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## Orthodox Tradition in Transition:

### What New Data Reveal About US Orthodox Christian Parishes



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## **Orthodox Tradition in Transition: What New Data Reveals About US Orthodox Parishes**

*"About every 500 years, the Church feels compelled to hold a giant rummage sale."*

Phyllis Tickle (1934-2015), an American writer with focus on spirituality and religion

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## Introduction

Despite ongoing discourse about growing “dechurching,” the percentage of Americans participating in religious congregations remains high. The [2020 US Religious Census](#) indicated that nearly half (49%) of the US population is involved in various local faith communities: Christian churches, Jewish synagogues, Muslim mosques, Buddhist temples, etc.

Further, in the US, religious congregations are not merely places of worship. Instead, they have been and remain living communities of fellow believers - communities that address various needs of their members through the diverse programs and activities. What is more, many congregations have developed ministries that cater not only to “their people” but also to local neighborhoods and society at large.

Nothing is set in stone, however. As America evolves and undergoes substantial cultural shifts, so do religious congregations. With more people embracing new social norms, ways of living, and advancing technologies, congregations are also faced with the need to adapt to remain relevant to the faithful. This reality holds equally true for Orthodox parishes, even though Orthodox Christianity defines itself by strict adherence to established religious practices and a strong resistance to change.

The key question addressed in this article is: “In 21st-century America, how are Orthodox Christian parishes faring compared to other religious congregations? And are there any noticeable differences in this regard among the parishes representing various Orthodox jurisdictions?” To answer this, we will investigate a wide range of subjects including lasting consequences of the pandemic, shifts in membership, distinctive features of Orthodox parish clergy, political involvement, church finances, and much more.

This article draws upon data from the national surveys of US religious congregations conducted by [Faith Communities Today \(FACT\)](#). Coordinated by the [Hartford Institute for Religion Research](#), FACT is a multifaith research coalition that tracks trends across America’s diverse faith communities. Orthodox parishes have actively participated in all FACT studies since the FACT’s launch in 2000. In the following pages, we will focus primarily on the most recent survey, conducted in December 2025.

Overall, 7,500 congregations across 79 denominations and faith traditions participated in the 2025 survey, including 270 Orthodox Christian parishes. When discussing the data and findings, we will contrast Orthodox parishes with the entire sample of US religious congregations. We will also break down the data to look at the distinctive features of four Orthodox jurisdictions that provided a sufficient number of participating parishes: the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, the Orthodox Church in America, and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia. Where helpful for the context, we will also use data from the early 2020 pre-pandemic FACT survey (15,300 congregations participating, including 370 Orthodox parishes).

### **Shock and Recovery: How COVID-19 Altered Orthodox Parish Life**

On September 11, 2001, the historic St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church in lower Manhattan was crushed beneath the collapse of the South Tower. Incredibly, it was the only house of worship destroyed in the terrorist attacks. In an instant, its congregation was left without a home and forced into a decades-long journey of maintaining their spiritual community without a sanctuary until St. Nicholas was rebuilt in 2022.

In the spring of 2020, American churches faced a similar yet distinct kind of catastrophic disruption. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck America, their buildings remained standing, but the doors were suddenly locked. Just like St. Nicholas, thousands of US congregations were stripped of their houses of worship, enduring a brutal test of their resilience.

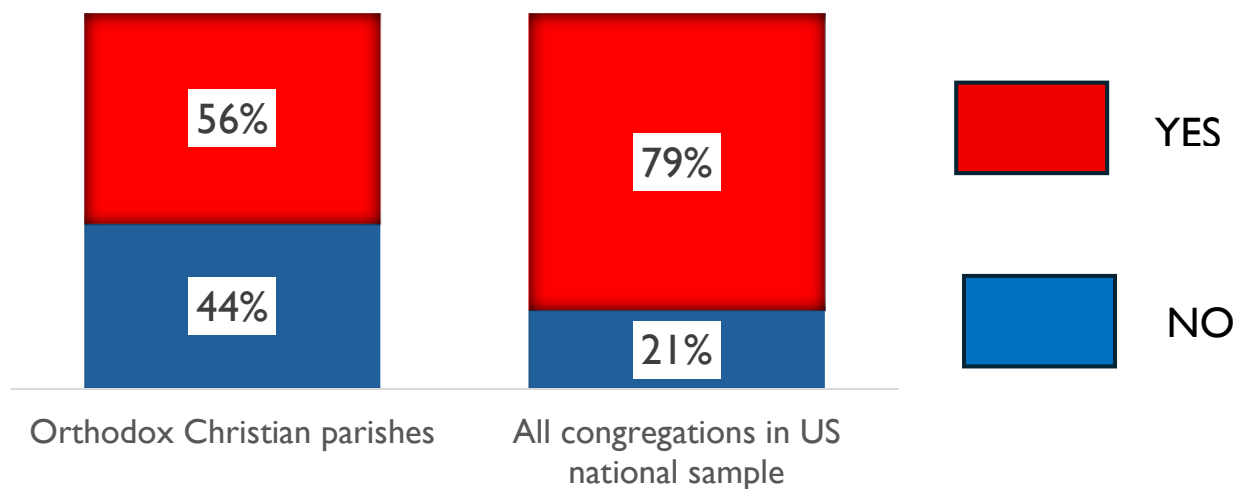
While the dark days of the deadly virus have long passed, the pandemic left many lasting consequences for religious congregations. Not all of them, however, were affected equally. Depending on the nature of a particular religious tradition and the unique context of each congregation, the outcomes differed considerably. What is unique in how Orthodox Christian parishes navigated the pandemic and came out of this crisis?

The two most obvious changes brought on by the pandemic were the closure of many congregations for in-person services and the consequent rapid proliferation of online services. Eventually, sanctuaries

reopened and welcomed back church members, but the virtual option to worship and otherwise participate has become the new standard for most US congregations.

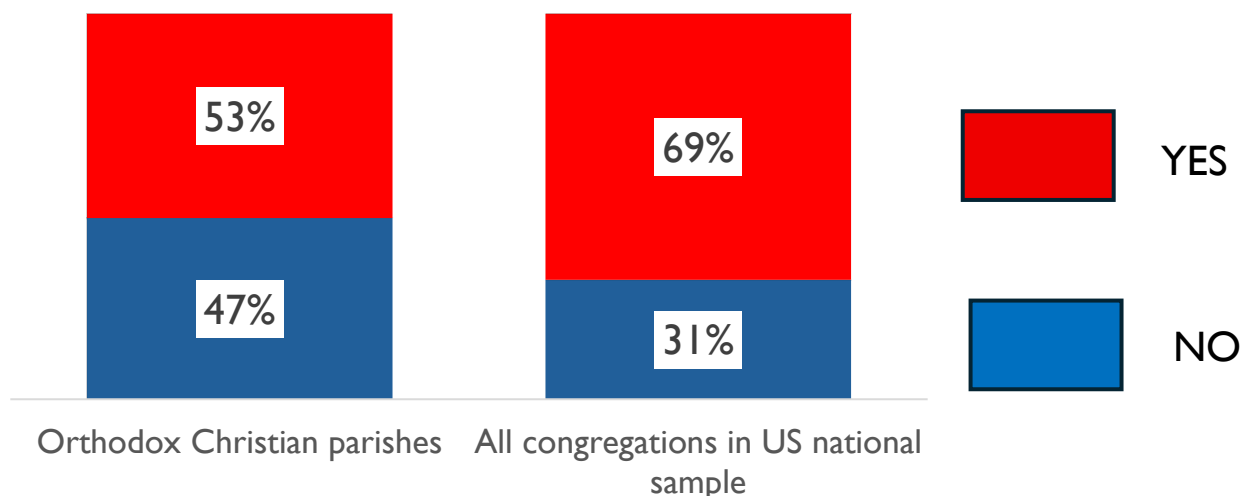
Figure 1 shows that compared to the overall sample of US congregations, a much larger share of Orthodox parishes never closed their doors for in-person services (44% of Orthodox parishes versus 21% among congregations nationally).

Fig. 1 Did your congregation stop meeting in person due to the pandemic?



As for the post-pandemic adoption of online services, a considerably smaller percentage of Orthodox churches currently offer virtual worship compared to all congregations in the US national sample (53% versus 69%). See Figure 2.

Fig. 2 Does your congregation presently hold online/virtual worship?



Yet, these two distinctive Orthodox patterns - fewer parishes closing for in-person services and a lesser proliferation of online worship - were not uniform across four individual jurisdictions.

Figures 3 and 4 show that three-quarters of Greek Orthodox parishes closed for in-person services during the pandemic, and the same percentage presently offers a virtual worship option. On the opposite side is the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia: only one-tenth (11%) of ROCOR churches closed their doors during the crisis, and only one-fifth currently stream their services online.

Fig. 3 Did your congregation stop meeting in person due to the pandemic?

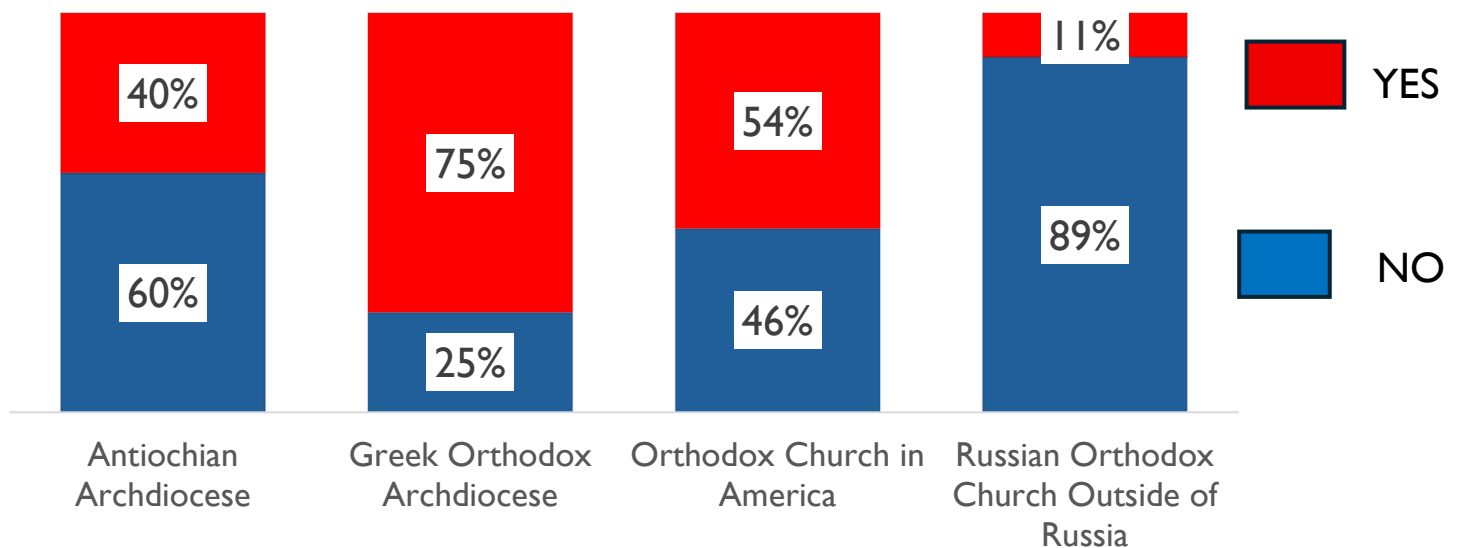
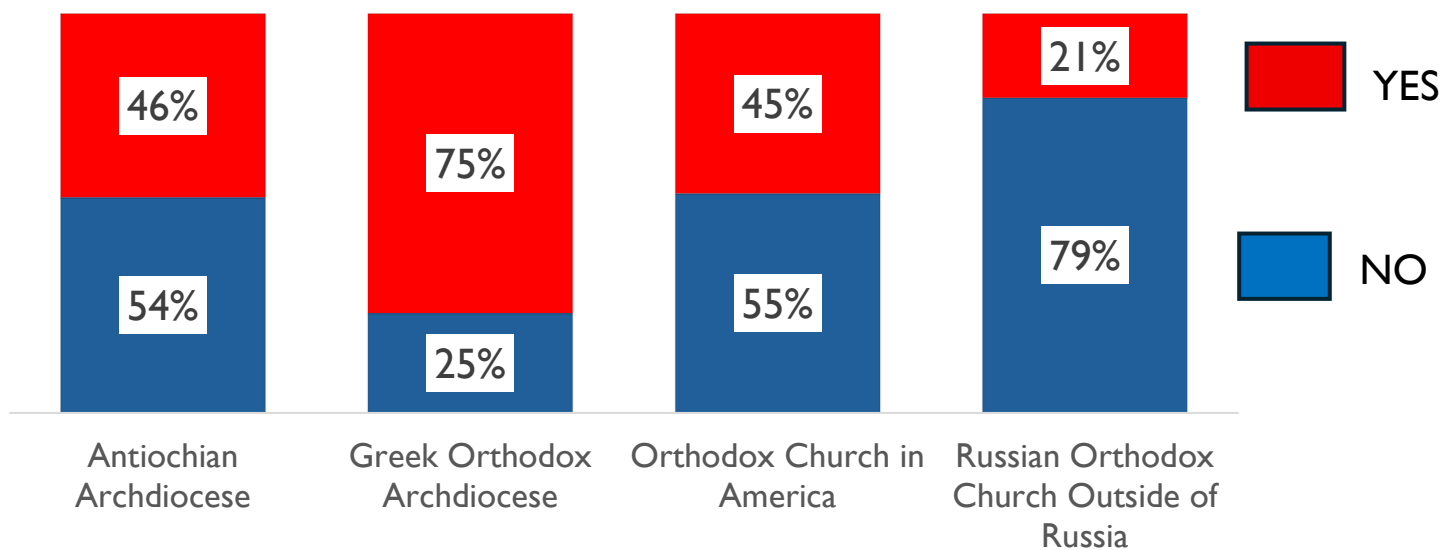


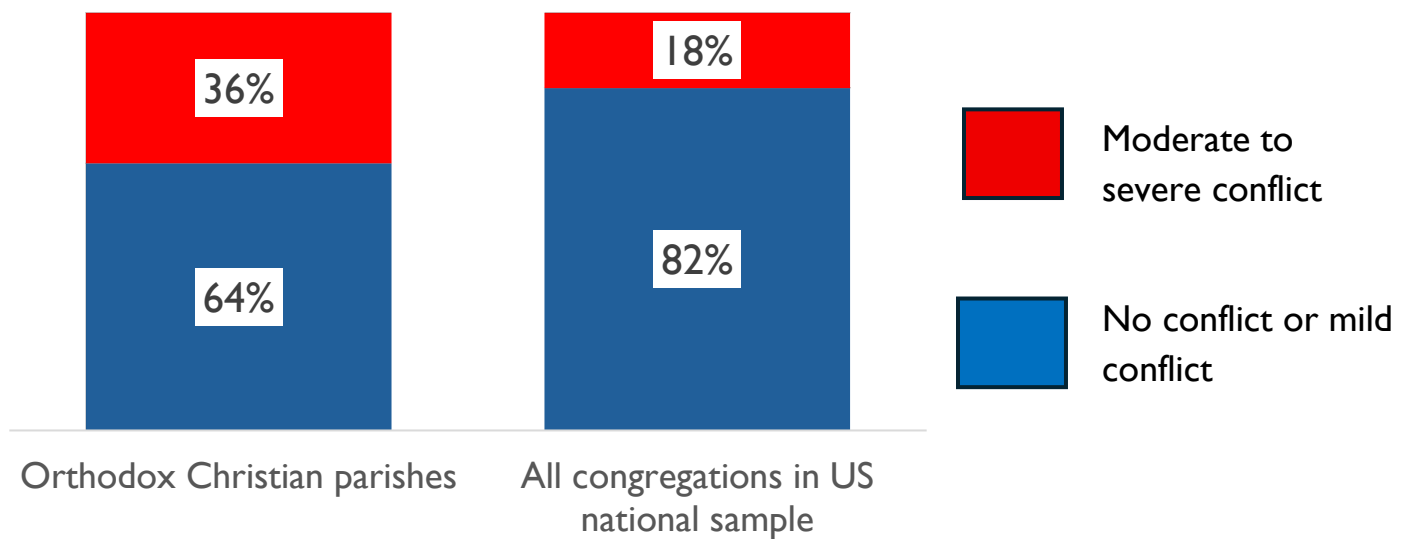
Fig. 4 Does your congregation currently hold online worship?



The pandemic hit congregations not only with the deaths of their members and church closures. It also challenged the unity and peace among congregants, sparking fierce internal conflicts over new COVID-19 restrictions and safety protocols.

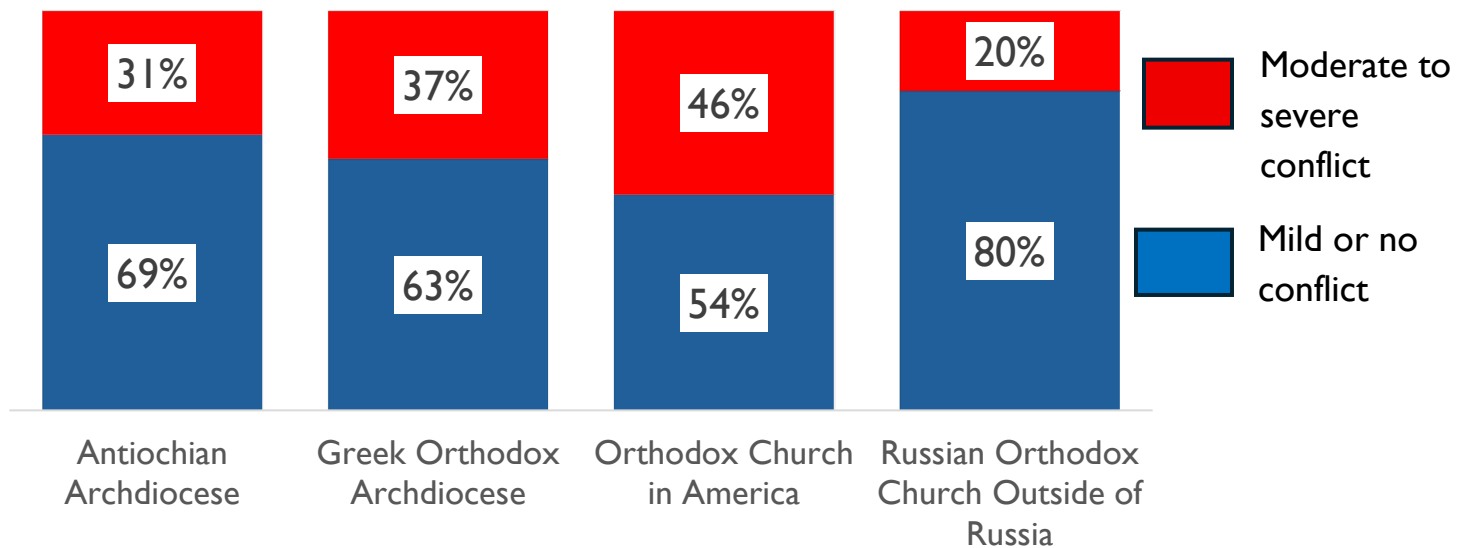
Orthodox parishes were no exception. Many experiencing dissents over issues such as the continuation of in-person services, mask-wearing, ways of administering Holy Communion, etc. In fact, as Figure 5 illustrates, American Orthodox churches actually suffered more from pandemic-related conflicts than religious congregations in the entire US national sample. Twice as many of them went through “moderate to high” disagreements (36% of Orthodox parishes vs. 18% of congregations nationally).

Fig. 5 How would you describe the level of dissent and/or conflict within the congregation regarding the congregation’s response (e.g., mask-wearing, closing/opening of congregational facility)?



Comparing the Orthodox jurisdictions, the most striking difference in pandemic-related tensions was between ROCOR and OCA parishes. The vast majority of the former (80%) lived through COVID-19 relatively peacefully, with little to no dissent among their members. By contrast, nearly half (46%) of OCA churches experienced either moderate or severe internal conflicts. See Figure 6.

Fig. 6 How would you describe the level of conflict/dissent within the congregation regarding the congregation's COVID response (e.g., mask-wearing, closing/opening of congregational facilities)?



Today, as congregations have firmly settled into their post-pandemic reality, it is time to ask: What are the major outcomes of COVID-19 for various faith communities, and how did they emerge from the crisis?

Comparing Orthodox parishes against the national sample of US congregations reveals a clear answer: the Orthodox parishes appear to have 'benefited' from the pandemic to a much greater degree. At least, this is true when looking at three metrics: changes in worship attendance, total membership, and overall vitality.

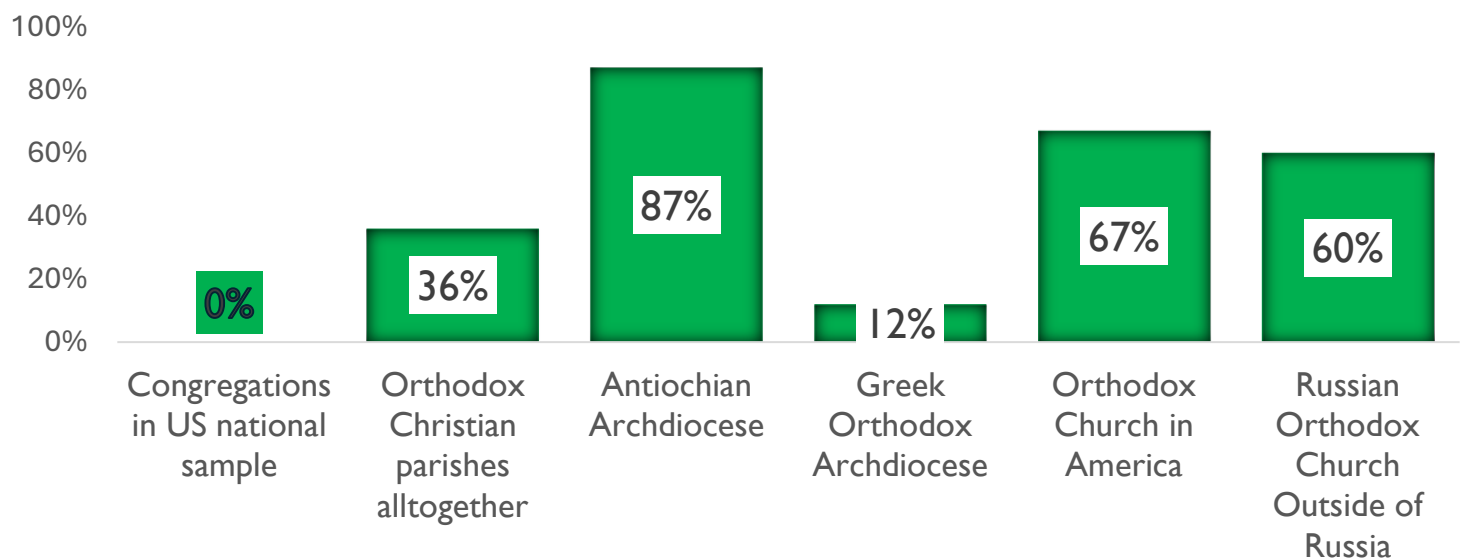
The survey asked about the average number of persons attending regular weekend worship services in 2025 versus 2019. Figure 7 shows the percentage change in median attendance from 2019 to 2025 for congregations in the US national sample, all American Orthodox parishes combined, and the four individual jurisdictions.

The main takeaways from the chart below are straightforward. On a typical Sunday, US religious congregations as a whole are seeing the same number of worshippers today as they did before the pandemic. In contrast, Orthodox parishes experienced a significant gain (+36%) in attendance.

Simply put, a 36% growth means that for every three people praying on Sunday in a typical American Orthodox parish before the pandemic, there are now four.

This growth, however, was highly uneven across the Orthodox jurisdictions. Parishes within the Antiochian Archdiocese saw the most impressive surge, compared to a much more modest gain in Greek Orthodox churches.

**Fig. 7 2019-2025 percent (%) change in median worship attendance at regular weekend services**

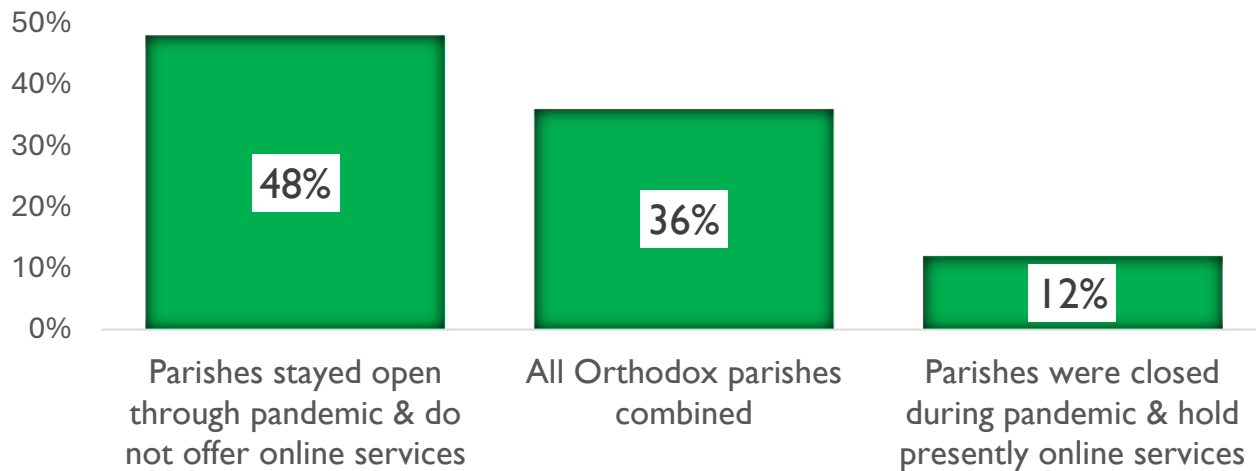


What is truly interesting, it appears that keeping church doors open for in-person services throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and abstaining from online services are key factors contributing to the post-pandemic attendance growth.

Figure 8 compares the percentage change in median worship attendance across the entire sample of Orthodox parishes against two distinct subgroups: (1) parishes that were closed for in-person services and presently offer online worship, and (2) parishes that remained open for in-person attendance throughout the pandemic and do

The first subgroup experienced a modest +11% gain in post-pandemic attendance. For the second subgroup, however, that growth was more than four times higher: +48%.

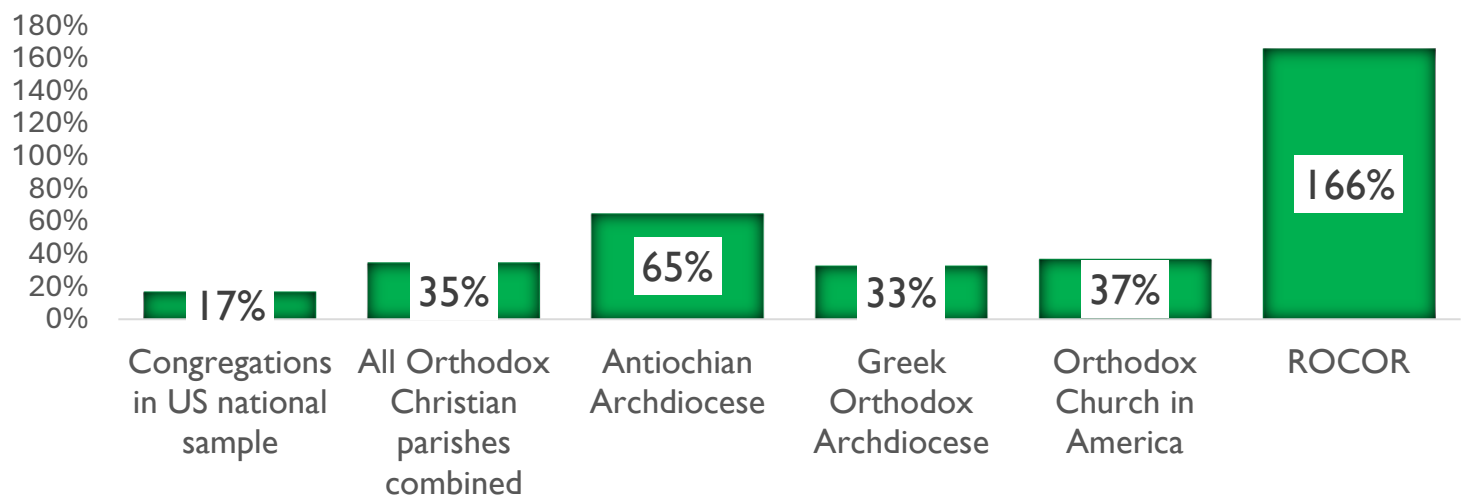
**Fig. 8 2019-2025 percent (%) change in median worship attendance at regular weekend services**



Similar to the trends in worship attendance were the 2020-2025 changes in total congregational membership. The survey measured membership by asking: “How many individuals regularly participate (once a month or more) in worship or other religious activities in your congregation?”

Based on data from the 2020 and 2025 FACT surveys, Figure 9 illustrates that while a “typical” US religious congregation saw a 17% increase in members, Orthodox parishes experienced more than double that growth: +35%. Among the individual Orthodox jurisdictions, the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia emerged as the clear leader in gaining new members, with a typical ROCOR parish experiencing a staggering 166% spike in total number of people involved.

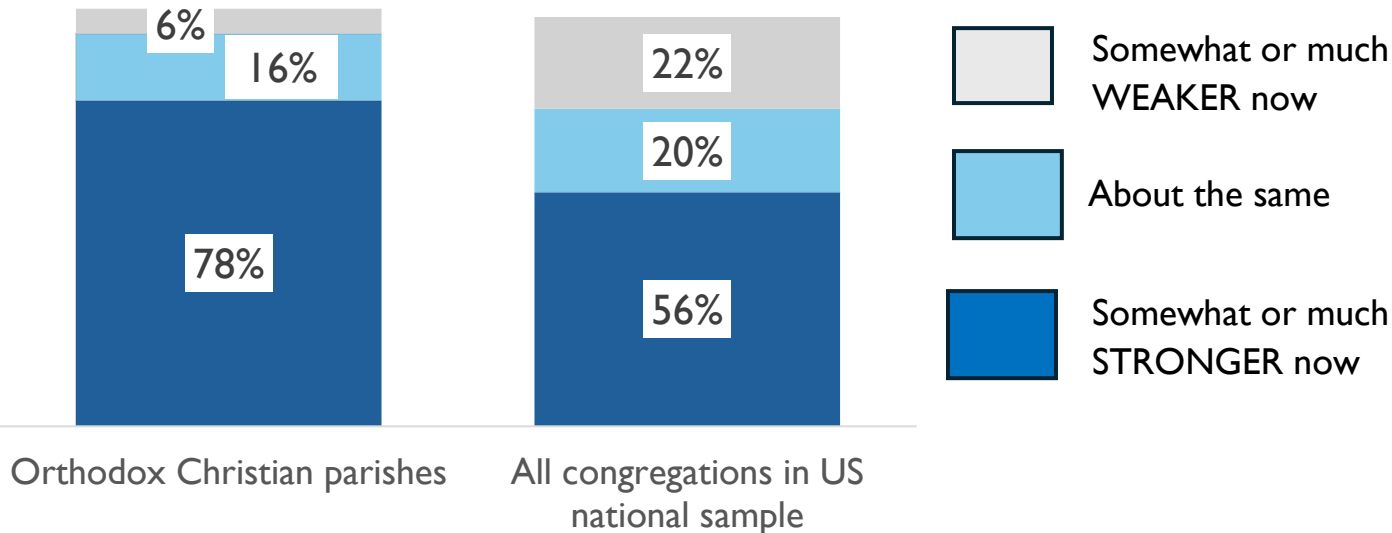
**Fig. 9 2020-2025 percent (%) change in median number of regular participants in a single congregation**



Granted, growth in worship attendance and overall membership are beloved metrics for measuring a church’s success. Yet, assessing congregational vitality should not be limited to just those two numbers. To get a more comprehensive picture of changes in the overall health of US congregations, the survey asked: “All things considered, how would you compare the overall vitality and strength of your congregation before the pandemic and now?”

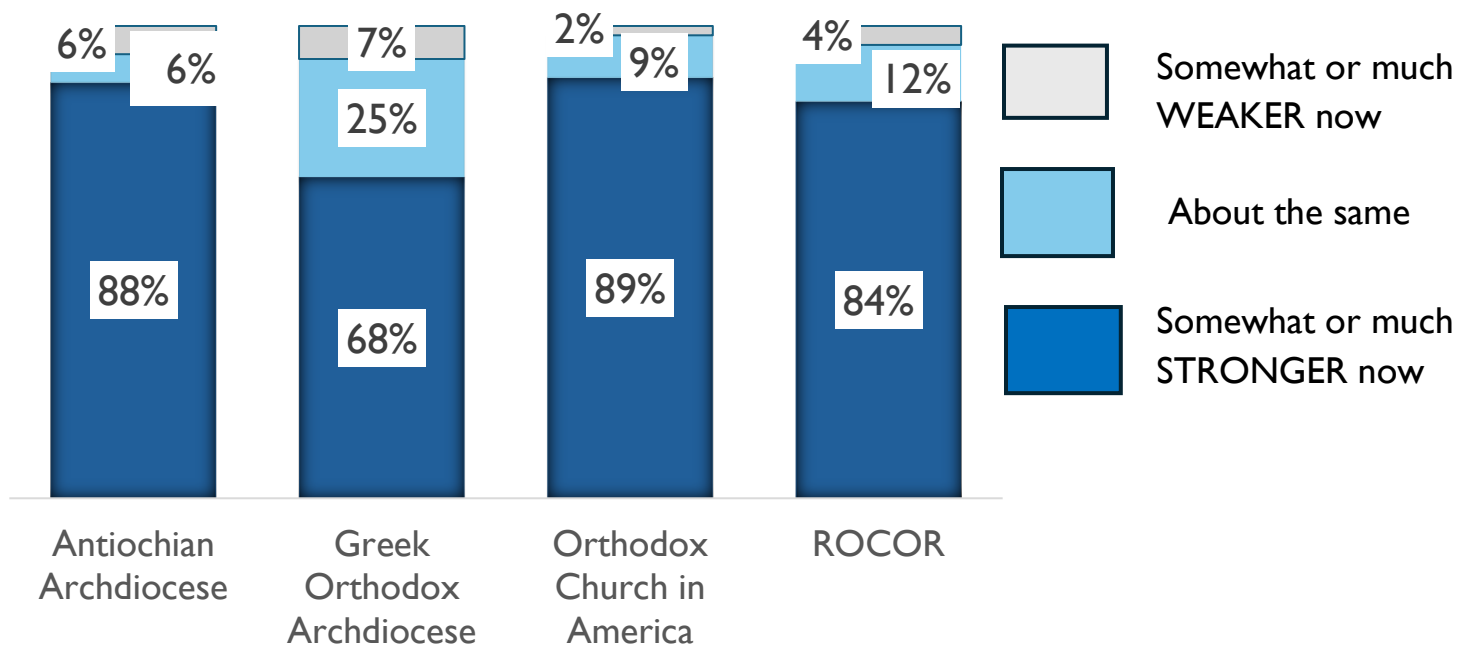
Figure 10 shows that more than half of all US religious congregations (56%) report being stronger now compared to before the pandemic. Yet, Orthodox parishes once again outpace this national average, with more than three-quarters (78%) reporting greater vitality.

Fig. 10 All things considered, how would you compare the overall vitality of your congregation before the pandemic and now?



Breaking the data down across the four individual jurisdictions, Figure 11 reveals just one noticeable outlier: the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, where a slightly smaller percentage of parishes (68%) report increased vitality.

Fig. 11 All things considered, how would you compare the overall vitality of your parish before the pandemic and now?



To sum up, the data presented in this chapter points to a few clear conclusions. There is little doubt that, compared to all congregations in US national sample, many Orthodox parishes navigated through pandemic in a distinctive way by keeping their doors open for in-person services and abstaining from online worship.

Did this approach pay off as congregations entered the new post-pandemic reality? Judging by the gains in worship attendance, overall membership, and perceived congregational vitality, the answer is “Yes.”

Among the individual Orthodox jurisdictions, the parishes of the Antiochian Archdiocese and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia emerged as the primary beneficiaries of this period, scoring especially high in both attendance and membership growth. Conversely, the success of the Greek Orthodox churches was more modest, with fewer of them reporting an influx of new members, increased worship attendance, and heightened post-pandemic strength and vitality.

## Demography Matters: Who Are Today's Orthodox Church Members?

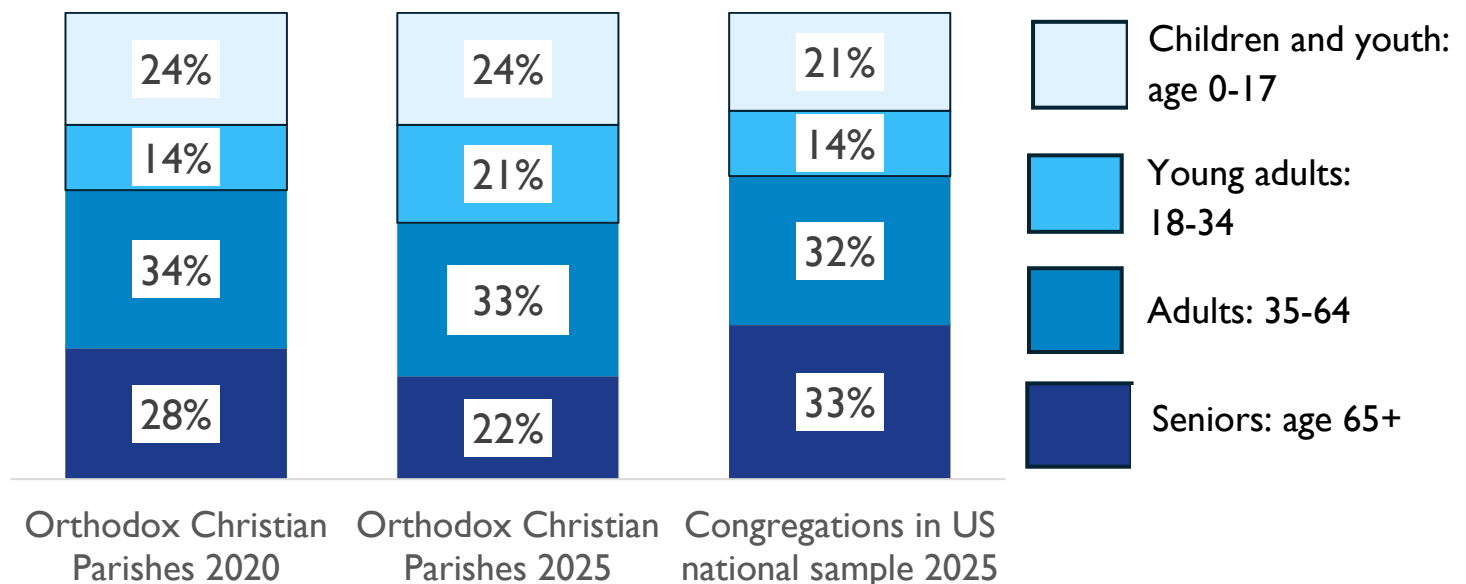
Membership of a congregation is a key factor in determining the scope and scale of various church activities. On one hand, the demographics of the members dictate the human resources available to the local faith community. On the other hand, congregations with different types of membership have distinct priorities regarding the ministries and programs that are most relevant to their needs.

Are the demographic profiles of American Orthodox parishes considerably different from those of the “typical congregation” in the U.S. national sample? The short answer is yes: by several measures, they are quite distinct. Further, as we will demonstrate in this chapter, the demography of US Orthodox churches also underwent some noticeable changes between 2020 and now.

First, let's look at the age composition of members in American Orthodox parishes compared to all congregations in US national sample. As Figure 12 shows, Orthodox parishes have significantly fewer seniors aged 65+ (22% vs. 33%) and more young adults aged 18-34 (21% vs. 14%).

But the really interesting part is *when* this divergence emerged: right during the pandemic. Fig. 12 also indicates that between 2020 and 2025, the senior population in Orthodox parishes dropped from 28% to 22%, while the young adult group has grown from 14% to 21%.

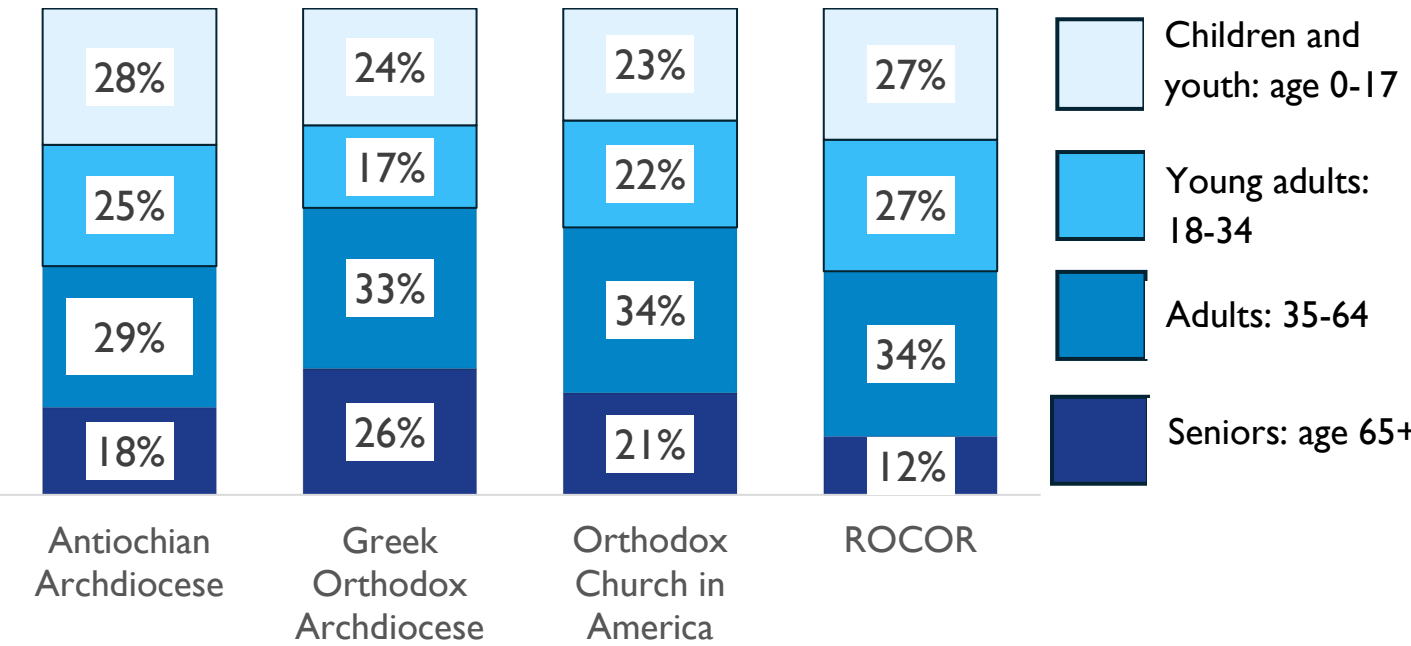
Fig. 12 Percent of members (regular participants) in each age group



Remarkably, this shift - fewer seniors and more young adults - happened across all four Orthodox jurisdictions. The intensity of this pattern, however, varied considerably.

As Figure 13 shows, parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia are currently the most "youthful." They have the highest percentage of young adults (27%) and the lowest share of seniors (12%). On the flip side, Greek Orthodox churches sit at the other end of the spectrum, with 17% young adults and 26% seniors in an average parish.

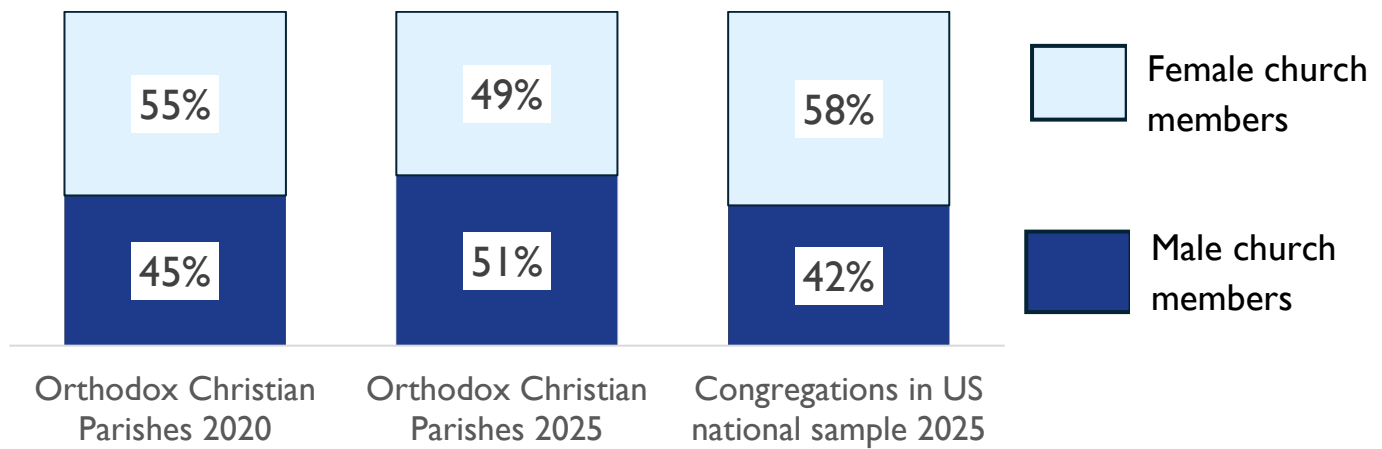
Fig. 13 Percent of members (regular participants) in each age group: 2025



Age composition of members isn't the only thing changing in American Orthodox parishes—the gender balance is shifting, too. As Figure 14 points out, the common assumption that "women form the majority in church" is no longer accurate for US Orthodox churches.

Between 2020 and 2025, the percentage of women in a typical Orthodox parish dropped from 55% to 49%. In contrast, female members still make up the clear majority (58%) in the average US congregation.

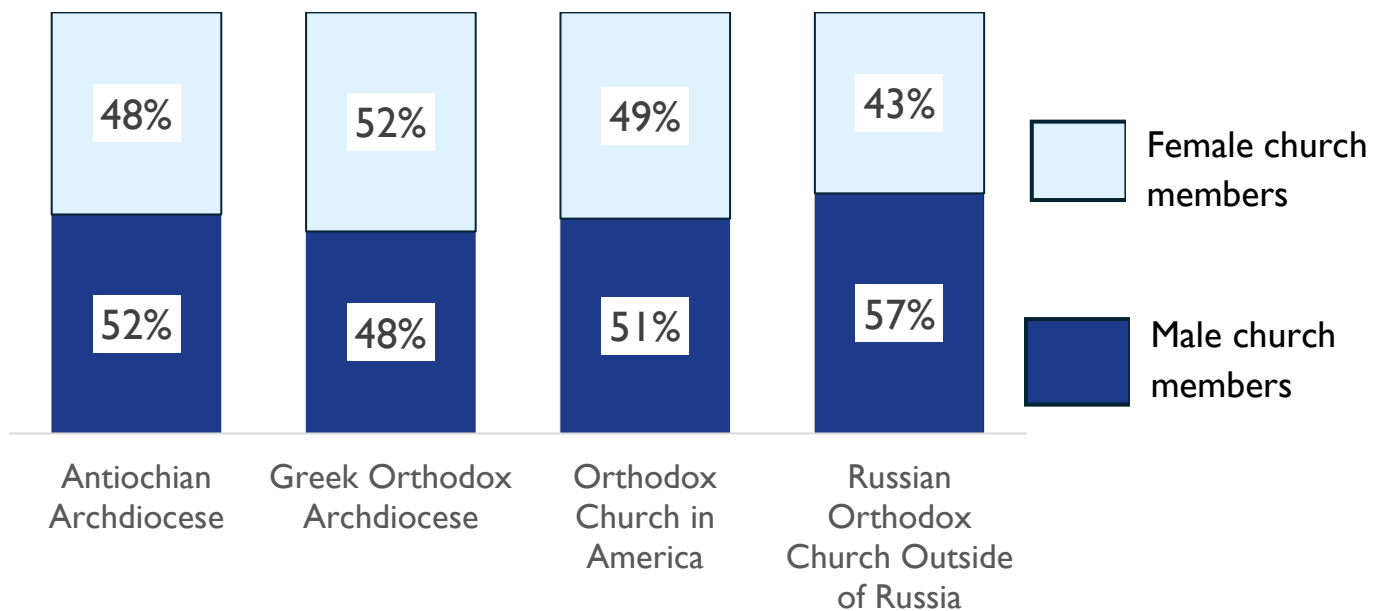
Fig. 14 Percent of men and women among members (regular participants)



And just like the age changes, this 2020–2025 shift - toward fewer women and more men - happened across all four Orthodox jurisdictions, though to varying degrees.

Figure 15 shows that, today, parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia have the lowest share of women at just 43% in a typical parish. At the other end of the spectrum are GOA churches, where female parishioners still maintain a slight edge at 52%.

Fig. 15 Percent of men and women among parishioners (regular participants)



Beyond age and gender, the survey also asked congregations to estimate what percentage of their adult members fit into four specific categories:

- College graduates
- New to the congregation in the last five years
- Living within 15 minutes of the church
- Born outside the United States

The following charts show how the presence of these four groups in American Orthodox parishes compares to the averages in the national sample of congregations, as well as how the individual Orthodox groups stack up against each other.

Looking at education, Figure 16 highlights that Orthodox parishioners tend to be more educated than the average US churchgoer. A clear majority (56%) of members in a typical Orthodox parish hold a college degree, compared to just 43% across all US congregations. This high level of education is fairly consistent across all individual Orthodox jurisdictions, with GOA parishes leading the way at 59%.

**Fig. 16 Percentage (mean) of COLLEGE GRADUATES among all regularly participating adults**

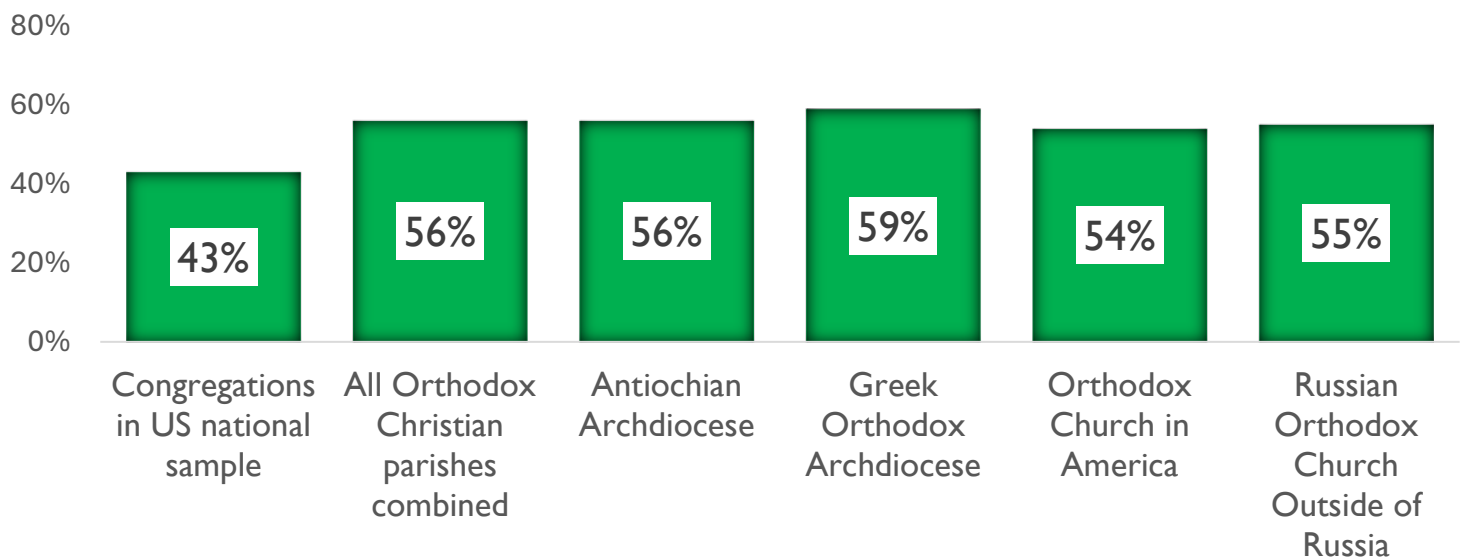


Figure 17 shows that during and after the pandemic, both American Orthodox parishes and all congregations in the national sample welcomed a significant number of new members.

While Orthodox churches as a whole saw a slightly higher share of newcomers than the national average (35% vs. 29%), the real story lies in the differences between the individual Orthodox jurisdictions. In a typical ROCOR parish, new parishioners now make up nearly half the members (49%), while GOA churches experienced a much smaller influx of 26%.

**Fig. 17 Percentage (mean) of members who are NEW TO CONGREGATION IN THE LAST 5 YEARS**

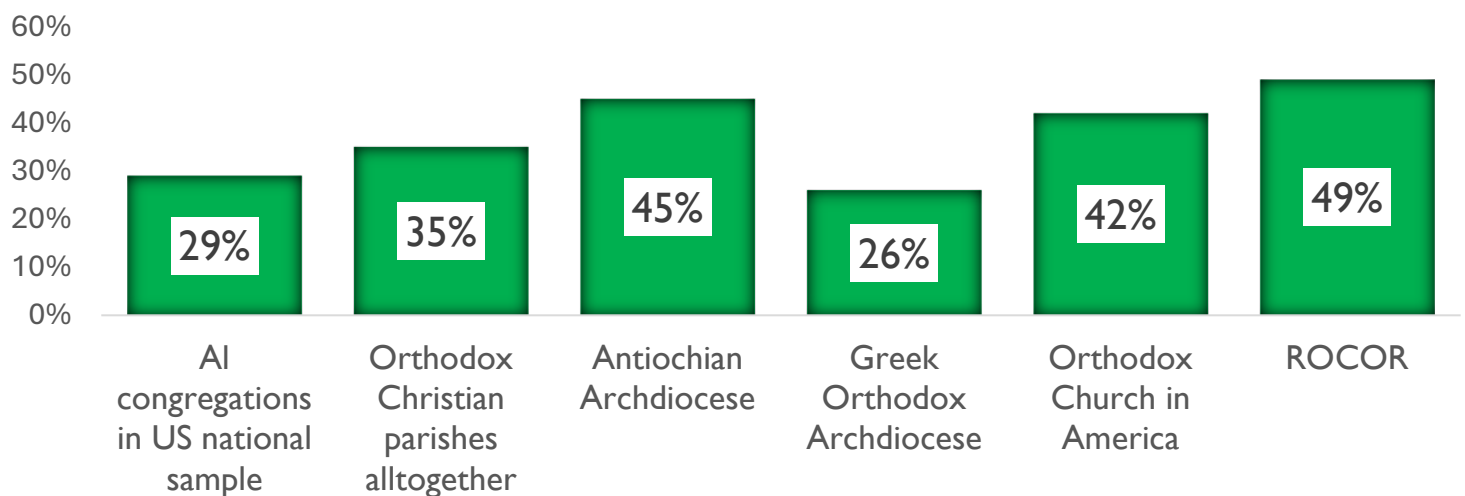
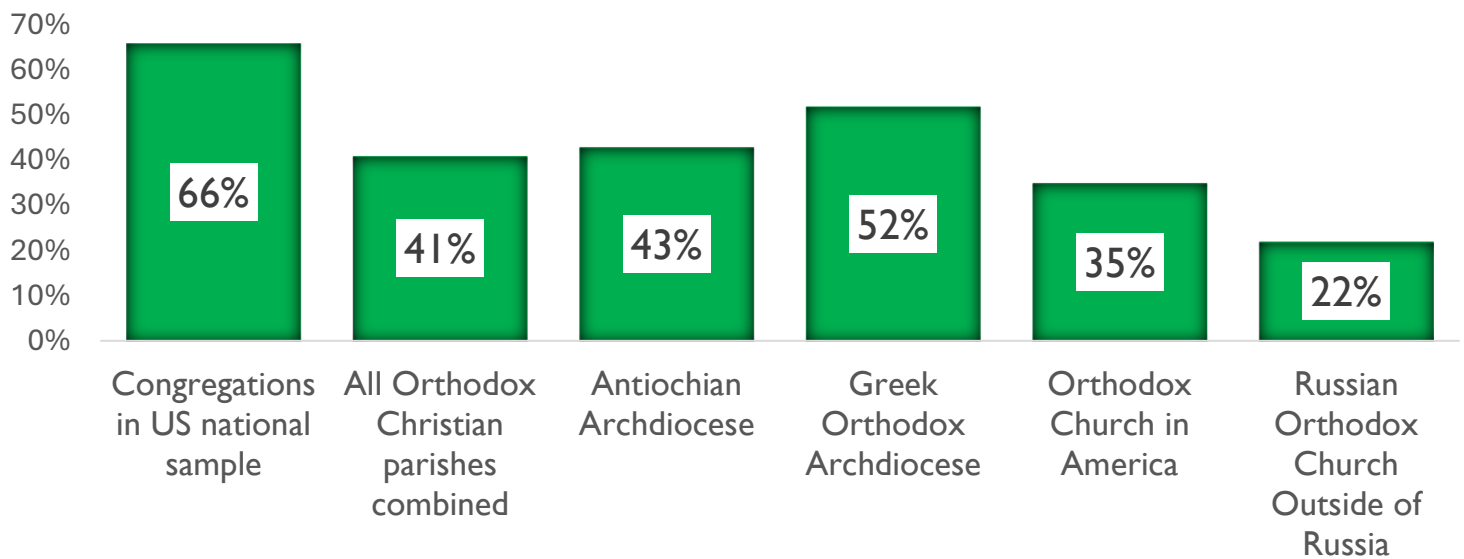


Fig. 18 shows that American Orthodox parishioners face much longer church commutes than the typical US churchgoer. Only 41% can reach their parish in under 15 minutes - a convenience enjoyed by two-thirds (66%) of congregational membership nationally.

Among members of various Orthodox jurisdictions, some face much longer drives than others. As Figure 16 indicates, just 22% of ROCOR parishioners live within a 15-minute distance of their church, whereas more than half (52%) of GOA members live that close.

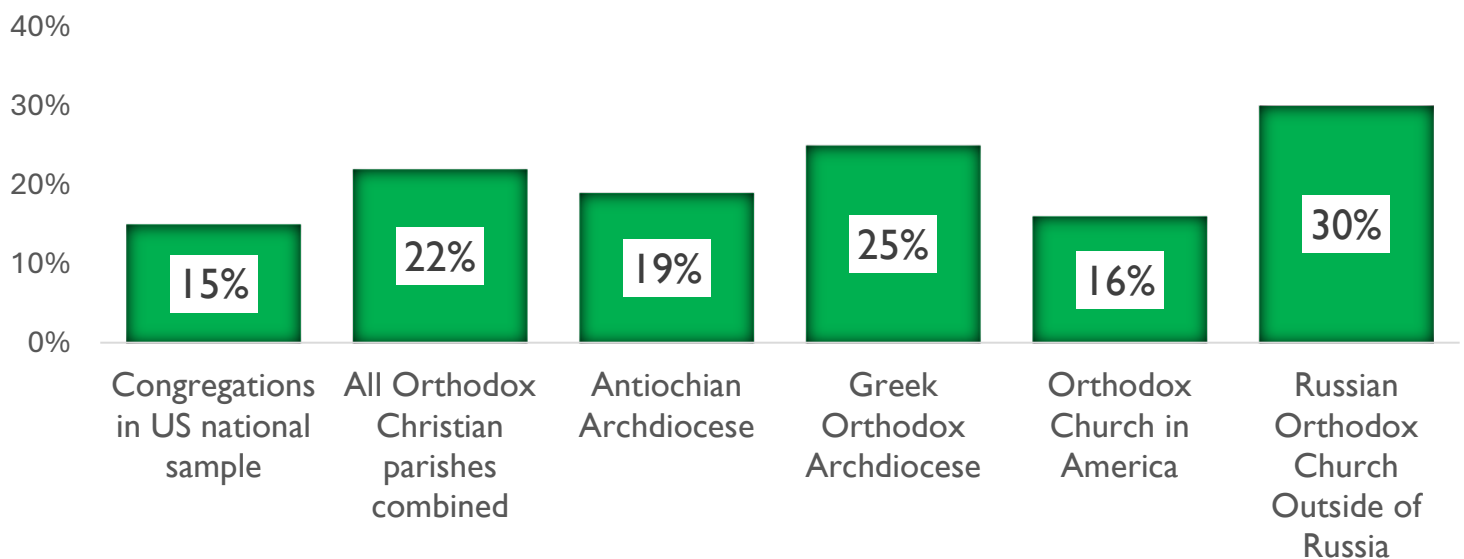
**Fig. 18 Percentage (mean) of members who LIVE WITHIN 15 MINUTES OF THE CONGREGATION**



Many people still assume that American Orthodox churches are largely made up of immigrants. However, as Figure 19 shows, that is not the case. Today, just 22% of Orthodox parishioners were born outside the US. While that is slightly higher than the national average for all congregations (15%), it's not a dramatic gap.

Yet, the differences in immigrant population *between* the Orthodox jurisdictions are still impressive, ranging from just 16% in the Orthodox Church in America to considerable 30% in ROCOR parishes.

**Fig. 19 Percentage (mean) of members who WERE NOT BORN IN THE UNITED STATES**



If there is one major takeaway from this chapter, it's that the American Orthodox Church is in transition. A typical Orthodox parish looks now different than it did just a few years ago. Far from the old stereotypes of an aging, immigrant-heavy community, current Orthodox church membership is highly educated, increasingly youthful, and largely made up of US-born citizens. The gender balance is also shifting away from the female majority that still dominates the wider US religious landscape.

At the same time, the intensity of these trends varies among individual jurisdictions. Overall, the ROCOR parishes lead the charge toward a younger, more male- and newcomer-leaning demographics, while GOA churches hold to a more established baseline.

### **The Shepherds: The Men Leading American Orthodox Parishes**

The great German philosopher Immanuel Kant once reflected on the difficult dual role of the clergy. He noted that pastors are challenged to walk a fine line: they must be loyal institutional subordinates, but, at the same time, have the qualities of strong leaders, inquisitive scholars, and strategic thinkers. In his words:

*"A pastor is bound to instruct his catechumens and congregation in accordance with the symbol of the church he serves, for he was appointed on that condition. But as a scholar he has complete freedom, indeed even the calling, to impart to the public all of his carefully considered and well-intentioned thoughts concerning mistaken aspects of that symbol, as well as his suggestions for the better arrangement of religious and church matters."*

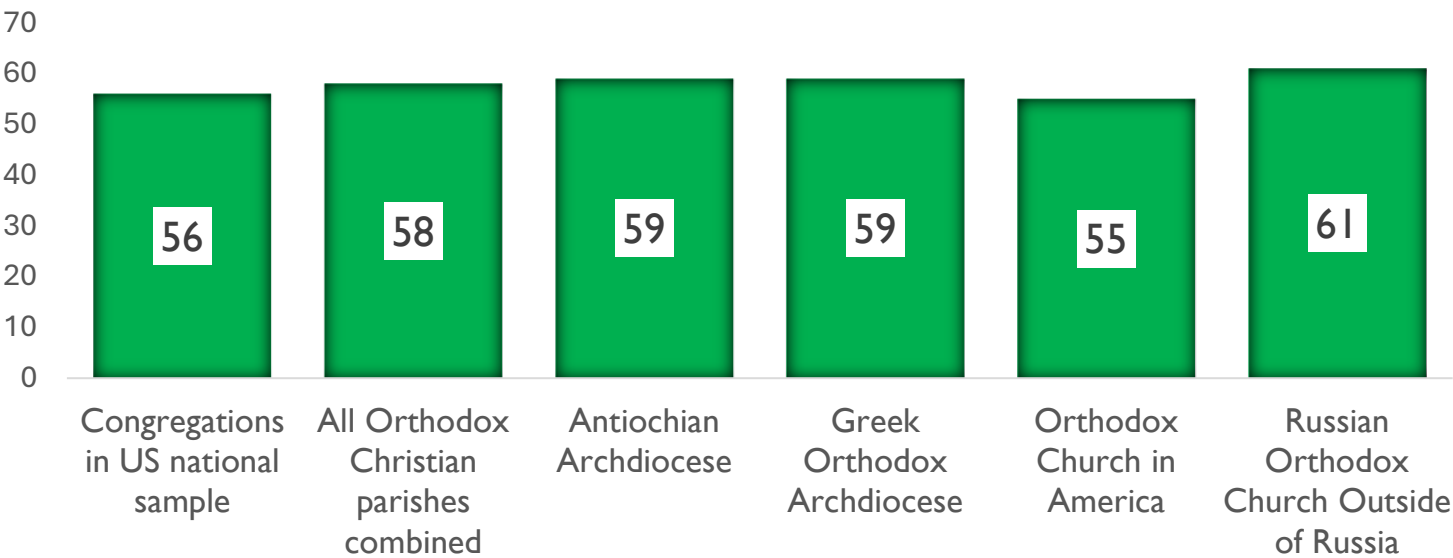
This fine line is perhaps nowhere more visible than among American Orthodox parish clergy. On the one hand, the Orthodox Christian Church is highly hierarchical, with bishops holding immense authority over local parishes with little room for discussion. Furthermore, Orthodox Christianity's strong adherence to tradition and resistance to change limits a priest's options for experimentation and innovation. On the other hand, these priests are operating within American context — a country where local congregations have historically enjoyed a great deal of freedom to decide exactly "how things should be done."

A few questions in the FACT 2025 survey give us some glimpse into the personal backgrounds of the men serving in American Orthodox churches. Simultaneously, the data helps us see what distinguishes them from the clergy in US national sample of congregations.

When most people picture a pastor, they imagine an older, gray-haired figure. The data from the FACT 2025 survey confirm that this assumption is completely accurate for both the broad US congregational landscape and, especially, for American Orthodox parishes.

Figure 20 shows that the typical US pastor is 56 years old, while American Orthodox priests skew slightly older with the median age of 58. However, this varies noticeably depending on the particular Orthodox jurisdiction. The pastoral leadership in the Orthodox Church in America is the most "youthful" (median age 55), while ROCOR parishes are typically led by significantly older priests (median age 61).

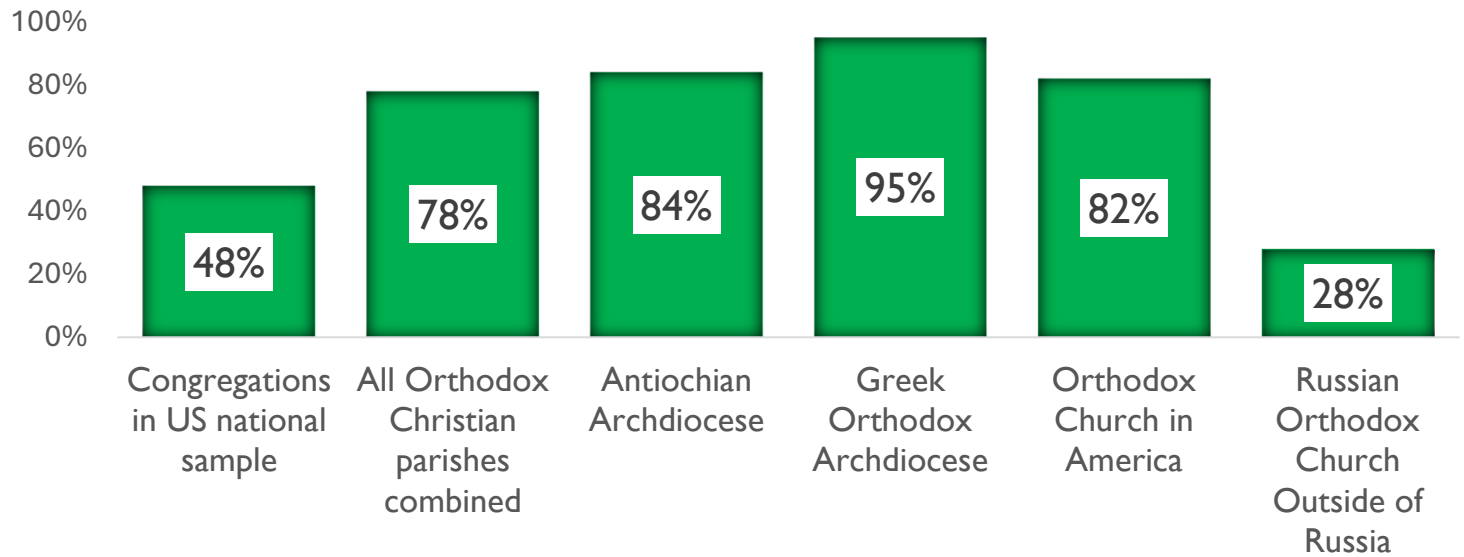
Fig. 20 Median Age (Years) of the Clergy



Being an "inquisitive scholar and strategic thinker" generally assumes a strong educational foundation, with a Master of Divinity (M.Div.) degree widely considered the gold standard in America. As Figure 21 shows, American Orthodox priests are far ahead of the national average on this measure. Over three-quarters (78%) of Orthodox priests hold an M.Div., compared to less than half (48%) of all US clergy.

However, the differences between individual Orthodox jurisdictions are striking. Nearly all GOA clergy hold an M.Div. (95%), whereas only a small fraction of ROCOR priests (28%) shares that same level of formal theological education.

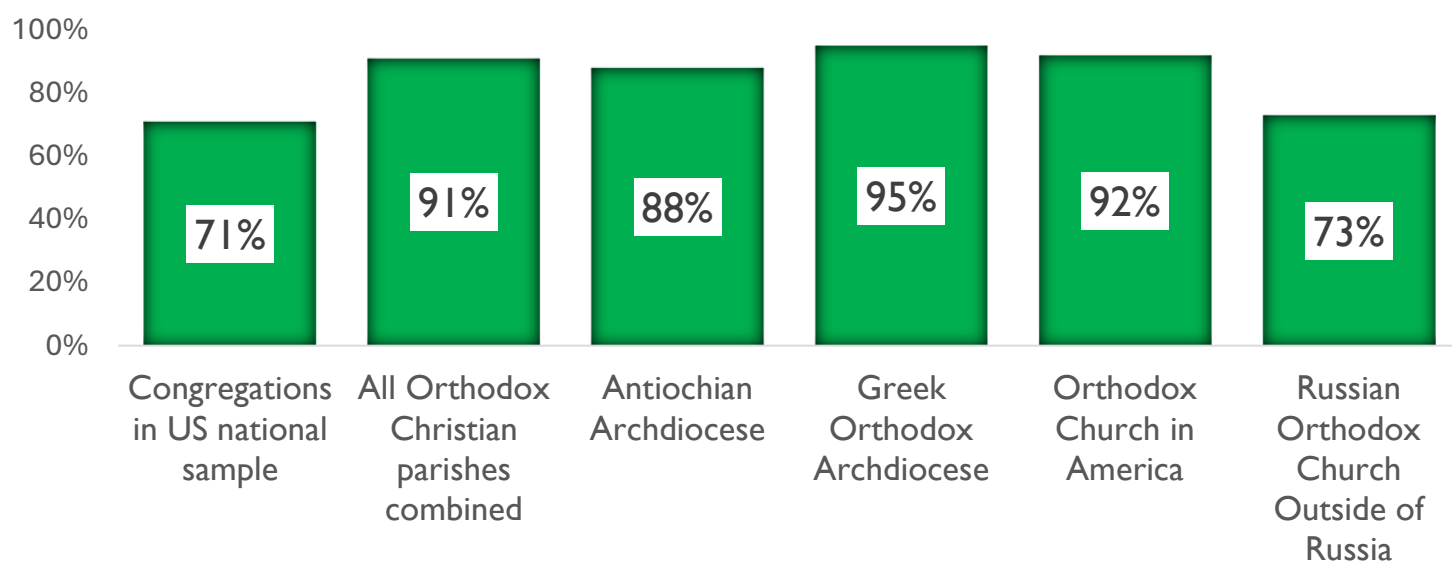
**Fig. 21 Percentage of Clergy Holding M.Div. Degree**



The FACT 2025 survey revealed that the median number of regular participants - those attending at least once a month—in a single US congregation is just 76 people, children included. In simple terms, half of American congregations have fewer than 76 people who are engaged in and contribute to their local place of worship. From a financial point of view, can all congregations this small afford a full-time pastor? The likely answer is "no."

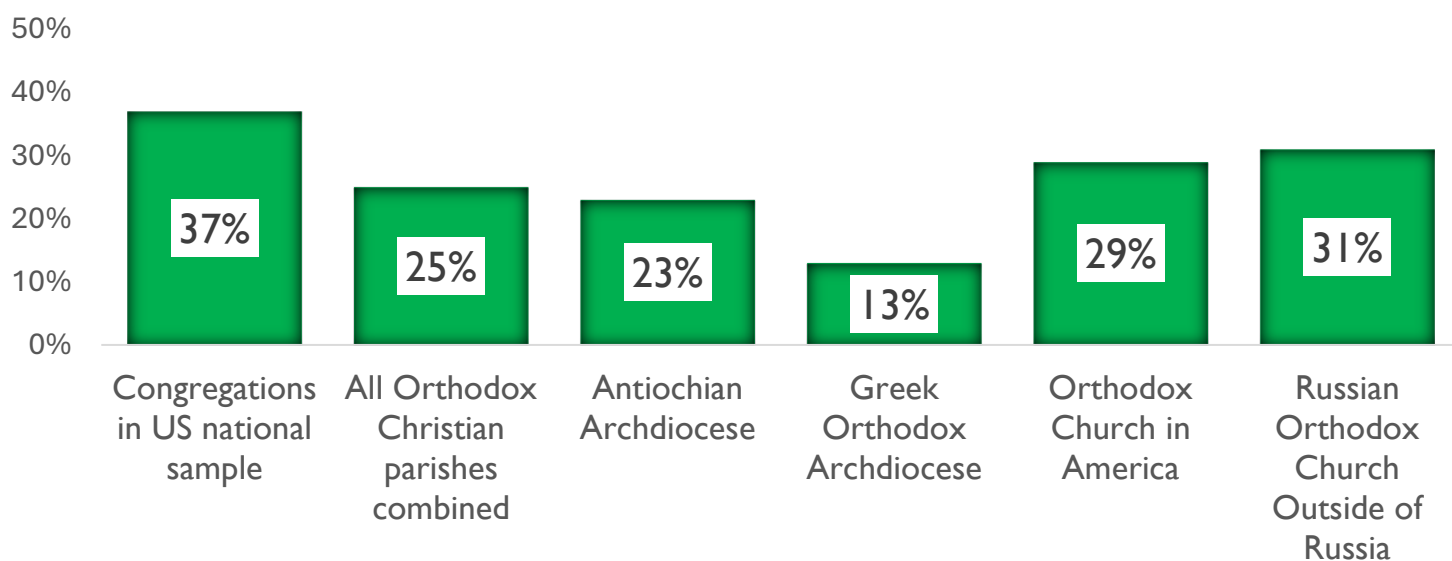
Figure 22 indicates that by the percentage of full-time clergy, American Orthodox parishes are ahead of the national average: 91% vs. 71%. This is not surprising, because the median size of a typical Orthodox parish is also larger: 130 vs. 76. Comparing individual Orthodox jurisdictions, nearly all GOA parishes (95%) are served by full-time clergy, while only 73% of ROCOR churches can afford a full-time priest.

**Fig. 22 Percentage of Clergy Serving Their Congregations Full-Time**



To make it clear, holding a full-time pastoral position does not rule out the need for a second job. This is clearly the case for American Orthodox priests. As Figure 23 illustrates, even though 91% serve their parishes full-time, a quarter of them (25%) still maintain some outside employment.

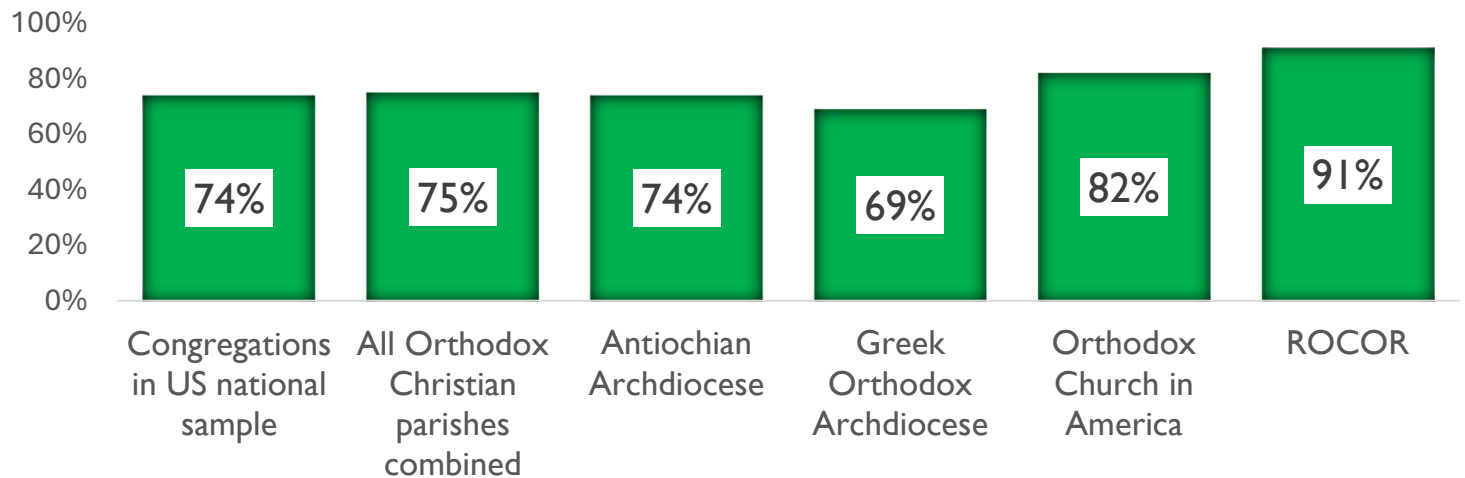
**Fig. 23 Percentage of Clergy Who Have Other Paid Employment Outside of a Congregation**



In the delicate architecture of faith, how strong is the bridge between pastors and their people? Do the "shepherds" truly connect with the minds and souls of their "flock"? To find out, the FACT 2025 survey asked: "To what extent is there a good 'fit' between the pastor of this congregation and the members?"

As Figure 24 shows, three-quarters of clergy - both within American Orthodox parishes and across the broader US religious landscape - feel there is "a very good fit" with their members. While an overwhelming majority of priests across all four Orthodox jurisdictions report this strong bond, it is especially pronounced in the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (91%). On the flip side, a noticeably lower share of pastors in Greek Orthodox churches (69%) feel the same way.

**Fig. 24 Percentage of Clergy Reporting "A Very Good Fit" Between Them and Their Members**



Are US clergy happy with their life choices to pursue a pastoral vocation? This is not a trivial question. Before looking at the answer, here is some context to consider. The 2014 [Harris Poll on Occupational Prestige](#) asked Americans: a) to rate the prestige of various professions and b) whether they would encourage a child to pursue that career.

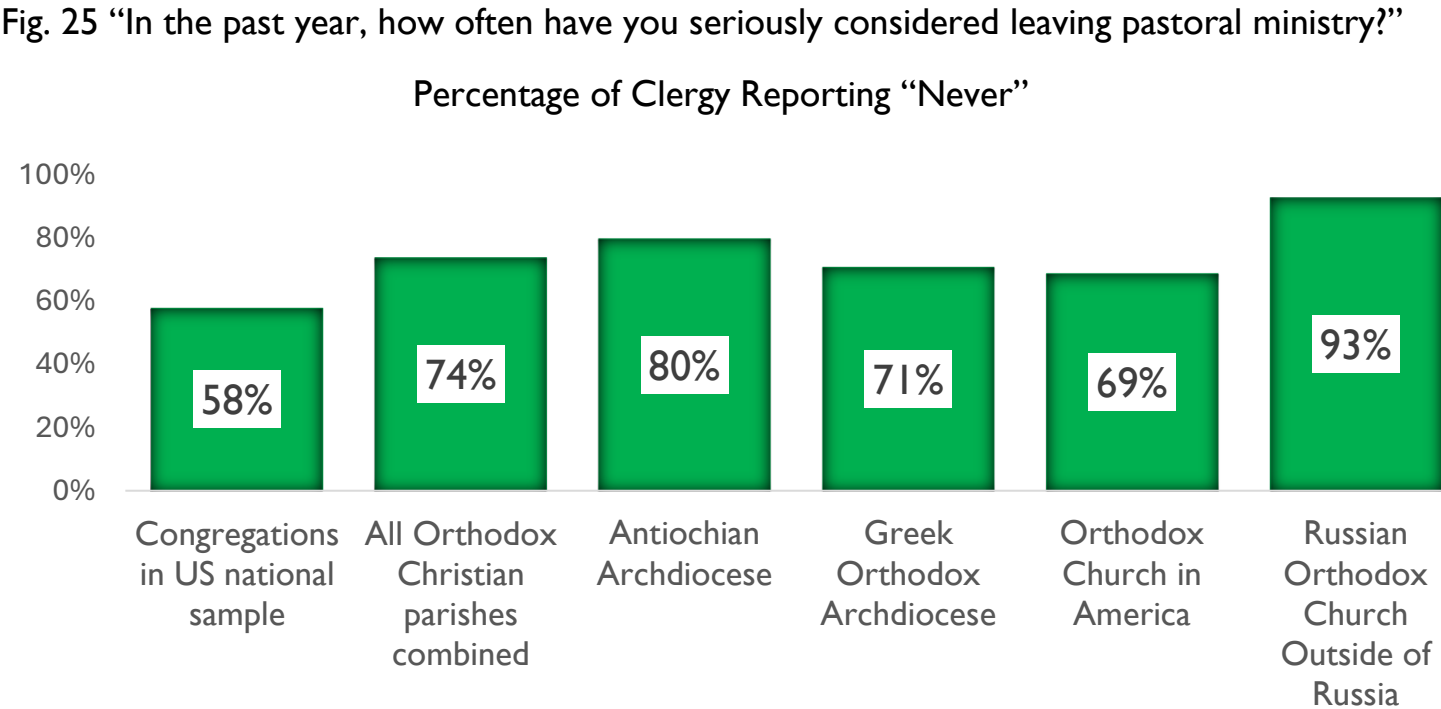
For pastors, the poll revealed both good and bad news. The good news was that 62% of Americans consider the clergy to have either "a great deal of prestige" or "prestige," keeping the pastoral vocation in the middle-to-upper tier. The clergy were outranked by medical doctors, military officers, scientists, and nurses, but they still had more prestige than lawyers, bankers, journalists, and business executives.

The bad news emerged when the Harris Poll asked adults if they would encourage a child to pursue the profession - perhaps the ultimate test of desirability. Here, the data showed a dramatic generational drop. While nearly 70% of the oldest Americans would encourage a child to become a pastor, only

about 56% of Millennials and younger generations said the same. By contrast, over 90% of these respondents would hope to see a child work as an engineer or a nurse.

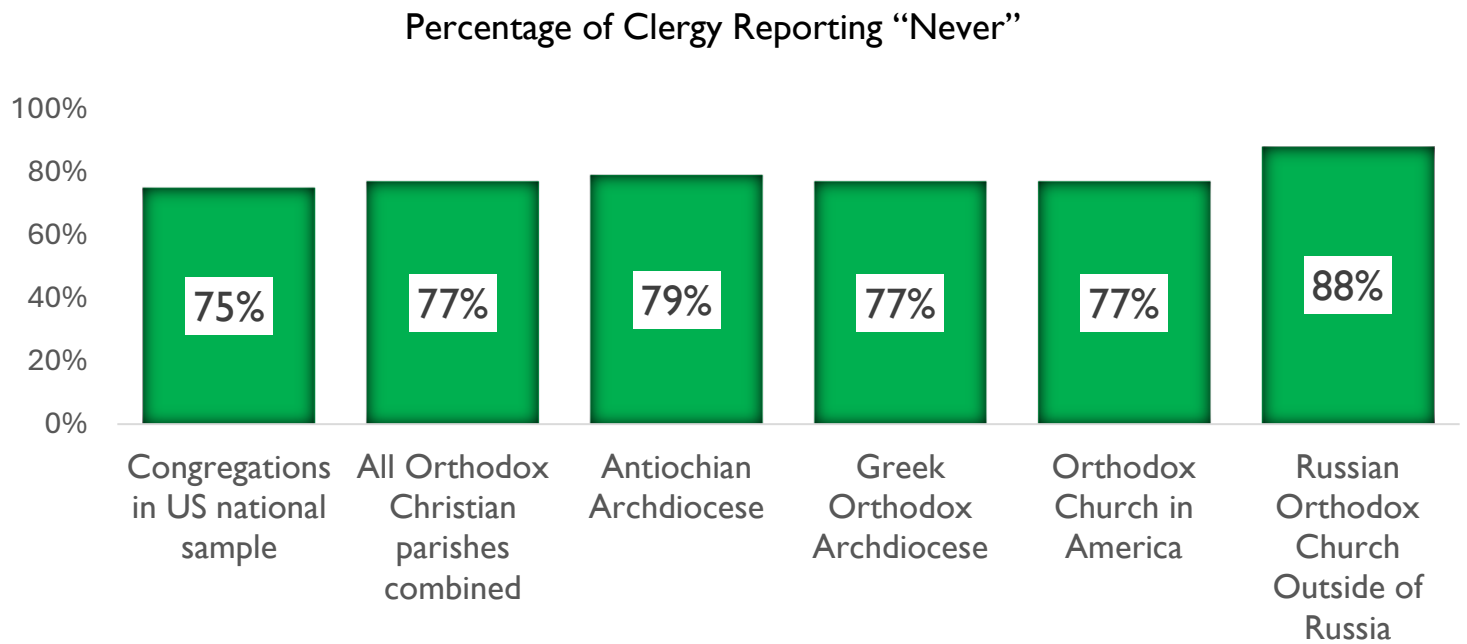
The public desirability of the pastoral vocation may have slipped, but the FACT 2025 data reveals that overall US clergy appear quite happy with their current positions. In fact, compared to the national average, Orthodox clergy are even more satisfied.

As Figure 25 demonstrates, a clear majority (58%) of all US clergy have "never considered" leaving the ministry, and an even greater share of American Orthodox priests (74%) have absolutely no regrets about being a pastor. When comparing Orthodox jurisdictions, ROCOR clergy stand out distinctly: an overwhelming 93% report they have "never considered leaving pastoral ministry," whereas GOA and OCA priests lag somewhat behind.



Similar conclusions can be drawn from the percentages of clergy who report they have "never doubted their call to ministry," as shown in Figure 26.

Fig. 26 “In the past year, how often have you doubted that you are called by God to ministry?”



What are major takeaways from this chapter? If we return to the difficult balancing act which was discussed at the beginning - the delicate dancing between being a loyal subordinate and an independent thinker - the FACT 2025 data paints a revealing portrait of the modern American Orthodox priest. He is, on average, older and vastly more formally educated than his peers from the full sample of US congregations. Compared to them, he also leads a larger congregation that demands a full-time devotion, albeit he occasionally needs a second job to make ends meet.

Yet, the most interesting finding is his clear sense of calling. Despite serving in an era where the cultural prestige of the clergy is fading, the Orthodox priests remain deeply connected to their flock (“a very good fit”) and overwhelmingly satisfied with their life choices to pursue pastoral vocation.

Whether it is the highly educated GOA pastor or the deeply bonded with his flock ROCOR priest, the men serving in American Orthodox parishes know exactly who they are and have little desire to be anywhere else.

## **The Frame of Faith: Seven Marks of Parish Identity**

In any local faith community, there is a clear distinction between what a community "believes" and what it actually does. The official mission statement on a congregation's website rarely reveals the true picture of its internal life and priorities. This holds true even for churches that are part of a "hierarchical" denomination - like American Orthodox parishes - where core values and expectations are clearly predefined.

As the scholar James Hopewell argued in his foundational work on congregations, a local church is never simply a "branch office" or a franchise of a larger denomination. Instead, it is a living organism with a distinct personality – something that can be called congregational identity. This unique personality is shaped by a constant, dynamic interplay: between ordinary members and religious leadership, and between the congregation's internal workings and its external environment.

To discover exactly how American Orthodox parishes navigate the realities of 21st-century America compared to the broader landscape of US congregations, the FACT 2025 survey asked clergy: "Do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about your congregation?"

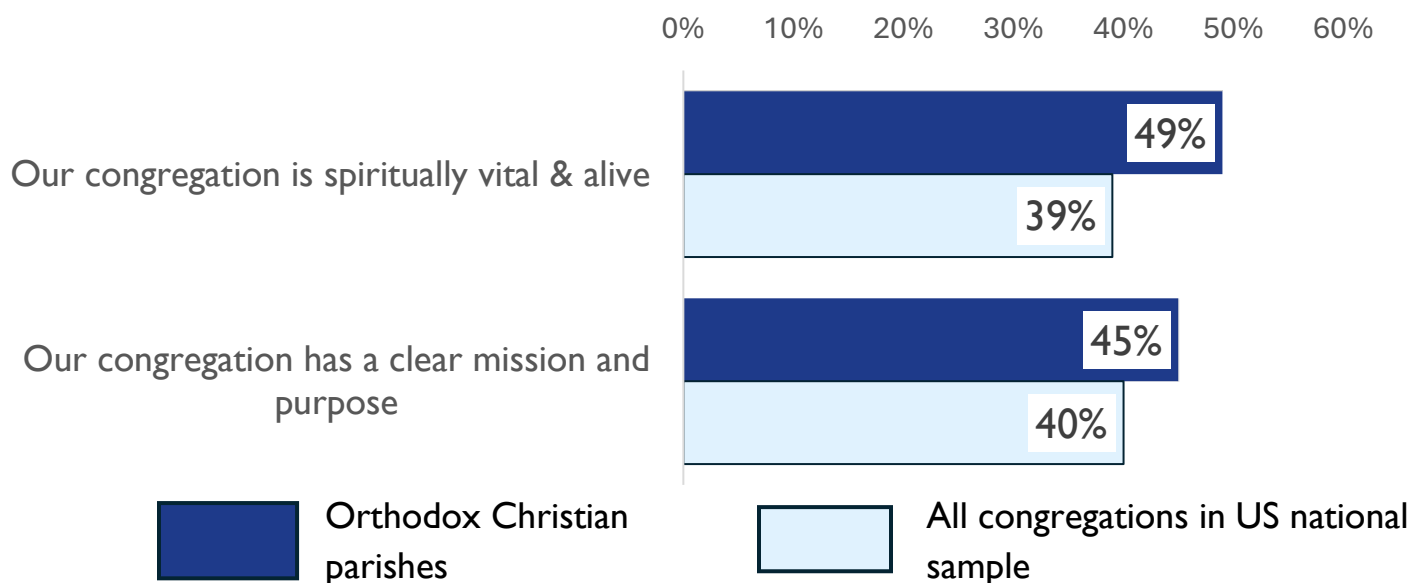
1. Our congregation is spiritually vital and alive
2. Our congregation has a clear mission and purpose
3. Our congregation is striving to be diverse (racially, ethnically, socio-economically)
4. Our congregation is good at incorporating new people
5. Our congregation is actively looking for new members
6. Our congregation is actively involved in local community
7. Our congregation is willing to change to meet new challenges

When exploring the answers to this question, we will focus solely on the percentages of those who "strongly agreed" with each statement. Eliminating the soft "rather agree" option - where respondents of ten just give the polite or expected answer - allows to extract the true intensity of conviction regarding each aspect of parish identity.

Comparing these "strong agree" responses between the Orthodox parishes and the national US sample creates a clear picture of where Orthodox churches stand out and where they lag behind the broader religious landscape.

The first two statements serve as good measures for a congregation's overall spiritual health. Figure 27 shows that nearly half (45-49%) of American Orthodox parishes gave themselves top scores here, being firmly convinced that they are spiritually vital and have a clear vision for their mission and purpose. On both measures, Orthodox churches clearly outpace the congregations in the US national sample (where strong agreement sat at only 39-40% of congregations).

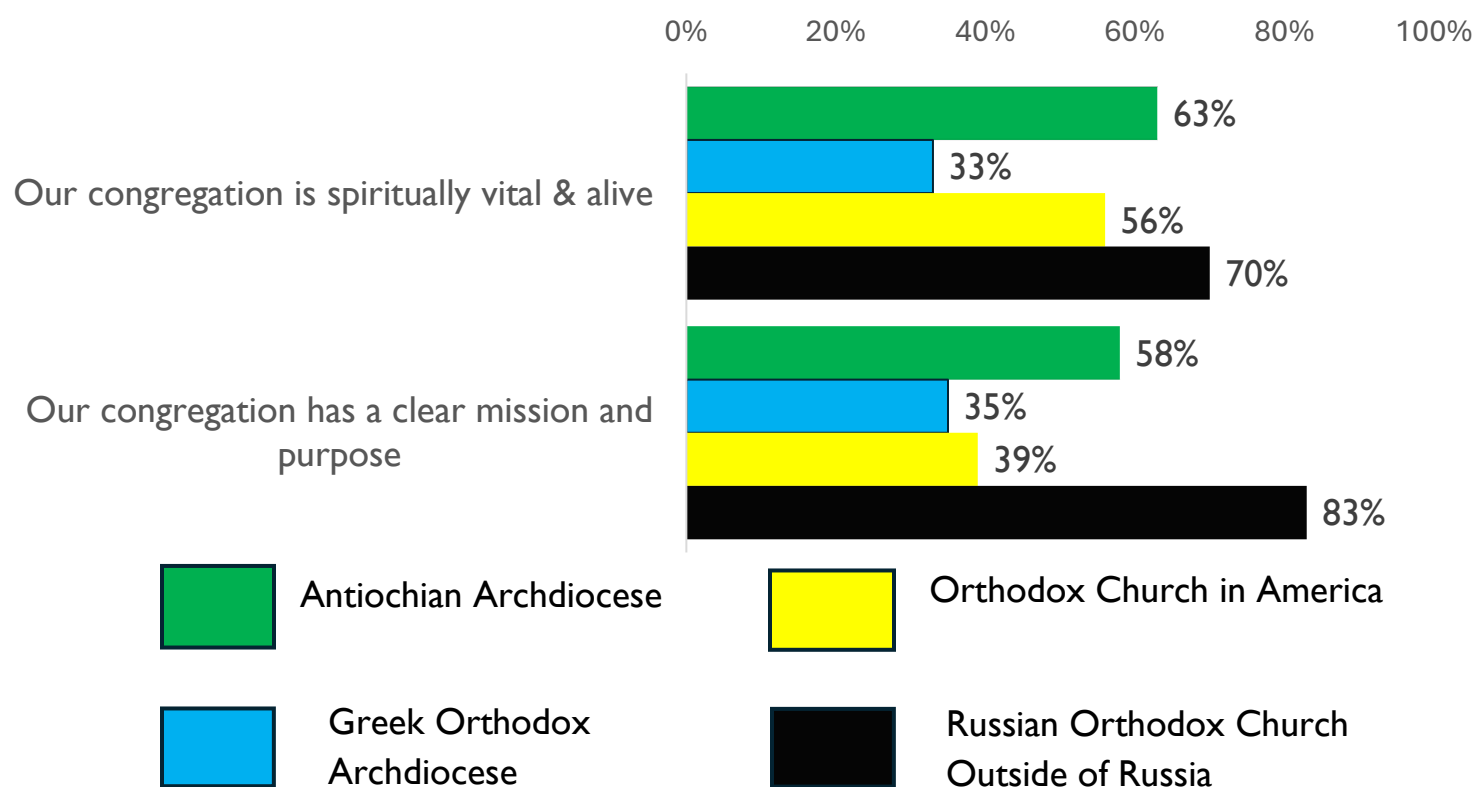
**Fig. 27 Percentage of congregations/parishes which "STRONGLY AGREE" with the statements**



While the spiritual health of all American Orthodox churches combined looks quite strong compared to the broader landscape of US congregations, their vitality and clarity of mission vary dramatically when examining individual jurisdictions. See Figure 28.

On both measures, the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia emerges as the clear "winner," while the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese lags behind other jurisdictions. Indeed, more than twice as many ROCOR parishes expressed a firm conviction of "being vital and alive" (70%) and "having a clear mission" (83%) than in the case of the GOA churches (33% and 35% respectively).

Fig. 28 Percentage of parishes that “STRONGLY AGREE” with the statements



The next three statements touch on an issue of paramount significance for most churches: finding and smoothly incorporating new members into a congregation. In the American multicultural context, an important tweak to this issue is also whether a congregation intentionally seeks greater diversity in membership. See Figure 29.

Fig. 29 Percentage of congregations/parishes that “STRONGLY AGREE” with the statements

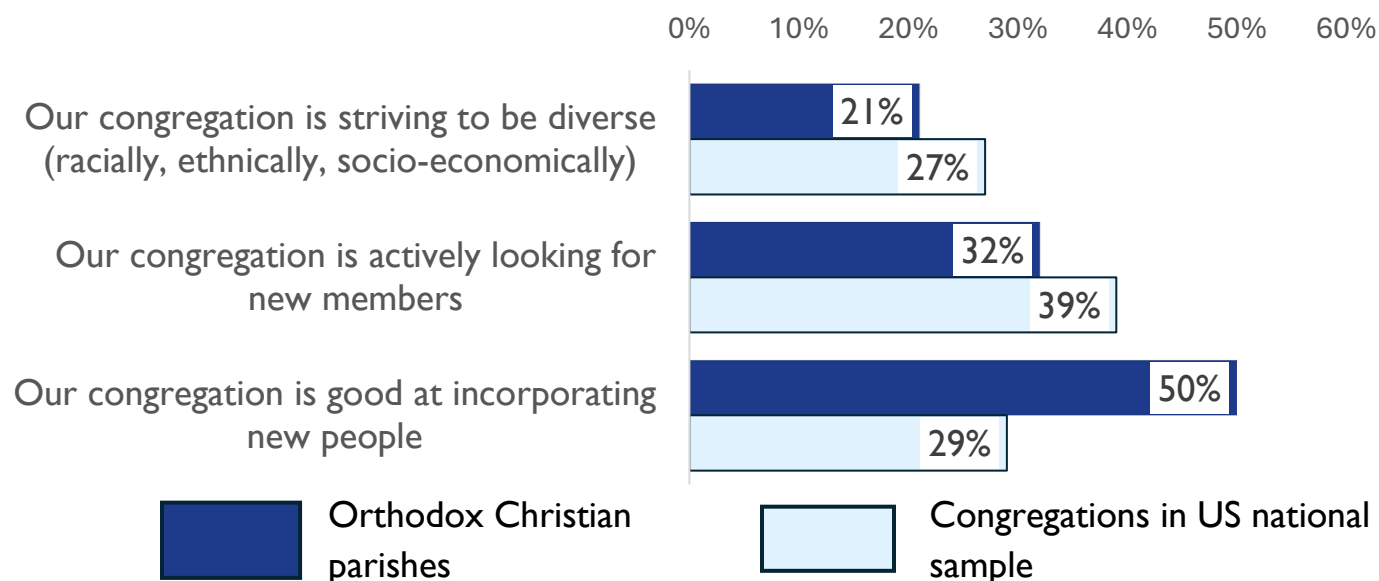
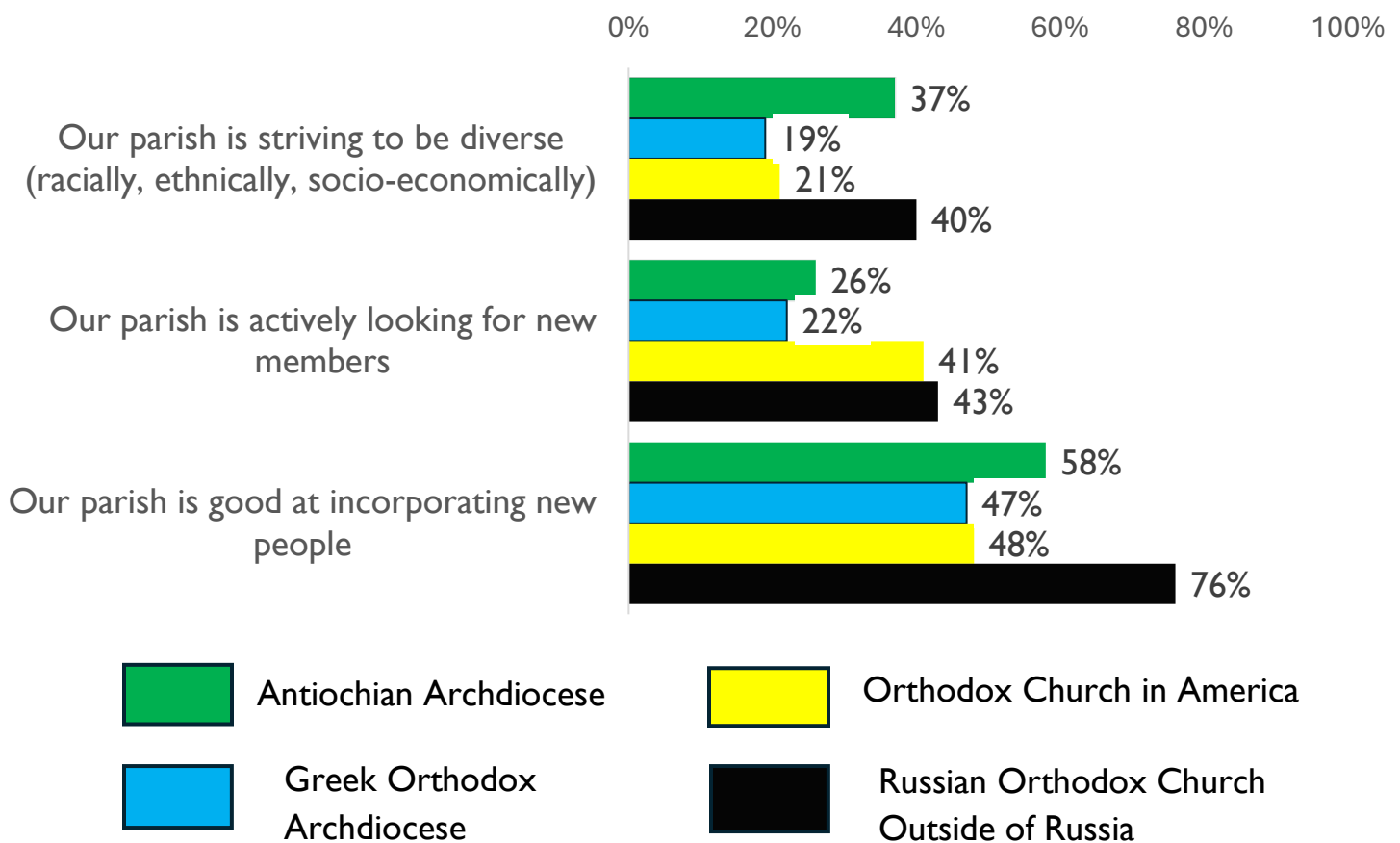


Figure 29 reveals an “Orthodox approach” to this goal. On the one hand, compared to a “typical” US congregation, an average Orthodox parish is less focused on actively hunting for new members (32% of Orthodox parishes vs. 39% of all congregations “strongly agree”). Similarly, Orthodox parishes are less concerned with cultivating a broader racial, ethnic, or social palette among their faithful (21% are truly “striving to be diverse” vs. 27% of congregations in the national sample).

On the other hand, however, when it comes to the crucial next step - integrating new members into the existing community - Orthodox parishes are clearly far ahead of the national average. Half of them “strongly agree” that they are “good at incorporating new people” contrasting with just 29% among congregations in the national sample.

Similar to the question of spiritual health, there is also a great variety among the four Orthodox jurisdictions when it comes to finding and integrating new members. See Figure 30.

Fig. 30 Percentage of parishes that “STRONGLY AGREE” with the statements



The Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia clearly leads the pack with the greatest share of its parishes looking for diversity (40% “strongly agree”), engaging in an active search for members (43%), and successfully incorporating new people (76%).

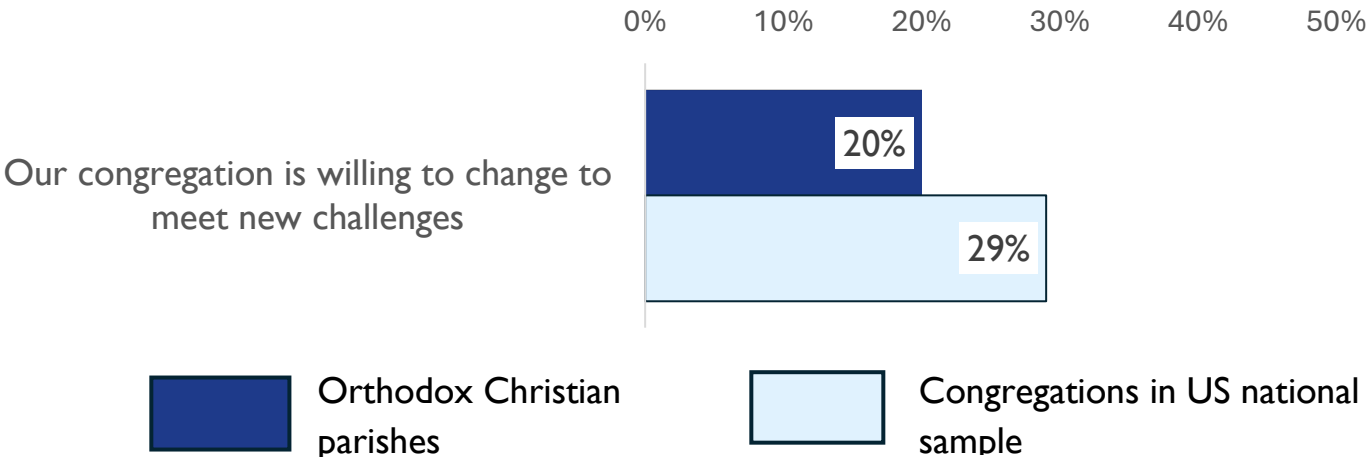
At the opposite end, the Greek Orthodox churches appear much less engaged in diversifying their membership (19% of GOA parishes), making a conscious effort to attract more people in the pews (22%), or efficient involving newcomers into parish life (47%).

Many Orthodox Christians proudly describe their Church as one that “never changes.” While this might be an exaggeration, holding fast to tradition is undeniably a trademark of Orthodox Christianity. Yet, for any religious congregation, a stubborn refusal to adapt to evolving local circumstances or broader societal trends can ultimately lead to decline and death.

The next statement offered to respondents for evaluation explored this very tension: “Our congregation is willing to change to meet new challenges.” Importantly, this wording does not imply fundamental doctrinal shifts. Rather, it measures a congregation’s readiness to proactively adjust to new times and realities.

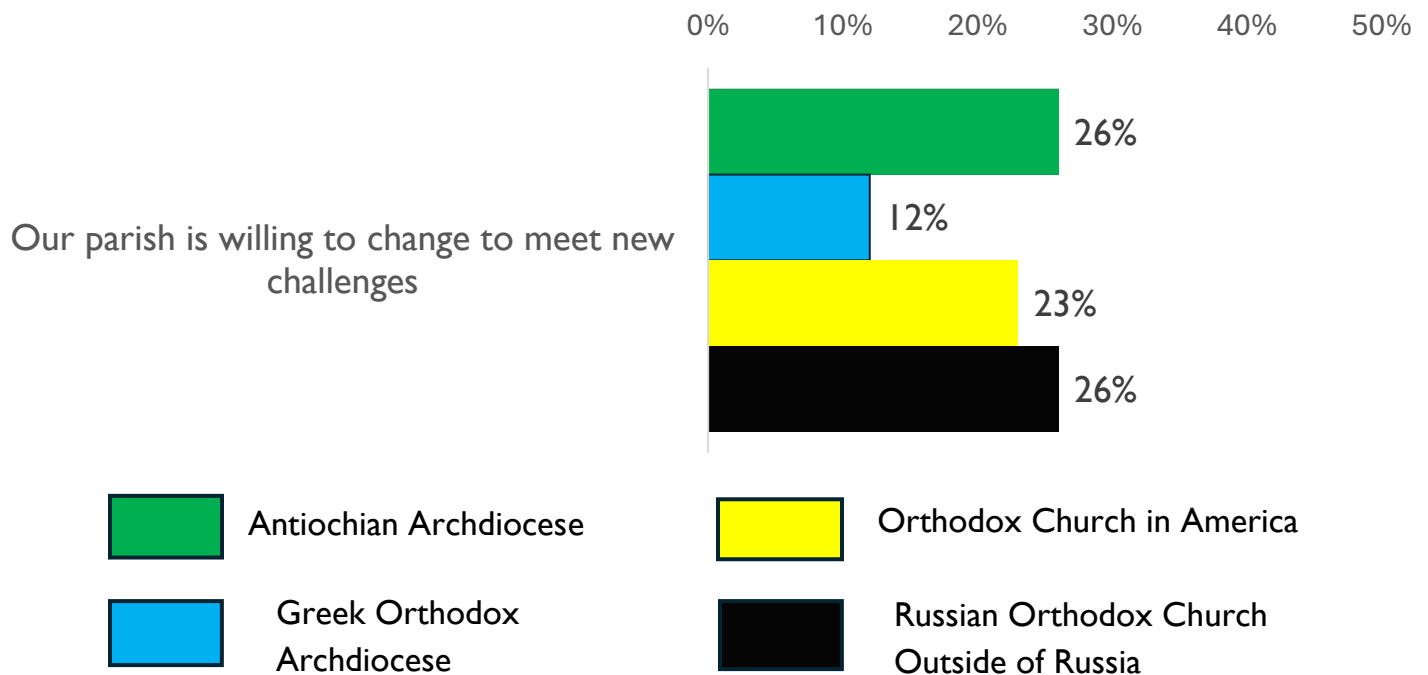
Figure 31 shows that the desire to try new things is indeed noticeably weaker among American Orthodox parishes than it is across the broader spectrum of US congregations (with only 20% of Orthodox clergy “strongly agreeing” compared to 29% nationally).

Fig. 31 Percentage of congregations/parishes that “STRONGLY AGREE” with the statement



When comparing the four jurisdictions on their willingness to change if needed, the Greek Orthodox churches fall significantly behind the parishes of the Antiochian Archdiocese, the Orthodox Church in America, and ROCOR. As Figure 31 illustrates, only a small fraction (12%) of GOA clergy “strongly agreed,” compared to roughly a quarter (23%-26%) of pastors in the other jurisdictions.

**Fig. 31 Percentage of parishes that “STRONGLY AGREE” with the statement**



In her 2005 book *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners*, the renowned sociologist Nancy Ammerman argued that US congregations are not merely private clubs for fellow believers, but crucial cornerstones of civil society, often acting as the essential fabric of their local communities.

Indeed, one does not need to be a scholar to observe that in America - unlike in many other countries - congregations are deeply connected to their neighborhoods. They serve their communities in a variety of ways: by sharing facilities with civic organizations, engaging in charitable work, or offering educational events to wider audiences, not just their members.

At the same time, it remains up to each congregation to decide how to interact with the outside world. The final subject to discuss in this chapter is: Comparing American Orthodox parishes to the broad cross-section of US congregations, are their doors facing inward to merely protect a sacred tradition, or are they wide open outward to engage the neighborhood?

The FACT 2025 survey suggests that the former is far truer than the latter. As Figure 33 shows, only 12% of Orthodox priests “strongly agreed” that their parishes are “actively involved in our local community,” contrasting with one-third (33%) of pastors from the national sample.

**Fig. 33 Percentage of congregations/parishes that “STRONGLY AGREE” with the statement**

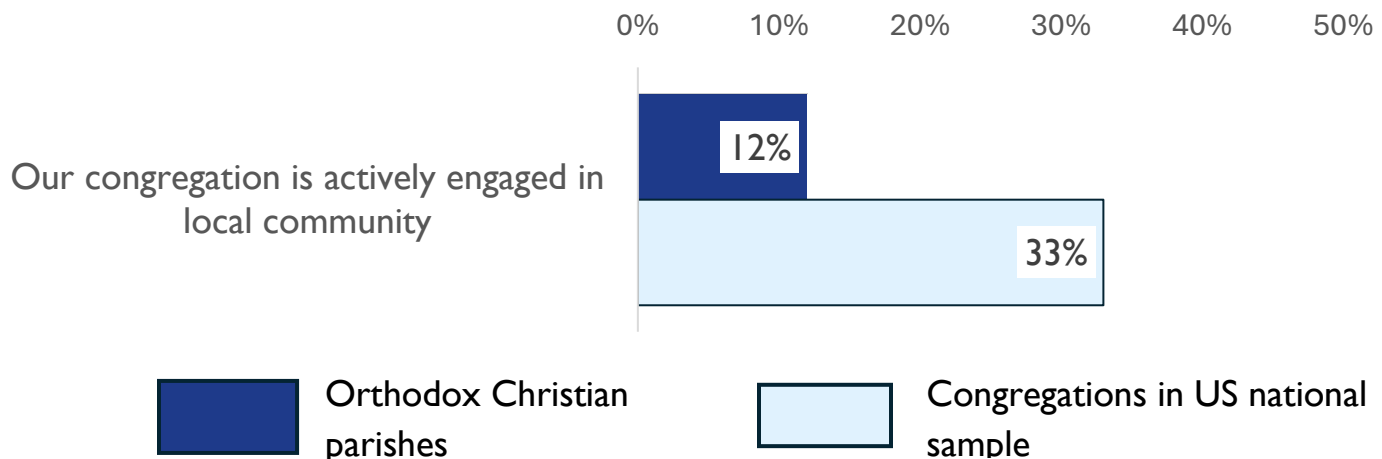
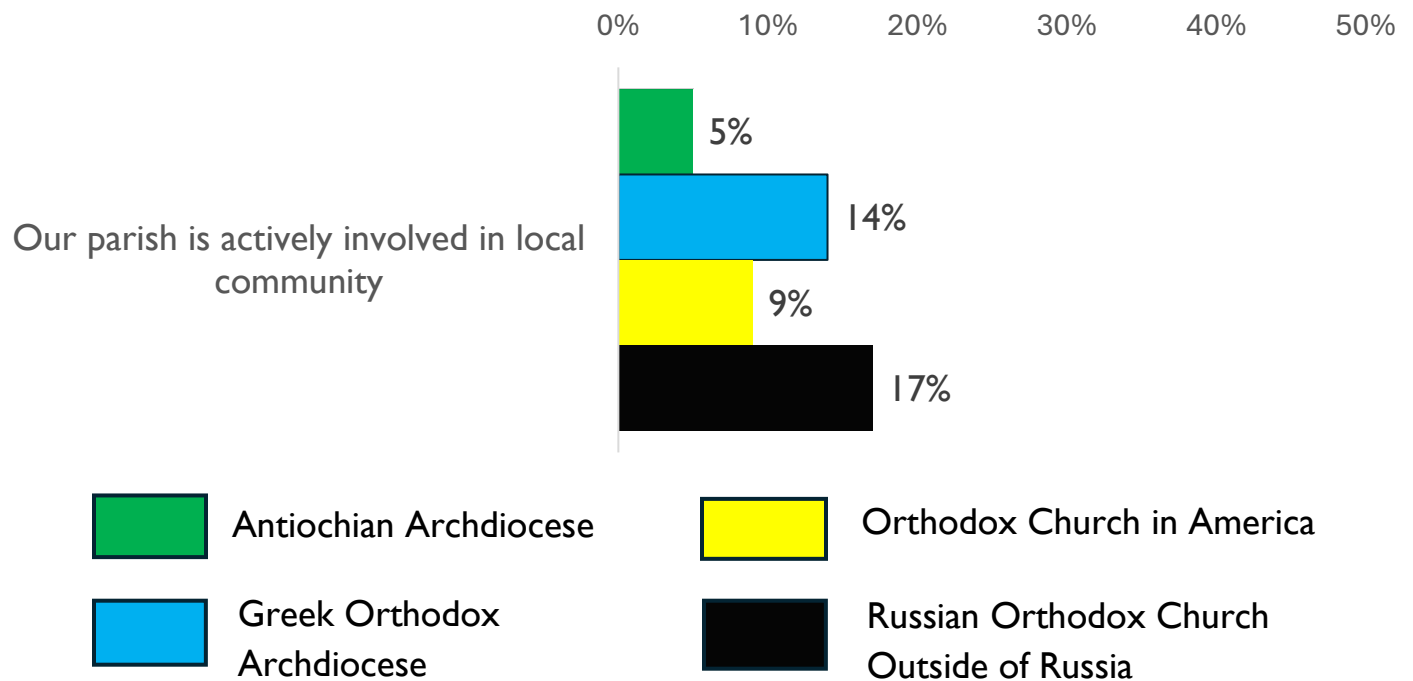


Figure 34 demonstrates that none of the individual Orthodox jurisdictions excel at being a “local community cornerstone,” though GOA and ROCOR parishes appear somewhat better connected to their wider neighborhoods than the Antiochian or OCA churches.

**Fig. 34 Percentage of parishes that “STRONGLY AGREE” with the statement**



What are the major takeaways from this chapter? The FACT 2025 survey highlights a striking paradox at the heart of American Orthodox church identity.

Survey data reveals that US Orthodox parishes are communities of profound internal strength but have limited external reach. Inside, they are remarkably healthy. Clergy express deep certainty in their spiritual vitality and clarity of mission. They also prove good at incorporating newcomers. However, this cohesion and spiritual health come with a distinctly inward-oriented energy. Compared to the broader American religious landscape, Orthodox parishes are more reluctant to creatively adapt to new challenges, less interested in diversifying membership or actively searching for new members. They are also largely disconnected from their local neighborhoods.

While the data shows some remarkable jurisdictional differences - with ROCOR parishes projecting more vitality and GOA churches experiencing more struggles - the overarching narrative remains consistent across jurisdictions.

Figuratively speaking, an American Orthodox parish acts as a formidable anchor rather than a sail. It provides a secure and nurturing sanctuary for those who seek it out, but it rarely spends its energy to open church doors outward to engage the broader world.

### **Beyond Worship: How Parishes Cultivate “Everyday Faith”**

The 20th-century theologian and philosopher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel described the vulnerability of the institutional church in a single sentence: "Religion is a reality only when it is a way of life, not merely a way of worship." In the case of a local congregation, Sunday services may establish the rhythm of members' faith, but public worship alone is not sufficient for their faith's survival. If a congregation's reach stops at the church doors, it becomes merely a traditional weekend destination - not a faith-nurturing and life-shaping community.

Likewise, the Orthodox Christian theologian and pastor Ion Bria offered a concept of the "Liturgy after the Liturgy." The premise is simple but demanding: the formal worship taking place inside the church is incomplete unless it continues to unfold in the daily life of church members.

If a parish desires to be a living community of faithful, then the rituals at the church altar must spill over into the "domestic altar" of the home. Therefore, true impact of a congregation on people's faith cannot be measured by how many people show up regularly for Sunday services. It must be judged by what those people do Monday through Saturday.

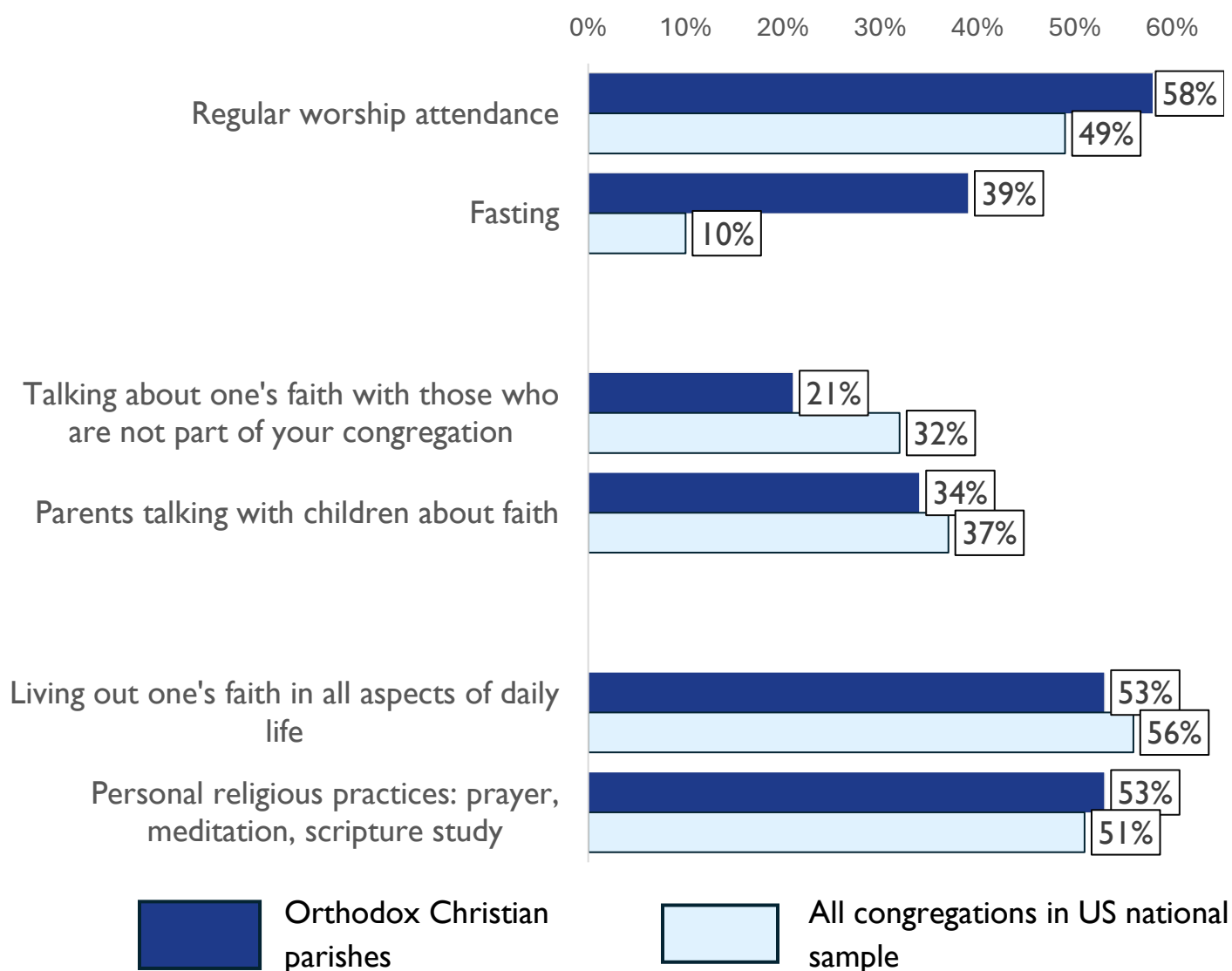
To understand how well US congregations cultivate this daily faith, the FACT 2025 survey asked clergy to evaluate how strongly their congregations encourage six specific disciplines: "How much does your congregation emphasize the following personal and family religious practices?"

1. Regular worship attendance
2. Fasting
3. Talking about one's faith with those who are not part of your congregation
4. Parents talking with children about faith
5. Living out one's faith in all aspects of daily life (work, family, civic engagement)
6. Personal religious practices: prayer, meditation, scripture study

These six disciplines can be grouped into three categories. Items 1 and 2 reflect an emphasis on the formal requirements of the church. Items 3 and 4 measure how strongly a congregation encourages sharing one's faith either with children or with those who are not part of the faith community. The final two evaluate a congregation's focus on incorporating religion into the daily routines of church members.

For this analysis, we will use the percentages of congregations/parishes that reported giving "a lot of emphasis" to these six disciplines. See Figure 35.

Fig. 35 Percentage of congregations/parishes that give “A LOT OF EMPHASIS” to following practices



As Figure 35 shows, formal church requirements receive more attention in American Orthodox parishes than across the wide spectrum of US religious congregations. This gap is especially impressive in the case of “fasting.” Compared to congregations in the US national sample, nearly four times as many Orthodox parishes give “a lot” of emphasis to this practice (39% of Orthodox vs. 10% nationally). This is not surprising, however, because fasting according to the church calendar has always been, and remains, one of the cornerstones of Orthodox Christian life.

When it comes to sharing faith with others, however, a typical Orthodox parish lags behind the average US congregation in emphasizing personal evangelism. Talking about one's faith with people outside the congregation is strongly encouraged by 32% of congregations in the national sample, compared to only 21% among American Orthodox parishes. At the same time, there is almost no difference between Orthodox and other congregations in their attention to transmitting faith to children within the church.

Finally, Orthodox churches also closely mirror the national average in their focus on bringing one's faith into daily life, scoring almost identically on the importance of "Personal religious practices: prayer, meditation, scripture study" and "Living one's faith in all aspects of daily life."

How do individual Orthodox jurisdictions compare to each other when it comes to celebrating this "Liturgy after the Liturgy?" The short answer is that the parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia give considerably more attention to building the "domestic altar at home," while Greek Orthodox churches take the most lukewarm approach to this goal.

As Figures 36a-36c demonstrate, ROCOR boasts the highest percentage of parishes placing "a lot of emphasis" on nearly every spiritual discipline (with only one exception). Conversely, GOA churches reported the lowest levels of emphasis across all six personal and family religious practices.

Fig. 36a Percentage of parishes that give "A LOT OF EMPHASIS" to following practices

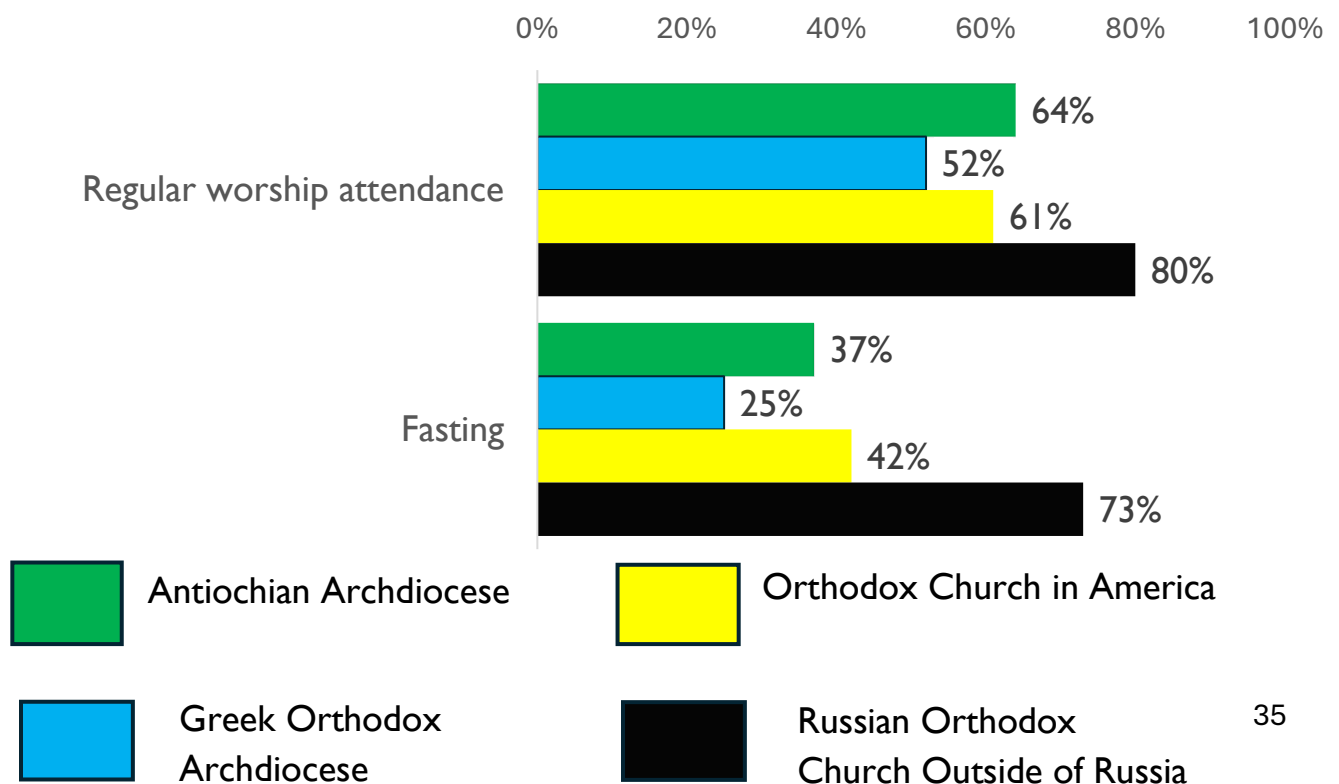


Fig. 36b Percentage of parishes that give “A LOT OF EMPHASIS” to following practices

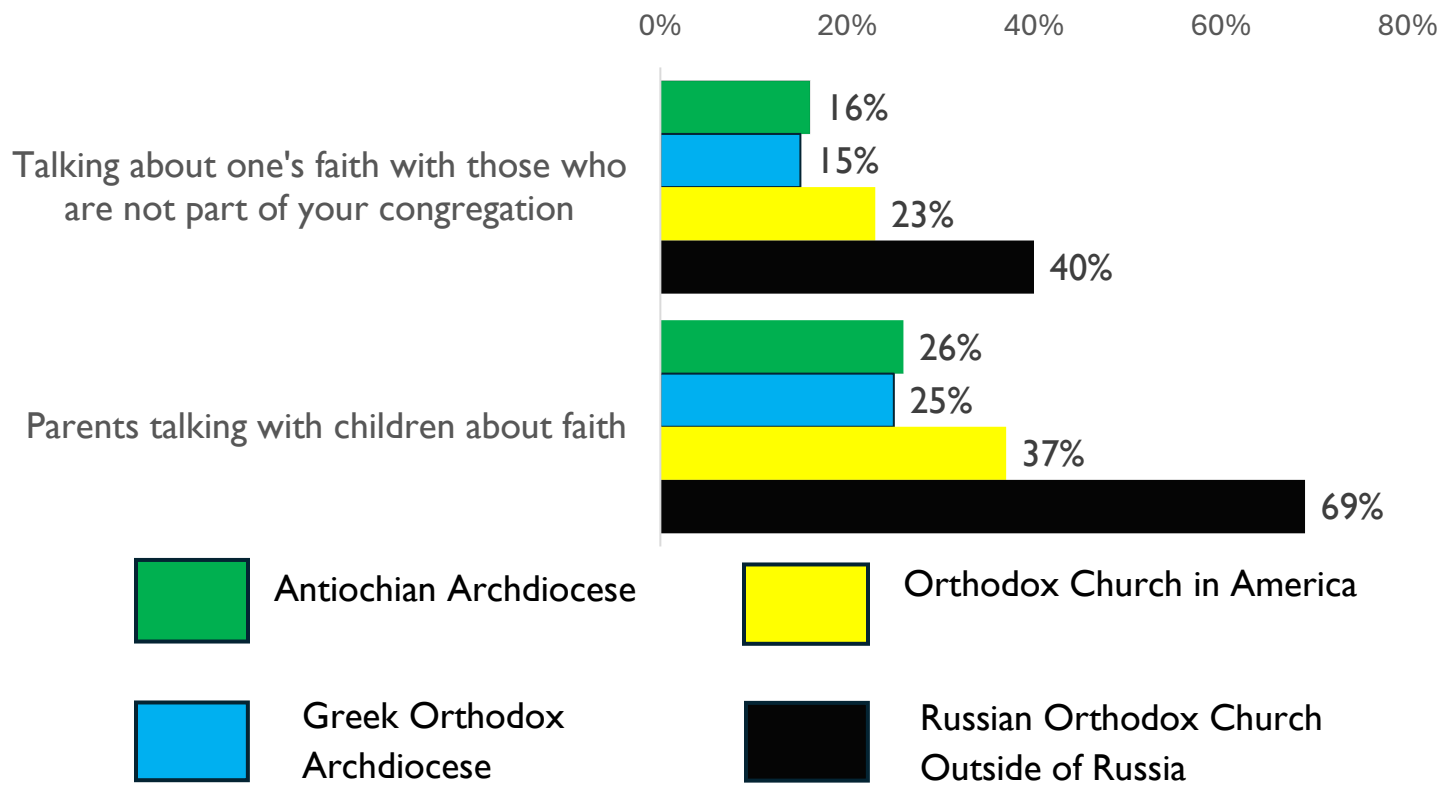
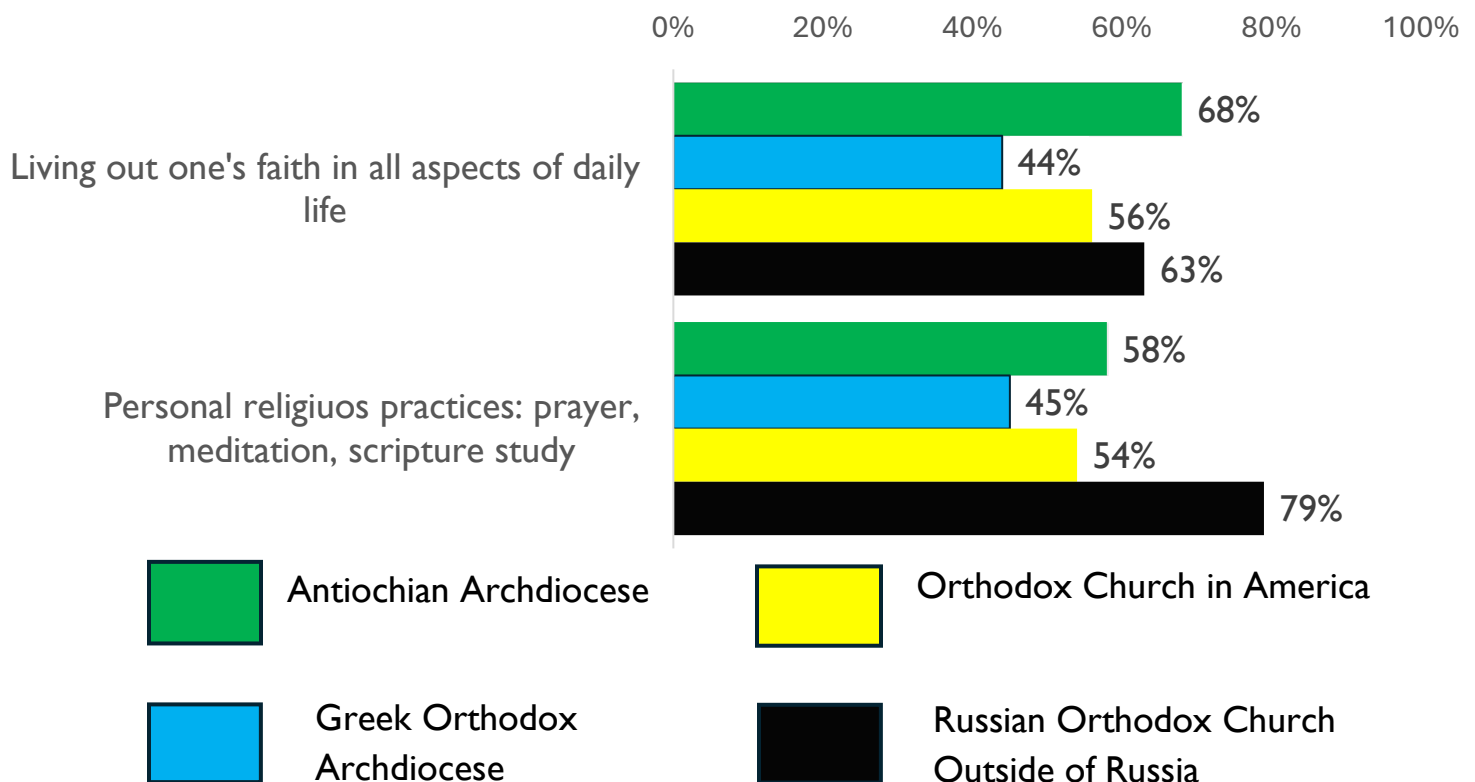


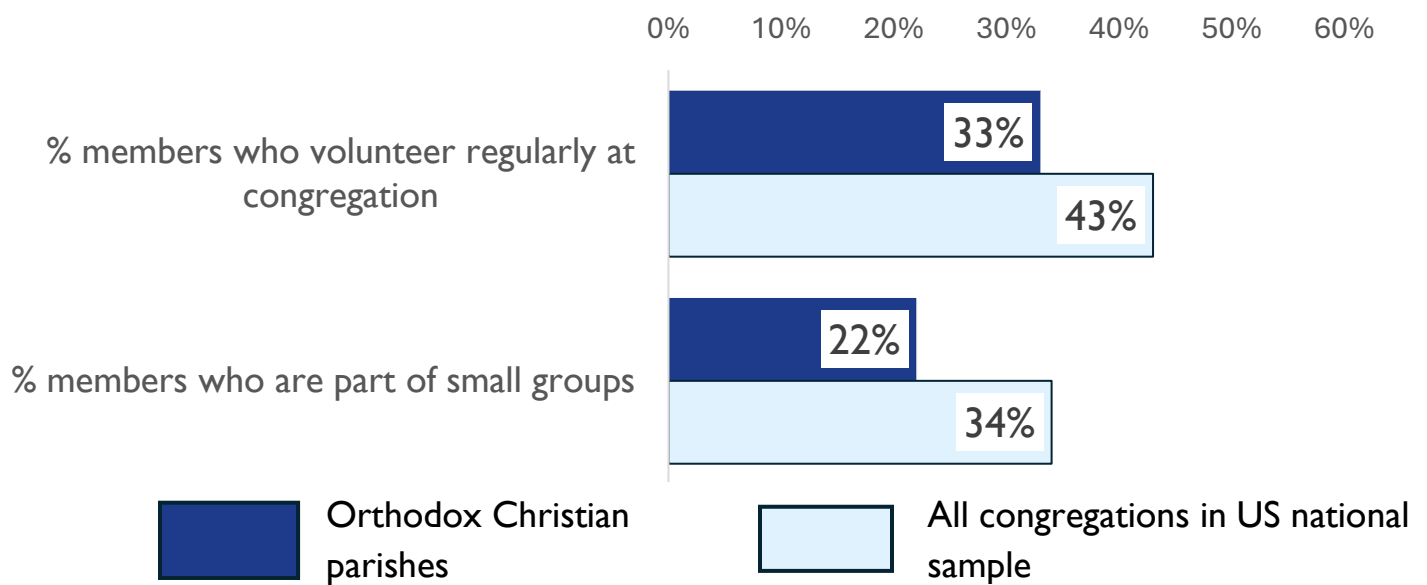
Fig. 36c Percentage of parishes that give “A LOT OF EMPHASIS” to following practices



The FACT 2025 survey offers two more measures of how successfully congregations engage their members in faith-based activities outside of formal worship. The questionnaire asked clergy to estimate the percentage of regularly participating adults who: a) are part of small groups, and b) volunteer regularly at the congregation.

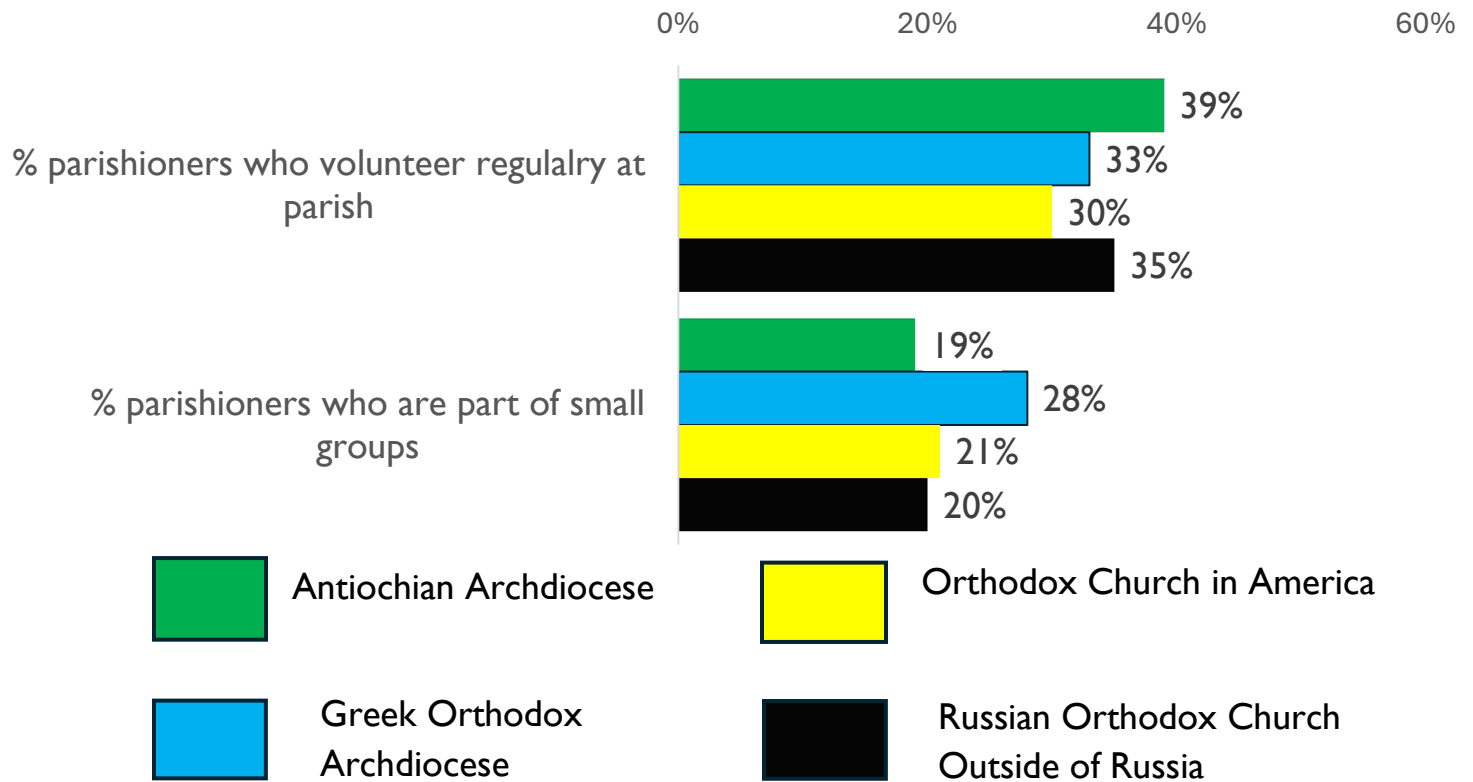
Looking at Figure 37, one can easily conclude that American Orthodox parishes are considerably outpaced by the congregations in the US national sample on both of these church engagement metrics.

**Fig. 37 Percentage of Regular Participants (Members) Who Volunteer at a Congregation and Are Part of Small Groups**



When comparing the four Orthodox jurisdictions, the Antiochian Archdiocese stands out with the highest percentage of members who volunteer regularly at their parishes (39%). Conversely, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese leads the other jurisdictions in integrating its members into small group activities (28% of GOA parishioners). See Figure 38.

**Fig. 38 Percentage of Regular Participants (Members) Who Volunteer at a Parish and Are Part of Small Groups**



To sum up this chapter, compared to the broad spectrum of US congregations, Orthodox parishes excel at preserving the ancient discipline of fasting, but they fall significantly behind the national average in the relational aspects of faith expressed in personal evangelism, volunteering, and small-group participation. It appears that the American Orthodox Church is a place of strong private devotion and traditional practices, but it pays far less attention to active, everyday community building.

Among the individual jurisdictions, when it comes to celebrating the "Liturgy after the Liturgy," the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia stands out for its intense focus on building the "domestic altar."

## Even the Lord's House Needs Money: Church Finances

Here is a true episode from 19th-century American religious history involving the legendary Methodist circuit rider (traveling pastor) [Peter Cartwright](#). He was a wildly popular frontier preacher known for his sharp wit and total lack of patience for stingy congregations. Frontier preachers like him were usually broke and completely reliant on whatever the cash-poor settlers could scrape together for the collection plate.

During a revival meeting in a small town, Cartwright noticed a notoriously wealthy local landowner sitting in the front pew. When the collection basket went around, this man dramatically reached into his pocket, pulled out a tiny copper coin - the absolute smallest denomination possible - and dropped it into the basket with a smug look of self-righteous satisfaction.

Cartwright stopped the service, walked down from the pulpit, picked up the collection basket, and fished out the man's tiny coin. He held it up high in the air and said: *"Brothers and sisters, our wealthy friend here has just contributed a single copper coin to the Lord's work. I want to return it to him publicly."*

He walked over, handed the coin back to the stunned landowner, and added: *"Take it back, brother. Your need for it is clearly much greater than the Lord's. Besides, you are heading to a very warm place when you pass, and you are going to need every single penny you have to buy ice."*

The crowd burst into laughter, while the embarrassed landowner immediately pulled out his wallet and dropped a massive wad of cash into the basket to save his reputation.

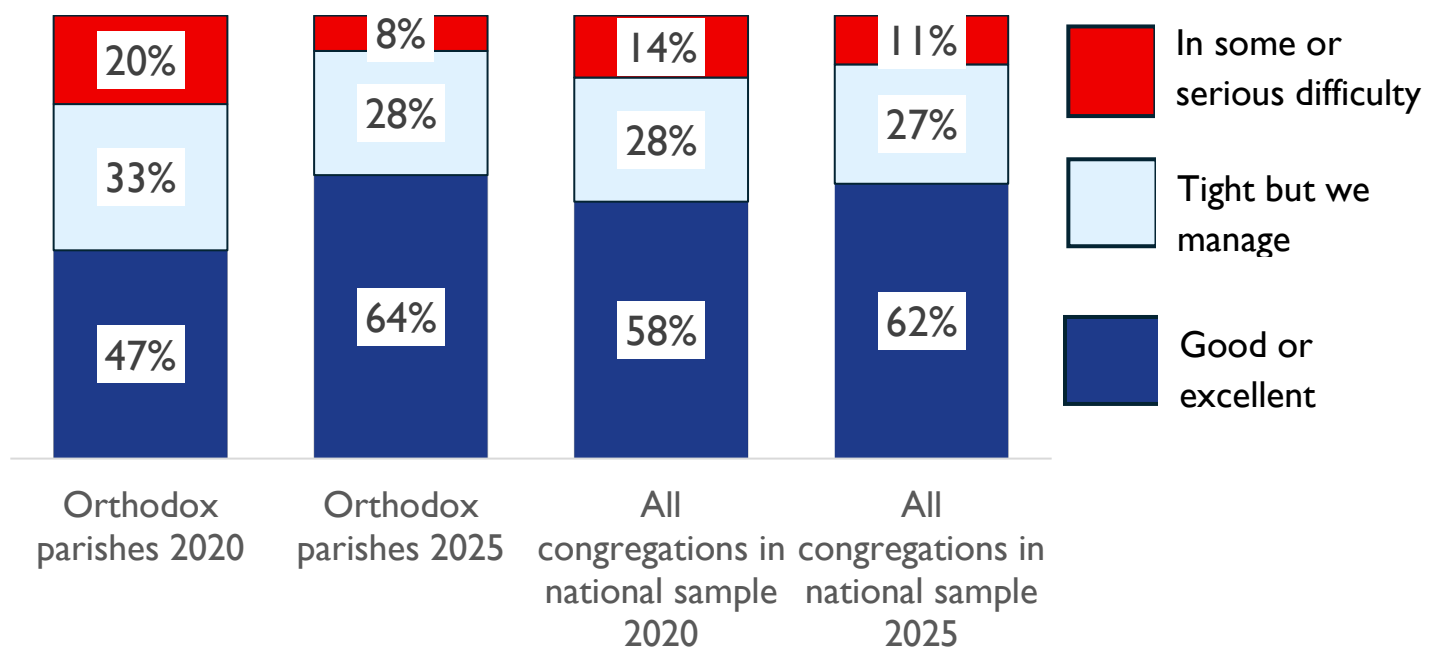
While the era of adventurous frontier preachers has vanished into oblivion, the need for US congregations to be financially fully self-reliant remains as imperative as it was two hundred years ago. Further, one can safely assume that sound budgets are a prerequisite for developing a wide range of church-based programs and activities. In this chapter, we will look at a few metrics of congregational finances from the FACT 2025 survey.

One question asked respondents to evaluate the overall financial health of their congregations in 2025 versus 2020: "How would you describe your congregation's financial health today and five years ago?"

Figure 39 tells an interesting story. Today (2025), there is virtually no difference between the monetary stability of American Orthodox parishes and congregations in the US national sample. Nearly identical percentages of parishes and congregations evaluate their finances as “good & excellent” (62-64%), “tight but we manage” (27-28%), or “in some or serious difficulty” (8-11%).

However, for Orthodox parishes, this picture of sound financial health emerged only within the past five years. Figure 39 shows that from 2020 to 2025, the share of Orthodox parishes reporting “good & excellent” finances has increased considerably from 47% to 64% - a growth pattern which was not present in the overall national sample.

**Fig. 39** How would you describe your congregation’s financial health today and five years ago?



Looking at individual Orthodox jurisdictions, we found that this trend – considerable improvement in finances within the past five years – was experienced by all of them, albeit to varying degrees. The most impressive surge occurred in the Antiochian Archdiocese, where the percentage of parishes reporting “good & excellent” finances more than doubled from 31% to 68% (not shown in the chart).

As Figure 40 demonstrates, today, a strong majority of parishes across all four Orthodox jurisdictions (61%-71%) enjoy “good & strong” financial health.

Fig. 40 How would you describe your parish’s financial health today (2025)?

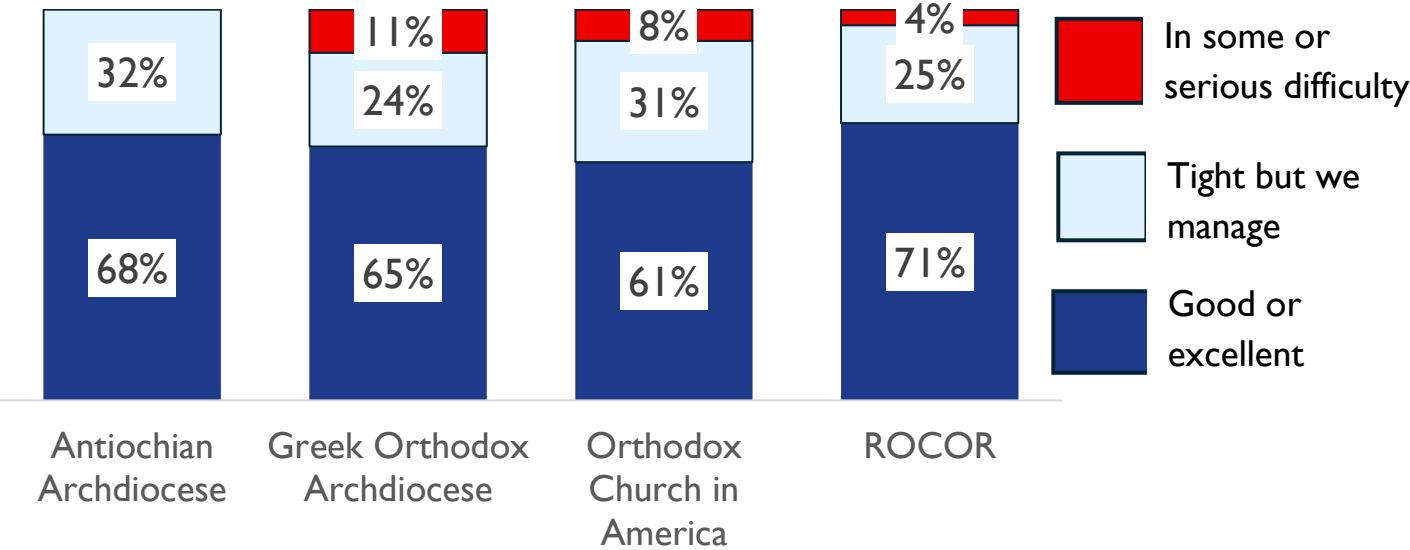
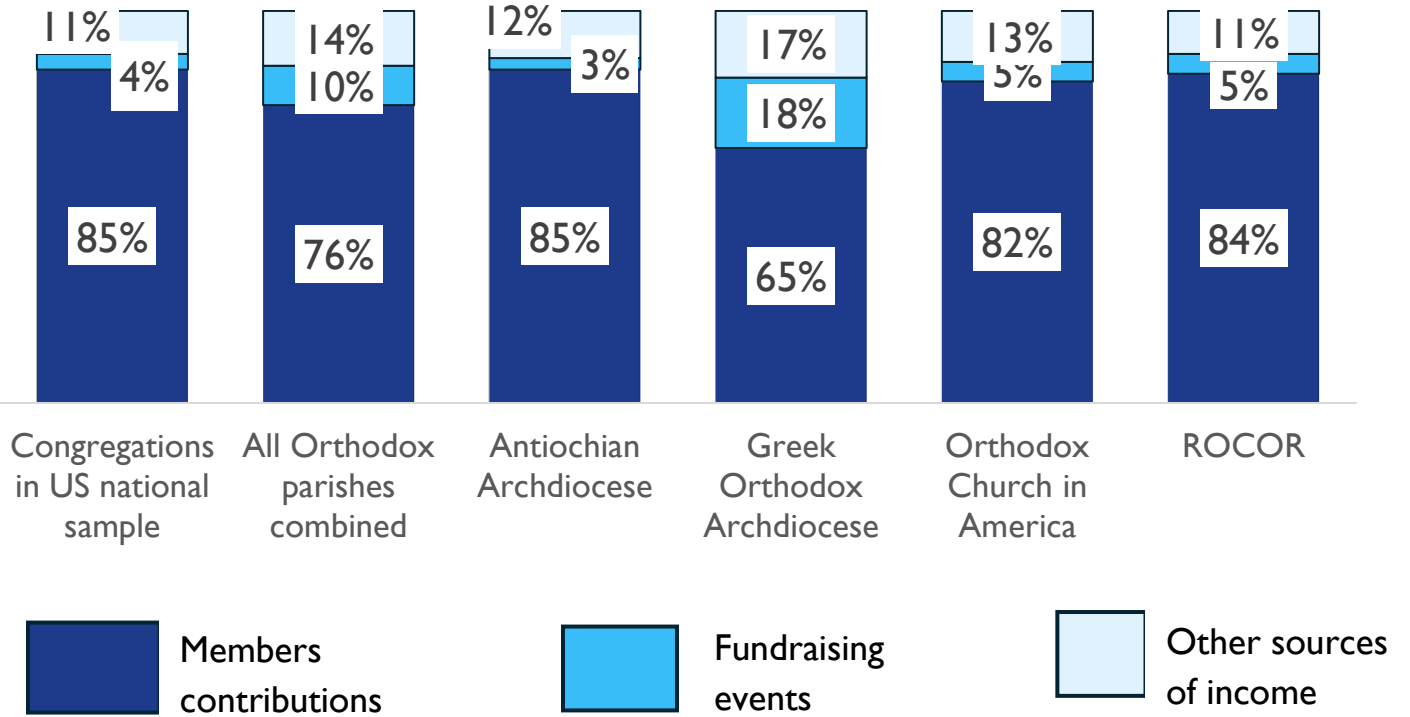


Figure 41 illustrates how congregations/parishes make their money, showing the percentage of annual income derived from three sources: member contributions (tithes, offerings, dues), fundraising events, and other sources (rentals, endowments, investments, capital campaigns, etc.).

Fig. 41 Percentage of Congregation Annual Income Coming from Different Sources



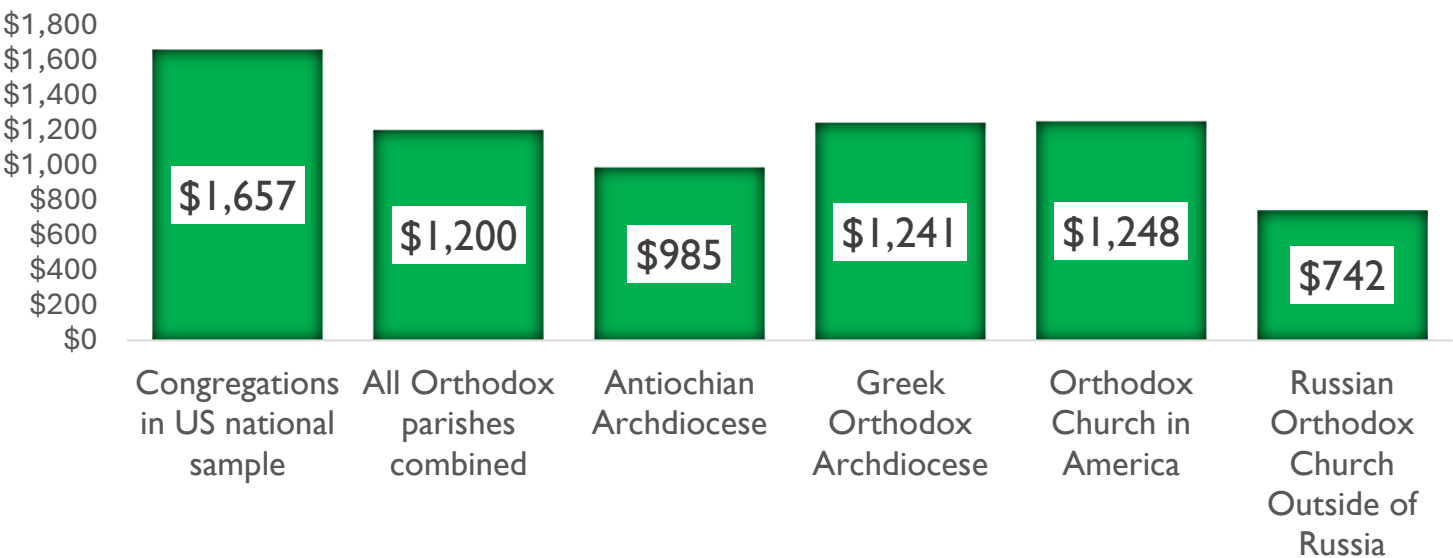
The first notable takeaway is that Orthodox parishes rely less on direct members’ contributions, leaning instead more heavily on fundraising events and other income streams.

However, a closer look at the individual jurisdictions reveals that this trend comes almost entirely from the Greek Orthodox churches. More than one-third (35%) of the money flowing into Greek Orthodox parishes arrives from fundraisers or “other” sources, compared to a mere 15-18% in the parishes of the other jurisdictions.

How generous American Orthodox parishioners compared to members of congregations in the US national sample? The short answer is “clearly, not as generous.” Figure 42 shows the median annual contributions per regular participant in the national sample of congregations, all Orthodox parishes combined, and individually for the four jurisdictions.

As one can see, each year, a typical US churchgoer shells out \$1,652 for their congregation - a far superior figure in comparison to an average Orthodox parishioner, who is willing to fork over only \$1,200. The gaps between individual jurisdictions are even more dramatic: GOA and OCA church members are the most generous, giving annually \$1,241-\$1,248, while ROCOR parishioners trail far behind, contributing just \$742 per year.

Fig. 42 Median Annual Contributions (\$) to Congregations/Parishes per One Regular Participant

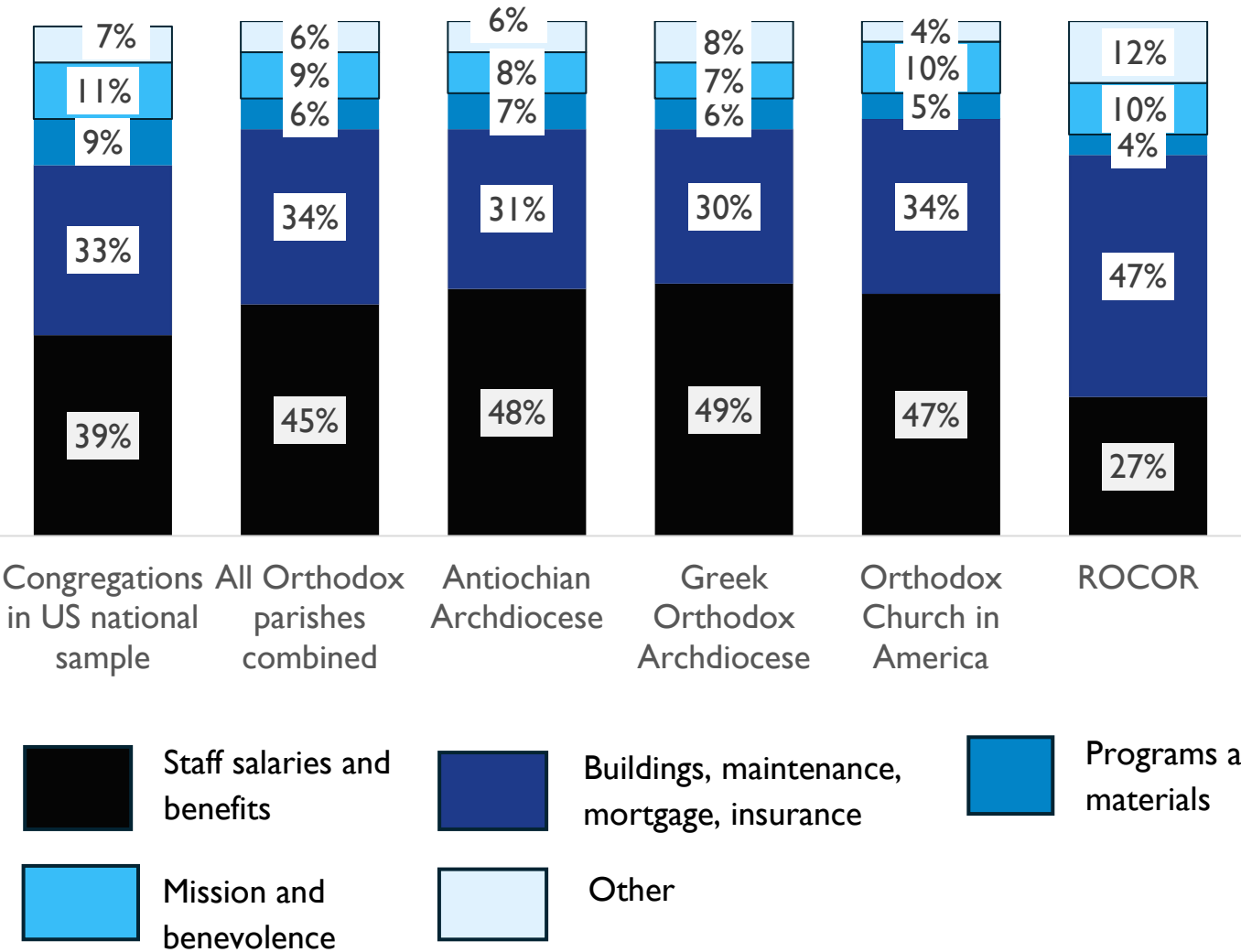


How do churches spend their money? Figure 43 breaks down the structure of annual expenditures comparing the national sample of congregations, all Orthodox parishes combined, and the four jurisdictions separately.

For both the national sample and American Orthodox parishes, the greatest expense is the salaries and benefits for the professionals running the churches - clergy and other staff – which accounts for 39%-45% of annual expenditures. This is followed by “mandatory” operational costs such as utilities, maintenance, mortgages, and insurance (33%-34%).

For individual Orthodox jurisdictions, this pattern holds true with one exception: ROCOR priests take home a much smaller slice of their parishes’ annual budgets - just 27%. This deviation, however, is fully consistent with the findings in the chapter on clergy: ROCOR churches have the lowest percentage of full-time clergy and the highest percentage of them working second jobs outside the parish.

Fig. 43 Percentage of Congregation Annual Expenditures by Categories

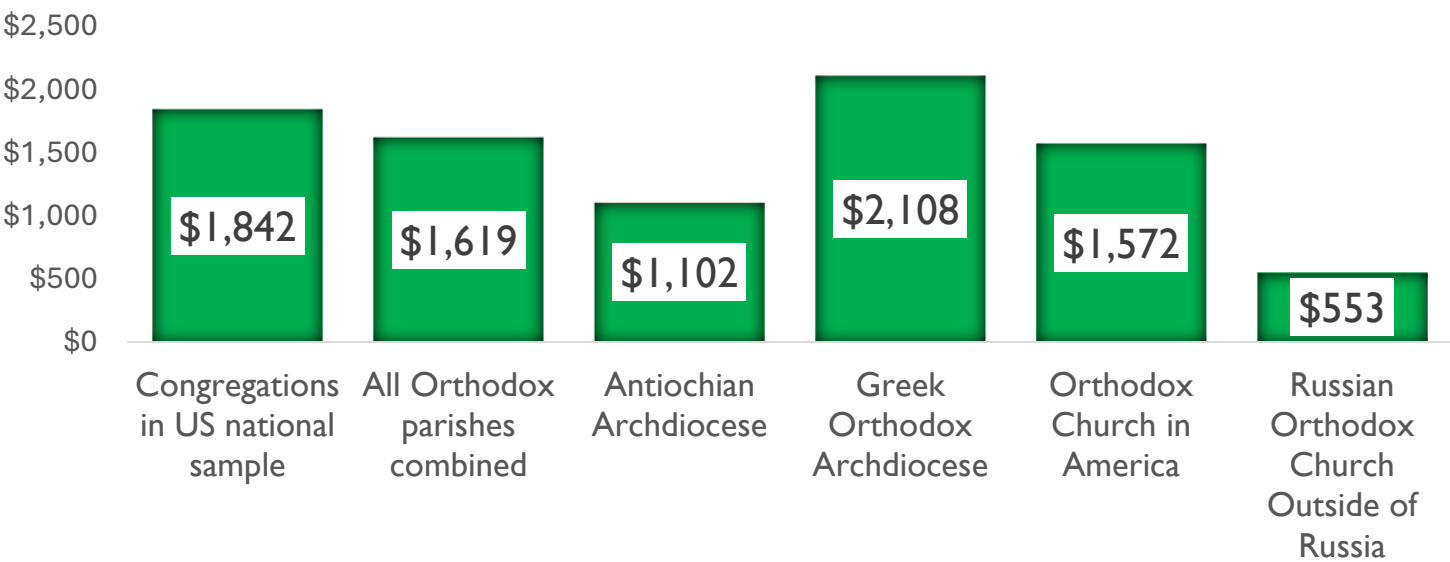


One can think of a church expense budget as something that, one way or another, serves the needs of the members. If so, the higher the annual per-capita budget, the more opportunities a congregation has to cater to the people in the pews. We do not live in an ideal world, of course, but examining annual church expenses per regular participant still provides a good insight into a congregation's potential monetary resources.

As Figure 44 demonstrates, there is a considerable difference on this measure between congregations in the national sample and American Orthodox parishes, and an even more dramatic gap among the four Orthodox jurisdictions.

As a whole, American Orthodox parishes trail the national average, spending annually just \$1,619 per member versus the national figure of \$1,819. At the same time, Greek Orthodox churches can lay out as much as \$2,108 per parishioner - nearly four time the amount spent by ROCOR parishes (\$553).

**Fig. 44 Median Annual Congregational Expense Budget (\$) per One Regular Participant**



What are the major takeaways from this chapter? The FACT 2025 data reveals an interesting paradox surrounding the monetary health of American Orthodox parishes. Today, they are in surprisingly good financial shape, mostly thanks to significant improvement over the past five years. Yet, these sound finances are not necessarily driven by the Sunday collection plate. Looking at per-member giving, the average Orthodox parishioner is noticeably less generous than the typical American churchgoer.

A possible explanation for this discrepancy is that American Orthodox churches simply run on more of a “shoestring budget,” spending considerably less money per member than the congregations in the national sample.

Breaking the picture down to individual jurisdictions, we found drastically different financial realities. On one end are the Greek Orthodox parishes, where the relatively high generosity of members, combined with significant fundraising efforts, allows them to spend over \$2,100 per parishioner annually. On the far other end are ROCOR churches, operating on a low budget of just \$553 per person, sustained, at least partially, by bivocational part-time priests who take much less from the parish coffers. If anything, the data proves that there is more than one way for a church to pay the bills on time, even if those ways look radically different.

### **Church and Politics: Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell?**

*“The separation of church and state is an excellent idea, mostly because it keeps politicians out of churches and preachers out of politics – saving both from a great deal of bad advice.”* Some anonymous person (not me).

The old “gold standard” of American social life suggests to never discuss politics or religion at the dinner table. But what happens when those two volatile subjects collide inside a church, especially in today’s era of intense political polarization?

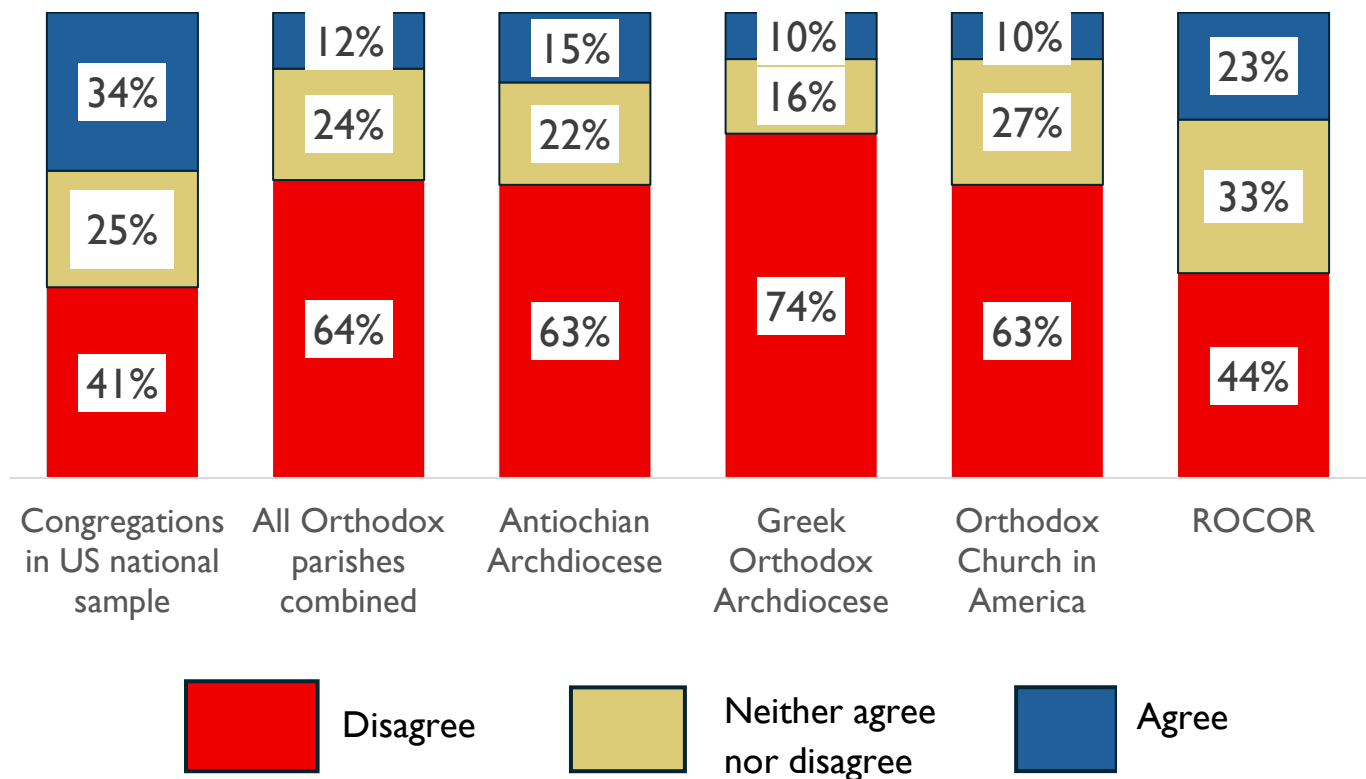
Are American places of worship filled with politically like-minded people, or do they need to navigate considerable ideological divides? Do congregations actively engage in the politics of the day as part of their vision, or do they refrain from doing so to preserve unity among the faithful? The FACT 2025 data offers a few good insights into both questions.

The survey asked clergy whether they agree that “almost everyone in this congregation has the same political position.”

Figure 45 shows that American Orthodox parishes house a much wider palette of ideological orientations among their members than the congregations in the US national sample. 64% of Orthodox priests disagreed that their parishioners share political uniformity, compared to just 41% of pastors in the national sample.

Among individual jurisdictions, the membership of the Greek Orthodox churches is the most politically diverse: nearly three-quarters (74%) of GOA clergy disagree with the statement regarding the political uniformity of their parishioners. On the other end of the spectrum, ROCOR are more likely to be composed of members who share the same ideological leanings.

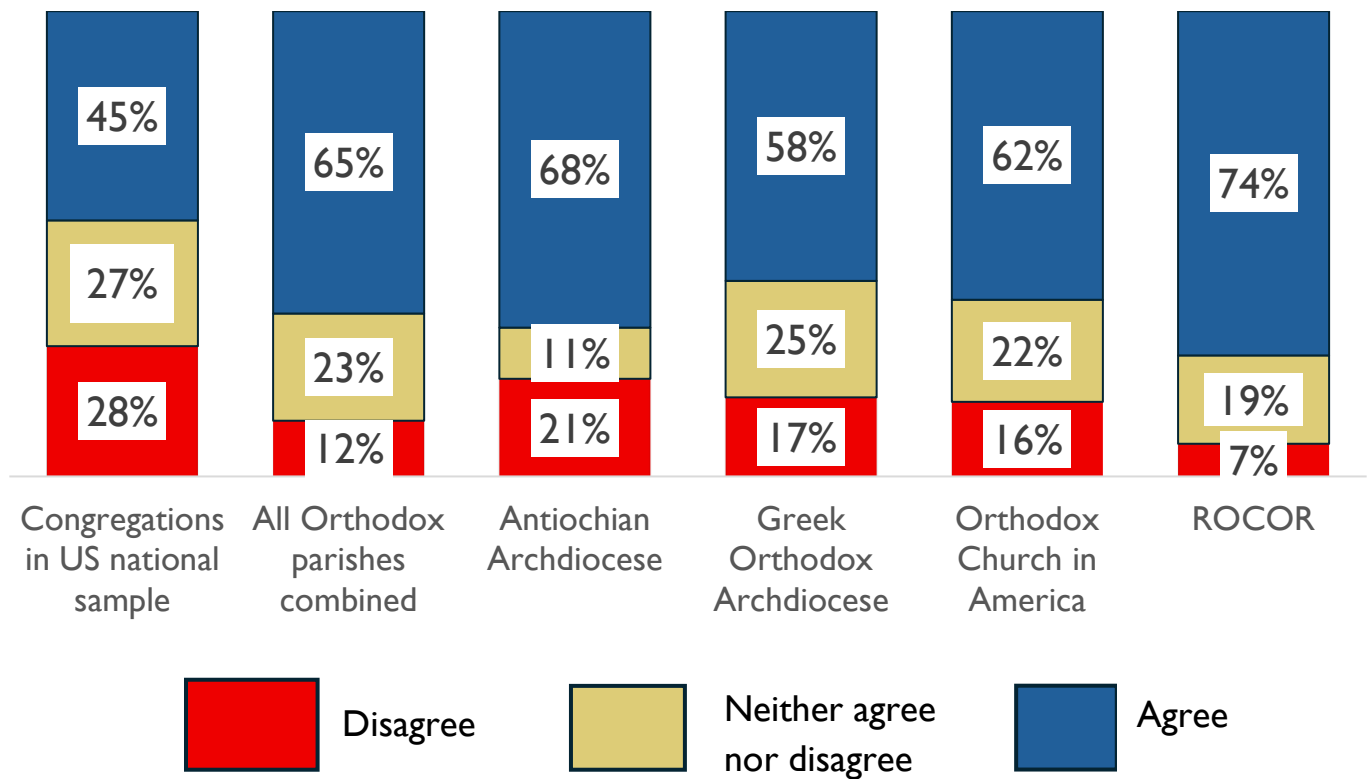
Fig. 45 “Do you agree or disagree that almost everyone in this congregation has the same political position?”



Yet, this relatively high variety of political preferences among members of Orthodox parishes is paired with low levels of political expression. Simply put, compared to all congregations in the national sample, Orthodox parishes are much more inclined to leave all political debates and activities outside the church.

As Figure 46 demonstrates, nearly two-thirds (65%) of Orthodox clergy agree that their parishes “avoid discussing political issues,” in contrast to less than half (45%) of all pastors nationwide. Among Orthodox jurisdictions, the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia stands out as the strongest champion of “no politics inside the church” approach.

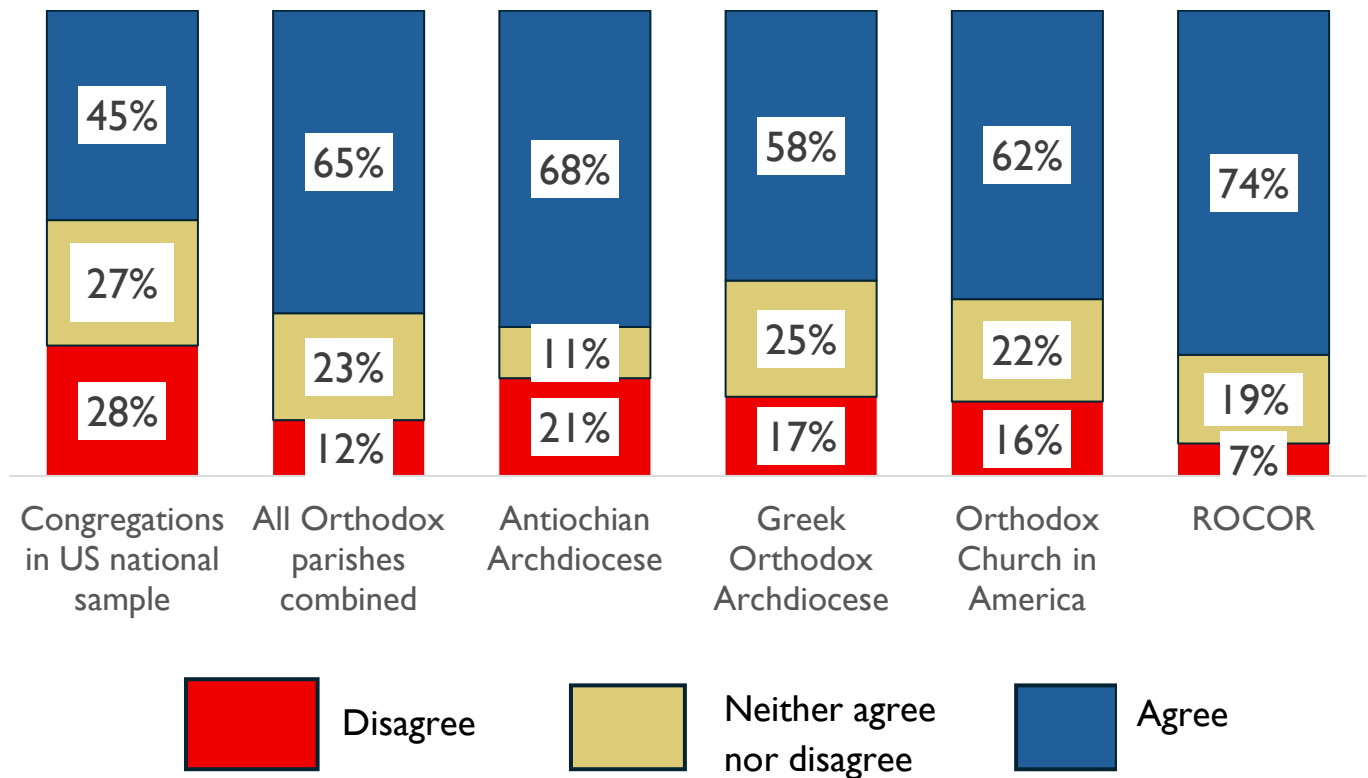
Fig. 46 “Do you agree or disagree that this congregation avoids discussing political issues?”



Consistent with putting a lid on political discussions, American Orthodox parishes also abstain from actual meddling in politics. And they are much more determined in doing so than US congregations overall.

Figure 47 shows that 75% of Orthodox priests disagree that their parishes are “politically active,” clearly outpacing 54% of clergy in the national sample.

Fig. 47 “Do you agree or disagree that this congregation avoids discussing political issues?”

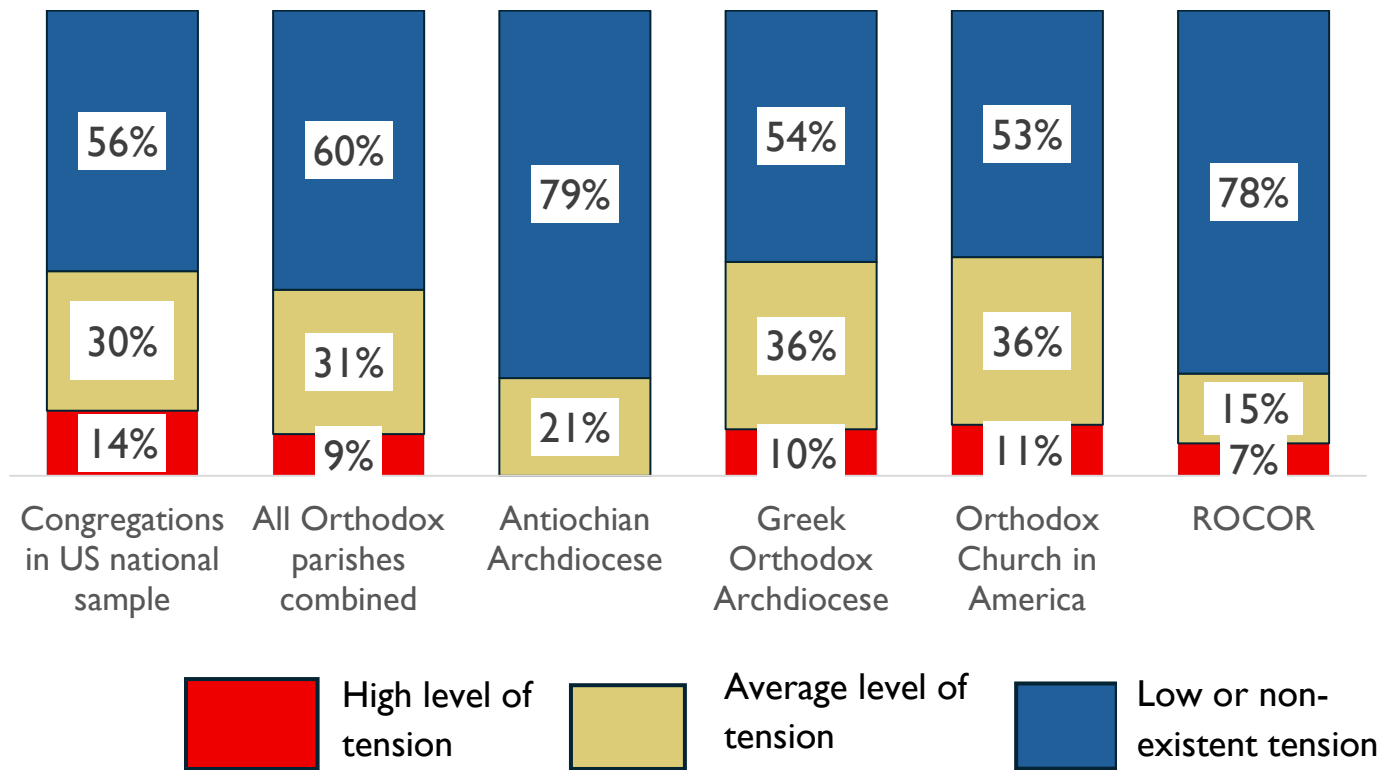


Did “no politics in the church” approach save Orthodox parishes from internal tensions, despite the ideological diversity of their members? The short answer to this question is: mostly, yes.

The survey asked clergy to rate the level of tension in their congregations surrounding social and political issues. Figure 48 indicates that American Orthodox parishes managed to avoid ideological frictions just as well as - if not better than - congregations in the US national sample. 60% of Orthodox priests reported “low or non-existent tension” with only 9% indicating “high tension,” compared to 56% and 14% among all pastors nationwide.

Still, as Figure 48 demonstrates, some Orthodox jurisdictions manage to have more “politically peaceful” parishes (Antiochian Archdiocese, Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia) than others (Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, Orthodox Church in America).

Fig. 48 “How would you rate the level of tension in your congregation surrounding social and political issues?”



To sum up this chapter, the data proves that a church does not need to be politically homogeneous to remain peaceful. A typical American Orthodox parish is significantly more politically diverse in members than the average US congregation, and yet it experiences slightly less ideological tension. The “Orthodox secret” to maintaining this peace is avoiding political discussions inside the church and abstaining from political activism—an approach far less common across US congregations nationwide.

Still, the data shows there is more than one way to achieve this peace in the church. While ROCOR parishes maintain harmony by attracting more politically like-minded parishioners who strictly avoid civic debates, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese also successfully avoids noticeable ideological friction despite having more political diversity and discourse in the pews.

## **Conclusion: The Orthodox Exception in Modern America?**

When looking at the data presented in this report, an interesting narrative emerges. In an era when the broader American religious landscape is defined by stalled attendance and rapid cultural shifts, Orthodox Christian parishes are forging a distinctive - and so far, successful - path.

Rather than adapting or modernizing to match overall trends among US religious congregations, Orthodox churches have leaned into their established practices. By keeping their physical doors open during the pandemic, refraining from online services, leaving secular politics at the church doors, and maintaining traditional religious disciplines like fasting, Orthodox parishes have not merely survived; they have experienced remarkable recent growth. Survey data paint them as being spiritually vital, increasingly youthful, highly educated, financially sound, and doing a great job of integrating new members.

To be sure, this internal vitality and ability to serve as a formidable spiritual anchor comes at a certain price. The data shows that Orthodox parishes often operate as insular communities, with little involvement in their local neighborhoods and not much attention to personal evangelism.

Furthermore, the Orthodox experience is not a monolith, exhibiting considerable variance across individual jurisdictions.

Yet, the ultimate conclusion is undeniable. Today, for US Orthodox churches, their defining resistance to change continues to be their greatest asset for navigating a rapidly changing America. Whether this investment in tradition will continue to pay dividends in the future remains to be seen.