

STUBBORN OR PERSISTENT? HOW AMERICAN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN CHURCHES DEALT WITH AND RECOVERED FROM THE PANDEMIC

ALEXEI KRINDATCH

FAITH COMMUNITIES TODAY SURVEY
& THE EXPLORING THE PANDEMIC IMPACT
ON CONGREGATIONS NATIONAL RESEARCH



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

I. “IGNORING” THE PANDEMIC

II. ONLINE WORSHIP

III. WORSHIP ATTENDANCE AND OVERALL PARTICIPATION IN THE CONGREGATIONS

IV. CHURCH FINANCES DURING AND POST-PANDEMIC

V. GAINING NEW MEMBERS AND REGULAR VOLUNTEERS IN A CONGREGATION

VI. CONGREGATIONAL IDENTITY: HOW WAS IT AFFECTED BY THE PANDEMIC?

VII. CONCLUSION

ALEXEI KRINDATCH



Alexei Krindatch is a sociologist of religion with a deep expertise on U.S. Orthodox Christian Churches. His professional website, providing free access to many his reports, articles and books is: www.orthodoxreality.org.

Alexei is the author of three books: Geography of Religions in Russia, Atlas of American Orthodox Christian Churches, and the five-star Amazon-rated Atlas of American Orthodox Monasteries.

An avid world traveler, Alexei lives in Berkeley, California. He also writes a travel-blog with stories on his trips to many places and countries: www.alexeiontheroad.com

STUBBORN OR PERSISTENT? HOW AMERICAN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN CHURCHES DEALT WITH AND RECOVERED FROM THE PANDEMIC

INTRODUCTION

It is clear now that COVID-19 resulted in many lasting consequences for religious congregations. However, not all religious communities were affected equally. The impact of the pandemic differed from one faith community to another, depending on the nature of a particular religion's practices and its demographic composition. Many factors either mitigated or aggravated pandemic's effects, including: geography (some states enforced stricter restrictions on public gatherings and longer church closures than others), demographics of membership (older people were more likely to self-isolate and stay home longer), social class (congregations with substantial resources had more options to creatively design new "alternative" forms of participation), race (certain racial/ethnic groups suffered greater exposure to the virus and higher infection rates and mortality), and much more.

Two aspects which also need to be considered when looking at congregational responses to the COVID-19 pandemic are the style of worship and willingness of a congregation to change and adapt to the new circumstances. The more a worship style liturgically emphasizes participants' physical presence and engages all senses (i.e., the more "embodied" it is), and requires abundant in-person interaction, the more in discord it was with adaptations triggered by the pandemic, such as online worship and virtual participation in congregational life.

Orthodox Christianity is a prime example of such a highly "embodied" church tradition both during and outside of worship services. Indeed, praying together in complex, multisensory services (e.g., processions, chants, incense) and with many physical interactions (e.g., kissing the Cross, icons, and the priest's hand; receiving Holy Communion with a shared spoon from a common chalice) are benchmarks of the Orthodox Church. Similarly, after services, animated multigenerational gatherings - frequently spiced with ethnic potlucks - are also "must do" activities in many Orthodox parishes



Photo by Alexei Krindatch

Other religious groups such as Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, or the Episcopal Church may be also considered “traditionally liturgical and highly embodied” Their services follow certain formal liturgical protocols, are multisensory and in many ways similar to the Orthodox Church. Despite these similarities, however, this is where an important “dividing line” comes into play: namely, the tradition’s willingness to change and adapt to changing circumstances or the lack thereof.

In this regard, compared to the Roman Catholic or Episcopal churches, Orthodoxy places a much greater emphasis on preserving things the way “they have always been.” Unlike Roman Catholicism or the Episcopal Church, in Orthodox churches, women cannot serve in any sacramental role and the institute of lay ministry is virtually non-existent. Participation in Holy Communion is limited only to Orthodox Church members. The usage of modern instruments or hymns is unheard in Orthodox parishes. Local Orthodox Christian congregations have fewer opportunities for even marginal experimentation with liturgy compared to their Roman Catholic and Episcopalian counterparts. Any worship “innovation” must be approved and blessed by a Bishop.

In short, Orthodox Christianity defines itself by strict adherence to ancient religious practices and strong resistance to change. The unyielding resolve to remain the “only original Christian Church” by retaining the teachings, rituals, and practices of ancient Christianity posed an additional challenge for Orthodox parishes when they had to deal with disruptions and forced changes brought by the pandemic.

It should be noted that there is no single Orthodox Christian Church in the U.S. in a sense of a unified and uniform denomination. Instead, several “jurisdictions” (the word commonly used by Orthodox instead of denominations) co-exist side-by-side and are administratively fully independent from each other. The largest three are the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, the Orthodox Church in America, and the Antiochian Archdiocese. Yet, while being separate church bodies and having certain distinct features, all Orthodox jurisdictions share the same teachings, adhere to the same religious practices, and are in full communion with one another. This report uses data coming from the parishes (congregations) representing all the major Orthodox jurisdictions. Therefore, this report simply uses the term “Orthodox Church” with an understanding that this references a “family” of diverse Orthodox Christian jurisdictions that exist in the United States.

The key questions of this report are: compared to the overall picture of US congregations, what was unique about Orthodox Christian parishes response to the COVID-19 crisis? And how has the pandemic affected the Orthodox Church, “the original Christian Church that never changes” as she is frequently and proudly described by her faithful? This report shows that despite (or, perhaps, thanks to) their resistance to change, Orthodox Christian churches managed to navigate through the pandemic quite successfully on some measures. And yet, in other areas of church life, they experienced significant losses.

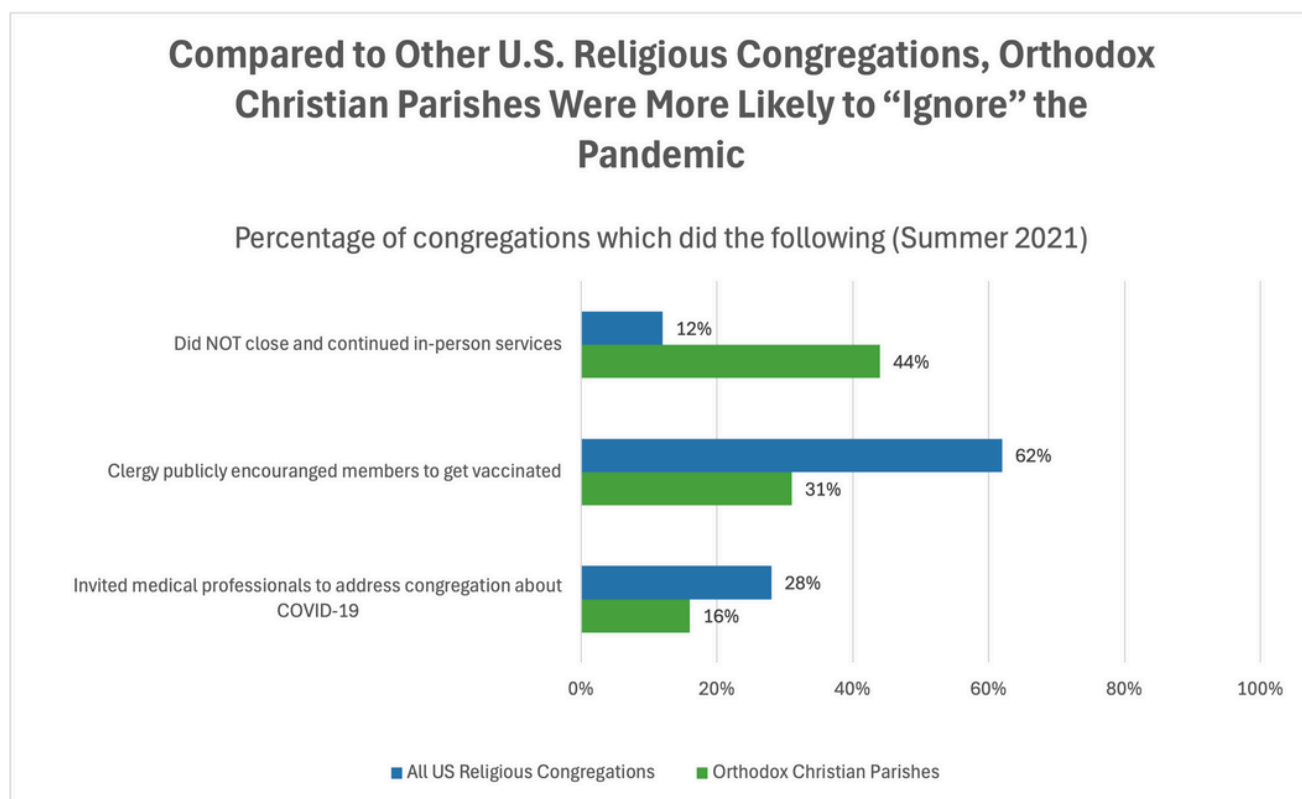
This report draws on the Faith Communities Today (FACT) spring 2020 data for pre-pandemic data and two Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC) surveys, collected in the midst of the pandemic (summer 2021) and post-pandemic (spring 2023). In particular, this report focuses on the following subjects: views on the pandemic, implementation of online services, changes in worship attendance and overall church participation, church finances, new members, and congregational identity (self-perception of what is or what is not a characteristic of a parish).

I. “IGNORING” THE PANDEMIC

Perhaps, the most obvious distinction between Orthodox Christian parishes and other U.S. religious congregations in how they handled the COVID-19 pandemic was the fact that the former were more likely to continue meeting and worshipping in person throughout the pandemic and also less likely to bring up the subject of the COVID-19 in congregational life (see figure 1).

Even at the height of the pandemic, many more Orthodox parishes (44%) **did not** close their doors as compared to other U.S. religious congregations (12%) and instead continued holding in-person worship services. Additionally, compared to other clergy, Orthodox priests were much more reluctant to publicly encourage their members to get vaccinated. Only 31% of them did so, in comparison to 62% of US pastors in general. Similarly, fewer Orthodox parishes invited medical professionals to address their congregation about COVID-19 compared to other US congregations.

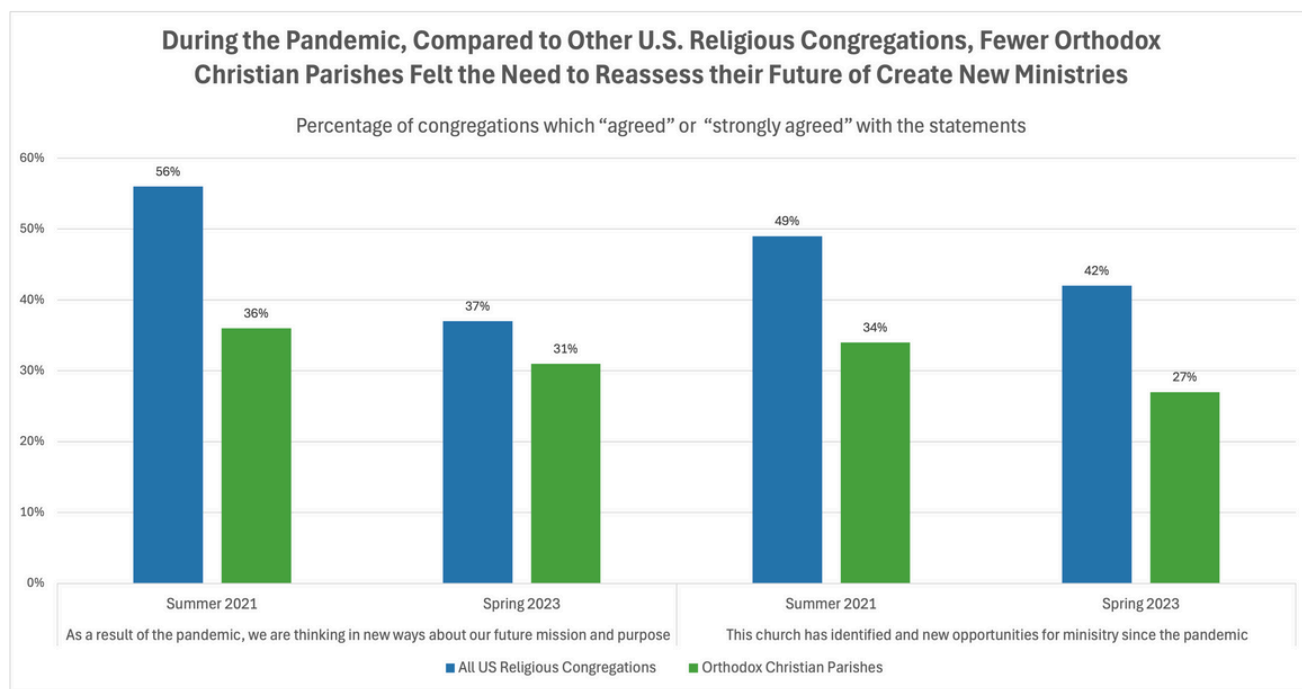
FIGURE 1



Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

Similarly, when faced with these novel pandemic-driven circumstances, Orthodox parishes were less likely than other congregations to initiate new forms of ministry to address the situation or reassess their future mission and direction. As Figure 2 shows, compared to congregations in other religious traditions, both at the peak of the pandemic (summer 2021) and post-pandemic (spring 2023), a considerably smaller percentage of Orthodox parishes “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statements: “this church has identified and embraced new opportunities for ministry since the pandemic,” and, “as a result of the pandemic, we are thinking in new ways about our future mission and direction.”

FIGURE 2



Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

The crucial question is: Did this approach of “ignoring the pandemic” help Orthodox churches to navigate through the crisis more successfully than the other U.S. congregations? The following sections will explore this question by looking at several areas of congregational life.

II. ONLINE WORSHIP



Photo by Alexei Krindatch

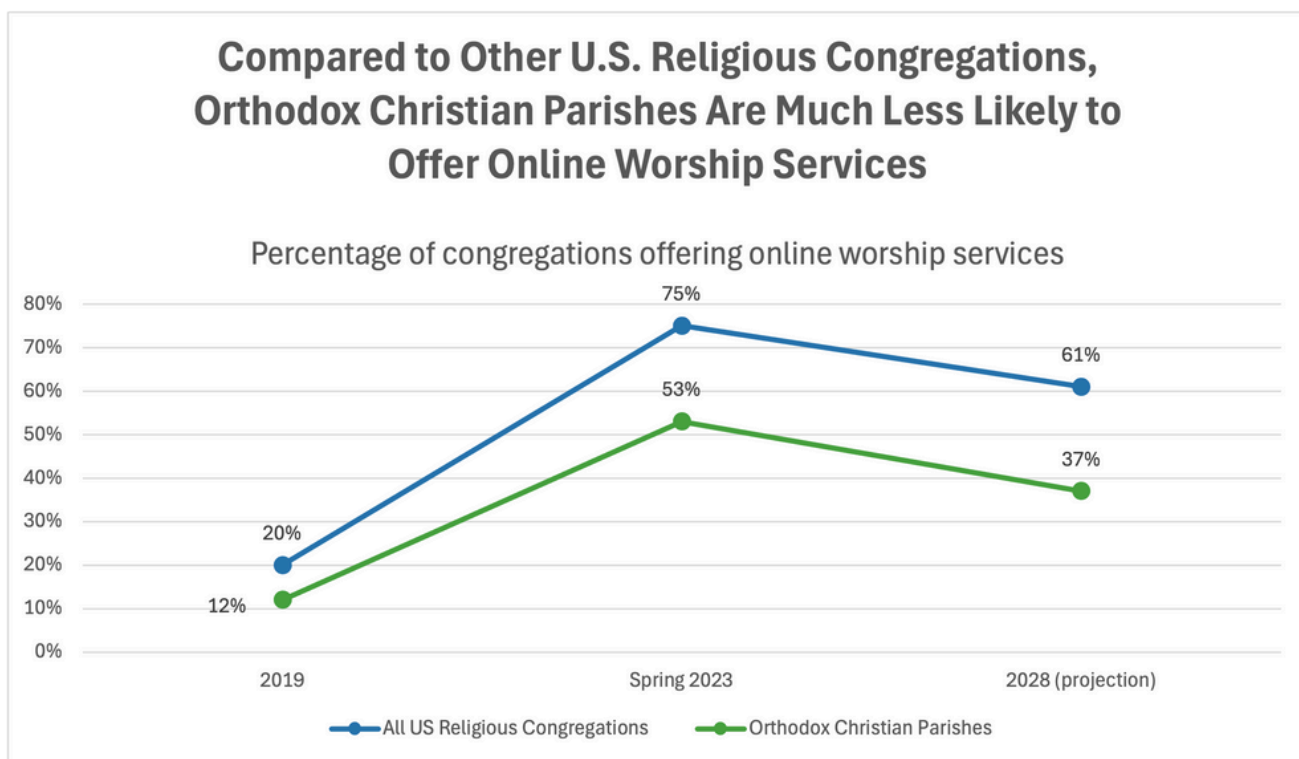
Perhaps the most obvious change brought by the pandemic for all religious congregations was an amazingly fast proliferation of online religious services. For many people, this format was the only option for partaking in worship, since most U.S. congregations (88%) were closed for in-person gatherings at least, for some time. For other congregants, this was a matter of choice: whether to worship in the safety of their homes or attend in-person and be potentially exposed to the virus in the church. Either way, as the pandemic evolved, it is likely that more and more church members became fully accustomed to “Zooming” into services from the comfort of home. It is also likely, as time went by, some of them began to see the online worship option not simply as safer, but also as more convenient and time efficient.

After nearly four years since the wide adoption of online services, two questions need to be answered. The first is: “How many congregations offered remote worship option, and will the practice continue or even expand?” The second question is: “Overall, how do churches feel about online vs. in-person services?”

EPIC data indicate that compared to other U.S. religious congregations, Orthodox parishes have been, and continue to be, intentionally reluctant to use virtual worship.

As Figure 3 shows, 20% of all U.S. religious congregations offered online worship pre-pandemic vs. only 12% in the case of Orthodox churches. By spring 2023, three quarters of all congregations could worship remotely, compared to only slightly over half of the Orthodox parishes. Further, when congregations currently offering online service were asked, “Do you imagine that you will still be offering an online/virtual worship option in 5 years”, 81% of all congregations responded affirmatively vs. only 70% of Orthodox parishes. If these intentions come true, then the gap in online worship presence between Orthodox churches and all other congregations will continue to grow (see Figure 3 that includes projections for 2028 of likely churches using virtual worship 37% and 61% respectively).

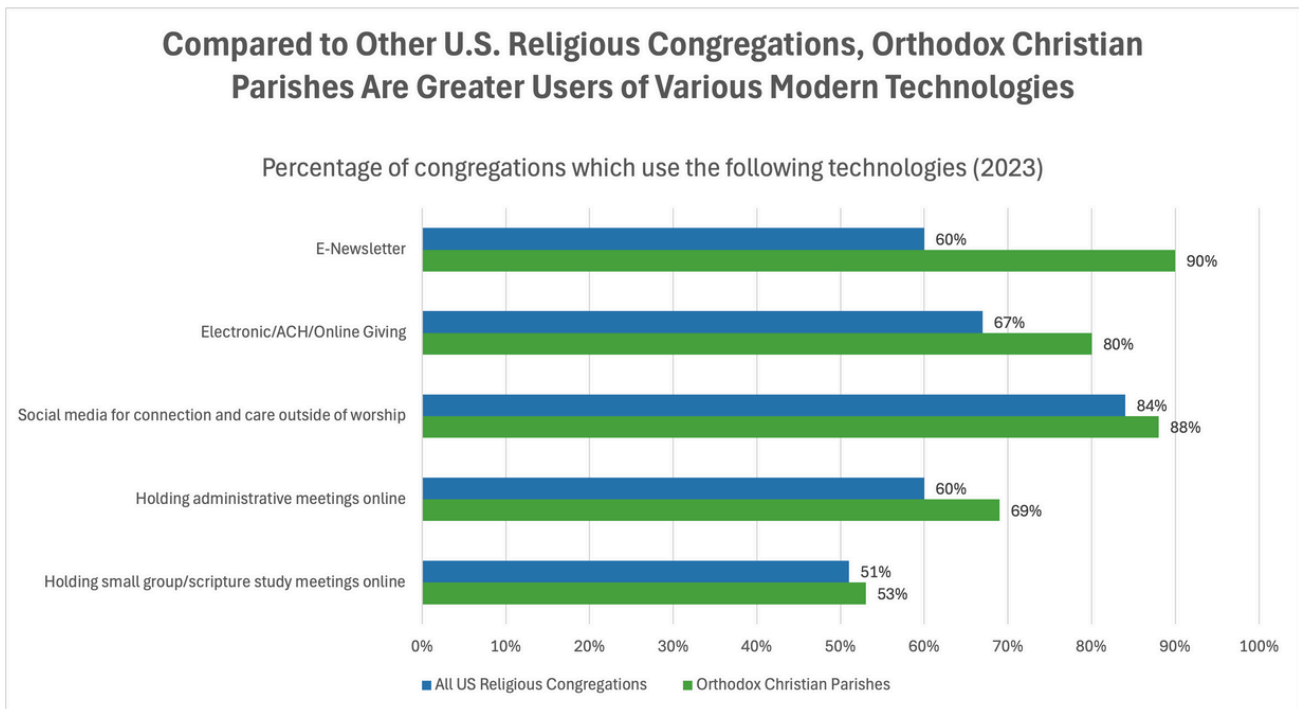
FIGURE 3



Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

It should be noted that considerably lower usage of online worship services by Orthodox Christian churches cannot be explained by their inability employ various technological innovations in the church life. To the contrary, compared to other congregations, Orthodox parishes are greater users of many modern technologies. (See Figure 4).

FIGURE 4



Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

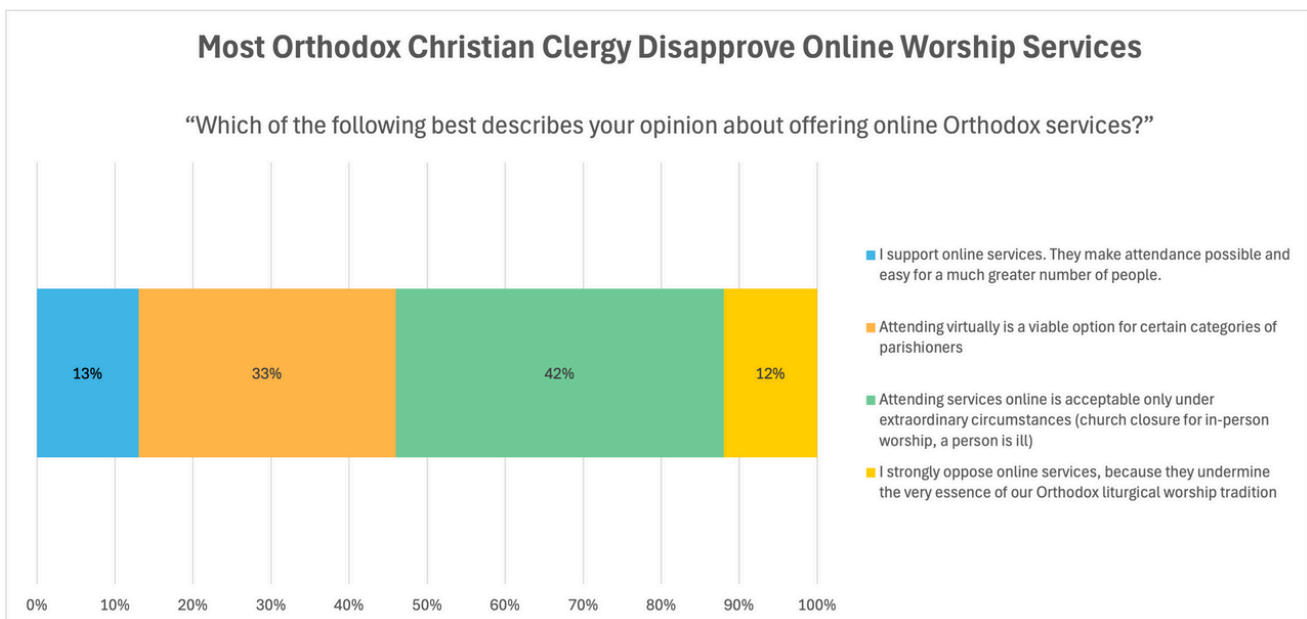
Another national study which focused specifically on Orthodox parishes during the pandemic ([The Pandemic and American Orthodox Parishes](#)) confirms that the absence of online worship options in many Orthodox Christian parishes is intentional as it contradicts the very nature of Orthodox Christian liturgical practices.

Nevertheless, when the pandemic erupted, a majority of Orthodox Christian parishes were forced to introduce online services, much like other congregations. And they did so remarkably quickly. According to [The Pandemic and American Orthodox Parishes](#) study, in early May 2020 almost two-thirds of Orthodox parishes (64%) offered the parishioners the opportunity to partake in their liturgical lives online (compared to only 12% pre-pandemic). Notably, however, this percentage did not grow any further throughout the next two years of the pandemic. In early 2022, nearly the same (63%) percentage of the parishes offered their services online. Essentially, this indicates that Orthodox churches made their decisions about offering virtual worship or not at the onset of the pandemic. At that time, more than one-third of them remained “in-person” only and did so throughout the duration of the pandemic. Further, as Figure 3 shows, the percentage of Orthodox parishes with online services had declined to 53% by the spring of 2023 indicating a retreat from this mode once it was no longer viewed as absolutely necessary.



As for the attitudes towards online worship, data from the study The ‘New Traditional’ in a Most Traditional Church: How the Pandemic Has Reshaped American Orthodox Christian Churches conducted in early 2022 found that less than half the Orthodox clergy (46%) support the idea of online services. As seen in Figure 5, the majority of Orthodox parish priests either unconditionally reject virtual services as undermining the essence of Orthodox liturgical worship (12%) or accept them only in the case of extraordinary circumstances—such as personal illness or church suspending in-person services (42%).

FIGURE 5



Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

III. WORSHIP ATTENDANCE AND OVERALL PARTICIPATION IN THE CONGREGATIONS

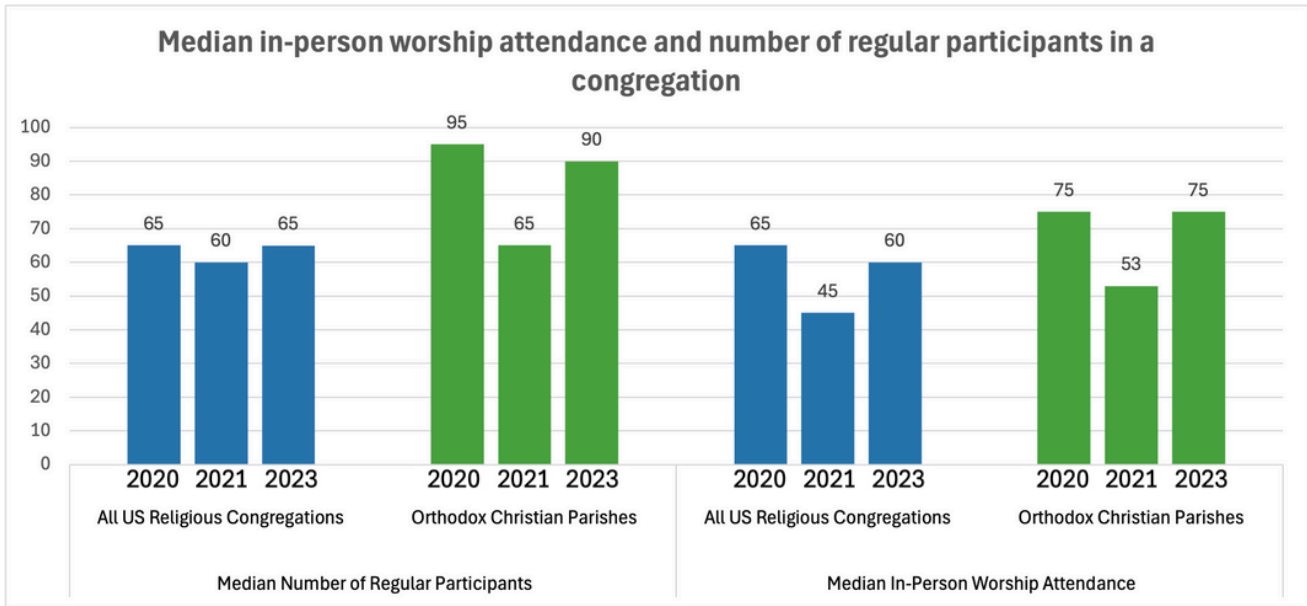
Two distinct features of Orthodox Christian parishes discussed previously – their tendency to “ignore” the pandemic and reluctance to employ online services – had significant consequences for trends in worship attendance and overall church participation throughout and post-pandemic.

Clearly, no other area of congregational life in the U.S. was affected as much by the pandemic as worship services. Complete church closures or restrictions on the number of people who could gather were imposed by most states and some denominations (even if secular authorities did not require it). At the local level, many congregations introduced their own policies to regulate services which were based on their unique contexts and the attitudes of their members and clergy. Individual church members also made their own decisions to either “self-isolate” and stay home even if a congregation continued in-person worship or to go to a service somewhere else if their own congregation had closed its doors. These dynamics were further complicated by the fast expansion of online worship options, allowing people to participate remotely. Now worshipers could “attend” not only their own congregation but even churches that were hundreds or thousands of miles away.

As noted previously, compared to other congregations, a significantly smaller percentage of Orthodox Christian parishes employed an online worship option. Furthermore, even fewer of them tracked the number of people who worshipped remotely. Given the scarcity and unreliability of data on online worship attendance in Orthodox churches, we limit this analysis to in-person attendance and overall regular participation in congregations (the latter measured by total number of adults and children who participate once a month or more frequent in any congregational activities).

Figure 6 displays a predictable trendline for in-person attendance numbers and the number of total participants. It shows a significant drop in both in-person attendance and overall regular participation from the pre-COVID level to the middle of the pandemic (summer 2021) but then a significant recovery by the spring of 2023. Both Orthodox Christian churches and all U.S. religious congregations experienced this dynamic. But how severe was the initial drop and how much did these numbers recover after the pandemic compared to the pre-pandemic level? Is there any difference between Orthodox parishes and other congregations?

FIGURE 6



Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

Table 1 shows the percentage of change for both in-person attendance and number of regular participants compared to their level in the spring of 2020.

Two quite different trends can be seen when comparing Orthodox Christian parishes and all other congregations. Orthodox parishes experienced a deep drop in the number of regular participants towards the middle of the pandemic (-32% compared to pre-pandemic) and have not fully recovered by the spring of 2023 (still 5% below their pre-pandemic level). At the same time, in-person attendance also declined almost as steeply as the participant numbers but by the spring of 2023, attendance fully recovered to initial pre-pandemic level in Orthodox parishes.

In comparison, many U.S. religious congregations experienced a different dynamic. For congregations in the national sample, the number of regular participants decreased relatively modestly towards the middle of the pandemic (-8%), and then fully returned to the pre-pandemic level by the spring of 2023. However, in-person worship attendance suffered much more from the pandemic (-31% in 2021 compared to 2020), and it still did not fully recover by the spring of 2023 (-8% compared to 2020).

Table 1

Percentage (%) Change in Median Worship Attendance and Number of Regular Participants in a Congregation Compared to 2020

	Summer 2021	Spring 2023
Change in Median Number of Regular Participants		
All US Religious Congregations	-8%	0%
Orthodox Christian Parishes	-32%	-5%
Change in Median In-Person Worship Attendance		
All US Religious Congregations	-31%	-8%
Orthodox Christian Parishes	-29%	0%

Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

A likely explanation for these two different patterns is the usage of online worship services in the Orthodox Christian parishes versus other U.S. religious congregations. During the pandemic, fewer Orthodox Christian parishes offered online worship as an alternative option for members. This contributed to a significant drop in overall participation in 2021 and, possibly, the complete loss of some pre-pandemic participants by 2023.

On the other hand, when it comes to the core-group of the more devoted members, those who prefer to gather and worship in person, the Orthodox parishes navigated through pandemic more successfully than other U.S. religious congregations. That is, the decline of in-person attendance towards the middle of the pandemic was slightly less in Orthodox parishes compared to other congregations (-29% vs. -31%), possibly because more Orthodox Church members were able to continue to attend in-person since more Orthodox parishes remained open. Most importantly, by the spring of 2023, Orthodox parishes were able to return to the same number of “in-person” worshippers as they had previously (2020), whereas other congregations were still 8% below their pre-pandemic level of “people in the pews.”

This explanation of a distinct “Orthodox scenario” can be anecdotally confirmed by the following quotes from two Orthodox parish priests who participated in [The ‘New Traditional’ in a Most Traditional Church: How the Pandemic Has Reshaped American Orthodox Christian Churches](#) and describes a major outcome of the pandemic specifically for Orthodox Christian churches.

“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 participating. Not that there is anything to celebrate with people not returning, but those who stayed have increased their ‘talent’ and dedication profoundly.”

“We are smaller in size than two years ago, but more agile. While we lost some parishioners permanently, the community is more close-knit and active. Parish life in some ways has never been better.”

Which of the two “scenarios” is better? Keeping your most dedicated members in the physical church as much as possible throughout the pandemic and assuring a full recovery of in-person attendance, but simultaneously losing some more marginally involved participants? Or, having all your pre-pandemic congregants still participating, either in-person or remotely, but at the cost of having increasingly empty physical sanctuaries? Clearly, each congregation will decide what the “right” answer is. The coming years will show how each of these scenarios will evolve.



Photo by Alexei Krindatch

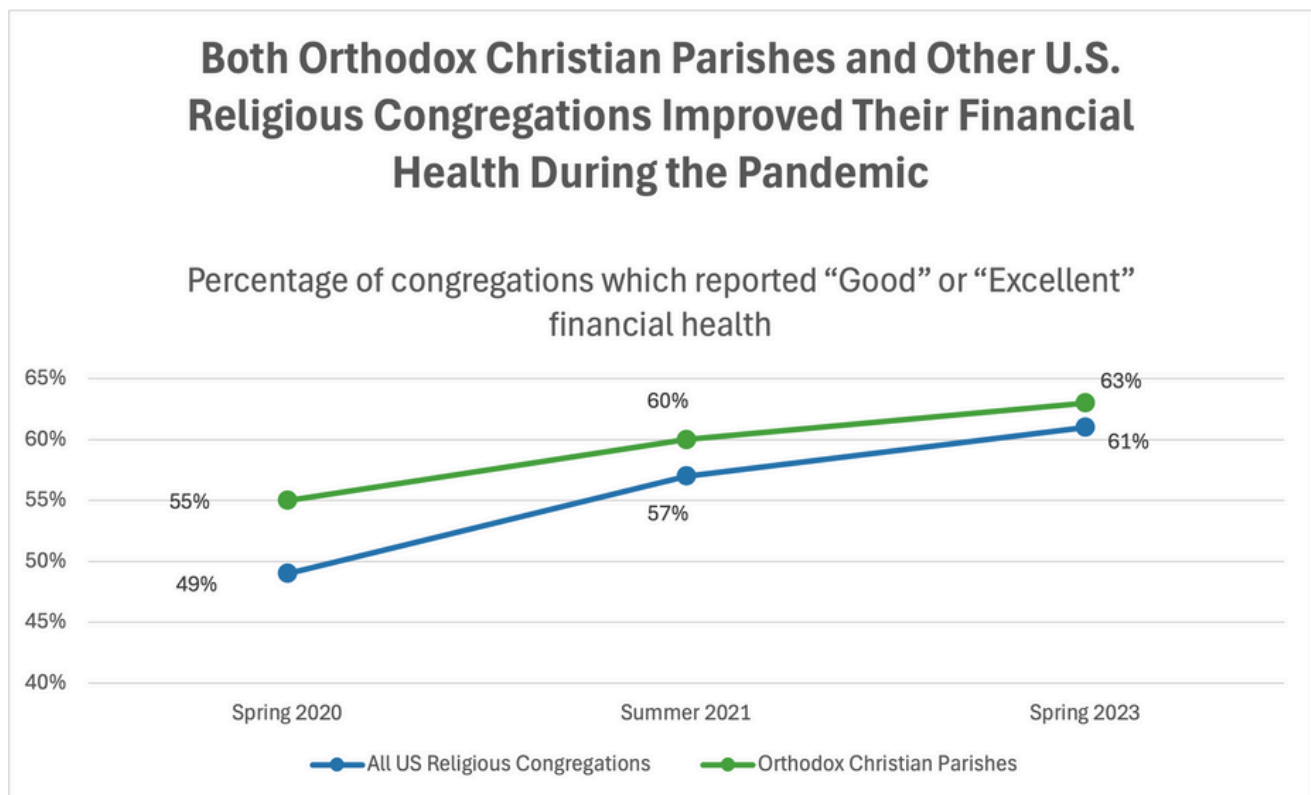
IV. CHURCH FINANCES DURING AND POST-PANDEMIC

Financial solvency is an important characteristic of congregational health and vitality. Indeed, having more monetary resources allows churches to be more flexible with creating new programs and ministries, hiring additional and well qualified staff members, etc.

Congregations were asked to assess their overall financial situation with options of “In serious difficulty,” “In some difficulty,” “Tight, but we manage,” “Good,” or “Excellent.”

Figure 7 shows that consistently – pre-pandemic, during, and immediately after COVID-19 – a slightly greater percentage of Orthodox Christian parishes reported either “good” or “excellent” financial health as compared to the national sample. At the same time, the overall trend for both Orthodox Christian parishes and the national sample of congregation has been similar, improving financial health with higher percentages reporting “good” or “excellent” in 2023 as compared to 2020.

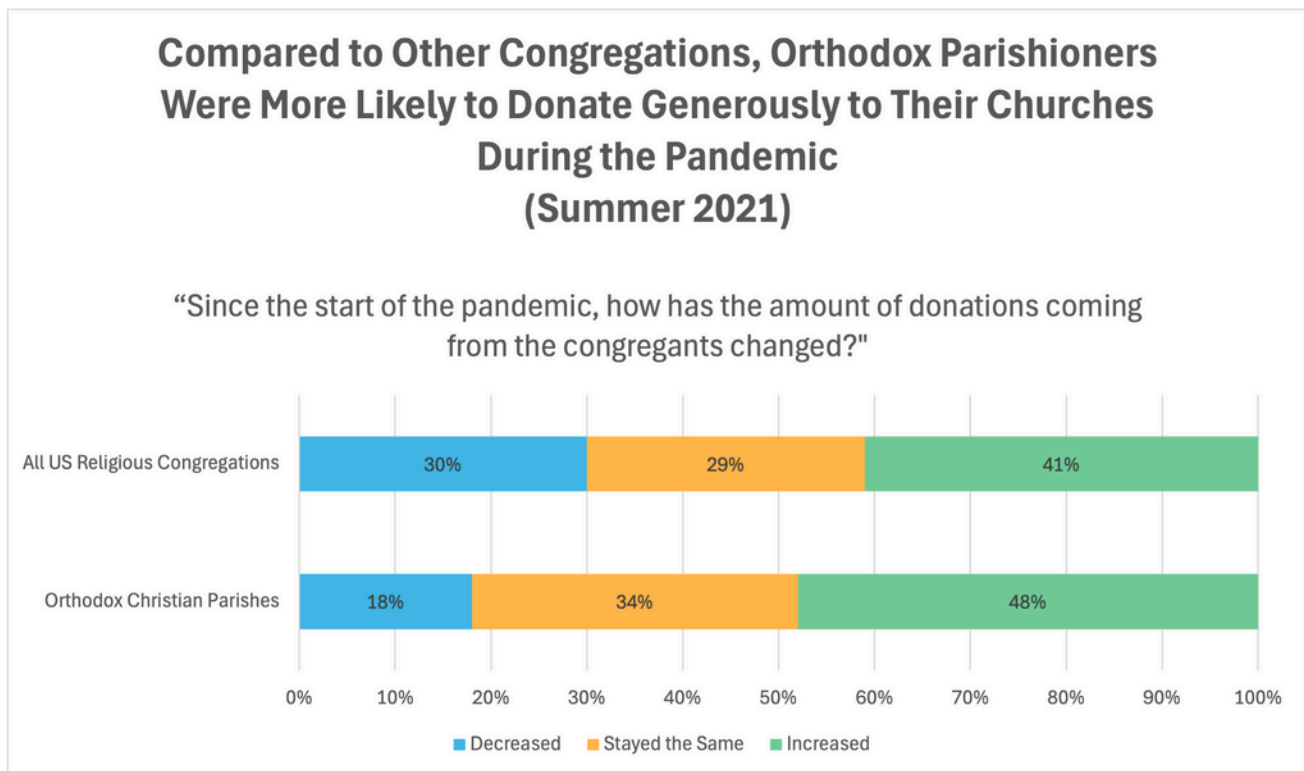
FIGURE 7



Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

An interesting difference between Orthodox parishes and other congregations, however, was that during the pandemic, the Orthodox parishioners were more likely to support their churches with an increased amount of donations than were the members of other U.S. religious congregations (see Figure 8). We do not have any data to explore this finding further, but one possible explanation can be offered. Amid the pandemic, many social venues (schools, restaurants, clubs, theatres) were shut down. Under such circumstances, people were especially appreciative of the places where they still could have an in-person experience of a close-knit local community. And they were, possibly, especially generous to support such places. As discussed earlier in this report, compared to the national sample of congregations, a significantly higher percentage of Orthodox parishes remained open throughout the pandemic resulting in the greater generosity of Orthodox congregants to their churches compared to members of other congregations.

FIGURE 8



Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

V. GAINING NEW MEMBERS AND REGULAR VOLUNTEERS IN A CONGREGATION



Photo by Alexei Krindatch

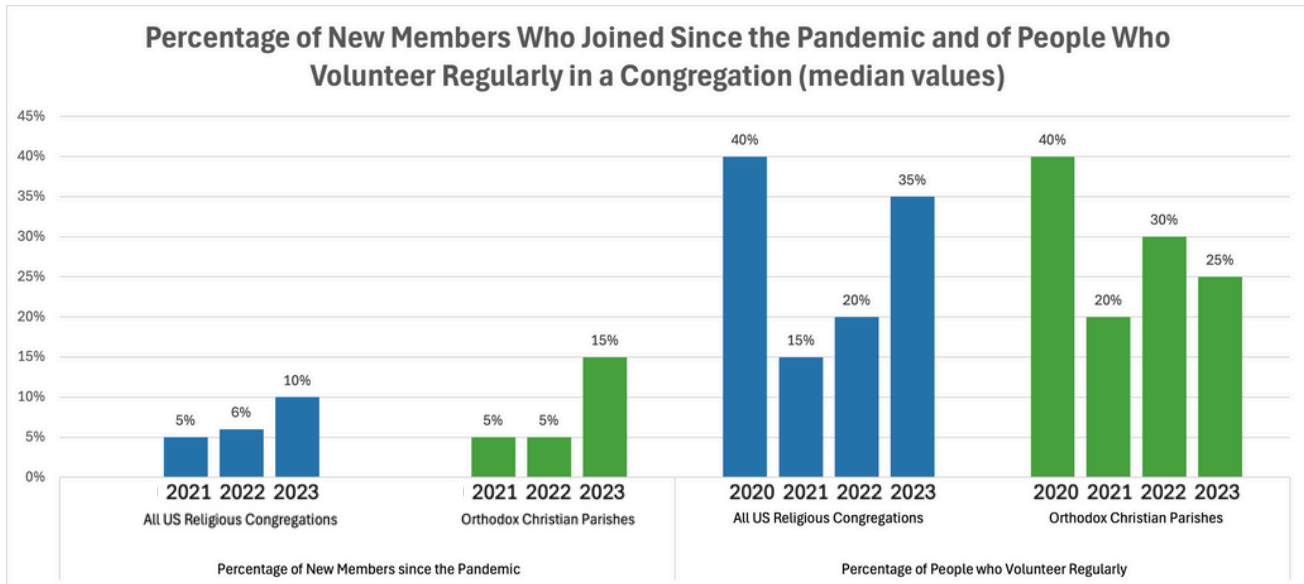
Healthy and vital congregations tend to attract new people, and they also have more congregants who volunteer regularly. These statements are true across denominations and faith traditions. The pandemic, however, changed the habitual ways that people could join a congregation and actively volunteer in it. Whether a congregation remained open for in-person worship, maintained some other in-person activities, or offered attractive online alternatives for active participation clearly impacted both the influx of new members and the number of regular volunteers.

Figure 9 shows that Orthodox Christian parishes and all congregations in the national sample experienced different dynamics in terms of change in volunteering and gaining new members. Pre-pandemic, Orthodox parishes had the same percentage of regular volunteers (40%) in a typical (median) congregation as those in the national sample.

Throughout the pandemic, however, the Orthodox Christian parishes retained a higher level of volunteering than the other congregations. But by the spring of 2023, the situation reversed and the percentage of regular volunteers in Orthodox parishes has declined to 25%, while other U.S. religious congregations have nearly recovered their pre-pandemic level of volunteer engagement (35%).

At the same time, Orthodox parishes were more successful than other congregations in acquiring new members through the pandemic. By spring 2023, 15% of the members of a typical (median) Orthodox parish were new people who had joined since the start of the pandemic compared to only 10% among other U.S. religious congregations.

FIGURE 9



Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

What could explain these two different patterns? It could be because many more Orthodox Christian parishes remained open for in-person worship and other activities through the pandemic as compared to all religious congregations. As a result, these parishes were able to both attract more new people and engage their original participants more successfully in volunteer roles. This is especially likely, considering that during the pandemic many people experienced social isolation or loneliness and were looking for any opportunity to socialize. But if this is the case, why have Orthodox parishes also witnessed a significant post-pandemic decline in the percentage of regular volunteers? One possible explanation is that perhaps these volunteers who served during a traumatic time of greater need were also more likely to get overwhelmed and burned out by the end of the pandemic. Is this decline in volunteers a short-lived trend or a new reality? Future EPIC and FACT surveys will hopefully help answer this question.

VI. CONGREGATIONAL IDENTITY: HOW WAS IT AFFECTED BY THE PANDEMIC?

Besides easily measurable rates of attendance, participation numbers, financial indices, etc. every congregation also has some distinct traditions, emphases, and approaches to “how things are done here.” Some congregations embrace innovation and change, while others adhere to established practices and ways of doing things. Some consider outreach to the local community among their top priorities, while others lead more insular lives with little connection to their neighborhoods. Some strive to have greater member diversity, while others remain relatively homogenous in terms of race or social class. In short, each congregation has a distinct combination of attributes which together create a unique local Christian community and can be called their “congregational identity.”

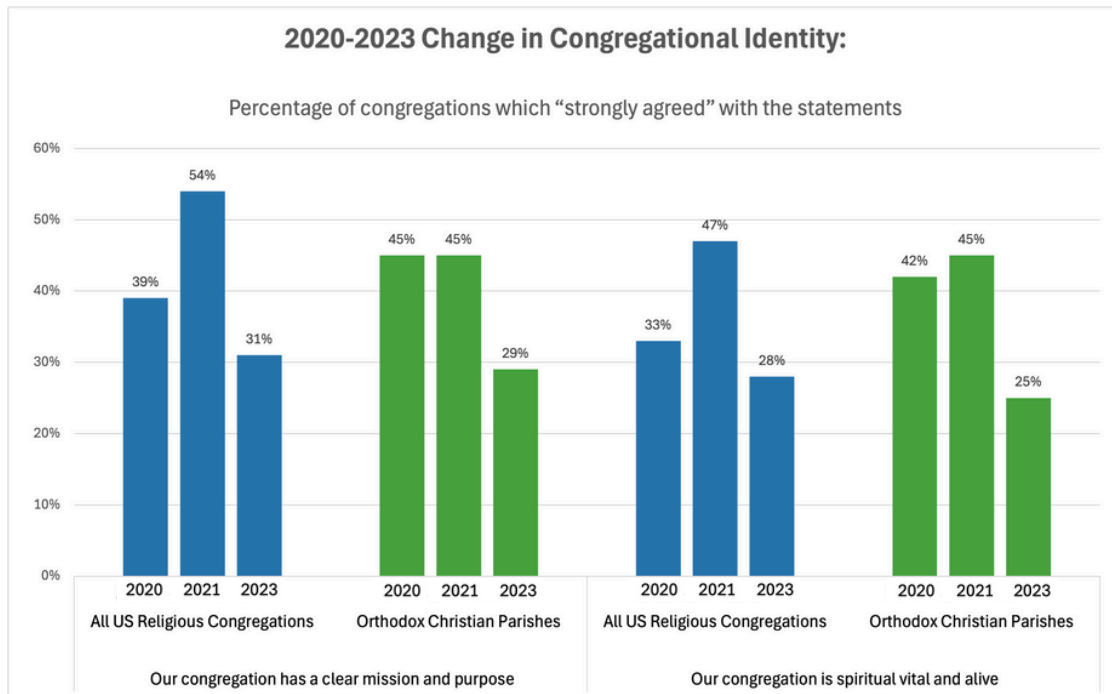
Throughout the four years of EPIC and FACT surveys (from pre-COVID to post-pandemic times), congregations were offered several statements, each describing some aspect of congregational identity. Religious leader respondents were asked how much they agreed with each of these statements.

An interesting pattern emerges, when contrasting Orthodox Christian parishes with all other congregations on the percentage of respondents who “strongly agreed” with the following four statements:

- “Our congregation has a clear mission and purpose.”
- “Our congregation is spiritually vital and alive.”
- “Our congregation is willing to change to meet new challenges.”
- “Our congregation is good at incorporating new people.”

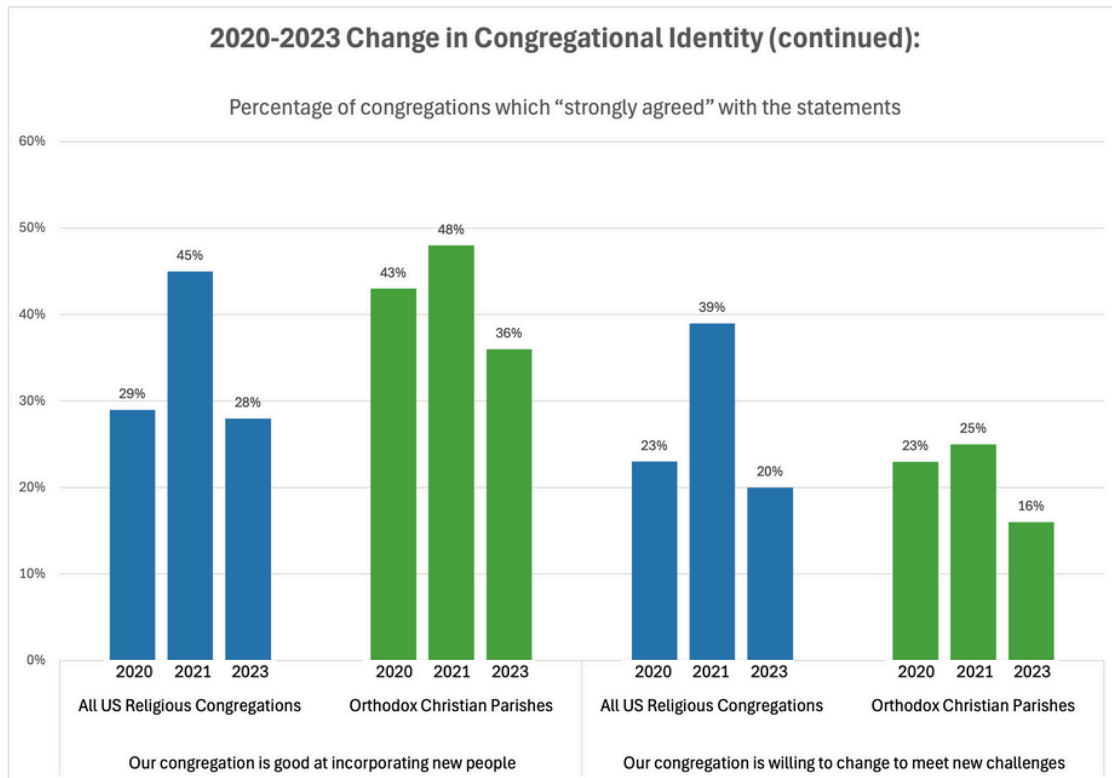
Figures 10 and 11 show that both Orthodox parishes and all other congregations have a lower degree of agreement with these statements post-pandemic (2023) than before COVID-19. During the pandemic (2021), however, Orthodox churches looked different compared to other religious congregations.

FIGURE 10



Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

FIGURE 11



Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research



Photo by Alexei Krindatch

In Orthodox parishes, there was little change between 2020 and 2021 on all of these measures. But then in 2023, they experienced a decline in the percentage of congregations that “strongly agreed”. In contrast, going into the pandemic, U.S. religious congregations first witnessed a substantial growth in the percentage of congregations “strongly agreeing” with these identity statements. But by 2023, this positive dynamic was reversed with significantly fewer congregations reporting “strongly agree” post-pandemic than in 2020.

Figuratively speaking, it appears that Orthodox parishes continued to live through the pandemic without much change which is consistent with all that is described above. Conversely, for other religious groups, the pandemic resulted in a short-lived boost in these four measures of congregational identity. In both instances, however, it appears that congregations have somehow lost their “steam,” when entering post-pandemic time. Regardless of what has caused this trend, the upcoming EPIC and FACT national surveys should answer a truly crucial question: will the decline in these four measures of congregational identity continue or will there be a renewal of strength.

VII. CONCLUSION

There is little doubt that when compared to the national sample of U.S. religious congregations, Orthodox Christian parishes navigated through the pandemic by displaying two clearly distinct features:

- They were much more likely to “ignore” the pandemic and keep their regular activities going (especially, by retaining in-person services) the way they had before COVID-19
- They were more reluctant to adopt and use online worship services (even though in other areas of church life Orthodox parishes are greater users of various modern technologies as compared to the national average for religious congregations)

At the same time, the answer to the question, “Did such an approach pay off to the advantage of Orthodox Christian parishes compared to all congregations, as they all enter a new post-pandemic reality?” remains open. This report highlighted what was different in how Orthodox Christian parishes navigated through the pandemic as compared to the national sample of religious congregations. When looking at the areas of congregational life where there were clear differences between Orthodox parishes and congregations in a national sample, we found the outcome to be a “mixed bag.” That is, Orthodox parishes were more successful than other congregations in some measures (for example, gaining more new members and returning their in-person worship attendance to what it was pre-pandemic), but challenged in other aspects (for instance, a greater decline in both total participation and the percentage of regular volunteers).

The latest data used in this report come from the spring of 2023 - the time which was still seen by many as a recovery period or even as the lingering pandemic “tail.” The upcoming EPIC and FACT national surveys will continue measuring these dynamics and hopefully uncover the truly lasting effects of the COVID-19 on congregational life in America and answer the question of whether these effects will be considerably different for the U.S. Orthodox Christian churches specifically.



ABOUT THIS STUDY

The Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study is generously funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. and led by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace (formerly Hartford Seminary). We will continue to release targeted analyses of more specific findings from our topical surveys breaking down how Mainline/Evangelical, multiracial, Black congregations, Latinx congregations, and churches of differing sizes are navigating the pandemic. Sign up to receive our newsletter and like and follow us on Facebook and X and make sure you receive our reports as soon as they are released.

METHODOLOGY

The surveys used to compile this report come from Faith Communities Today (FACT) and the Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC) study. Questions for this study are generated by a collaborative venture of denominations from the FACT cooperative partnership and Hartford Institute for Religion Research staff. The survey wording was customized slightly for individual faith groups. The specific wording for questions used in the above graphics can be found on the EPIC and FACT websites. A national sample of congregations from non-FACT partner denominations was drawn from a random sample sourced from a national marketing company list. This key informant questionnaire was completed by a congregation's primary leader, staff, or lay leadership. For the national analysis, the sub-surveys were individually weighted by region and attendance size for their faith group. Then responses from each partner denomination and the random sample were combined into an aggregated dataset. Using statistical weighting, this data was adjusted to be proportionate to a group's representation in the total population of congregations in the United States as well as adjusted for size and regional distribution using a combination of the 2010 US Religion Census, the 2018/19 National Congregations Study, and the 2020 Faith Communities Today research. The aggregated datasets include responses from 15,278 congregations in 2020, 1,610 Christian congregations in May/June of 2021, 764 Christian congregations in Oct./Nov. of 2021, and 5,162 congregations in 2023 from more than 57 different Christian denominations and 5 other religious traditions. The response rate and sampling error for a survey using this methodology can only be roughly estimated. An estimate for the margin of error is +/- 4% at the 95% confidence level. For more information about this study, its methods, or to participate in future surveys, contact Scott Thumma at sthumma@hartfordinternational.edu.