

Surveys shed light on pandemic-related challenges churches must face

BY TRACY SIMMONS

For the first time in more than 15 years, theological schools have experienced an uptick in enrollment, indicating newly minted ministers will need a place to serve. However, the pandemic—coupled with trends over the past two decades—shows that might be difficult.

Overall, most congregations are growing older, smaller, and—by many measures—less vital, though there are hopeful signs of resilience and creativity throughout US congregations.

This leaves new clergy wondering what the church will look like moving forward and how congregations will function. Will there be adequate full-time placement for the large number of new graduates and what new skills will they need to know to lead post-pandemic faith communities?

The [Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations](#) project, spearheaded by the Hartford Institute of Religion Research at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace, is working to address these questions in collaboration with Debbie Gin, ATS director of research and faculty development, and many other scholars serving as researchers and advisors.

Using both qualitative and quantitative data, we are exploring how Christian congregations are adapting to the pandemic and what implications COVID-19 has had, and will have, on the decline, stability, and/or growth of the church.



Since our launch last summer, we have conducted three national surveys. The first, which included 2,074 survey responses from 38 Christian denominational groups, was released in November 2021 and showed that congregational life was far from back to normal, with 80% of churches offering hybrid services and only 15% solely worshipping in person. However, it also showed that community service activities remained a thriving ministry for most churches and continued to be offered in person.

Our second report, released a month later, revealed that most churches were embracing new and innovative ministry opportunities. One congregation, for example, helped to fund a food truck that was donated to a school to provide a mobile feeding center for a low-income community. Another of our survey respondents said their church went from a monthly sandwich-making ministry to feeding up to 1,200 people per week.

The most recent survey, published in April, showed that religious education took a hit during the pandemic and is struggling to recover. Half of the 615 survey respondents

from churches in 31 Christian denominational groups said they felt the pandemic had caused major disruption to their educational programs. This includes Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, church day camps, and adult education. Smaller churches, those in the mainline tradition, and churches that did not quickly return to a modified in-person education program suffered more during the past two years.

Since our initial survey one year ago, most congregations are now reporting they are back to in-person worship (97%) with the vast majority (80%) offering a hybrid of face-to-face and virtual services.

However, the median attendance for US congregations is averaging the same now as it was before the pandemic, with only 30% of churches claiming to have the same or greater attendance as they did prior to 2020. For most, though, attendance is roughly 20% less than it was before COVID-19.

Other trends observed before the pandemic, including an increasing number of small churches and a growing percentage of part-time pastoral positions, continue to be monitored as it remains to be seen what the post-pandemic situation will bring.

According to the “Twenty Years of Congregational Change” report by Faith Communities Today, 70% of churches now have 100 or fewer weekly attendees, with half in the country having 65 people or fewer in weekly attendance. It is predicted that this trend will accelerate during the next ten years in the post-pandemic world. In many cases, smaller congregations have led to unpaid or part-time faith leaders, resulting in churches becoming less vital to their communities.

In the Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations surveys, there is evidence that dynamics within congregations are also changing. While volunteering is significantly off from pre-pandemic levels, giving has remained robust. Ministry needs and requests for support have risen, and 55% of congregations added or intensified

their outreach efforts to the community. At the same time, clergy express exhaustion. The year 2020 was one of the worst years of their ministry, 70% of them said.

According to a February article in the Religion News Service, “After two years of a global pandemic, rabbis, pastors, and other congregational leaders have given up predicting the future. Some say they are exhausted. Some are thinking about quitting. Others, while they are weary and the future is uncertain, say the pandemic has also brought opportunities for ministry and growth.”

Perhaps most importantly, there is some evidence from the surveys that churches are more open and willing to change to meet new challenges. They are also continuing to experiment with the delivery of worship services, rethink committee meeting formats, and have a greater desire to use their buildings in new ways.

What will come of all this once the dust settles is unknown. However, that is the reason we will continue the systematic study of churches through the summer of 2026. We want an accurate picture of what congregational life will be after the pandemic influences play out. Your students and alumni can participate in this research by volunteering their churches to participate in our surveys. Additionally, your seminary could be a collaborating partner in this research. If you have done small studies related to the pandemic and are willing to post summaries of those investigations on our site, please let us know by emailing us at info@covidreligionresearch.org or by visiting <https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/get-involved/researchers/>

Although we don't yet know exactly what the future will hold for congregations, we intend to watch it carefully. What is certain, however, is that the next reality of congregational life will require new skills and abilities of clergy that should be learned in their seminary preparation. The times and challenges demand an additional set of new tools in the ministerial toolkit.

Principal investigator of our project, Scott Thumma, will be presenting a workshop at the upcoming 2022 ATS/COA Biennial Meeting Onsite Conference in Pittsburgh this June. His workshop will report new findings from our

three recent surveys and will also provide an overview of our Lilly Endowment-funded research project.



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