

**The “New Traditional” in a Most Traditional Church:
How the Pandemic Has Reshaped American Orthodox Christian Churches**
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Executive Summary

The core question addressed in this report is: how has the pandemic transformed the Orthodox Church, “the original Christian Church that never changes”? The report examined not only overall impact of the pandemic and the ongoing process of recovery in church life, but most importantly, the possible long-term consequences of the past two years for American Orthodox Christian parishes. Special attention has also been given to the “mysteriously” strong growth in vitality that some parishes experienced despite and even because of the pandemic. This study 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. Data were gathered January 24 – February 10, 2022 through an online survey of 370 Orthodox parish clergy from all parts of the country. The following major subjects are discussed in the report:

- ❖ Changes in membership, worship attendance, and involvement in religious education. The reasons for growth in some parishes against the backdrop of a general and widespread decline
- ❖ The positives and negatives of switching to an “online mode” for church services, religious education and other ministries
- ❖ Church closures and mortality rates among church members
- ❖ Internal conflicts within parishes and their disagreements with ruling bishops because of pandemic-related decisions
- ❖ The pandemic’s effects on financial health of the parishes
- ❖ Changes in overall parish vitality and distinctive features of the 12% of parishes manifesting strong growth in vitality throughout the pandemic
- ❖ Greatest achievements of the parishes and their major fears for the future

Several open-ended questions allowed us to learn about creative strategies and practices developed by the parishes that helped them through this crisis. Descriptions of these strategies and practices are included in the report.

The study was conducted in cooperation with the national research initiative *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations: Innovation Amidst and Beyond COVID-19*. Therefore, in several instances, the report presents consequences of the pandemic for US Orthodox Churches as compared to other Christian denominations.

A few examples of key results are given below:

- During the past two years, most parishes suffered losses in the total number of parishioners and, even more dramatically, in the number of people who attend liturgical services now that their churches have reopened for in-person worship. A “typical” (median) parish shrank by 15% in members who were regularly involved. If measured by average in-person worship attendance, a “typical” Orthodox parish has lost 22% of its pre-pandemic “people in the pews.”
- However, one in five parishes experienced the opposite trend and grew substantially by more than 20% in members and in-person worship attendance. And this growth was not random. The report identified and discussed seven particular characteristics and factors that were associated with this growth
- More than one-fifth (22%) of US Orthodox parishes never closed their doors and continued in-person worship services throughout the pandemic, in comparison with only 7% of other American Christian religious congregations
- The single area of church life most negatively affected by the pandemic has been faith formation of children and teenagers. Nationwide, a “typical” (median) parish is currently missing a quarter of its pre-pandemic students. About one-fifth of the parishes completely shut down their faith formation programs for young people with the start of the pandemic and have not yet resumed them
- Despite the overall decline in young people’s participation in religious education, one in seven parishes (14%) witnessed the opposite: growth by more than +20% in the number of students. The study looked at distinctive demographic characteristics of these parishes and also found two factors contributing to greater participation of children and teenagers. The first is the modality of religious education. 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.
- Presently, nearly two-thirds (63%) of the parishes offer their worship services on the internet. The study found that the online format can potentially enhance two parish ministries: work with prospective converts and catechumens, and religious education for adults. But in all other areas of parish life, the virtual version of programs and activities has had a rather negative impact on parishioners’ involvement. The online modality has an especially strong negative influence on

parishioners' participation in Sunday Liturgy, the involvement of children and teenagers in religious education, and youth activities and programs.

- The rate of deaths from COVID-19 is nearly three times higher among members of American Orthodox Churches than among the general US population. American Orthodox parishes also suffered more from COVID-related deaths than other Christian congregations
- For many parishes, the pandemic was a powerful learning experience in effective local decision-making. One-third of the parishes (33%) reported that during the pandemic they “became accustomed to making decisions locally and without waiting for guidance from the diocesan headquarters.”
- During the pandemic, one in eight American Orthodox parishes (12%) reported strong growth in overall vitality. In summary, “strong growth” in vitality in these parishes includes:
 1. Both growth in the number of new members and greater involvement of existing (pre-pandemic) parishioners, which especially manifests itself in more frequent participation in worship services
 2. A substantial increase in engagement of adults in learning about their faith and the ability of a parish to - at least - maintain the rate of young people’s participation in religious education during the pandemic
 3. Not only improvement of parish finances, but in many instances their full reversal from “tight or difficult” to “excellent or good”
 4. Finding new ways to get involved in their local community to a much greater extent than they had done pre-pandemic.
- The study looked at distinctive characteristics of the parishes with strong growth in vitality. Compared to all other parishes, these 12% of churches:
 1. Placed great emphasis on keeping their worship services and other practices as unchanged as possible throughout the pandemic including in-person services, in-person religious education classes, and continuing the traditional way of administering Holy Communion (with one spoon from a common chalice)
 2. Pay more attention to collective decision-making, in which entire parish community participates
 3. Are reluctant to offer their services online, consistent with the negative attitude of their clergy towards virtual Orthodox worship as undermining the nature of the Orthodox liturgical tradition.

The next crucially important stage of this study will be to listen the “people in the pews” – ordinary Orthodox parishioners – and learn from them how the pandemic has changed the lives of their congregations. If you are willing to help with such a study in your parish, please communicate via email to orthodoxdata@usreligioncensus.org or via the contact form on the website, www.orthodoxreality.org.