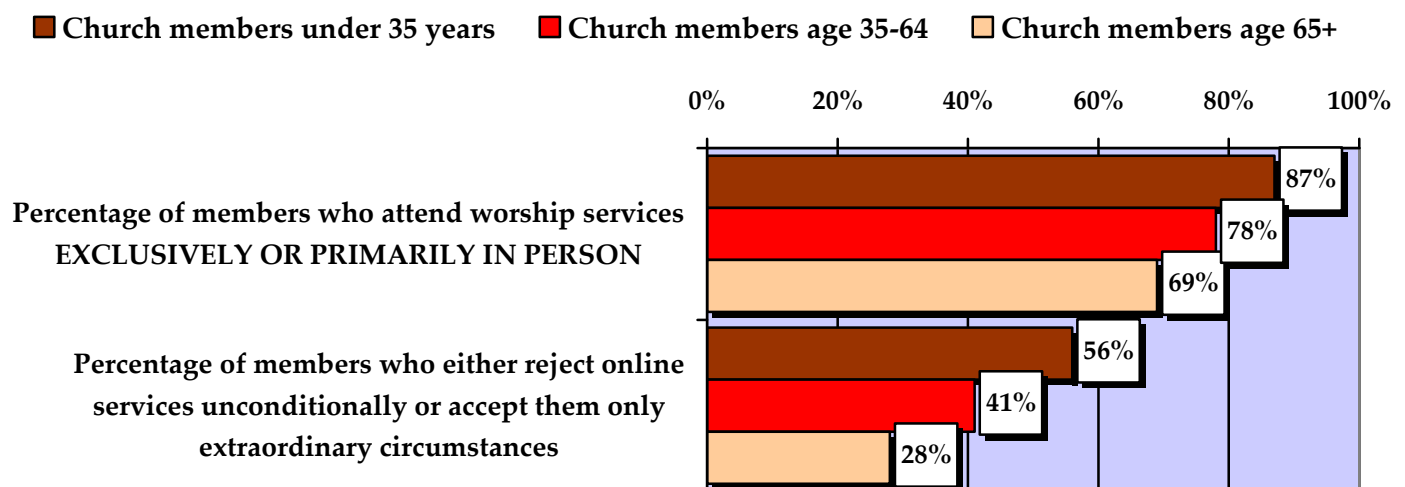
**Fig. 38 “How do you currently participate in worship services?”**



Second, even among the strongest proponents of remote worship (the 23% of parishioners who support online services because they “make attendance easy and possible for greater number of people”), only 16% watch services primarily or exclusively online, while a majority (56%) attend primarily or exclusively in person.

Third, younger parishioners are the future of the Church. One might think that they would be more likely to embrace new technologies such as remote worship, but this is not the case. Fig. 39 shows that the percentage of younger parishioners (under 35 years old) who oppose online services and who attend exclusively or primarily in person is significantly higher than among middle-aged and older members.

**Fig. 39 Younger Parishioners Are Stronger Opponents of Online Services than Middle-Aged and Older Church Members**



Fourth, in chapter 1, we saw that 12% of study participants “strongly agreed” with the statement, “Our parish is always willing to try new things.” One might assume that the members from the more “experimental” parishes would be more likely to be in favor of and participate in remote worship. Survey data, however, did not support this assumption. There is no relationship between agreement with the statement about the parish’s willingness to try new things and its parishioners’ support for online services or actual participation in remote worship.

This suggests that while more “experimental” parishes might be in a better position to introduce high-quality online services (and the survey shown that they actually did it in greater proportion than other churches), this innovation is not seen by their members as a particularly appealing way to participate in the ongoing life of an Orthodox parish.

Finally, the survey examined personal preferences of parishioners for either online or in-person participation in six areas of church life, *providing* that they had full freedom of choice and that COVID-19 was not a concern.<sup>22</sup> These six areas of church life are:

- Sunday Liturgy
- Weekday worship services
- Confessions
- Counseling with a priest
- Religious education for adults / Bible classes
- Parish's various business meetings

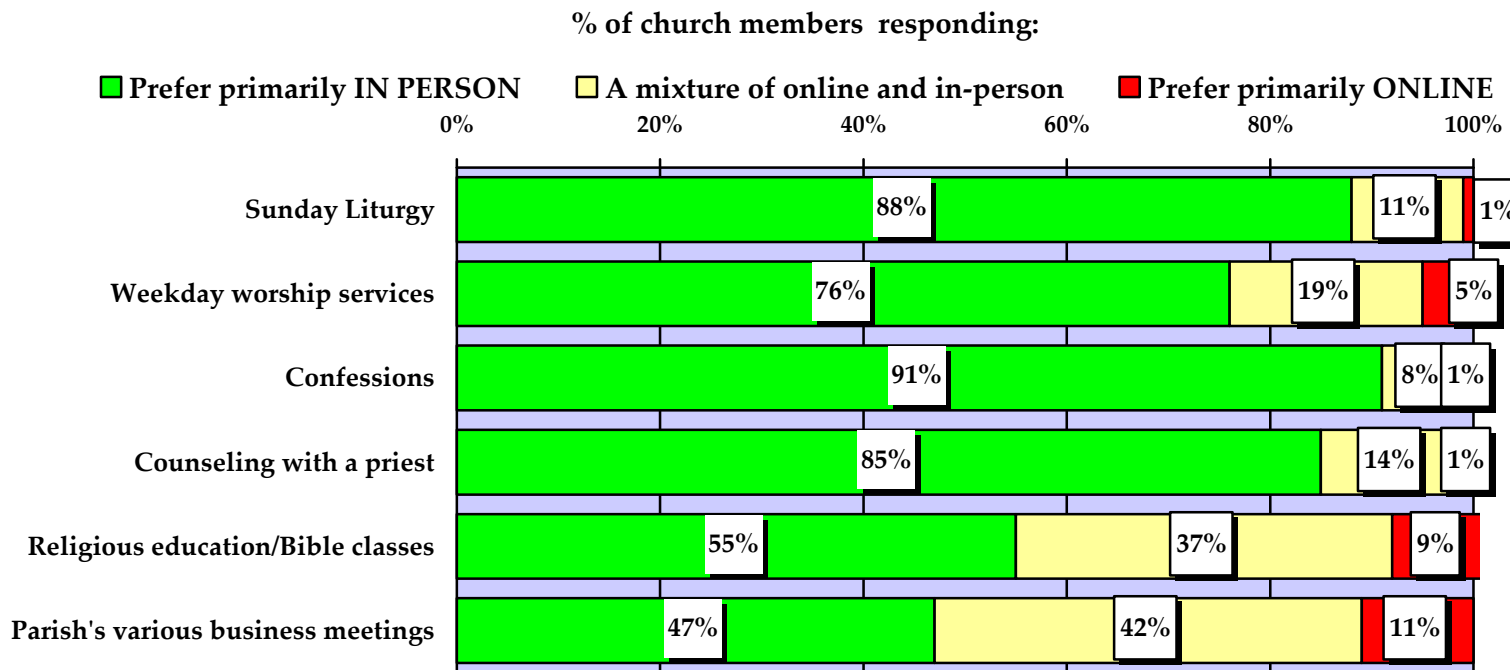
---

<sup>22</sup> The survey was conducted in early April 2022. At this point, the issue of COVID-19 and related safety concerns were still significant.



Fig. 40 shows that the online mode of church life has little appeal for members of American Orthodox parishes. Very few respondents (no more than 15%) prefer to participate remotely or in a blend of online and in-person formats in the main worship services (Sunday Liturgy), confessions, or private counseling with a priest. Even in the case of secondary weekday worship services, more than three-quarters of parishioners (76%) would choose to primarily participate in-person.

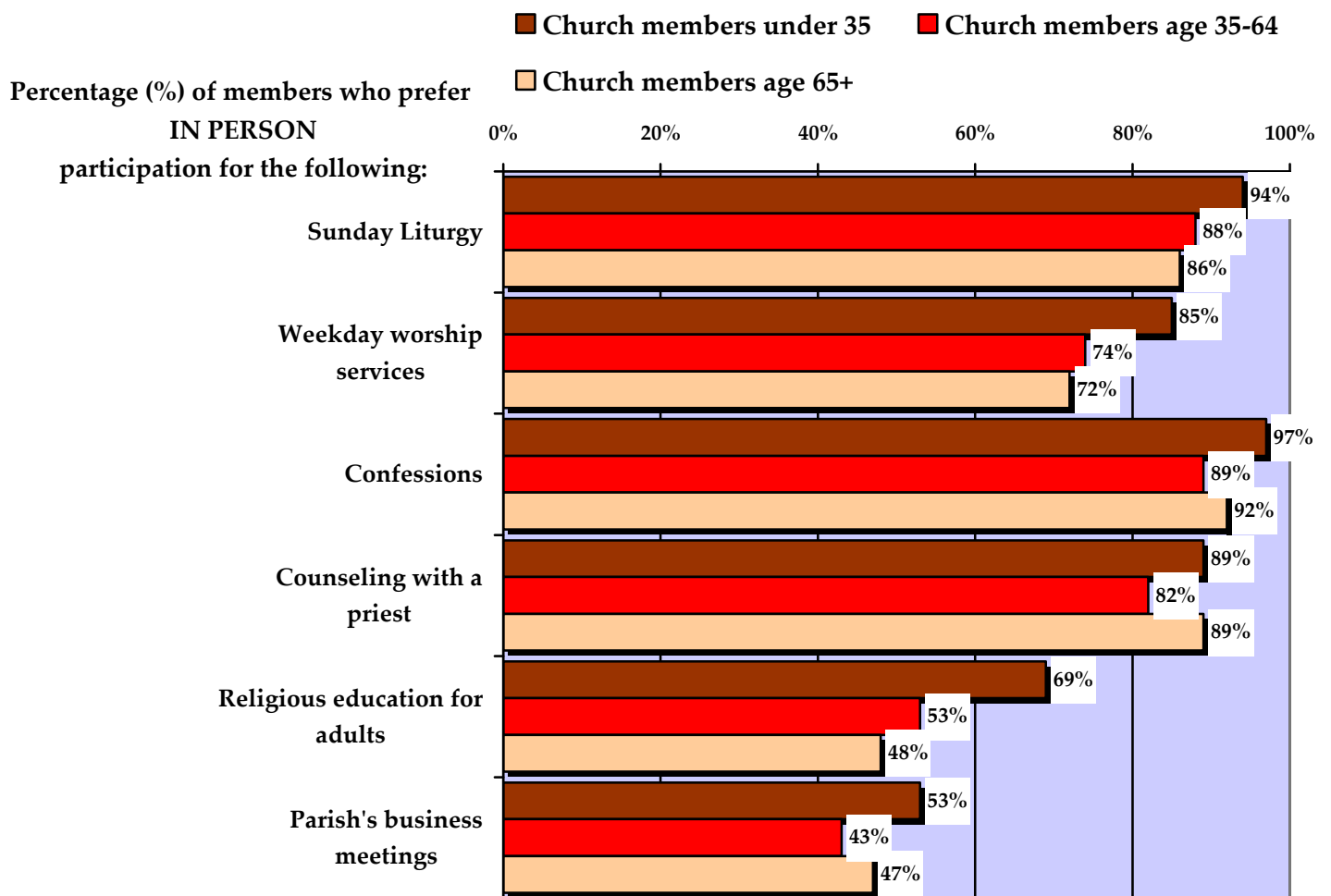
**Fig. 40 The “Online Format” of Church Life Has Little Appeal for American Orthodox Church Members**  
 “Regardless of the situation in your parish, if you had the choice and COVID-19 was not a concern, would you prefer to participate in each of the following in person or online?”



Only in two areas of parish life – religious education for adults and the parish’s various business meetings – would a significant percentage of parishioners opt for a mixture of online and in-person formats. But even in these two areas, very few (9-11%) would participate primarily online.

Is the online format of church participation more attractive for younger (under 35) church members, who are likely to have busier everyday lives than older (65+) parishioners? The answer to this question is: “No.” In fact, the opposite is true. Fig. 41 shows that younger parishioners have a stronger preference for in-person participation in all six areas of church life than do middle-aged and older church members.

**Fig. 41 Younger Parishioners Have Stronger Preference for In-Person Church Participation than Middle-Aged and Older Church Members**

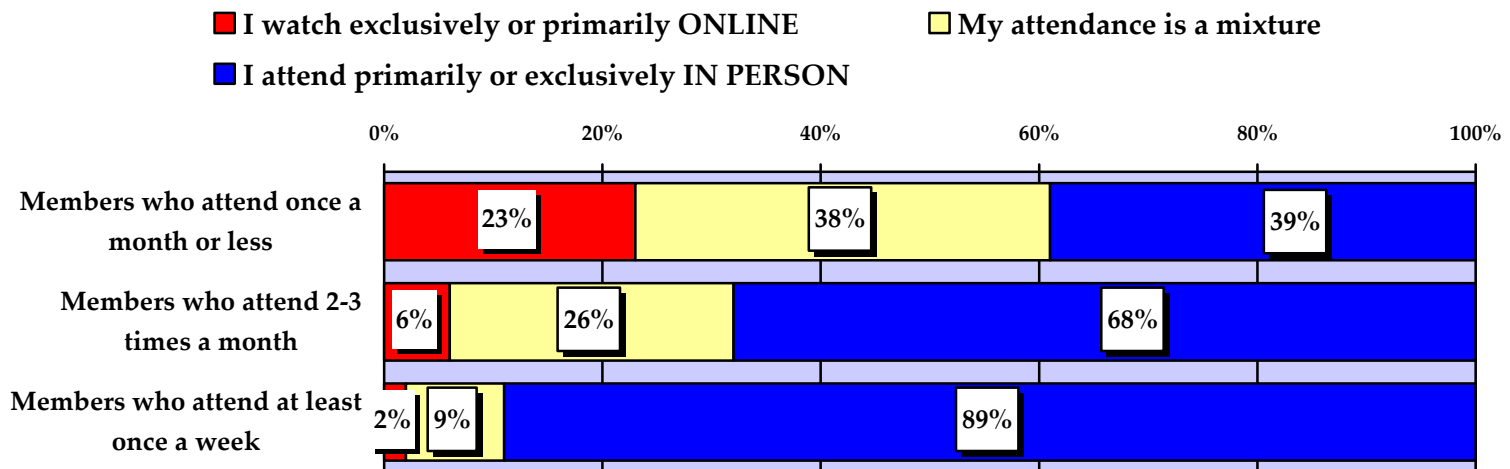


All these suggest a rather limited future for the online format in the lives of American Orthodox parishes.

There is, however, also a significant argument to keep this option available. One particular category of parishioners – people who attend occasionally (once a month or less) – have a much stronger preference for participating in various church activities remotely, and they attend worship services online more often than the other church members. Fig. 42a and 42b demonstrate this.

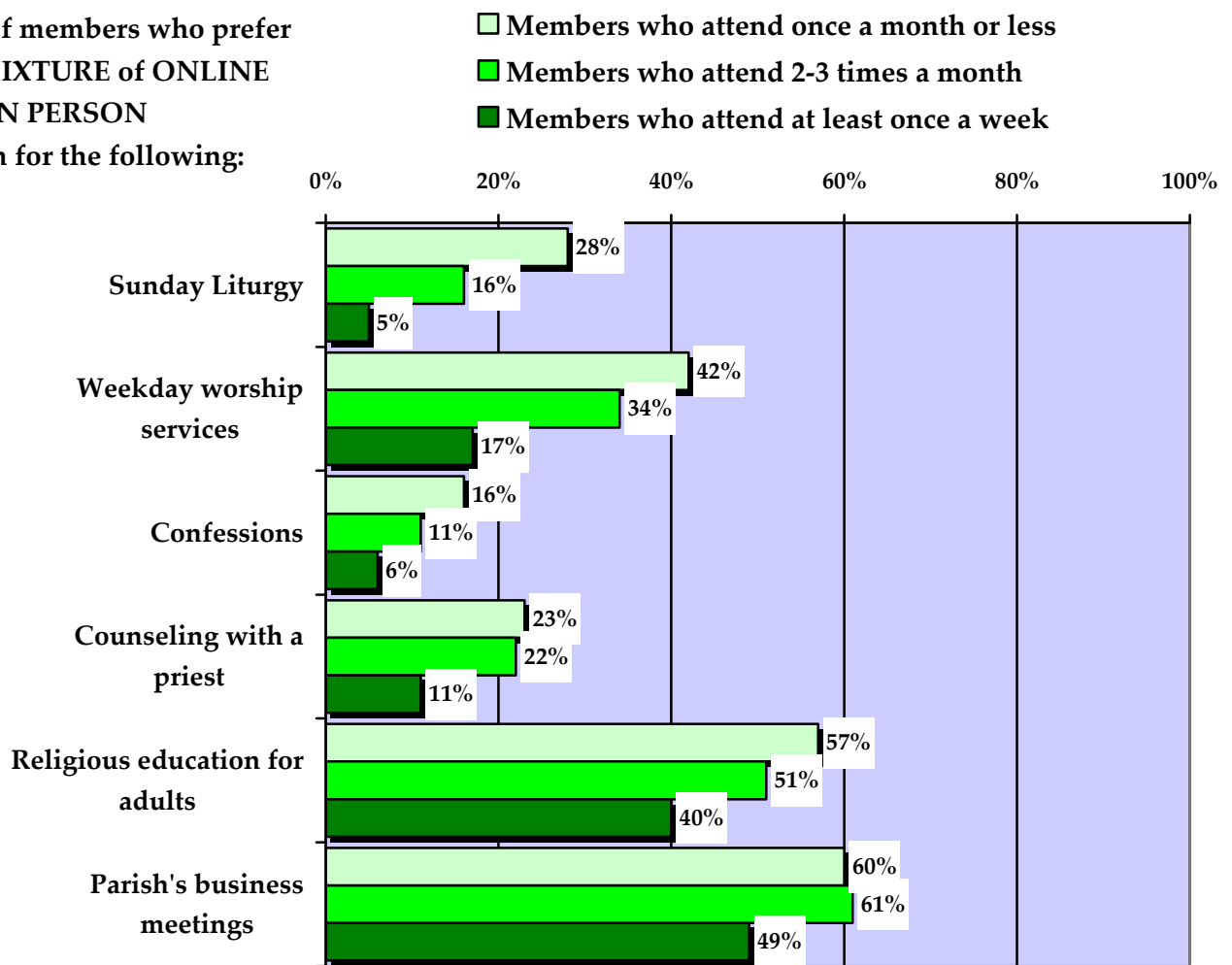
**Fig. 42a Parishioners who Attend Services Occasionally Are More Likely to Worship Online**

“How do you currently participate in worship services?”



**Fig. 42b Parishioners Who Attend Services Occasionally Have Stronger Preference for Online Church Participation than Frequently Attending Members**

Percentage (%) of members who prefer ONLINE or MIXTURE of ONLINE and IN PERSON participation for the following:



One could speculate that ceasing convenient online worship services might force these occasional attendees to become more involved in person and be back in physical church. But it is also possible that these church members – already only marginally involved – might then simply drop out of the life of the Church altogether.

In summary, overall, the online format for church life does not appear to have a significant future in American Orthodox parishes. While most Orthodox Church members are supportive of keeping remote worship services as an option, the vast majority of them prefer physical church and actually attend in person. Orthodox parishioners also have a strong preference for the in-person mode when it comes to communications with their pastors on spiritual and intimate matters (e.g., Sacrament of Confession, personal counseling). Even in the cases of religious education for adults and the parish’s business meetings, very few would opt for an exclusively or primarily remote mode (although a mixture of online and in-person meetings is appealing for a number of people). Yet, the online format of church participation can be important for maintaining some level of engagement for church members who only occasionally attend services.

## VIII. The Pandemic and Changes in Parish Vitality

### **DEFINITIONS USED IN THIS CHAPTER:**

- ***Strictly Observant parishioners:*** parishioners who attend church weekly and report that they strictly follow Orthodox fasting requirements
- ***Never Closing parishes:*** parishes which remained open to congregants for in-person worship services throughout the pandemic
- ***Intentionally Orthodox parishes:*** parishes in which 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 in which members “strongly agreed” that their parishes are “always willing to try new things and meet new challenges”

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

- ❖ More than half (54%) of the respondents reported a decline in the number of people attending Sunday services in their parishes since the start of the pandemic.

- ❖ Lay members and clergy had very similar opinions about changes in the overall vitality of their congregations through the pandemic. About one-third of them (35% among laity, 36% among clergy) felt that their parishes have become stronger during the past two years, while one-third (35% of clergy, 39% of laity) reported their parish's decline in vitality
- ❖ Five categories of parishes were much more likely to grow in vitality throughout the pandemic:
  - "Experimental" parishes
  - Parishes that never closed and continued in-person worship through the pandemic
  - Those with a high percentage of converts to Orthodoxy
  - "Intentionally Orthodox" parishes
  - Those that desire more racial/ethnic diversity in members, i.e., parishes that "strongly agreed" with the statement, "Our parish is striving to become more diverse racially and ethnically."
- ❖ Among these five attributes associated with strong growth in a parish's vitality during the past two years, the most important is the "experimental" nature of the parish community – i.e., the willingness of a parish to "try new things and to meet new challenges."

The two years of the pandemic have tried American religious congregations in many challenging ways. From concerns regarding members' health and safety to difficulties in adopting new technologies, from the need to keep members engaged to the constant adjustments to fast-changing circumstances, congregations have wrestled with many complex issues. In this chapter, we will offer some glimpses into what the pandemic did to the overall viability of American Orthodox parishes.

The pandemic has shrunk American religious congregations. Nationwide in the US, fewer people currently participate in their congregations than they did pre-pandemic. The national study, *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC)*,<sup>23</sup> found that the median size of a "typical" American congregation has decreased from 90 regular participants in 2019 to 60 at present (-33%). Similarly, between 2019 and today, the median in-person weekend worship attendance in a "typical" US congregation has dropped from 65 to 45 persons (-30%).

How do Orthodox Christian Churches fit into this picture? The short answer is that American Orthodox parishes were no exception to the decrease in members and attendance.

---

<sup>23</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>

During the first stage of this study conducted in April 2022,<sup>24</sup> Orthodox parish clergy were asked two questions:

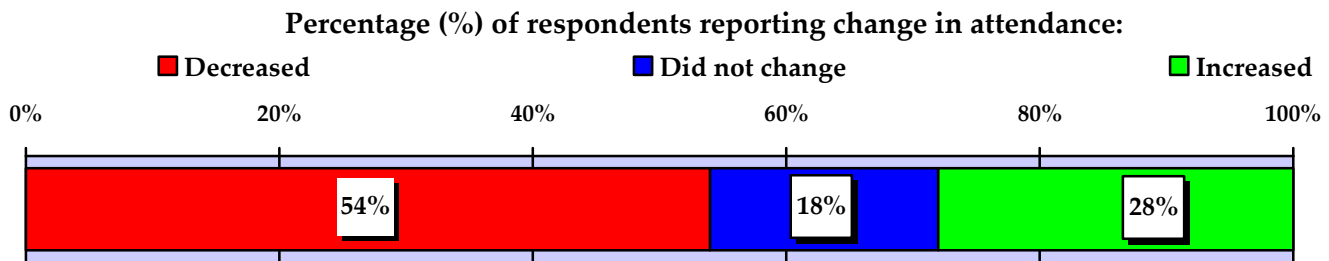
- How many people (including children) regularly participate NOW vs. BEFORE THE PANDEMIC in worship services or other activities in your parish: at least once a month and counting both in-person and online?
- What is the total (including children) average in-person attendance at your Sunday service NOW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

Data provided by the clergy revealed that Orthodox parishes suffered significant losses. If measured by the change in number of all regular participants, the median change is -15%. That is, in a “typical” parish, out of seven parishioners in 2019, one has dropped out of parish life as of spring 2022. Measuring by in-person worship attendance, the median 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. These figures reflect the overall situation in the US Orthodox Churches. The reality is more complex, with some parishes nearly “killed” by the pandemic but others growing and becoming stronger in many ways.

The current survey of American Orthodox laity asked respondents: “How has the number of people attending Sunday Liturgy in your parish changed since the start of the pandemic?” Fig. 43 shows that more than half (54%) of the respondents said that the number of people attending Sunday services in their parishes has declined and only 28% reported growth.

**Fig. 43 Growth, Stability, and Decline in Worship Attendance: Pre-Pandemic and Now**

“How has the number of people attending Sunday Liturgy in your parish changed since the start of the pandemic?”



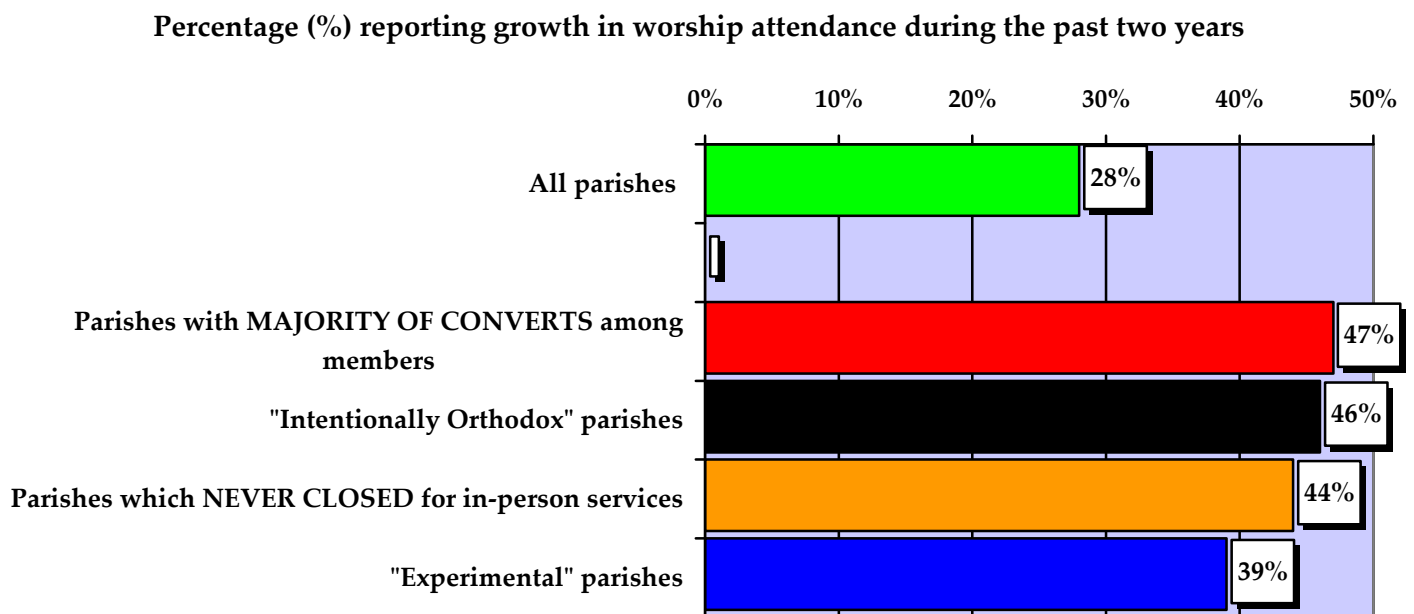
<sup>24</sup> This first study report is available at: <https://orthodoxreality.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/NewTraditionalInMostTraditionalChurchClergyReportReduced.pdf>

Are there any particular characteristics which distinguish the congregations of those respondents who reported growth in attendance? In short, the following categories of parishes were much more likely to grow in attendance:

- Parishes with a high percentage of converts to Orthodoxy
- “Intentionally Orthodox” parishes
- Parishes that never closed their doors for in-person worship through the pandemic
- “Experimental” parishes

Fig. 44 shows how different these four categories of parishes were from others in their growth in worship attendance.

**Fig. 44 Four Categories of Parishes with Greater Growth in Worship Attendance During the Past Two Years**



The vitality of a congregation is a complex phenomenon that is not limited to changes in membership or worship attendance. The involvement of members in various church activities, their desire to volunteer in a congregation, the variety of ministries, the quality of religious education for young people and adults, the financial health of the parish – all these are both criteria and contributors to overall viability.

The first stage of this study, conducted in April 2022, asked Orthodox clergy about the following changes since the start of the pandemic:

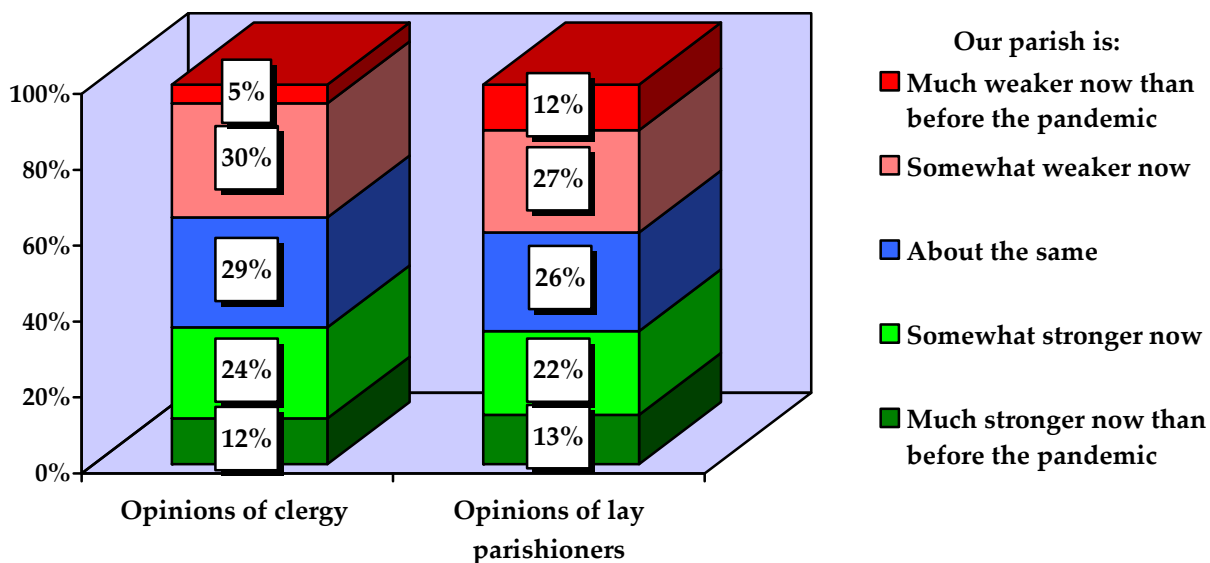
- Overall involvement of parishioners in the parish
- Average size of individual parishioners’ monetary contributions to the parish
- Small group activities and ministries
- Involvement of children and teenagers in religious education
- Involvement in religious education for adults

The detailed analysis of obtained data and principal conclusions can be found in the first study report.<sup>25</sup>

During the current stage of the study, the survey simply asked parishioners: “All things considered, how would you compare the overall vitality and strength of your parish before the pandemic and now?” This question was also offered to parish clergy in the first stage of the study. Fig. 45 shows that the answers of the priests and lay members are remarkably similar. Essentially, roughly about one-third of the respondents reported that their parishes have either become stronger through the pandemic (35% of laity, 36% of clergy) or, on the contrary, declined in vitality (39% of laity, 35% of clergy).

**Fig. 45 Orthodox Clergy and Laity Have Very Similar Opinions about Changes in Vitality of their Parishes During the Pandemic:**

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



<sup>25</sup> This first study report is available at: <https://orthodoxreality.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/NewTraditionalInMostTraditionalChurchClergyReportReduced.pdf>



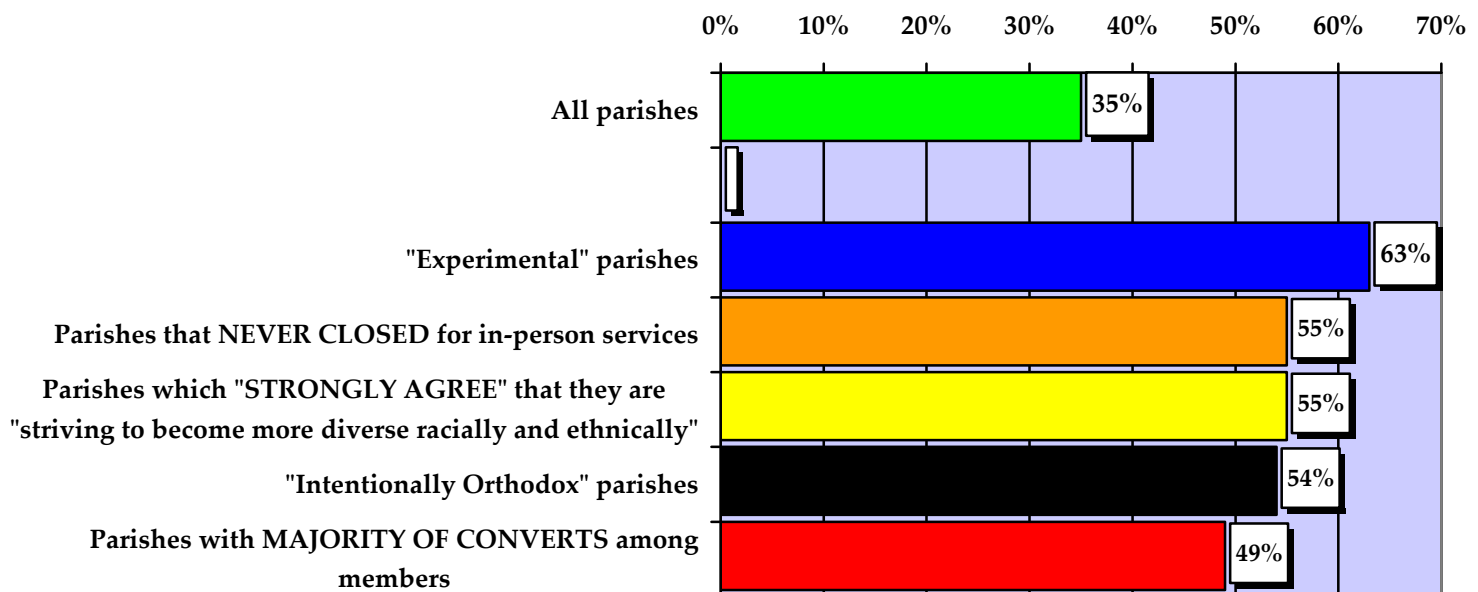
The analysis of data revealed that five categories of churches were much more likely to grow in vitality than all other parishes:

- “Experimental” parishes
- Parishes that never closed their doors for in-person worship throughout the pandemic
- Parishes that desire more racial/ethnic diversity in members; i.e., members “strongly agreed” with the statement, “Our parish is striving to become more diverse racially and ethnically.”
- “Intentionally Orthodox” parishes
- Parishes with a high percentage of converts to Orthodoxy

Fig. 46 shows how different these five categories of churches were from all other parishes in their growth in vitality during the past two years.

**Fig. 46 Five Categories of Parishes with Stronger Growth in Vitality During the Past Two Years**

Percentage (%) of respondents reporting growth in vitality in their parishes during the past two years



Notably, among the five attributes associated with overall growth in a parish’s vitality, *the most important was the “experimental” nature of a parish community.*

Clearly, no one of these five characteristics offered a guarantee that a parish would grow in worship attendance and overall vitality through the past two turbulent years. However, they all contributed to a greater potential for strengthening, especially when a parish possessed several of these characteristics simultaneously.

## IX. Seven Scenarios of Upsurge and Seven Scenarios of Downfall in Parish Communities

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

- ❖ When study participants were asked why they had described their parishes as becoming either “much stronger” or “much weaker” during the pandemic, seven main narratives – the most common scenarios – emerged for each of the two outcomes.
- ❖ The seven common narratives from parishioners who said their parishes are now “much stronger” were (in order of frequency):
  - Pandemic resulted in growth in faith and spirituality of parish members
  - Members are proud of never closing their parish for in-person worship, living as a strong community through the pandemic, and keeping all church practices unchanged
  - The sense of unity and mutual support among parish members has grown significantly
  - During the pandemic, members have realized how important the Church and their parish are to them
  - Pandemic was a trigger to address old problems and has inspired various positive changes
  - Pandemic has revealed the strong leadership skills of the parish clergy
  - During the pandemic, a number of people discovered the Orthodox faith, converted to Orthodoxy, and joined the parish
- ❖ The seven common narratives from parishioners who said their parishes are now “much weaker” were (in order of frequency):
  - Parish community became deeply divided and torn apart by disagreements about COVID, new church policies in respond to the pandemic, and safety protocols
  - Parish experienced immense decline in worship attendance and other activities, specifically because many young families either moved away or dropped out of the church
  - While parishes were closed, many people “learned” that it was not really essential for them to participate in the Church any more
  - Parish leadership, and especially the parish priest, were unable to guide the parish through the crisis
  - Parish made no effort to adjust and to keep church life going under the new circumstances
  - Pandemic was like a “litmus test” for the parish: it revealed that, what under normal conditions appeared to be a loving and supportive community of believers, was not really this way under trying circumstances.
  - During the pandemic, the parish was affected and divided by political agendas

In the previous chapter, we saw that 13% of study participants think that their parishes are “MUCH STRONGER” now than before the pandemic,” while 12% of the respondents reported the opposite and said that their churches are “MUCH WEAKER” now. But what did the church members mean when they gave these evaluations? What were either the “success stories” or the “downfall scenarios” in these two contrasting categories of parishes?

The survey asked respondents: "Please say a few words about the main reasons why you said ‘much stronger’ or ‘much weaker’ when comparing your parish's vitality now to before the pandemic?" Many answers were simply about significant changes in membership: either impressive growth or dramatic decrease in numbers. But beside quantitative changes, seven other narratives about both growth and decline in vitality showed up repeatedly in responses.

### **IXa. Stories of Success: Seven Common Narratives from Parishioners Who Said Their Parishes Are “Much Stronger” Now**

The most frequent answers were about the fact that the *pandemic resulted in growth in faith and spirituality of parish members*. Here are four examples:

- Our parish has seen the pandemic as a call to greater faithfulness and commitment to Christ. While we have seen turnover in parishioners, leaving and joining, those who have stayed are extremely faithful and committed to Christ.
- We have worked hard to adapt to a changing world while remaining the same timeless Church. Through this challenge of the pandemic, we've grown stronger as a body of believers.
- I feel that our parish has grown stronger spiritually and has brought us closer to God despite all of the turmoil going on in the world. People are seeking God more than ever now.
- The pandemic has strengthened our commitment and love for our church and God. We would not let the pandemic keep us away from our prayers and our church. If we could not be there in person, we were there virtually and most importantly we were there spiritually.

The second common pattern in responses was from parishes which never closed their doors and did not change anything in their worship practices. In these parishes, *members were proud of living as a close-knit community through the pandemic while keeping their faith strong and church practices unchanged*. Here are examples:

- Anchoring to the Rock of Christ and not bowing to secular authorities to change liturgical worship out of fear of death - when our God conquered death - means we had an opportunity to live our faith and we feel much stronger as a community for it.
- We had to sneak into church, as legally we were not permitted to attend for 6 months. Being an underground church strengthened our parish and made us a beacon for other Orthodox Christians in the area.
- Because nothing changed. No mask wearing, communion wasn't served with plastic cups and plastic spoons. We communed with a common chalice and common spoon. We continued business as usual and we grew. Both Orthodox looking for a parish because theirs was closed and non-Orthodox looking for an anchor in this turbulent time came to us.

The third in frequency answers discussed *growth in the sense of unity and mutual support among parish members*. Here are examples of these answers:

- This pandemic has strengthened the realization that we MUST support the many & varied needs of each other: both while we gather together at Church and at home. A few may have gone into the pandemic rather lax, but have become stronger and more sincerely caring toward others.
- The activities and commitment of the priest and the congregation during the pandemic brought us more together and that continued afterwards.
- The pandemic was an international life-changing event that no one has ever experienced before. It has ended the lives of family, friends and coworkers. Our church was always there to support and assist the members of our family, as well as other families affected by the pandemic. It was our church that got everyone through the toughest times.

The fourth pattern in responses entailed stories about *members who realized during the pandemic how important the Church and their parish are to them*. The pandemic taught them to not take "good times" for granted, and now they are much more appreciative of their parishes. Here are examples:

- We are more grateful. The pandemic ruled our lives, but we felt that there was one place it couldn't run our lives: the Church.
- We have learned now more than ever to not take our community and people we live for granted. We have grown stronger in love and community more than ever.
- During the pandemic I would follow the service by video and did not feel that I was participating. First time back at my Church I felt something special that I cannot explain in words. Many of my fellow

parishioners expressed the same feeling, and support for our stewardship program has grown beyond what it was pre-pandemic.

The fifth narrative in “success stories” was that the *pandemic was a trigger to address old problems and has inspired various positive changes*. Here are examples:

- Adapting to the change in ministering [to] the community helped eliminate things that needed to die but were kept on life support, because people held on to them for sentimental reasons. While removing activities and ministries that were no longer fulfilling, a real need brought focus to the ministries that were making an impact. Also, our parish raised a new crop of leaders who may not have risen if there had not been a crisis which required new leadership resources.
- We have faced many weaknesses within our parish which we did not know existed. The struggles brought forth many problems which otherwise would not have been faced. Struggle allows for the truth to be shown particularly if one is willing to see it and step into it. This gives the opportunity for healing to occur in a community which was not aware that it needed to happen.

The sixth category of answers indicated that the *pandemic has revealed the strong leadership skills of the parish clergy*. Here are some quotations:

- Fr. “X” has led us very well. I felt he was very consistent, and always listened to parishioners’ differing opinions, and made well-informed decisions. This has brought us closer together with a sense we came through this together.
- Our priest was completely instrumental in keeping our parish involved as much as possible through the pandemic. At no time did I ever feel unsupported.
- Messages from our Priest encouraged the parish to keep our attention on spiritual matters, not on temporary and temporal matters.

Finally, the last category of answers was about the *significant number of people who discovered the Orthodox faith, converted to Orthodoxy, and joined the parish during the pandemic*. Here are examples:

- More people seem to be seeking God and we have many new people attending and visiting. I feel we have all grown closer and focus more on what's important.
- We had many new inquirers during the pandemic who find us and became catechumens.

## IXb. Stories of Downfall: Seven Narratives from Parishioners Who Said Their Parishes Are “Much Weaker”

### Now

By far the most frequent stories about a decline in vitality dealt with the fact that, during the pandemic, *a parish had become deeply divided by disagreements about COVID, new church policies in response to the pandemic, and safety protocols*. Some people felt endangered because of insufficient – from their perspective - safety measures. But others believed that Church life should continue normally and perceived any restrictions as a betrayal of the Faith. Here are answers expressing different points of view and yet coming from the same parish:

- A lot of people left the parish due to the concern for not following protocols that would reduce the spread of COVID-19.
- Prioritizing bodily health at the cost of our spiritual health has trampled on the conscience for over two years and revealed the lack of faith of our leaders, including parish councils which should never have final say over clergy in any matter. This “little godhood” of democracy is hellish and needs to be corrected immediately.
- I feel that our church acted with a great deal of irresponsibility during the pandemic. One of my favorite parts of the Bible is Matthew 4. In it the devil tempts Christ and asks Jesus to put himself in harms way to show that the Father will save him. Jesus informs the devil that that is not what you are to do. I feel that is exactly what our church did. Those of us who are in favor of masks, distancing and vaccines were treated badly by the other parishioners. We were told we did not have faith. Many of my friends are afraid to go to church because they felt that the safety procedures they had seen when they tried to go back were very lax.
- I look at the church now and it is half empty. All my friends have fled to Florida where they attend fully open churches that are thriving and people aren't afraid to receive Communion from a common spoon. I have attended services in [names of towns] recently and I am envious of the bustling atmosphere that is no longer present at our parish.

And here are three comments from other parishes, exemplifying the same pattern in answers:

- The parish community was divided on points surrounding the pandemic. People judged one another for masking or not masking, or for their vaccination status. Some members began attending other Orthodox churches for preferences surrounding COVID protocol. Now, there is a great sense of distrust amongst each other. I feel that we are no longer of one mind, especially when it comes to the holy Eucharist, the purpose of attending church in-person, and regarding one another as icons of Christ.

- There was a huge divide among people who believed in the pandemic and wearing masks and people who didn't believe in it. For some, the COVID precautions were viewed as insufficient and they drifted away for fear of catching the virus from those who refused to mask. For others, any acknowledgement that COVID is real, and we should protect each other, was enraging. Our priest took a political stance and did not help bring the community together which broke us even further.
- When parish members turn on each other for not wearing a mask, I saw hate with many. That's not love. The level of fear in the parish has caused a lot of damage to the faith of parishioners.

The second most frequent pattern of responses was that *parishes experienced an immense decline in worship attendance and other activities, because many young families either moved away or dropped out of the church.* Without young people, a parish has no future. Here are examples:

- We have seen a huge decline in the number of people coming to church and participating in community activities. All of our young families moved to other parishes during the pandemic. It has been lonely now that we are back to regular services. I'm considering leaving our parish for the sake of my children having peers and Orthodox friends.
- The youth are gone. Young families are gone. Because the church was closed for so long, many young families stopped attending church. The Sunday School was hit particularly hard: our most cherished and precious souls, nearest to the heart of the Father, were left without instruction. Without a strong youth, how can our faith survive?

The third narrative indicated that *during the pandemic – while parishes were closed - many parishioners “learned” that it was not really essential for them to participate in the Church any more.* Here are such answers:

- Videoing the services was good during the pandemic, but it seems that many drifted into a comfortable zone where they felt that attendance was not necessary.
- I feel that a sense of spiritual need was lost by many, following the forced separation from gatherings at our religious home. Many have since convinced themselves that their life does not need or depend on the Sunday Divine Liturgy. People have convinced themselves and their families that there are other "more important" things to do on a Sunday morning than to "sit in church."
- The parish was closed for too long. People were slow to return to the liturgy. Some are now satisfied that they can WATCH the services on Facebook Livestream. Apparently, there is no need to gather for

prayer and actually receive the sacraments. Stewardship dropped. Activities were curtailed. Some may never recover their pre-pandemic vibrancy. My parish is broken!

The fourth common pattern in answers was that *the parish leadership, and, especially, the parish priest, were unable to guide the parish through the crisis*. Here are examples:

- Due to poor leadership and poor communication in our parish during the pandemic, several families chose to leave our longtime parish of 20 years and join another parish.
- Many of the parishioners have gone somewhere else or don't go to church at all because the priest has made no effort to contact them to find out why!
- The priest has isolated himself from the community to a fault. He was not engaged with the community to begin with. Many individuals who needed his attention at difficult and end of life times did not get it.

The fifth common narrative was about *parishes which made no effort to keep church life going under the new circumstances*. As a result, members fled to other parishes which developed and offered new ways of participation; for example:

- Prior to the pandemic we had church school and other activities for children and the priest offered some adult education. However, during the pandemic, the church school and activities for children and adult education ceased. Other Orthodox churches in the area had more services and activities for adults and children both online and in person. Many families with children have left our church due to the lack of opportunities/activities.
- Though I was able to watch services from home through YouTube, there was no virtual adult education, church school, or virtual activities for children or adults. I found out that other parishes had those but my parish did not.

The sixth typical narrative was that the *pandemic was like a "litmus test" for a parish. It revealed that, what under normal conditions appeared to be a loving and supportive community of believers, was not really this way under trying circumstances*. Here are examples:

- Many families have left the parish. They have chosen to commute over two hours in order to attend a more supportive parish.
- My parish has no outreach to those who feel emotionally hurt and isolated.



- Before the pandemic I thought parish members cared about one another. During the pandemic we as Christians did not. The parish on the whole chose the ‘f\*\*\* you if you are not a healthy person’ approach, which has led to anger and divisions in what was a diverse but close-knit community.

Finally, the last pattern in answers was that *during the pandemic, the parish was affected and divided by political agendas*. Here are examples:

- The church bowed down to the political system, crazy media manipulation and stopped being a spiritual hospital for people.
- Political views surrounding the pandemic and culture wars have polarized our parish.
- The main issue is that often Christians mix politics with religion. With Trump’s major push against COVID protocol, at the beginning of the pandemic, many people who notice someone taking precaution may associate them with Democratic ideals which somehow in turn becomes “anti Christian”. This association between the Church and Conservative values seeps its way into the hearts of the faithful and turns into outspoken hate within a parish.

## **X. How the Pandemic Has Changed Financial Giving to a Parish**

### ***DEFINITIONS USED IN THIS CHAPTER:***

- ***Strictly Observant parishioners:*** parishioners who attend church weekly and report that they strictly follow Orthodox fasting requirements
- ***Never Closing parishes:*** parishes which remained open to congregants for in-person worship services throughout the pandemic
- ***Intentionally Orthodox parishes:*** parishes in which 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 in which members “strongly agreed” that their parishes are “always willing to try new things and meet new challenges”

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

- ❖ Four out of five Orthodox Church members (79%) give the greatest portion of their total annual charitable donations to their home parishes.
- ❖ Since the start of the pandemic, one-third (33%) of Orthodox Church members have increased their giving to the parishes, including 7% who reported a “significant increase.” About half (48%) did not change their contributions, and about one-fifth (19%) now give less than they did pre-pandemic.

❖ Four factors are strongly correlated with an increase in parishioners' giving to their parishes since the start of the pandemic:

1. Parishioners who felt strongly supported by their parishes during past two years now give more to them than they did pre-pandemic
2. In parishes that experienced strong growth in vitality during the pandemic, many more members increased their contributions than in other parishes
3. Compared to other church members, a greater percentage of "strictly observant" parishioners increased their contributions
4. Compared to other congregations, many more members of "experimental" parishes increased their contributions

The first stage of this study<sup>26</sup> indicated that since the start of the pandemic, 56% of US Orthodox parishes experienced an increase in the average size of parishioners' contributions, and only 14% of congregations witnessed an opposite trend. Yet, despite this uptick in individual giving, the financial health of American Orthodox Churches has worsened as compared to pre-pandemic. The percentage of parishes reporting that their fiscal health is either "in difficulty" or "tight" has grown from 31% pre-pandemic to 41% presently.<sup>27</sup>

As America wrestles with many post-pandemic economic consequences, including inflation and possible recession, Orthodox parishes will be increasingly dependent on the willingness of their members to be generous even under harsh financial circumstances.

Two related questions will be examined in this chapter:

- How did the contributions of the Orthodox Church members to their parishes change during the pandemic?
- What are the factors that positively influence members' generosity and resulted in an increase in their giving during the past two years?

One preliminary observation should be made. The culture of philanthropy and voluntary contributions to various not-for-profit organizations and charitable causes has deep roots in American society. The members of

---

<sup>26</sup> The first study report can be accessed here:

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

<sup>27</sup> The budgets of many parishes were negatively affected by decline in number of members and, especially, the absence of various fund-raising events during the pandemic

US Orthodox churches are as likely to be affected by traditions of giving as any other American. It would be safe to assume that they also donate to various causes outside of their parishes. The question is: “Where does most of their giving go?”

The survey asked: “Do your financial contributions to your parish (stewardship, membership, other gifts) comprise the largest charitable donation of any that you made last year?” It was found that four out of five (79%) Orthodox Church members give the greatest portion of their total annual charitable donations to their home parishes. This percentage of people who give most to their parishes is similar among various categories of parishioners: members with different education levels, men and women, cradle Orthodox and converts to Orthodoxy, and younger, middle-aged, and older parishioners.

Instead of asking about dollar amounts, the survey inquired about the percentage of income that members give to their parishes:<sup>28</sup> “Think about the combined income of your household last year (including pensions, etc.) Think also about your household's total donations to your parish. Approximately what percentage (%) of your total income did you give to your parish?” Based on the answers of study participants, the median percentage of combined household income that goes to their parishes is 5%.<sup>29</sup>

However, this percentage varies depending on the type of parish and the particular category of church members. Fig. 47 shows that members of four types of parishes, and four categories of parishioners, give more than others.

Types of parishes:

- Those with a strong growth in vitality since the start of the pandemic (i.e., church members reported that their parishes are “much stronger” now than before the pandemic)
- “Intentionally Orthodox” parishes
- “All-American” parishes (i.e., parishioners disagreed with the statement “Our parish has a strong ethnic culture and heritage”)
- Those that never closed their doors for in-person services during the pandemic

---

<sup>28</sup> This was done for two reasons. First, the percentage of income given to the charity better reflects the notion of generosity (i.e., the proportion of what a person has, which they choose to give away) than the actual dollar amount, because of significant differences in income among church members. Second, the experience of previous surveys indicated the reluctance of many respondents to provide the data on actual numbers for their income or donations.

<sup>29</sup> In the sequence of numbers, the median is the “number in the middle.” That is, half of our respondents give their parishes 5% or less and half give 5% or more.

Categories of parishioners:

- “Strictly observant”
- Senior (age 65+)
- Lower education level (no college degree)
- Converts to the Orthodox Church

**Fig. 47** Members of Four Types of Parishes, and Four Categories of Parishioners, Give More Generously to their Parishes

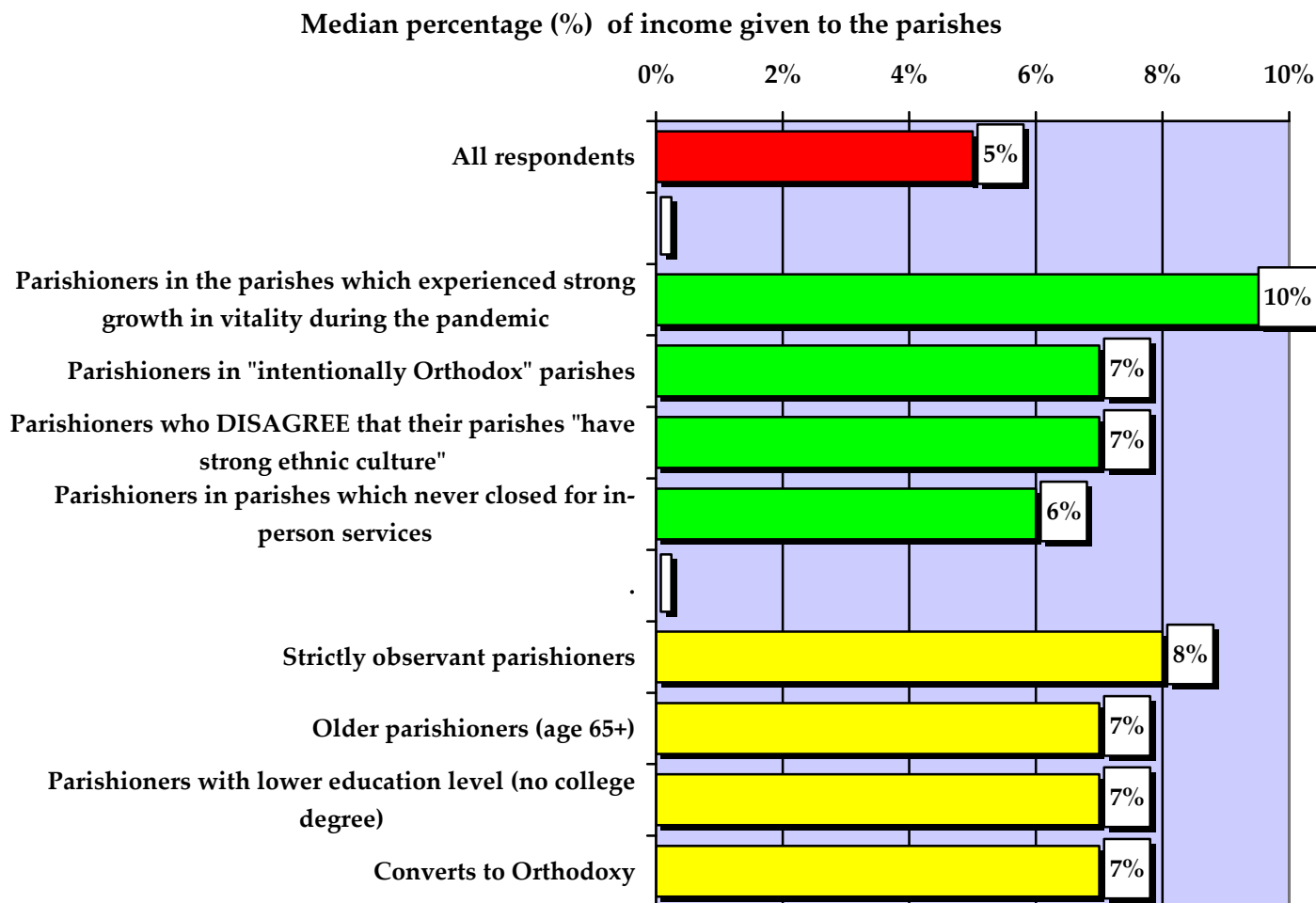
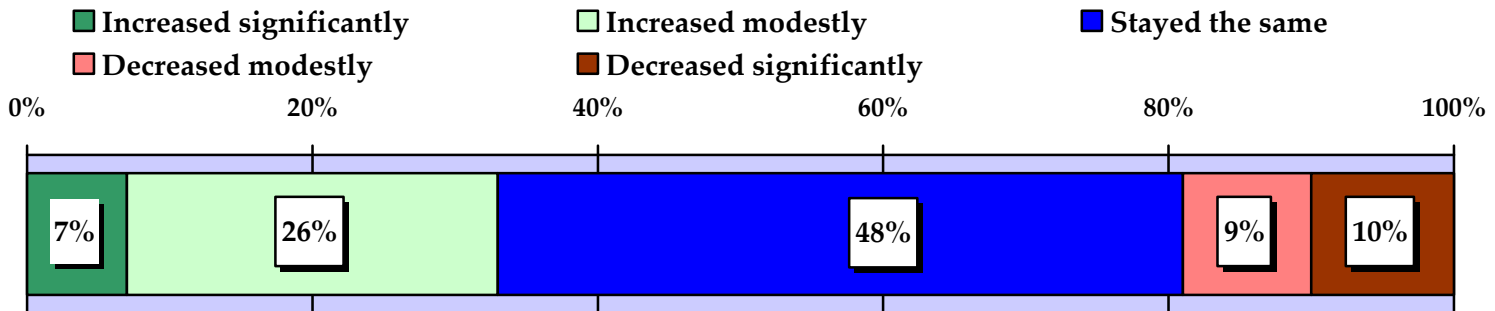


Fig. 47 shows that the most “generous” category (by far) is made up of members of parishes that experienced strong growth in vitality since the start of the pandemic. Clearly, the causal relation between growth in a parish’s vitality and the greater generosity of its members can be bidirectional. A parish may become stronger because of particularly generous donations by its members. Simultaneously, members of especially vital parishes may be more enthusiastic about their churches and therefore aspire to give more. The fact is that a strong increase in the viability of a parish goes hand-in-hand with the elevated generosity of its members.

Fig. 48 shows that, since the start of the pandemic, one-third (33%) of members have increased giving to their parishes, including 7% of those who reported a “significant increase” in donations. About half of the respondents (48%) did not change their contributions and about one-fifth (19%) said that they now give less than they did pre-pandemic.

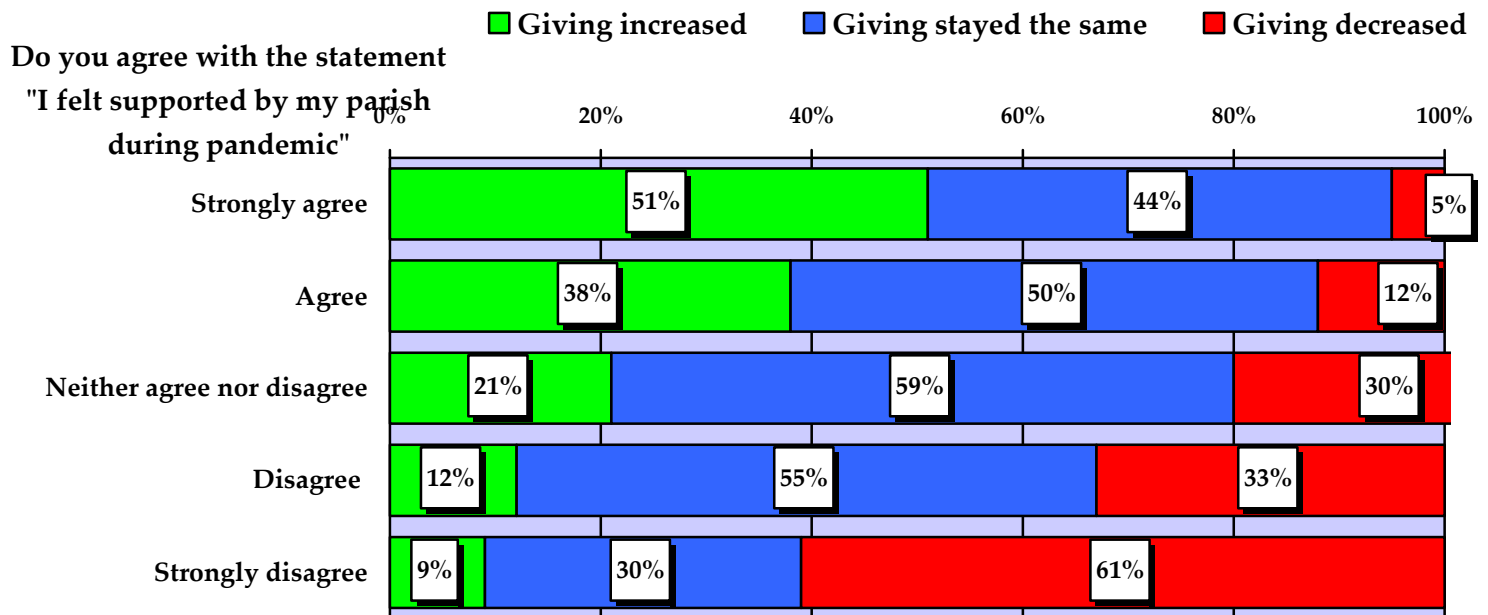
**Fig. 48 “How has your giving to this parish changed since COVID-19 began?”**



The survey also revealed that four factors are strongly correlated with an increase in parishioners’ giving. The first is the support provided by a parish community to its members during the pandemic. Fig. 49a shows that more than half of the parishioners (51%) who felt strongly supported by their parishes now give more to them than they did pre-pandemic.

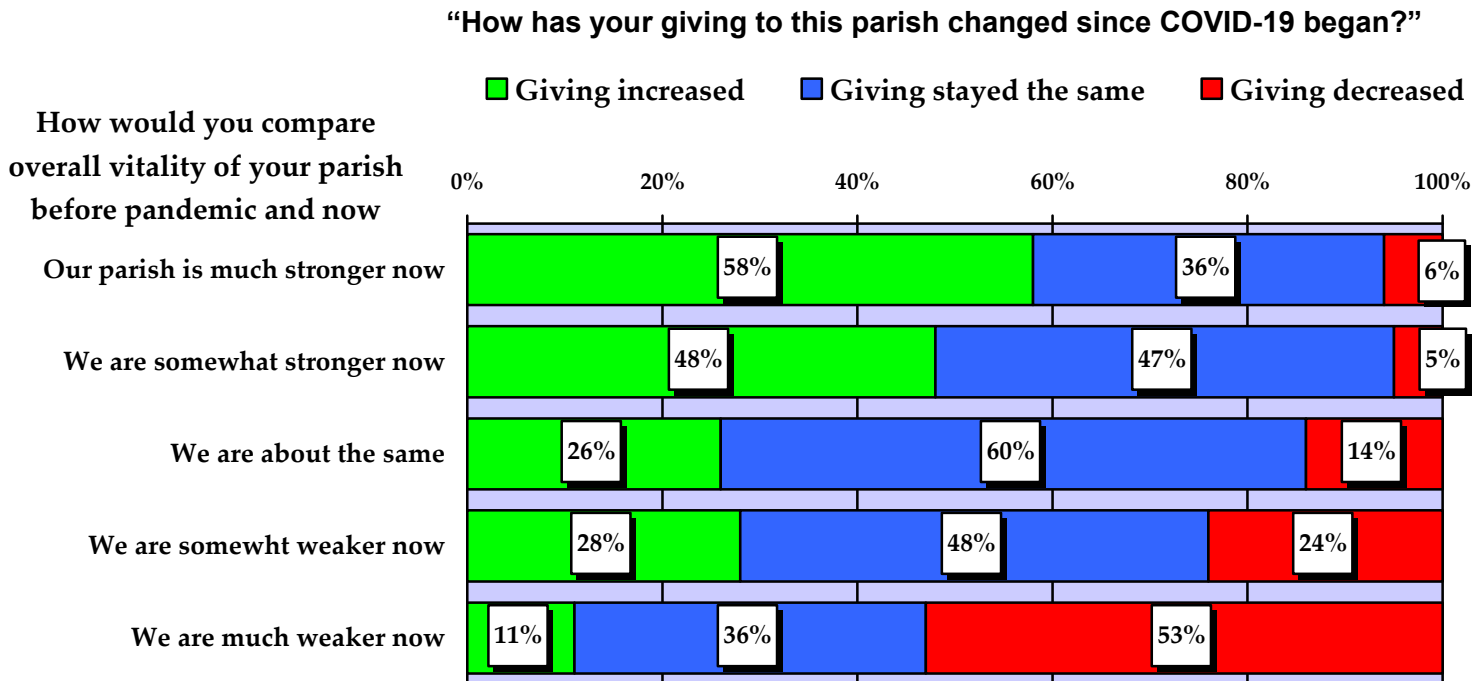
**Fig. 49a Members Who Felt Supported by their Parishes during Pandemic Now Give More to Them**

“How has your giving to this parish changed since COVID-19 began?”



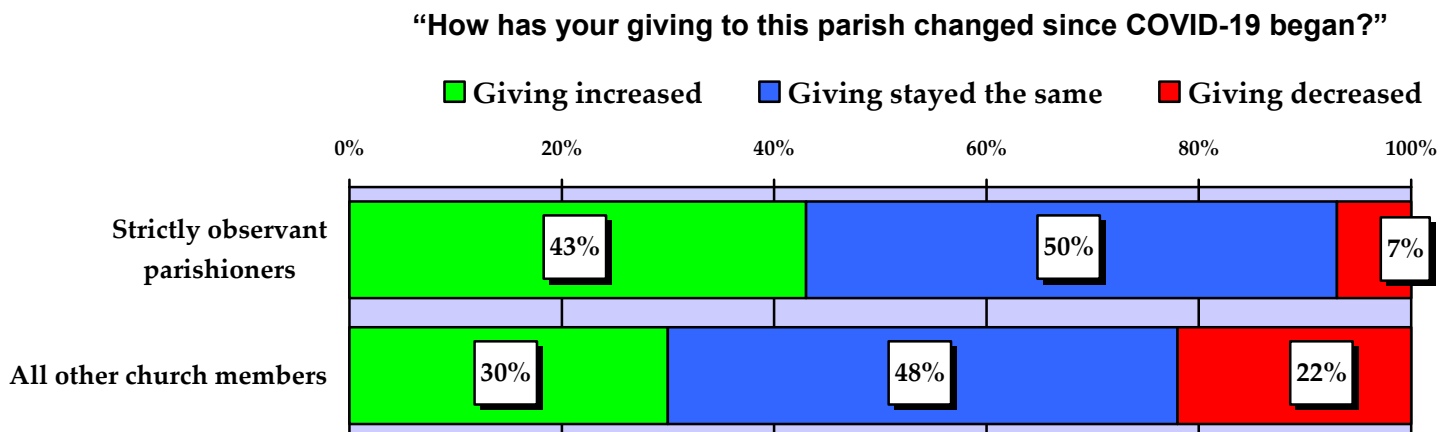
The second factor is related to what was discussed previously: a strong increase in the viability of a parish is accompanied by elevated generosity of their members. Fig. 49b shows that, in those parishes that experienced strong growth in vitality during the pandemic, many more members (58%) increased their contributions than in other parishes.

**Fig. 49b Growth in Parish’s Vitality Goes Hand in Hand With Growth in Generosity of its Members**



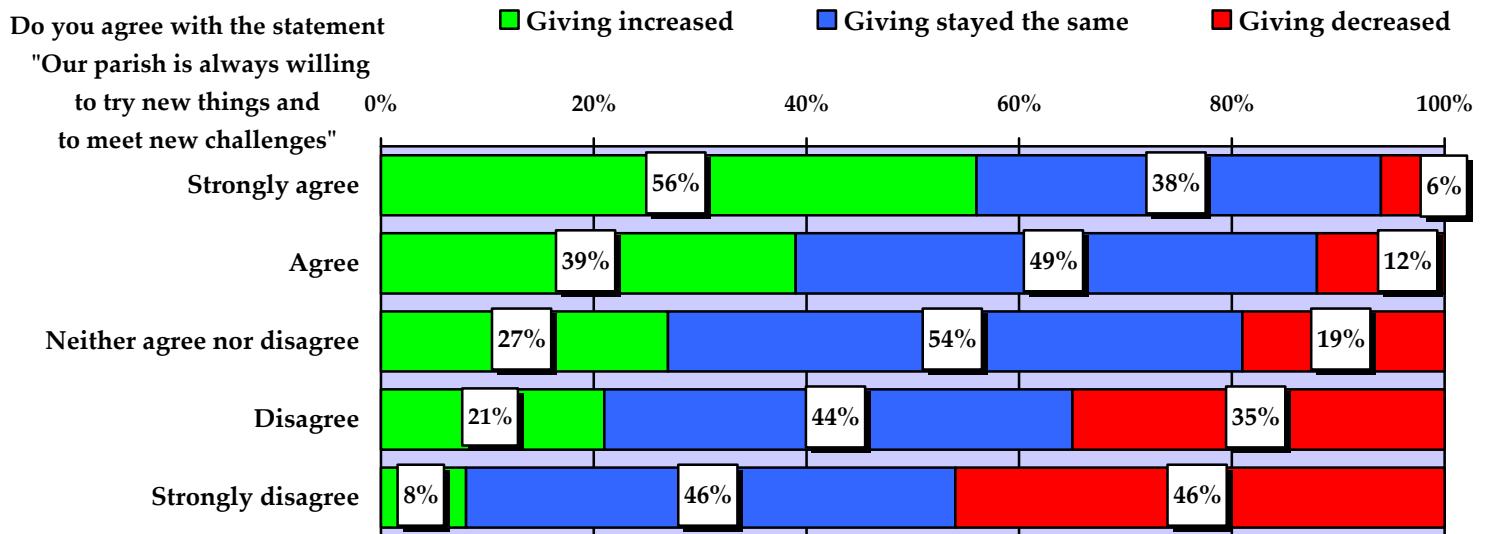
The third factor in increased giving is members’ strictness in following various rules and practices of the Orthodox Church. Fig. 49c shows that a higher percentage of “strictly observant” parishioners (43%) increased their contributions, as compared to other church members (30%).

**Fig. 49c Strictly Observant Church Members Were More Likely to Increase their Contributions to Parishes during the Pandemic**



The last factor influencing increased giving is the openness of members to changes and innovations in the life of a parish. Fig. 49d shows that, in “experimental” parishes,” many more members (56%) increased their contributions than in all other parishes.

**Fig. 49d Members in More Experimental Parishes Are More Willing to Increase their Giving**  
**“How has your giving to this parish changed since the COVID-19 began?”**



The fact that members in more “experimental” parishes are more generous is not surprising. If “meeting new challenges” and “trying new things” requires greater financial support, than the members of more “experimental” parishes are probably more willing to provide it.

## XI. Building a Post-Pandemic Future: What Parishes Need and What They Fear

### KEY FINDINGS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER:

- ❖ When asked what their parishes urgently need in order to grow and become stronger, respondents most frequently indicated two items: “young parishioners being more involved” and “greater outreach into local community.” More than two-thirds of American Orthodox parishes are struggling with the lack of actively participating young people and disconnection from their local communities.
- ❖ Only a small minority (18%) of church members think that “modernization” of Orthodox liturgical practices (making them more contemporary and innovative in style) would be helpful in building a better future for their parish.

- ❖ In parishes which declined in vitality over the past two years, the three most urgent needs are: more effective pastoral leadership, a better vision of the parish's future, and more agreement and unity among parishioners. In parishes that have grown in vitality since the start of the pandemic, the three most desired further improvements are: better outreach into the local community, stronger financial resources, and greater involvement of young parishioners.
- ❖ In parishes with mostly cradle Orthodox parishioners, the need to have “a better vision of the parish's future” is at the top of the list of desired improvements. In contrast, parishes with mostly convert parishioners indicated that they should focus on having “more unity and agreement among parishioners.”
- ❖ The questionnaire asked: “What is your single greatest concern for your parish's future caused by the pandemic?” Five major “narratives” – frequently repeated concerns – emerged from the answers. Among these five, only one theme was unrelated to the pandemic: many people thought that the future of the Orthodox Church in the US is uncertain, unless it grows closer to ordinary people and addresses their needs and realities of life. This chapter discusses all five narratives and illustrates each with direct quotes.

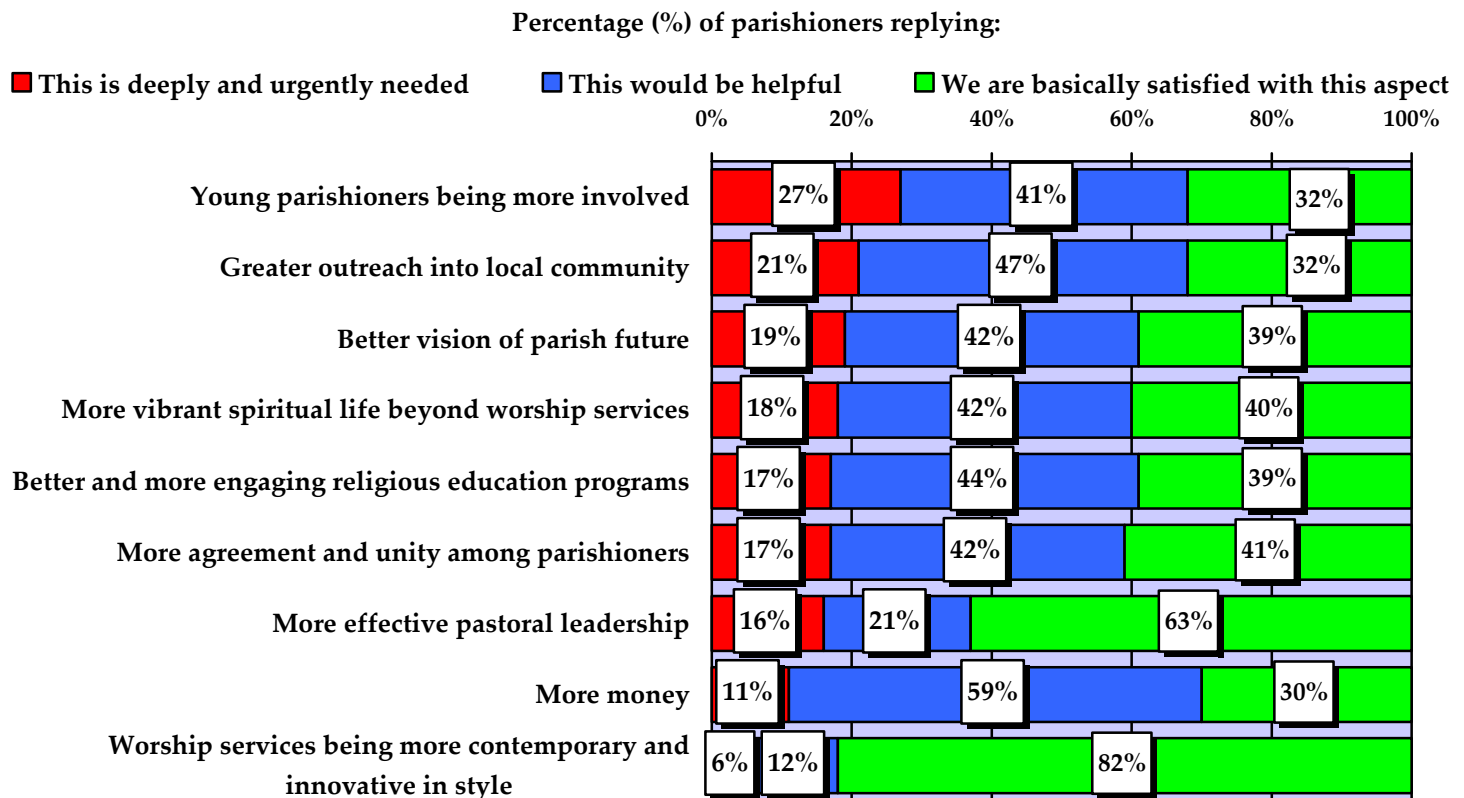
During the pandemic, the overall vitality of most US Orthodox parishes changed significantly. In chapter 4, we saw that 35% of respondents indicated that their congregations are stronger now (including 13% saying “much stronger”) than they were prior to the pandemic. In contrast, 39% reported a decline in the vitality of their parishes (including 12% reporting that their parishes are “much weaker” now). These numbers closely matched the percentages of priests who reported either growth or decline in the vitality of their parishes, when surveyed two months earlier.

Regardless of their current condition, the most important question is: “What do parishes need most now? What can help them build a viable future?” The survey asked: “For your parish to become stronger and grow, how urgent is improvement in each of the following nine areas?” See Fig. 50.



**Fig. 50 What Can Help Parishes to Build a Viable Future**

“For your parish to become stronger and grow, how urgent is improvement in each of the following?”



Two items were most often indicated as urgently needed to assure a bright future for the parish: “young parishioners being more involved” and “greater outreach into local community.” More than two-thirds (68%) of American Orthodox parishes are struggling to a greater (“urgently needed”) or lesser (“this will be helpful”) extent with lack of participation by young people and with disconnection from their local communities. The need to improve parish finances (“more money”) was also noted by a significant percentage of parishioners (70%), but with a much lower sense of urgency (only 11% saying “more money” is “urgently needed”).

On the positive side, the dominant majority of parishioners (63%) are quite happy with the leadership of their pastors. It is also clear that only a small minority of Orthodox Church members (18%) think that modernization of Orthodox liturgical practices (making them more contemporary and innovative in style) would help in building a better future for their parish.

The picture in Fig. 50 reflects the overall national situation, but the reality is more nuanced when looking at different types of parishes.

Both the urgency (percentage of people saying “deeply and urgently needed”) and priority of needs (their order of urgency) vary greatly from parish to parish.

Three pronounced differences among parishes emerged when assessing which items for improvement were most important and how critical they were. The first clear divide is between the parishes that grew “much stronger” (as reported by 13% of participants) and those that grew “much weaker” (as reported by 12%).

Predictably, many more study participants in parishes with a significant decline in vitality said all possible improvements were “deeply and urgently needed,” as compared to respondents in the parishes with an increase in vitality (Table 3a).

But also, these opposite categories of parishes prioritize differently their needs for various improvements. For parishes with a decline in vitality, their three most urgent needs are: more effective pastoral leadership, better vision of the parish’s future, and more agreement and unity among parishioners. In contrast, for parishes with increased vitality, their most desirable improvements are: greater outreach into the local community, followed by better financial resources, and involvement of young parishioners.

**Table 3a Rank Order (Priority) and Urgency of Various Needs in the Parishes:  
Percentage (%) of Respondents Reporting “Deeply and Urgently Needed in Order to Become Stronger”**

Parishes which are <b>MUCH WEAKER</b> now than before the pandemic	Parishes which are <b>MUCH STRONGER</b> now than before the pandemic
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>More effective pastoral leadership (63%)</b></li> <li>2. <b>Better vision of parish future (57%)</b></li> <li>3. <b>More agreement/unity among parishioners (55%)</b></li> <li>4. Young parishioners being more involved (54%)</li> <li>5. More vibrant spiritual life beyond worship services (46%)</li> <li>6. Greater outreach into local community (44%)</li> <li>7. Better and more engaging religious education programs (41%)</li> <li>8. Worship services being more contemporary and innovative (16%)</li> <li>9. More money (14%)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Greater outreach into local community (12%)</b></li> <li>2. <b>More money (11%)</b></li> <li>3. <b>Young parishioners being more involved (9%)</b></li> <li>4. Better and more engaging religious education (6%)</li> <li>5. Better vision of parish future (5%)</li> <li>6. More agreement and unity among parishioners (5%)</li> <li>7. More vibrant spiritual life beyond worship services (3%)</li> <li>8. More effective pastoral leadership (2%)</li> <li>9. Worship services being more contemporary and innovative (1%)</li> </ol>

The second clear division is among parishes in which a majority of members are cradle Orthodox Christians and those in which most members are converts to the Orthodox faith. See Table 3b. Compared to the latter, parishes with mostly cradle Orthodox felt more urgency around all their needs (i.e., a greater percentage rated all possible improvements as “deeply and urgently needed”).

**Table 3b Rank Order (Priority) and Urgency of Various Needs in the Parishes:  
Percentage (%) of Respondents Reporting “Deeply and Urgently Needed in Order to Become Stronger”**

Parishes with majority members being <b>CRADLE ORTHODOX</b>	Parishes with majority members being <b>CONVERTS TO ORTHODOXY</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Young parishioners being more involved (40%)</li> <li>2. Better vision of parish future (30%)</li> <li>3. Greater outreach into local community (29%)</li> <li>4. Better and more engaging religious education programs (27%)</li> <li>5. More vibrant spiritual life beyond worship services (25%)</li> <li>6. More agreement/unity among parishioners (20%)</li> <li>7. More effective pastoral leadership (21%)</li> <li>8. More money (13%)</li> <li>9. Worship services being more contemporary and innovative (13%)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Greater outreach into local community (18%)</li> <li>2. More agreement/unity among parishioners (17%)</li> <li>3. Young parishioners being more involved (16%)</li> <li>4. More vibrant spiritual life beyond worship services (15%)</li> <li>5. Better vision of parish future (14%)</li> <li>6. More money (12%)</li> <li>7. Better and more engaging religious education(12%)</li> <li>8. More effective pastoral leadership (14%)</li> <li>9. Worship services being more contemporary and innovative (3%)</li> </ol>

The lists of top-three most desirable improvements in cradle versus convert parishes are also somewhat different. Both indicated “young parishioners being more involved” and “greater outreach into local community” among their major three concerns. At the same time, the need for a “better vision of parish future” also tops the list for parishes with cradle Orthodox members, while parishes with mostly convert parishioners strongly believe that they must address the issue of disagreements and conflicts among members (their second most urgent need).

The last clear difference in needed improvements is between congregations that stayed open for in-person services throughout the pandemic and those that were closed for some period of time. See Table 3c.

**Table 3c Rank Order (Priority) and Urgency of Various Needs in the Parishes:  
Percentage (%) of Respondents Reporting “Deeply and Urgently Needed in Order to Become Stronger”**

Parishes that were CLOSED for in-person services at some point during the pandemic	Parishes that stayed OPEN for in-person services throughout the pandemic
1. <b>Young parishioners being more involved (29%)</b>	1. <b>Young parishioners being more involved (18%)</b>
2. <b>Greater outreach into local community (22%)</b>	2. <b>More money (17%)</b>
3. <b>Better vision of parish future (21%)</b>	3. <b>Greater outreach into local community (16%)</b>
4. More agreement/unity among parishioners (19%)	4. Better vision of parish future (13%)
5. Better/more engaging religious education (19%)	5. Better and more engaging religious education(13%)
6. More vibrant spiritual life beyond worship services (19%)	6. More vibrant spiritual life beyond worship services (12%)
7. More effective pastoral leadership (18%)	7. More agreement/unity among parishioners (11%)
8. Worship services being more contemporary and innovative (13%)	8. More effective pastoral leadership (10%)
9. More money (10%)	9. Worship services being more contemporary and innovative (5%)

Parishes that were closed at some point indicated a greater degree of urgency for most improvements, when compared to those that stayed open. That is, the “resuming and repair of church life” is calling for more effort across the board, as compared to the scenario in which a church operated continuously throughout the pandemic.

We also see that the need for a clearer vision of the parish’s future is high on the list for parishes that were closed, while a different priority emerged for parishes that stayed open: stronger church finances (“more money”).

The local context of each congregation is unique and so are their major concerns. Therefore, the survey also offered the respondents the opportunity to describe the challenges that could threaten the future of their congregations. The questionnaire asked: “What is your single greatest concern for your parish's future caused by the pandemic?”

From the variety of answers (including the optimistic “none whatsoever”), several common themes repeatedly emerged. Some concerns were strikingly similar to the key themes in parishioners’ comments regarding causes of diminished vitality in their parishes (see chapter 9).

Interestingly, only one strong theme was unrelated to the pandemic. Many people thought that the future of the Orthodox Church in the US is uncertain unless it becomes closer to ordinary people and better addresses their needs and realities of life. Here are examples:

- My biggest concern is how difficult the service is to the average English-speaking American. There needs to be more English, less Ancient Greek, and more congregation participation during the liturgy. We also need more understanding that we are in the US and there are many religiously mixed marriages that should be nurtured, not turned away.
- I'm afraid our church is going to become a "shrine." We need to be more open with "inspirational sermons" (clarity and brevity in English) that speak out to our religiously inter-married young families. Traditions are what we have and should keep, but in a today's world, we need to reach out and bring the young people back with sermons on issues that matter to them.
- I am concerned with the refusal of our hierarchy to modernize our religion. We have a majority of mixed (Orthodox – non-Orthodox) marriages. The rules about Holy Communion should be revised as well as lengthy services.
- Unless we make it easier to fit worship into today's busy lifestyle, it will be difficult to maintain attendance. Dress code, length of services, Communion administration procedures, etc., all need to be updated. We must find a way to move the church's position in people's lives and into the current century, while maintaining the traditions and sacraments that are critical to our religion.
- The pandemic simply revealed how limited as a Church we are. Pastoral care needs to occur OUTSIDE the doors of the church and minister to parishioners where they are: in homes, in the community, etc. The Orthodox Church needs capacity to minister, going to the people, not berating them to come to church as the sole means of experiencing Christ.

A second narrative in responses was uncertainty about the parish's future because of the polarization and conflict among members which surfaced during the pandemic. Deep divides in parishes based on pandemic-related cultural and political issues and on the safety protocols in the church (mask-wearing, changes in services, church closures) were seen as threatening the community. Here are examples of quotes exemplifying this trend:

- We experienced the loss of community. We had people leave due to dissatisfaction with how the pandemic was handled. Overall, we see polarization in attitudes towards the public health issues, which probably mirror parallel political issues.

- I fear that going forward people still will be focused on pandemic-related matters and that conversation will be overrun with secular opinions instead of shaping our thoughts towards our Orthodox faith and church.
- My major fears for the future are divisions caused by partisan political views in our parish and very emotional reaction to COVID measures by parishioners.

The third pattern in answers came from respondents who were dissatisfied with how the church handled the pandemic. It should be noted, the reasons for dissatisfaction fell into two opposing groups. One “camp” was concerned that during the pandemic, the church “succumbed” to secular authorities, when many bishops, priests, and members “betrayed the Orthodox faith” by closing churches for in-person services, introducing changes in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, encouraging vaccination, etc. The second “camp” held the view that the parish’s response to pandemic was inadequate and reckless, thus fostering and encouraging the most conservative wing of the church: those who, in the name of the Orthodox faith, refused to recognize the danger of COVID and rejected any safety measures. Here are examples of such opposite points of view:

- I fear that the parish will be left to those who are comfortable taking the risk to go back to all activities as if the pandemic didn't exist, thereby making it an inhospitable place to those of us who follow the science and take the COVID situation as serious.
- My major concern is proliferation of the myth that church can be a dangerous place to be. That it is acceptable for our churches to close their doors.
- I can't stand my parish. You have somebody who's dying of COVID in our parish: do not tell their spouse to not intubate them because "God's got it." Don't be repeating nonsense like the gold of the communion spoon will prevent transmission of diseases. Instead of being the Church of intelligence, most Orthodox have slipped into common crazy Evangelical magical thinking.
- Church doors should NEVER be closed. Instead, clergy have used the same secular, "In an abundance of caution, concern, safety." We had no altar boys, no choir, masks galore, separation of peoples. What a pity not to trust God as our Asia Minor Greeks/Armenians did. Our faith has not stood no matter what! Science has proven to be totally manipulated; why was faith in our churches so easily victimized? Why did we become proponents of this manipulation?
- Please, priests, take off your masks and stop pushing the vaccine to your congregations.

The fourth common theme was concern about members who did not resume their participation after parishes reopened for in-person services and other activities. Apparently, this trend has especially affected two opposite demographic groups: younger parishioners or young families with children, and the most elderly members, whose health is compromised and who still fear to physically return to the church.

- We witness the lack of return of the youth. They seem to have filled their lives with other activities on Sunday and are not motivated to come back to church.
- Youth are gone and young families have left. Closing church broke their attendance habits. Masking made it impossible to attend with young children.
- Return of older parishioners is in question.
- Our older parishioners, our parents and grandparents, always showed us an example in the church. Now [they] feel unsafe in crowded places, and they don't attend liturgy. This is leaving entire families to stay home with their elderly loved ones on Sunday instead of attending. This has caused a major decline in numbers.

The last common narrative was about church members who – regardless of their demographic characteristics – simply fell out of the habit of attending in-person church services after their parishes had been closed for an extended period of time.

- I fear that people forget the importance of in person worship because it is more “convenient” to watch it online. Which means that people forget why they are Orthodox in the first place. Being an Orthodox Christian was never easy. Just because being an Orthodox Christian was made “easier” by offering the online services doesn’t mean that we should take this option and live that way.
- Many people have left and do not plan on coming back. While church was closed, they had enough time to decide that they do not need church at all.
- I am afraid that people have become lax in attending services in person and conveniently forgetting to attend online either.

## XII. Beneficiaries of the Pandemic: the 13% of Parishes with an Upsurge in Vitality

### KEY FINDINGS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER:

- ❖ As reported both by clergy and lay members, about one of eight American Orthodox Christian congregations (12-13% of all parishes) experienced strong growth in overall vitality since the start of the pandemic.
- ❖ The surge in vitality in these parishes manifested itself in a variety of ways, including:
  - Parishioners increased their church participation (at worship services and beyond) and involvement of their children in religious education
  - Members increased their giving to their parishes
  - Parishioners said their personal faith grew significantly during this time
  - Trust of parishioners in their clergy and fellow church members became greater
- ❖ These congregations with strong growth in vitality display a number of common characteristics which distinguish them from other US Orthodox parishes:
  - They are much more likely to have a majority of members who are converts to Orthodox faith
  - They are much more willing to try new things in response to new challenges
  - Many of these parishes never closed their doors during the pandemic. They continued in-person worship services and in-person religious education for young people
  - They offer their members a strong sense of being supported in difficult times
  - 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 overwhelmingly disapprove of online Orthodox worship services
  - Many of their members deny the danger of COVID-19 and the efficacy of vaccination

Chapter eight of this report looked at the impact of the pandemic on the overall vitality of American Orthodox parishes. It was found that about 13% of US Orthodox Christian congregations have become *much stronger* now than they were before the pandemic. Notably, this conclusion was supported by two separate sources of data: the surveys of clergy (February 2022) and of ordinary church members (May 2022).<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Both the survey of clergy (February 2022) and laity (May 2022) asked the same question: “All things considered, how would you compare the overall vitality and strength of your parish before the pandemic and now?” 12% of clergy and 13% of laity respondents chose the answer, “Our parish is MUCH STRONGER now than before the pandemic.”

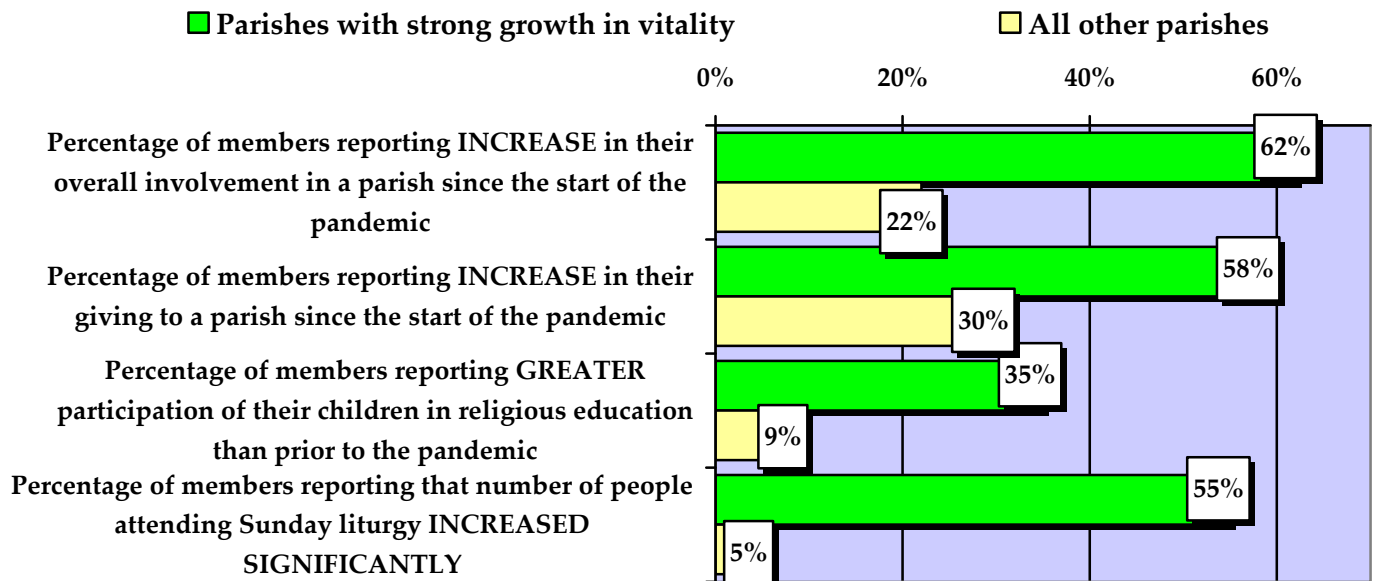


Chapter nine offered initial insights into what church members mean when saying that their parishes are much stronger now than pre-pandemic.

On the following pages, we will present a number of congregational characteristics that are typical of churches with a recent surge in vitality and which distinguish them from all other parishes. That is, the goal of this chapter is to offer a collective portrait of American Orthodox Christian congregations that not only adapted to the challenges of the past two years, but also emerged from the pandemic much stronger than before, finding new opportunities for their ministries to flourish. Clearly, not all features described below are present in every parish which experienced a boost in vitality, but many tend to cluster together.

First, the strong growth in congregational vitality manifested itself in a variety of ways. On the level of church practices, compared to other Orthodox Christian congregations, many more members in these 13% of parishes increased their overall church involvement, their giving to the parishes, and the participation of their children in parish-based religious education. These changes were accompanied by the significant growth in the number of people attending worship services. See Fig. 51a.

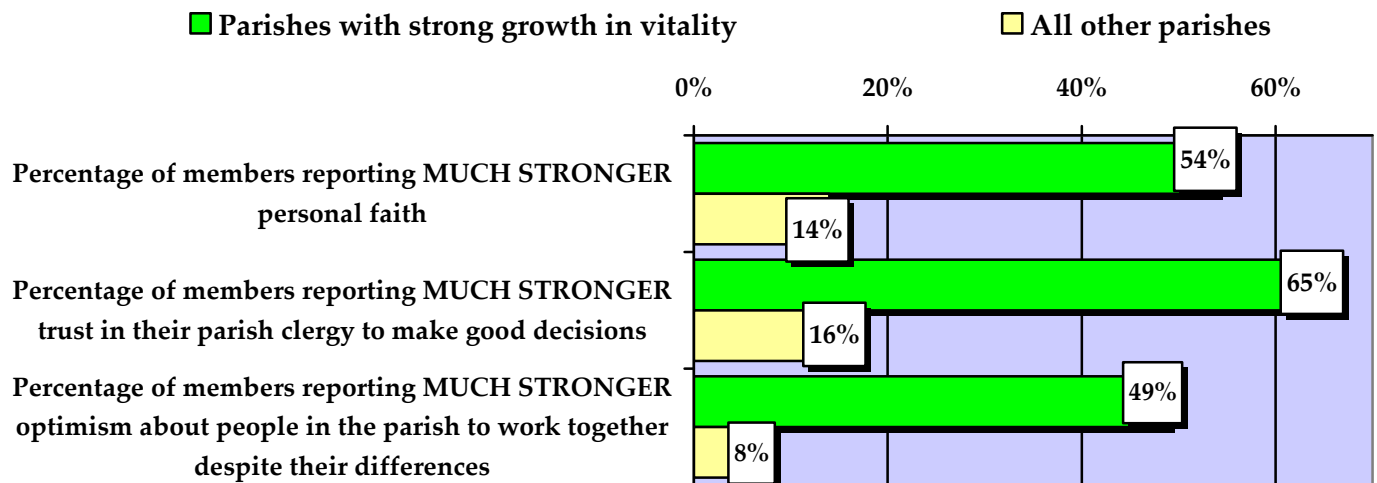
**Fig. 51a Strong Growth in a Parish’s Vitality Manifested Itself in Increased Church Involvement of Parishioners and their Children**



On the level of personal beliefs, compared to other Orthodox Christian congregations, many more members in parishes with an upsurge in vitality reported strong growth in personal faith, in confidence in their parish clergy’s ability to make wise decisions, and in the ability of all fellow parishioners to work collaboratively, even across personal differences. See Fig. 51b.

**Fig. 51b Strong Growth in a Parish’s Vitality Manifested Itself in Stronger Personal Faith of Parishioners and Increased Trust in their Parish Clergy and Fellow Parishioners**

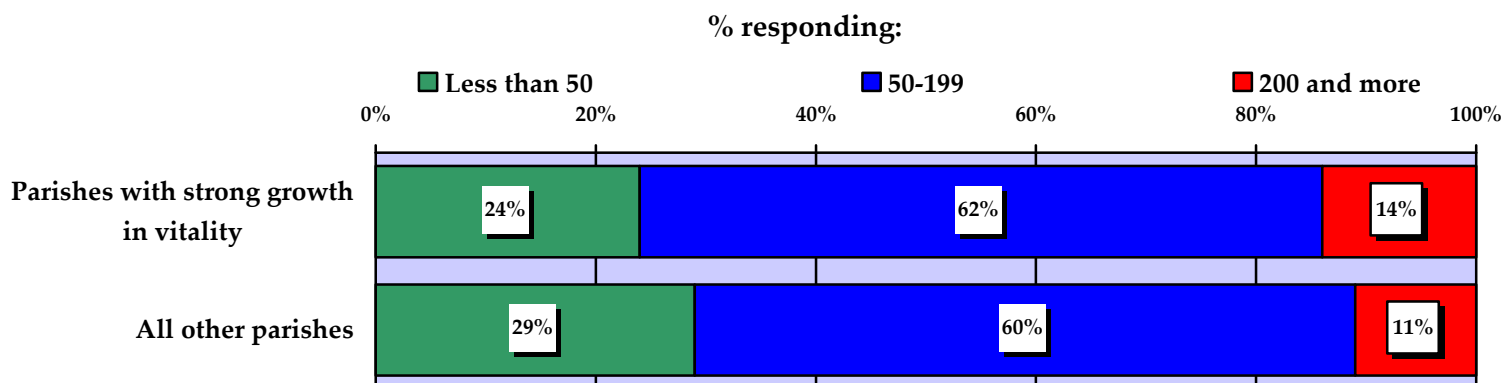
“As a result of the pandemic, how did each of the following change?”



Second, when it comes to the distinguishing characteristics of the parishes which flourished through the pandemic, it appears that the size of a membership was not a factor related to growth in vitality. Fig. 52 shows that in this measure there is no significant difference between churches with a strong increase in vitality and all other Orthodox Christian parishes.

**Fig. 52 No Difference in Size between Parishes with Strong Growth in Vitality and All Other Parishes**

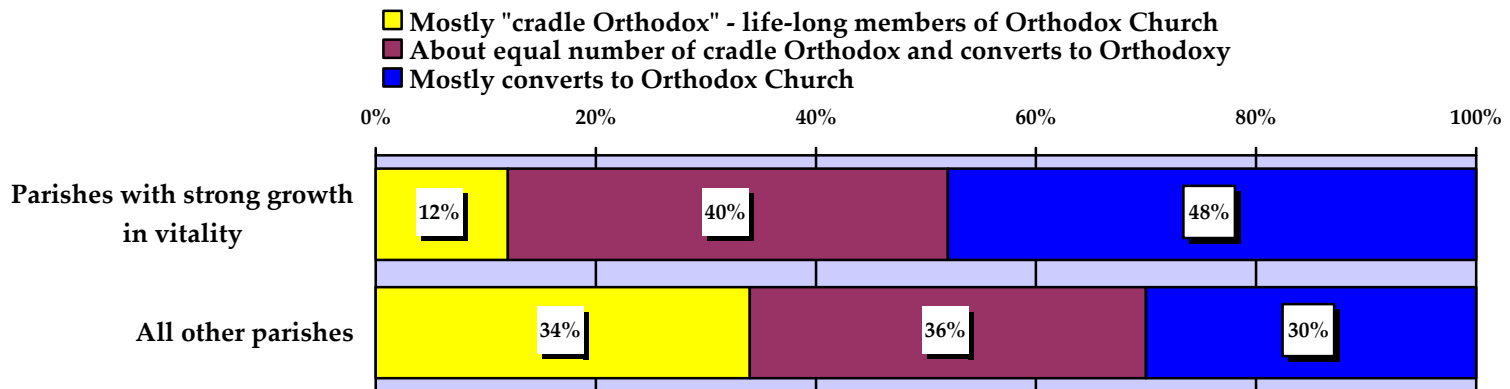
“What is the current total (including children) average in-person attendance at your Sunday Liturgy?”



At the same time, another characteristic of membership does clearly distinguish Orthodox Christian congregations that have become much stronger through the pandemic. Fig. 53 shows that, compared to other Orthodox parishes, these congregations are much more likely to have a majority of members who are converts to the Orthodox faith.

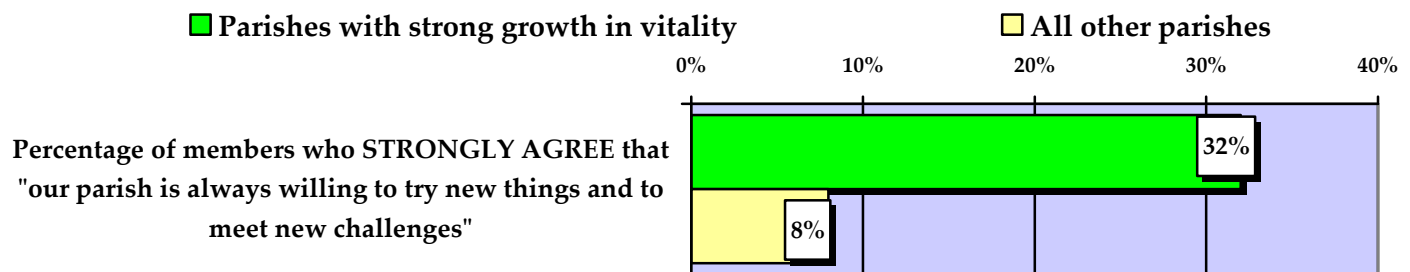
**Fig. 53 Growth in Vitality during the Pandemic Is Associated with Dominance of Converts to Orthodoxy among Parishioners**

“Would you say that the members of your parish are:”



Third, parishes with strong growth in vitality are more “experimental.” That is, they are NOT bound to keeping everything unchanged in their lives, and they understand the need to adapt. Fig. 54 shows that, compared to other Orthodox Christian congregations, in parishes with strong growth in vitality, many more members “strongly agree” that “our parish is always willing to try new things and to meet new challenges.”<sup>31</sup>

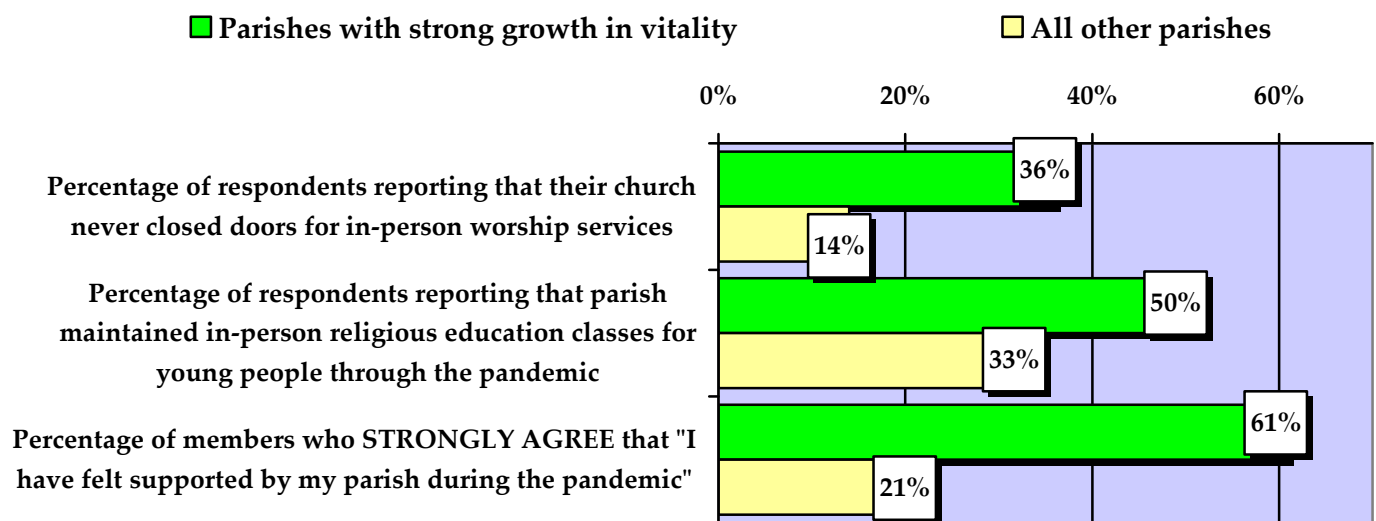
**Fig. 54 Growth in Vitality Is Associated with Readiness of Parish Community to Try New Things**



<sup>31</sup> This readiness for innovation and adaptability is particularly interesting, in light of the simultaneous preferences of these congregations for more conservative religious and social views discussed later in this chapter. We might only speculate that parishes with growth in vitality are capable of discerning what kinds of “experiments” are acceptable to them, and what they feel must be “carved in stone” and unchanged.

Fourth, when COVID-19 hit America, many more parishes which experienced a boost in vitality navigated through the pandemic without ever closing their doors for in-person worship services and without canceling in-person religious education classes for children and teenagers (whether or not it was officially permitted). Also – and, perhaps, partially *because* they continued to gather in person - their members felt much greater support coming from their parish communities than did members of all other Orthodox Christian congregations. See Fig. 55.

**Fig. 55 During the Pandemic, Many More Parishes with Strong Growth in Vitality Continued In-Person Worship Services and Religious Education for Young People, and Offered Members Strong Support**



Fifth, members of parishes with a surge in vitality have a much stronger preference for congregations that “expect uniformity of belief and practices, where people hold more or less the same views” rather than parishes that “tolerate diversity of belief and practice, where people have different views and openly discuss their disagreements.”

Also, parishioners in these churches tend to have more conservative personal views on various church-related and social matters. It is exemplified by their reluctance to allow women to serve in the ordained ministry as deacons or to afford legal status for the marriages of same-sex couples. See Fig. 56.

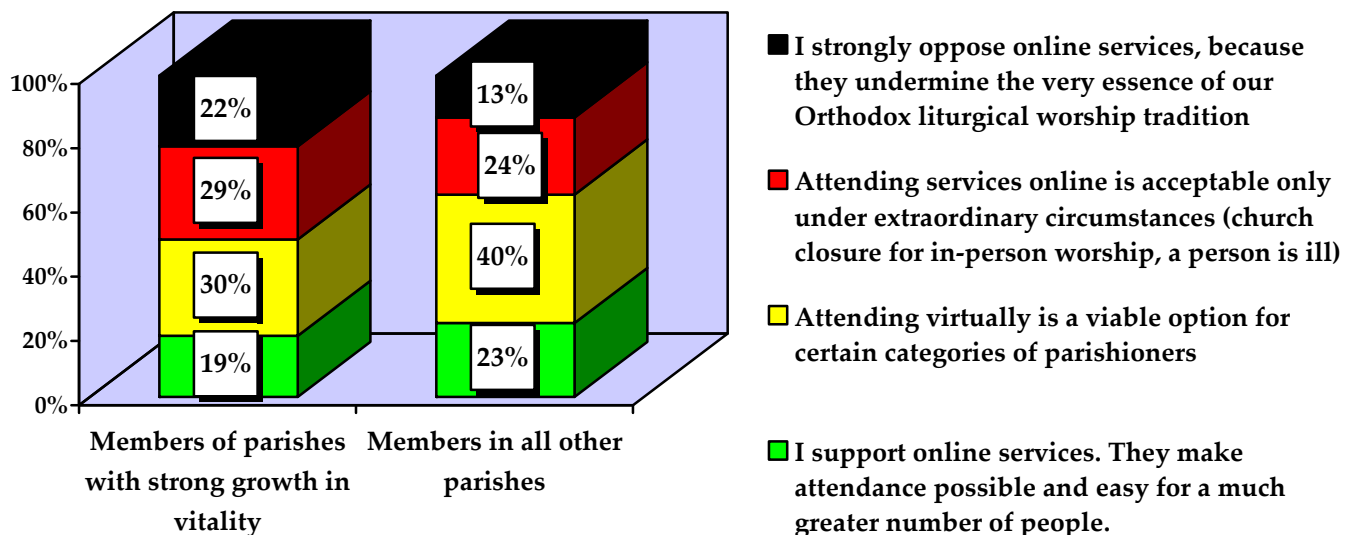
**Fig. 56 Growth in Vitality Is Associated with Members' Conservative Social and Church-Related Attitudes and their Preference for Uniformity of Beliefs, Practices, and Opinions in a Parish**



Sixth, when thinking about online religious services, members of parishes with strong growth in vitality have a much stronger negative opinion about worshipping remotely. Fig. 57 shows that less than half (49%) of them accept the remote worship option; the rest either unconditionally reject online services as undermining the essence of Orthodox liturgical worship, or grudgingly accept them, but only under extraordinary circumstances.

**Fig. 57 Members of Parishes with Strong Growth in Vitality Have a More Negative Attitude towards Online Format of Orthodox Worship Services**

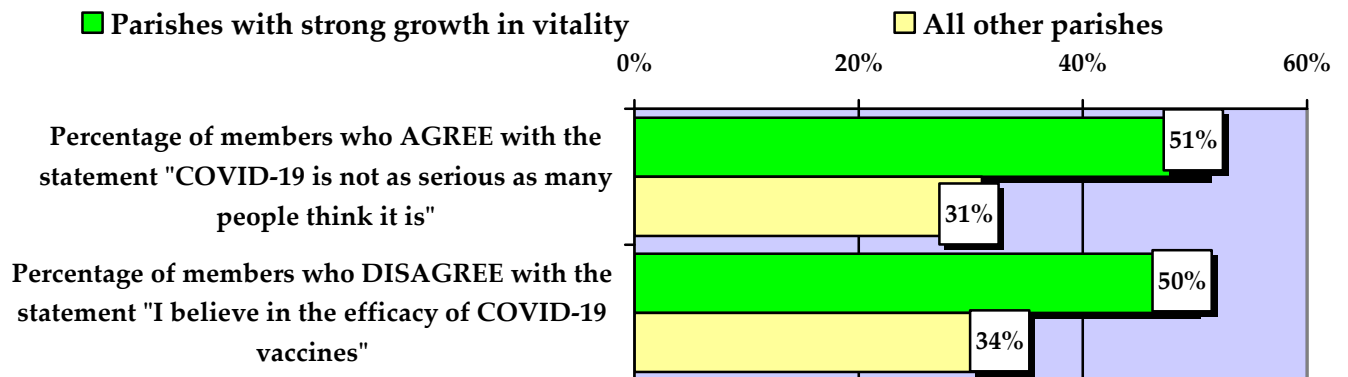
“Which of the following best describes your opinion about offering online Orthodox services?”



In contrast, a clear majority of parishioners (63%) in other congregations support the possibility to worship remotely, either because this makes it easier for more people to participate, or because this is the only way for certain categories of parishioners to attend.

Finally, the surge in vitality in 13% of American Orthodox parishes was also associated with less concern among their members for COVID-19. Fig. 58 shows that, compared to all other Orthodox Christian congregations, a much greater percentage of members in parishes with a boost in vitality dismiss the dangers of COVID-19 and deny the importance of vaccination.

**Fig. 58 Compared to all other Parishes, More Members in Congregations with Strong Growth in Vitality Deny the Danger of COVID-19 and the Efficacy of Vaccination**



Clearly, this picture of the 13% of American Orthodox parishes that surged in vitality since the start of the pandemic is far from complete, as it was limited only to data gathered in this survey. Yet it offers a snapshot of how a good number of flourishing Orthodox Christian congregations in the USA may look in the future.

The next question, to be explored in the following chapter, is: “What were the main paths and scenarios leading to the boost in a parish’s vitality during the pandemic?”

### XIII. Three Paths to Powerful Growth in Congregational Vitality: How Do they Differ?

- ❖ Most of the American Orthodox parishes that experienced *strong growth* in vitality since the start of the pandemic belong to one of the following categories:
  - “Never Closing” parishes: parishes that never closed their doors, continuing in-person worship services throughout the pandemic
  - “Intentionally Orthodox” parishes: parishes whose members “strongly agreed” with the statement, “Our parish expects 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” with the statement, “Our parish is always willing to try new things and to meet new challenges”

- ❖ This chapter offers a step-by-step comparison of the three different paths paved through the pandemic to much stronger congregational vitality by the “never closing,” “intentionally Orthodox,” and “experimental” parishes.
- ❖ Not only were these “paths” quite distinct, but also, the reported upsurge in vitality manifested itself differently in these three types of congregations.

On many topics in this report, we have seen that the same three categories of parishes adapted much better during the pandemic than did other Orthodox Christian congregations. Such parishes even *improved* in various ways despite the challenges brought by COVID-19. These three categories of churches are:

- Never-closing parishes: parishes that never closed their doors, continuing in-person worship services throughout the pandemic (17% of all study participants were members of such parishes)
- “Intentionally Orthodox” parishes: parishes whose members “strongly agreed” with the statement, “Our parish expects members to strictly follow the practices of the Orthodox Church: weekly church attendance, fasting, confessions, participation in religious education, etc.” (15%)
- “Experimental” parishes: parishes whose members “strongly agreed” with the statement, “Our parish is always willing to try new things and to meet new challenges” (12%)

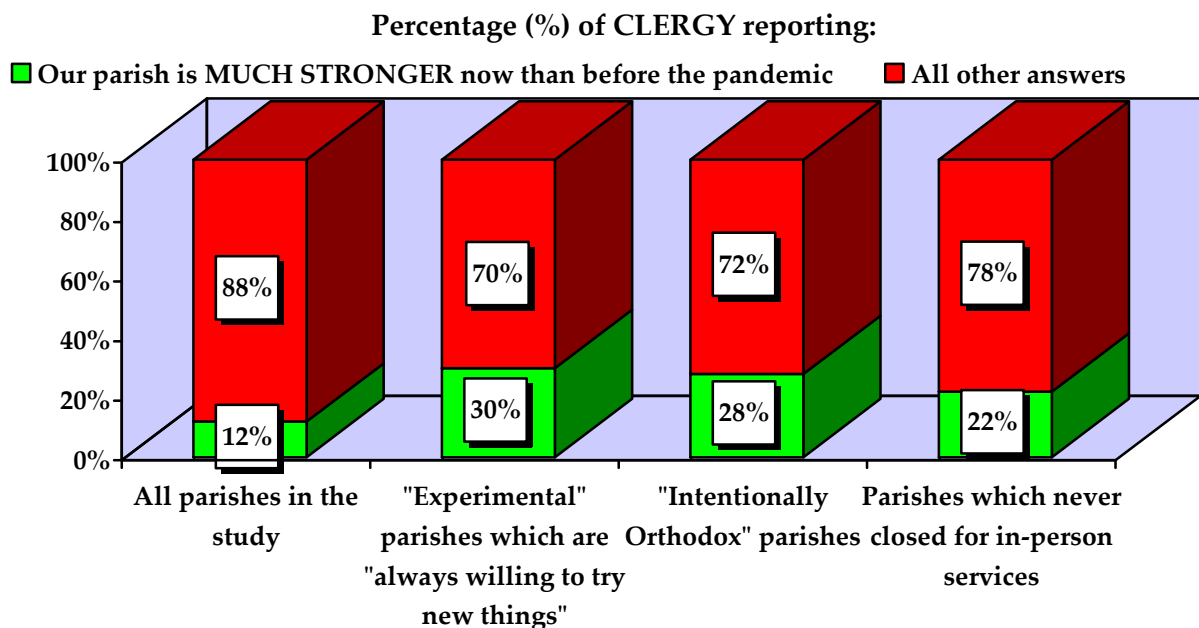
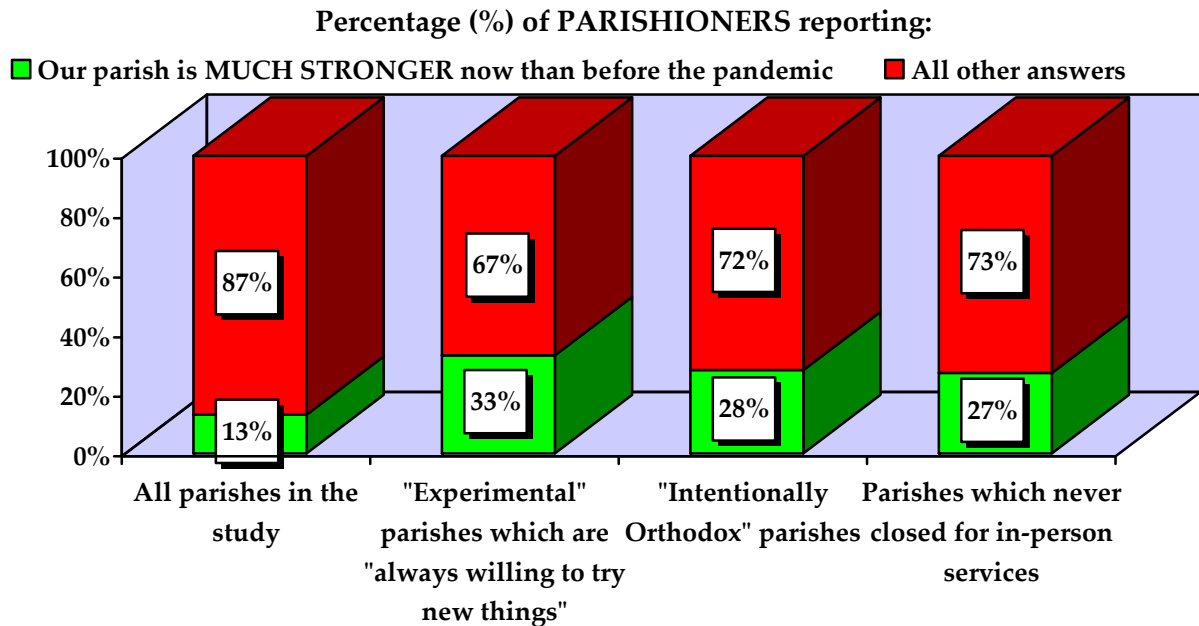
In comparison with other parishes, these three categories of congregations succeeded better in continuing their various ministries throughout the pandemic. When compared to pre-pandemic, they were also much more likely to grow in worship attendance, in overall involvement of members in the life of a parish beyond worship services, and in the number of children and teenagers participating in parish-based religious education. Also, more members in such congregations than in other parishes feel that they “have grown significantly in their personal faith through the pandemic.”

The previous chapter discussed the “collective portrait” – the combination of distinctive features – of those 13% American Orthodox parishes that experienced *strong growth* in their vitality since the start of the pandemic. Survey data show a statistically very sound correlation between a parish’s reported surge in vitality and the fact that it belongs to one (or even simultaneously two) of these three categories: i.e., it is an “experimental” parish, an “intentionally Orthodox” parish, or a “never closing” parish. In other words, among the congregations in these categories, a much higher percentage experienced a surge in vitality than among all other parishes.

It is noteworthy that this finding from the survey of lay church members fully corroborates the data from the clergy's survey conducted two months earlier. See Fig. 59.

**Fig. 59** “Experimental,” “Intentionally Orthodox,” and “Never Closing” Parishes Were Much More Likely to Experience Surge in Vitality through the Pandemic. Both Members’ and Clergy’ Surveys Confirm this Finding

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





Among these three categories, the “experimental” parishes displayed the most robust correlation with a parish’s reported strong growth in vitality. It appears then that the willingness of a parish 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.

The questions to be addressed in this chapter are: “How different are these types of congregations? Do they, indeed, offer three distinct paths to much greater vitality through the pandemic? Which features do they share, and what clearly sets each one apart?”

One answer to this question is that there is a certain overlap between the “experimental,” the “intentionally Orthodox,” and the “never closing” parishes. That is, some of them “fit” simultaneously in two or even all three categories. Among all study participants from parishes experiencing a surge in vitality, 42% belonged to one of these three categories and 27% were from congregations that were simultaneously in two or even three of the above categories (the remaining 31% were from the parishes which were neither “experimental,” nor “intentional,” nor “never closing”).

Among those 27% in two categories simultaneously, the *most* common combination was for a parish to be both “intentionally Orthodox” and “never closing.” The *least* likely combination was for a parish to be both “experimental” and, at the same time, “never closing.”

On the following pages, we will look again at the distinguishing characteristics of American Orthodox parishes with a strong recent growth in vitality which were discussed in the previous chapter. We will see to what extent each of these characteristics is present when looking separately at those *congregations which experienced strong growth in vitality and, at the same time, are:*

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

1. The previous chapter concluded that the surge in vitality witnessed by 13% of American Orthodox parishes manifested itself in a variety of ways, including an increase in members' church participation, in giving to their parishes, and in the involvement of their children in religious education. Strong growth in members' personal faith and in their trust in clergy and fellow parishioners were also hallmarks of congregations with a boost in vitality.

Fig. 60a and 60b show that these expressions of growth in vitality were present to different extents in "experimental," "intentionally Orthodox," and "never closing" parishes.

The "intentionally Orthodox" parishes witnessed a much greater increase in members' overall involvement than did "experimental" parishes and parishes that never closed for in-person services. Members' giving swelled in both "experimental" and "intentionally Orthodox" parishes, but less so in the "never closing" parishes. At the same time, "never closing" and "intentionally Orthodox" parishes succeeded much more than "experimental" parishes in bringing more people to their worship services.

**Fig. 60a** Growth in Vitality Expressed Itself Differently in "Experimental," "Intentionally Orthodox," and "Never closing" Parishes

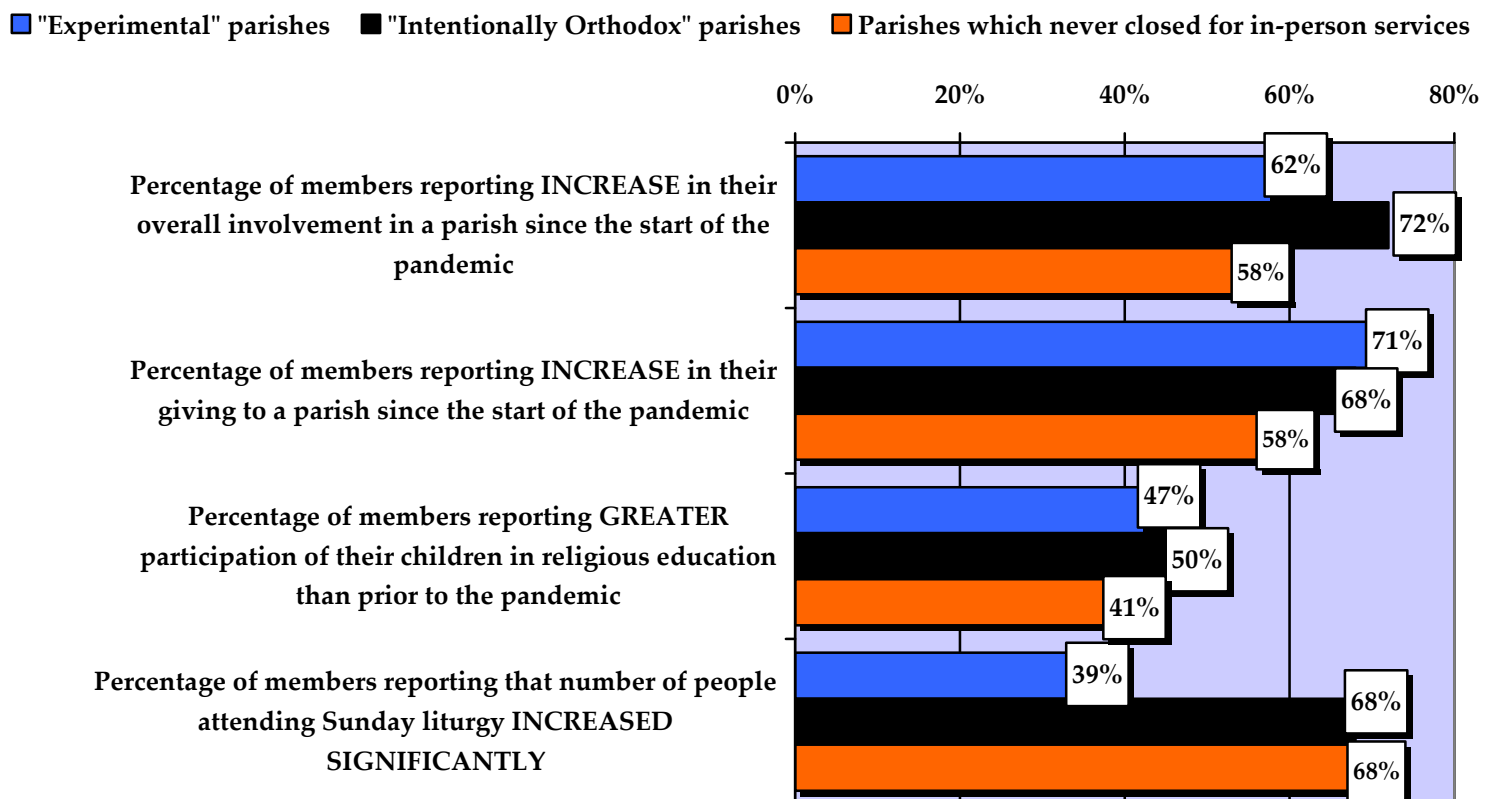
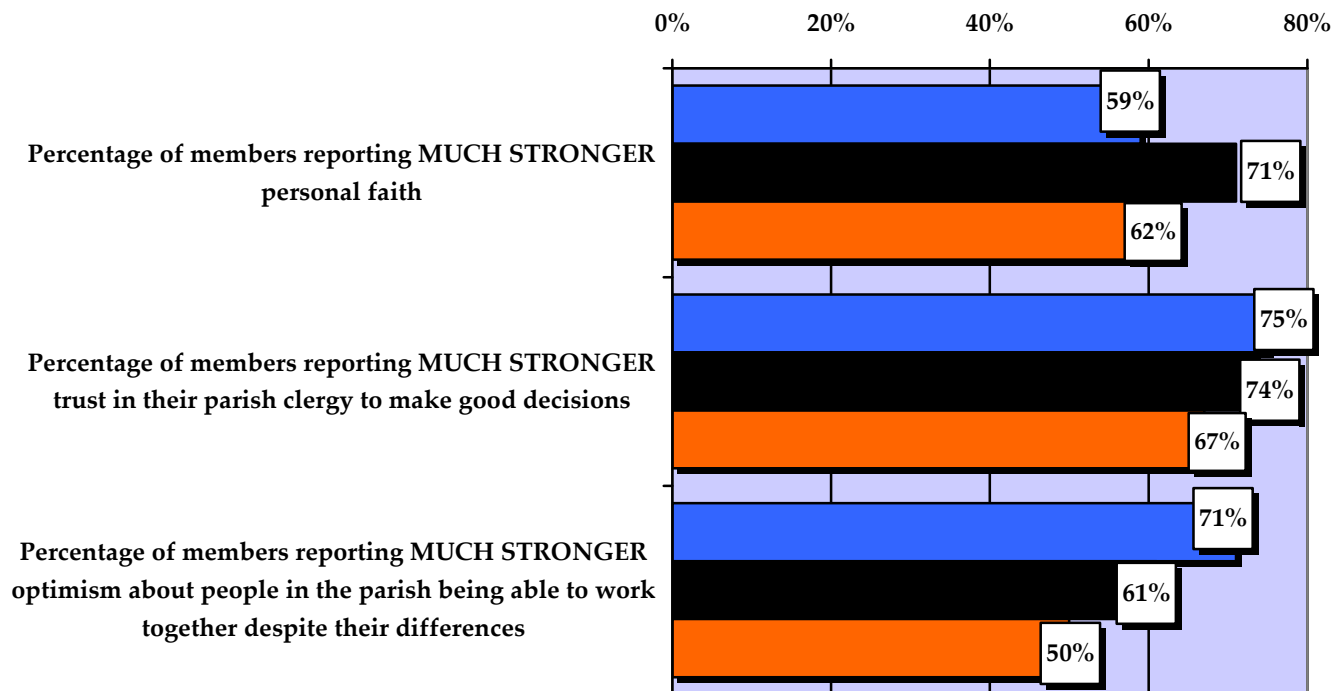


Fig. 60b shows that, on the level of personal beliefs, compared to “experimental” and “never closing” parishes, more members in “intentionally Orthodox” parishes have grown in their personal faith. At the same time, the “experimental” parishes were much more successful in creating a greater sense of unity among congregants: 71% of their members said that as a result of the pandemic they feel truly optimistic about the ability of all fellow parishioners to work collaboratively and across personal differences.

**Fig. 60b “Intentionally Orthodox” Parishes Experienced Strong Growth in Personal Faith of their Members. “Experimental” Parishes Have Grown in Ability of Parishioners to Work Together.**

“As a result of the pandemic, how did each of the following change?”

■ “Experimental” parishes   ■ “Intentionally Orthodox” parishes   ■ Parishes which never closed for in-person serv

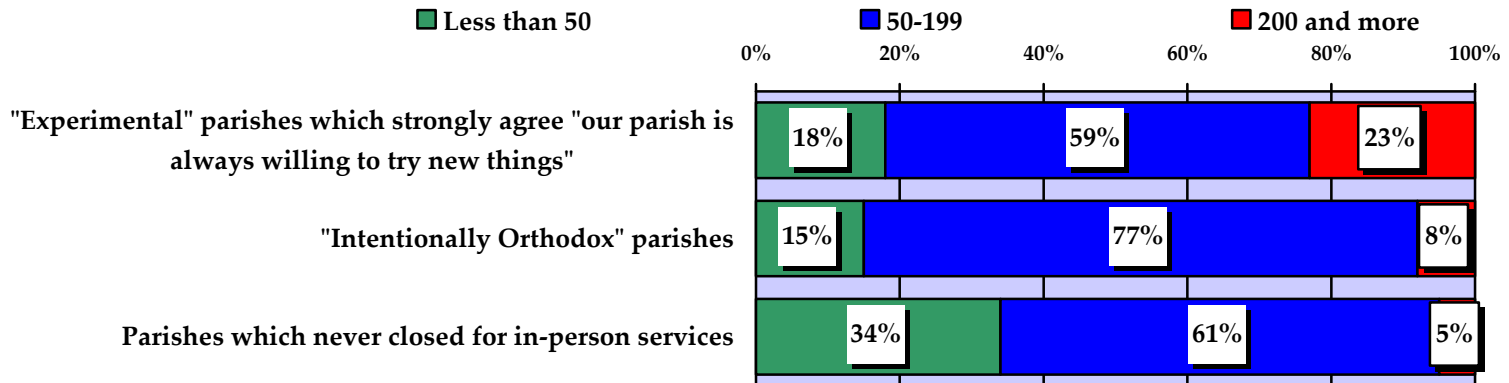


2. Fig. 61 shows that typical parish size is quite different for “experimental,” “intentionally Orthodox,” and “never closing” parishes. The “experimental” churches tend to be larger, while “intentionally Orthodox” and “never closing” congregations are smaller.

**Fig. 61 Churches Which Never Closed for In-Person Services during the Pandemic Tend to Be Smaller in Size**

“What is the current total (including children) average in-person attendance at your Sunday Liturgy?”

Percentage (%) responding:



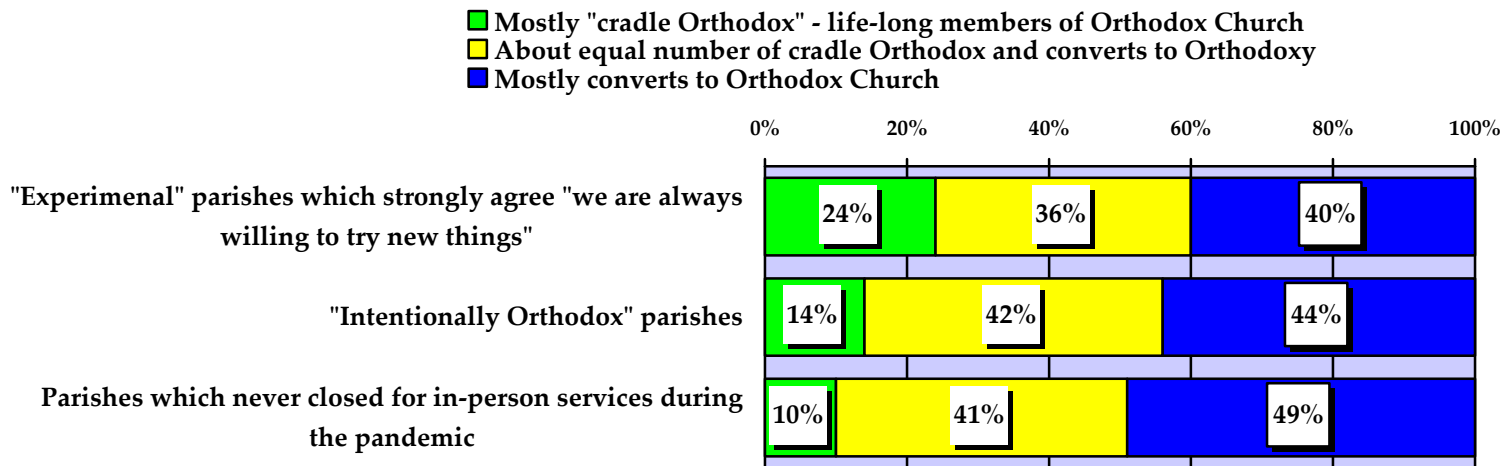
This makes sense. Larger parishes have more resources - human, financial, etc. – available to them, which results in more opportunities to experiment and try new things. But being a smaller congregation helps to cultivate a sense of close-knit community with members feeling united and supporting each other in intentionally practicing and living out the Orthodox faith. It was also probably easier for smaller churches to remain open for in-person services through the pandemic, especially in those situations where they had to “fly under the radar” of local secular authorities or ruling bishops.

We also saw in the previous chapter that congregations with a recent surge in vitality have significantly more converts to Orthodoxy among their members than do other parishes.

Fig. 62 shows that in this measure there is a difference between “experimental,” “intentionally Orthodox,” and, especially, “never closing” parishes. Compared to the former, the two latter categories are more convert-populated.

**Fig. 62 “Intentionally Orthodox” Parishes and Parishes Which Never Closed for In-Person Services Have More Converts to Orthodoxy among Members than “Experimental” Parishes**

“Would you say that the members of your parish are:”

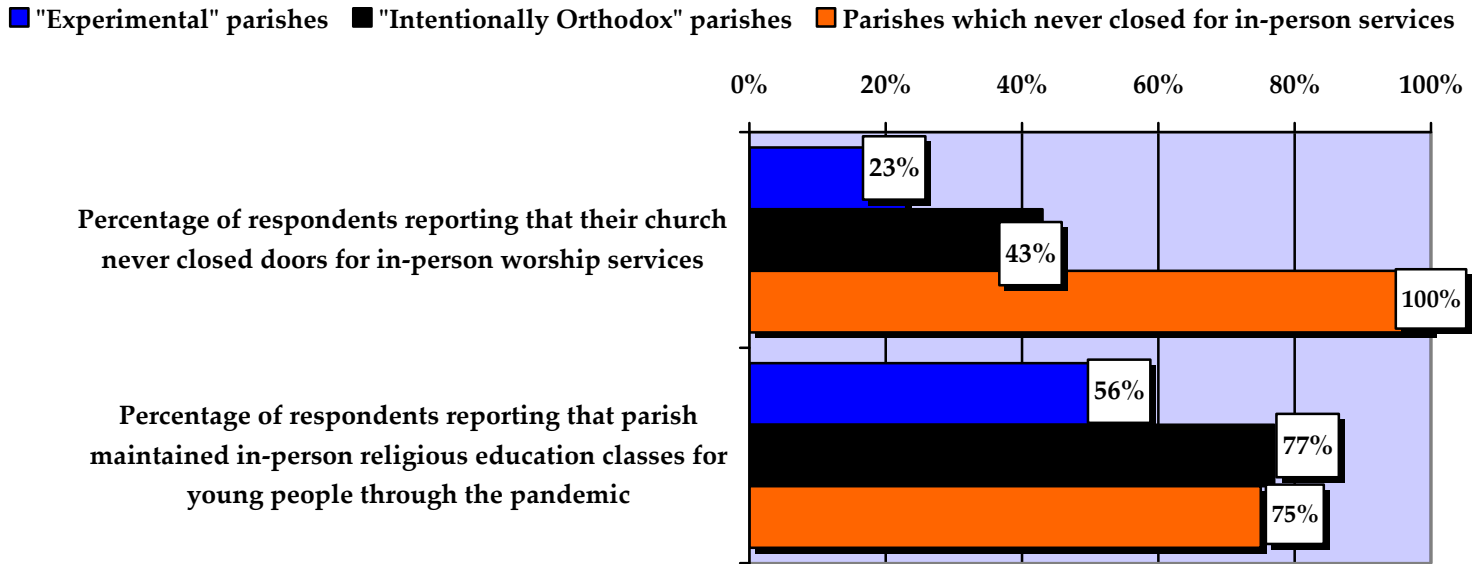


3. The previous chapter indicated that, compared to other parishes, many more congregations with an upturn in vitality never closed their doors during the pandemic. Instead, they continued in-person worship services and/or in-person religious education classes for young people.

Fig. 63 shows that in this regard the three categories of parishes played out three very different scenarios. Those that never closed their doors for in-person services have also mostly (75%) maintained in-person religious education classes for young people. In contrast, the overwhelming majority of “experimental” parishes hunkered down and ceased in-person worship, although many more of them still found ways to keep in-person religious education classes for children and teenagers.

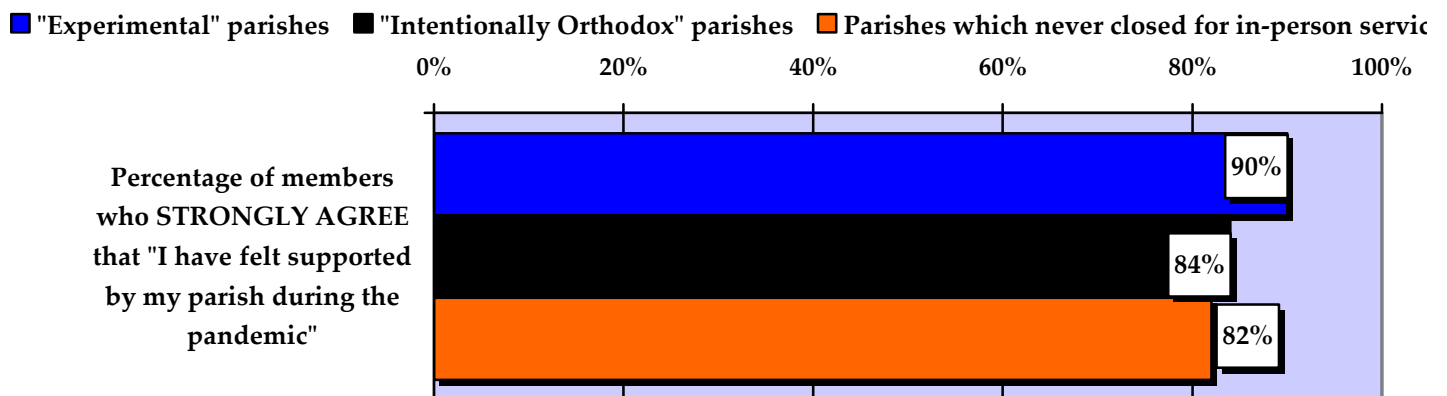
“Intentionally Orthodox” parishes took a “middle road” in terms of in-person services (43% of respondents said their parishes stayed open) but emphasized as much as “never closing” parishes the continuation of in-person religious education classes for their young people (77% of respondents said their parishes maintained in-person classes).

**Fig. 63 Three Categories of Parishes with High Growth in Vitality during the Pandemic Took Different Approaches to Keeping In-Person Services and Religious Education Classes**



4. We saw in the previous chapter that parishes with growth in vitality provided their members with strong support throughout the pandemic. Fig. 64 shows that this is true for all three categories of parishes: “experimental,” “intentionally Orthodox,” and “never closing.” In all of them, an overwhelming majority of members (82-90%) strongly agreed with the statement, “I have felt supported by my parish during the pandemic.”

**Fig. 64 “Experimental,” “Intentionally Orthodox,” and “Never Closing” Parishes All Found Ways to Offer Their Members a Strong Sense of Support during the Pandemic**

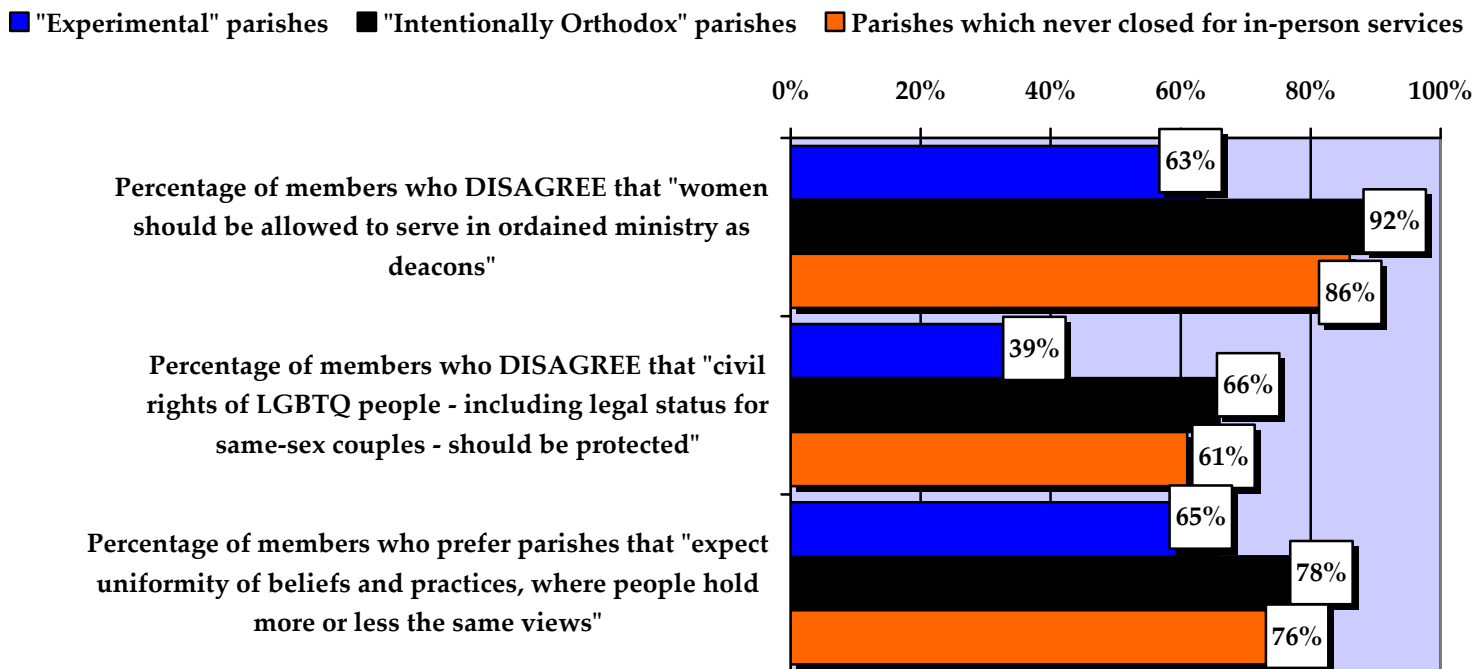


5. We learned that most parishioners in churches which surged in vitality have a preference for congregations that “expect uniformity of belief and practices, where people hold more or less the same views,” rather than for parishes “where people have different views and openly discuss their disagreements.”

Members in congregations with a boost in vitality also exhibit more conservative personal views on various church-related and social matters. This was exemplified by their stronger – as compared to other Orthodox parishes - reluctance to allow women to serve in the ordained ministry as deacons or afford legal status for the marriages of same-sex couples.

Fig. 65 shows that these traits are much more typical for “intentionally Orthodox” and “never closing” parishes, but less so for “experimental” congregations.

**Fig. 65 Conservative Social and Church-Related Attitudes Combined with Preference for Uniformity of Beliefs and Opinions in a Congregation Are Much More Typical for Members of “Intentionally Orthodox” and “Never Closing” Parishes**



6. The previous chapter indicated that members of parishes with a surge in vitality have much more negative opinions about online services than do members of all other Orthodox Christian congregations. But this general picture looks more complex, when examining separately “experimental,” “intentionally Orthodox,” and “never closing” parishes.

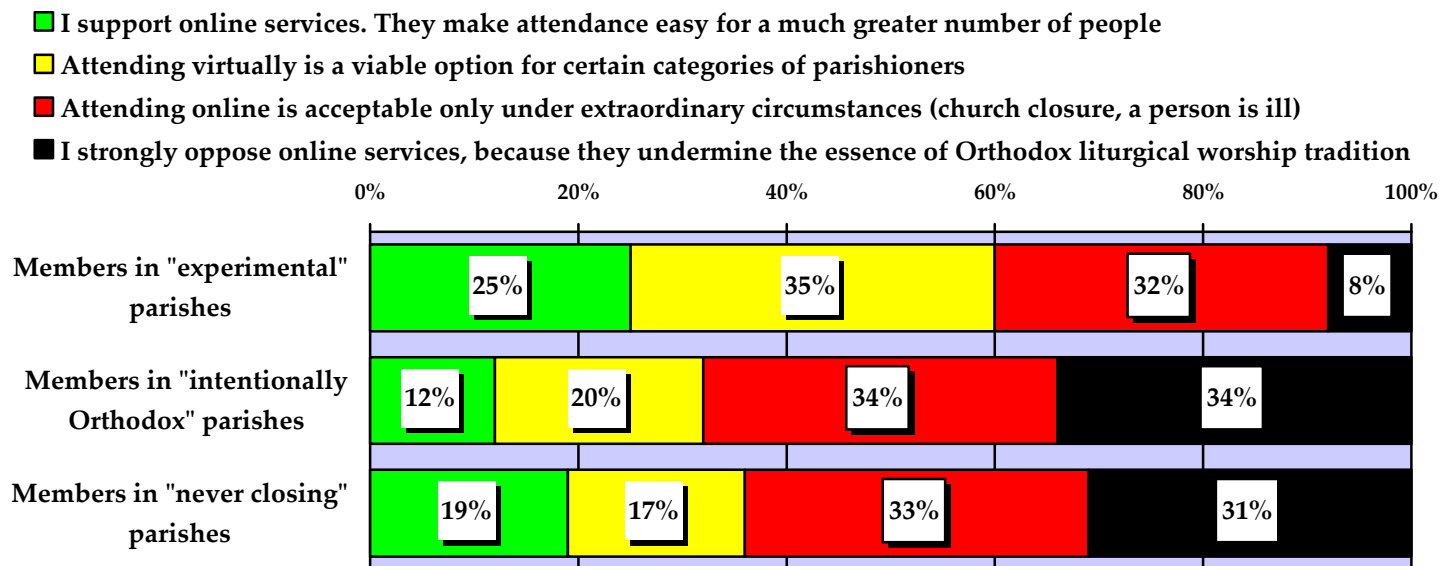
On one hand, survey data show there is no difference among these three categories in the *actual mode of attendance* of their members. In all of them, an overwhelming majority of parishioners (74-80%) presently worship in person. However, there is a noteworthy difference *in attitudes* of their congregants toward the idea of worshipping remotely.

Fig. 66 shows that about two-thirds of members in “intentionally Orthodox” congregations (68%) and parishes that never closed (64%) either unconditionally reject online services as undermining the very essence of Orthodox liturgical worship, or grudgingly accept them, but only under extraordinary circumstances. The parishioners in “experimental” parishes voice an opposite opinion. A strong majority of them (60%) support the option to worship remotely, either because this makes it easier for more people to participate, or because this is the only option for certain categories of parishioners.

**Fig. 66 Members in “Intentionally Orthodox” and “Never Closing” Parishes Have an Overwhelmingly Negative Attitude toward Online Services.**

**Members in “Experimental” Congregations Voice an Opposite View**

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

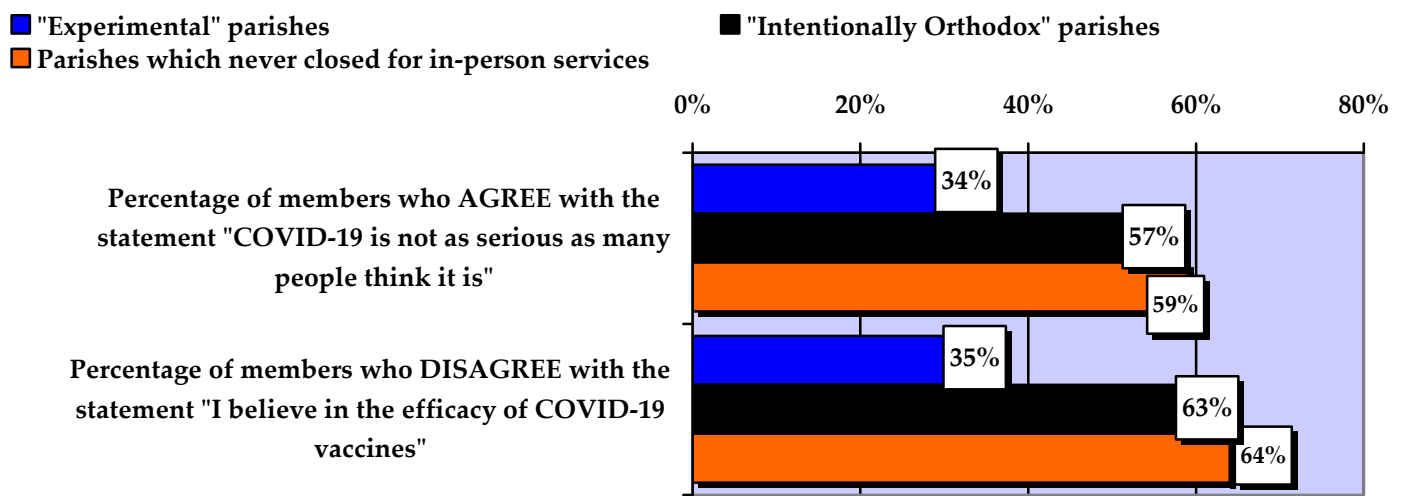




7. It was found that the impressive growth in vitality experienced by 13% of American Orthodox parishes was accompanied by little concern among their members for COVID-19. Compared to members of other Orthodox congregations, many more of them dismissed the dangers of the virus and denied the importance of vaccination.

Fig. 67 shows that such sentiments have indeed a pronounced presence in “intentionally Orthodox” and in “never closing” parishes, but not in “experimental” congregations.

**Fig. 67 Compared to “Experimental” Parishes, Many More Members in “Intentionally Orthodox” and “Never Closing” Congregations Deny the Danger of COVID-19 and the Efficacy of Vaccination**



The major take-away from this chapter is simple. The three paths through the pandemic to a stronger congregational vitality offered by “experimental,” “intentionally Orthodox, and “never closing” parishes were quite distinct. In fact, not only the paths themselves, but also their endpoints, were different, because each category had its own way of manifesting “strong growth” in vitality.

Both “intentionally Orthodox” and “never closing” parishes achieved growth in membership and an impressive rise in the number of people attending their worship services as compared to pre-pandemic. And both of them – along with “experimental” parishes - were effective in offering parishioners much-needed support during the pandemic.

At the same time, members of “intentionally Orthodox” parishes experienced stronger growth in their personal faith and overall church involvement.

Unlike the “never closing” churches, 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.

Both “intentionally Orthodox” and “never closing” congregations are smaller in size than “experimental” parishes, and have more members who are converts to Orthodox faith. Their congregants have a strong preference for uniformity of beliefs and opinions in a parish, and they generally show more conservative social and church-related attitudes. A clear majority of them also dismissed the dangers associated with COVID-19 and denied the importance of vaccination. While both “intentionally Orthodox” parishes and (to a lesser extent) “never closing” churches introduced online services, their members have an overwhelmingly negative opinion about remote participation in Orthodox worship.

Compared to “intentionally Orthodox” and “never closing” churches, the “experimental” parishes had more 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 successful in increasing the generosity of parishioners towards their churches.

Being larger in size than the other two categories of parishes, 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 “intentionally Orthodox” and “never closing” parishes.

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 found ways to provide their people with a strong sense of support throughout the pandemic.

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

## XIV. 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.

### **DEFINITIONS USED IN THIS CHAPTER:**

- *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.”

---

<sup>32</sup> The first study report can be accessed here:

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

- *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:<sup>33</sup>

- 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

---

<sup>33</sup> 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 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](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

## How Has the Pandemic Reshaped the Life of Your Parish?

1. Overall, how satisfied are you now with your spiritual life and growth?

Very unsatisfied      Rather unsatisfied      Mixed feelings      Rather satisfied      Very satisfied

2. BEYOND SIMPLY ATTENDING WORSHIP SERVICES, how has your overall involvement in the life of your parish changed since the start of the pandemic?

Decreased      Stayed about the same      Increased      Not applicable: I joined parish during the pandemic

3. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Neither agree nor disagree      Agree      Strongly agree

I have a strong sense of belonging in my parish

I have felt supported by my parish during the pandemic

I am happy with how our parish has adapted in response to the pandemic

Despite the pandemic, we managed to continue the life of our parish without major disruption

4. 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

## How Has the Pandemic Reshaped the Life of Your Parish?

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

## How Has the Pandemic Reshaped the Life of Your Parish?

### A few questions about the unique context of your parish community

6. Approximately, what is the current total (including children) average in-person attendance at your Sunday Liturgy?

Less than 50

50-199

200 or more

I do not know

7. Would you say that the members of your parish are:

- Mostly "cradle Orthodox" - life-long members of the Orthodox Church
- Mostly converts to Orthodox Church - people who became Orthodox by their own choice as adults
- About equal number of cradle Orthodox and converts

8. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your parish?

Strongly  
disagree

Disagree

No opinion /  
Not sure

Agree

Strongly  
agree

Our parish expects parishioners to strictly follow the practices of the Orthodox Church: weekly church attendance, fasting, confessions, participation in religious education, etc.

Our parish is striving to become more diverse racially and ethnically

Our parish has strong ethnic culture and culture (e.g., Greek, Slavic, Coptic)

Our parish is always willing to try new things and to meet new challenges

9. In which state is your parish located?

Select the state from the drop-down menu

State:

10. What is your Orthodox Church jurisdiction?

Select from the drop-down menu

Orthodox Church jurisdiction:



## How Has the Pandemic Reshaped the Life of Your Parish?

### About changes brought by the pandemic

11. As a result of the pandemic, how did each of the following change?

	It is now much weaker	It is somewhat weaker	No change	It is somewhat stronger	It is much stronger
Your personal faith	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Your trust in hierarchs (Bishops, Metropolitans) to make good decisions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Your trust in your parish priest to make good decisions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Optimism about the ability of people in the parish to work together despite their differences	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

12. 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:

13. How often did you attend worship services at your current parish PRIOR to the pandemic?

A few times a year, occasionally	About once a month	2-3 times a month	At least once a week	Not applicable: I joined this parish during the pandemic
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

14. How often do you NOW attend worship services at your parish: either in-person or online?

A few times a year, occasionally	About once a month	2-3 times a month	At least once a week
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

15. How has your giving to this parish changed since COVID-19 began?

Decreased significantly	Decreased modestly	Stayed the same	Increased modestly	Increased significantly	Not applicable: I joined this parish during the pandemic
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

16. Think about the combined income of your household last year (including pensions, etc.). Think also about your household's total donations to your parish. Approximately, what percentage (%) of your total income did you give to your parish? About (%):

17. Do your financial contributions to your parish (stewardship, membership, other gifts) comprise the largest charitable donation of any that you made last year?

- No  
 Yes

18. How have the following changed in your parish since the start of the pandemic?

	Increased significantly	Increased moderately	No change	Decreased moderately	Decreased significantly
Number of people attending Sunday Liturgy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Conflicts and dissent among parishioners	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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

- No  
 Only occasionally. Sometimes we livestream our services or record them and post online  
 Yes, we regularly livestream our services or record and post them online  
 None of the above

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

## How Has the Pandemic Reshaped the Life of Your Parish?

20. How do you currently participate in worship services?

- I attend primarily or exclusively IN PERSON
- I watch exclusively or primarily ONLINE
- My attendance is a mixture of online and in person

## How Has the Pandemic Reshaped the Life of Your Parish?

21. Why have you decided to attend church mostly online?

## How Has the Pandemic Reshaped the Life of Your Parish?

### About possible lasting consequences of the pandemic

22. Regardless of whether your parish offers online services, which of the following best describes your opinion about attending Orthodox services online?

- 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 (e.g., certain physical conditions, life situations, etc.)
- Attending services online is acceptable only under extraordinary circumstances (e.g., church is closed for in-person worship, a person is seriously ill, etc.)
- I strongly oppose online services, because they undermine the very essence of our Orthodox liturgical worship tradition

23. During the pandemic, many parishes switched their worship services and other activities - either partially or fully - from in person to an online format. Regardless of the situation in your parish, IF YOU HAD THE CHOICE (and COVID-19 was not a concern), would you prefer to participate in each of the following in person or online?

	I would prefer primarily online	A mixture of online and in-person	I would prefer primarily in-person	Doesn't matter to me
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 / Bible classes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Counseling with your priest	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Confessions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Parish's various business meetings	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

24. Is there any difference between how your parish administers Holy Communion now versus before the pandemic?

- No
- Yes

25. Are you satisfied with how your parish now administers Holy Communion?

- Yes
- No

If "No," please explain, what you think should be changed?

26. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I feel confident in the efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccine and boosters	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
COVID-19 is not as serious as many people think it is	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Our parish should have taken MORE safety measures in response to the pandemic	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
You cannot get sick from partaking in Holy Communion regardless of the way it is given to you	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## How Has the Pandemic Reshaped the Life of Your Parish?

### Let's take a look at your parish's future

27. For your parish to become stronger and grow, how urgent is improvement in each of the following?

	This is deeply and urgently needed	This would be helpful	We are basically satisfied with this aspect
Better overall vision of parish future	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
More agreement and unity among parishioners	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Greater outreach into local community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
More effective pastoral leadership	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
More money	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
More vibrant spiritual life beyond worship services	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Young parishioners being more involved	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Better and/or more engaging religious education programs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Worship services being more contemporary and innovative in style	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

28. Based on your parish's experience of dealing with the pandemic, in any future critical situation (comparable in impact to the pandemic), how much SHOULD each of the following influence the decisions that the parish makes?

	Should have dominant influence	Should have strong influence	Should have some influence	Should have little influence
Personal position of a priest	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Guidance from a ruling hierarch (Bishop, Metropolitan)	<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"/>
Recommendations of secular authorities and experts (like CDC)	<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"/>

29. What is your single greatest concern for your parish's future caused by the pandemic?



## How Has the Pandemic Reshaped the Life of Your Parish?

**A few questions about you, so that we can better understand your context and church participation**

30. Which statement describes your household?

- There are NO children under 18 living with me/us
- There are children under 18 living with me/us

## How Has the Pandemic Reshaped the Life of Your Parish?

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

- We did not have religious education for children prior to the pandemic and do not have now
- Since the start of the pandemic, religious education for children has been essentially shut down
- Religious education was switched from in person to online mode. It is still mostly in online mode now
- Religious education was switched for some time from in person to online. But it is back to mostly in person now
- Religious education for children and teenagers has been and remains in person. We never switched to an online mode

32. Which best describes the participation of children and teenagers **in your household** in religious education?

- They did not participate prior to the pandemic and do not participate now
- Since the start of the pandemic, they pretty much dropped out of religious education
- They participate now in religious education, but are less involved than prior to the pandemic
- They participate now as much as they did prior to the pandemic
- They participate now in religious education and are more involved than prior to the pandemic

33. If you had the choice and if COVID-19 were not a concern, would you prefer for your children to participate in religious education classes in person or online?

- Online, because it is more convenient and time-efficient
- Online, because this is a better and more efficient way of learning for children and teens
- In person, because this is a better and more efficient way of learning for children and teens
- Either way is equally good. No opinion on this matter

## How Has the Pandemic Reshaped the Life of Your Parish?

### A few questions about you so that we can better understand your context and participation in church

34. What is your position in this parish?

- Parish Council/Board Member
- Any other leadership position (Sunday school teacher/director, choir member/director, altar server, leader of any ministry)
- Regular member. Currently not in a leadership position

35. How seriously do you observe the rules of fasting during Great Lent and through the year?

Not much	Partially	Mostly	Strictly	I have a medical condition that limits my fasting
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

36. What is your age? Years:

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

- I am "cradle Orthodox." I was baptized as a child and have always been an Orthodox Christian
- I am a convert to Orthodoxy. In the past, I was a member of some other religious community
- In the past, I was a non-religious person and/or not affiliated with any specific religion

38. Your gender?

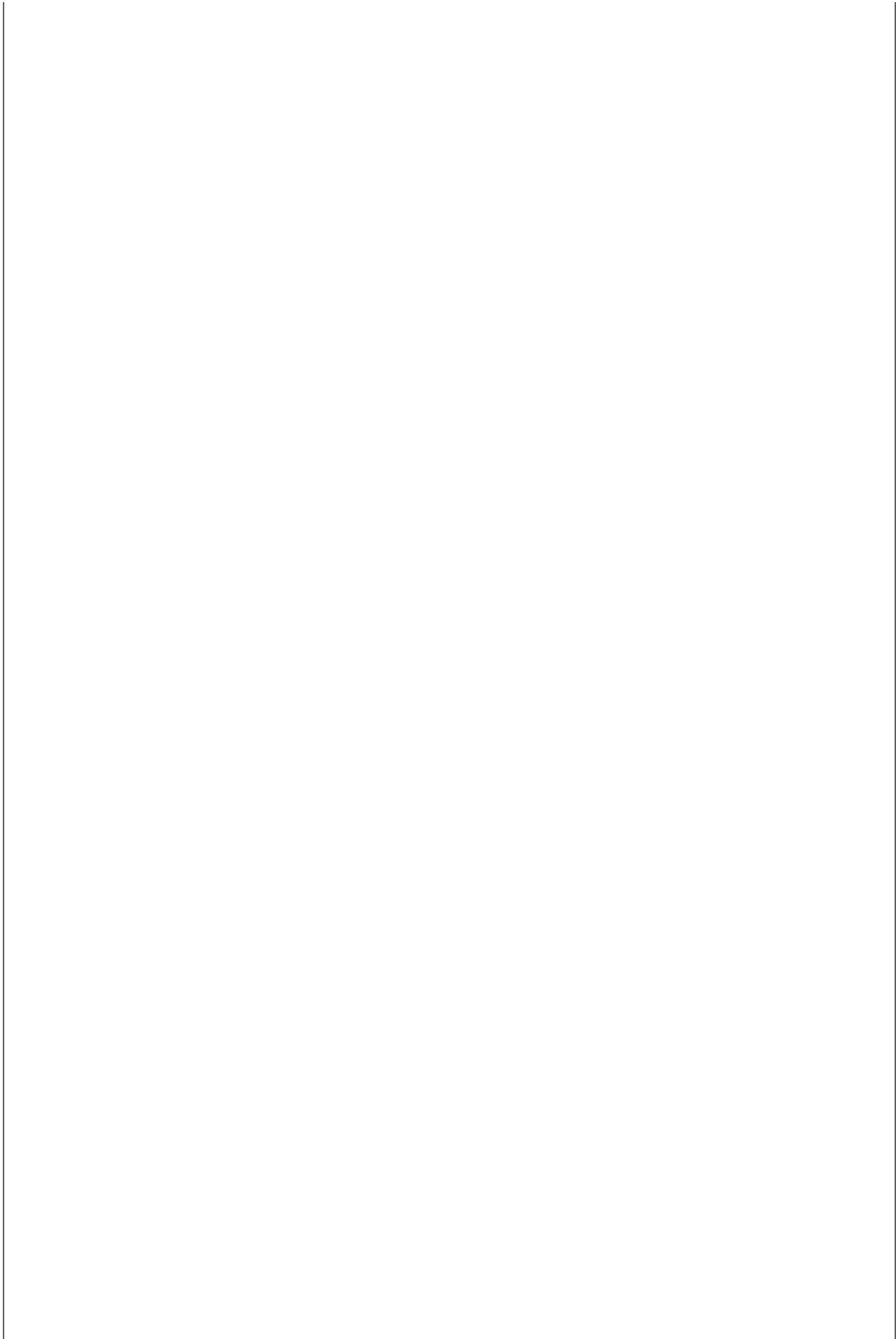
- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to say

39. What is the highest level of your education?

- High school or less
- Some college
- College degree or advanced degree

40. How often do you go online to socialize with your friends/relatives and use social media (Facebook, Instagram, etc)

Never/Rarely	Occasionally	Regularly	Very frequently
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



## How Has the Pandemic Reshaped the Life of Your Parish?

### Finally: just a few questions about your opinions about Church in general

41. What type of parish do you prefer?

- A parish that expects uniformity of belief and practice, where people hold more or less the same views
- A parish that tolerates diversity of belief and practice, where people hold different views and openly discuss their disagreements and varied approaches to church life

42. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
How a person lives is more important than whether she/he is an Orthodox Christian	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think it is a good idea for Orthodox laity and parish clergy to be more involved in the selection of Bishops/Metropolitans	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often feel that I cannot explain the Orthodox faith to others	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In order to be more engaging and participatory, Orthodox worship services should be more modern	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Children need to be exposed to a variety of religious differences so they can make informed choices as adults	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Women should be allowed to serve in ordained ministry, at least as deacons	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Even if homosexuality is wrong, the civil rights of LGBTQ people - including legal status for "same-sex couples" - should still be protected	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

43. If you could request JUST ONE THING from the Bishops/Metropolitans to improve the life of your parish or the Orthodox Church in the United States in general, what would that be?

44. Thank you for your help. Last question. The next step of the study will include follow up questions, in-person interviews, and focus-groups. Would you be willing to help and participate? If yes, please provide your contact information. If "no," simply: thank you!

Your name

Email address

Phone number