

New study examines how COVID has changed churches

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [December 15, 2021](#) issue

CHURCHES AND THE PANDEMIC



Navigating the Pandemic: A First Look at Congregational Responses

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A new study from the Hartford Institute for Religion Research provides a look at the state of churches in the wake of the ongoing pandemic.

The study surveyed 2,074 churches from 38 denominations this summer and, according to Scott Thumma, the study's principal investigator, showed that "the

pandemic had a profound impact across the religious spectrum, and that some churches are faring better than others.”

Thumma, in an interview, said he was surprised that a third of the clergy did not say the last year was their most difficult in ministry.

“You have to wonder, OK, so what year of your ministry was harder than the past year?” he said.

Researchers found that the vast majority of churches—88 percent—suspended in-person worship for some period of time. Most of those churches—93 percent—have now resumed gathering in person.

More than half of the churches in the survey (54 percent) reported that at the pandemic’s height they completely halted fellowship events, such as church suppers and picnics.

More than 30 percent saw growth in requests for food assistance, counseling, and spiritual guidance—and a quarter received more requests for financial help. The rise in demand for these community services came as the churches saw an overall decline in the volunteers who might help supply them.

Churches reported that just 15 percent of regular adult attendees were volunteering, a significant drop from pre-pandemic times, when the Faith Communities Today survey reported that 40 percent of attendees volunteered.

The majority of clergy (62 percent) encouraged church members to get vaccinated, but that stance varied significantly depending on their denominational affiliation.

“Among clergy from historically African American denominations 100% encouraged vaccinations, while 77% of Mainline Protestant clergy, 49% of Catholic/Orthodox clergy and 41% of Evangelical Protestant clergy publicly encouraged their attendees to get vaccinated,” the study stated. “Within majority Latino churches from various denominations, 65% of their clergy encouraged the vaccine.”

Eight percent of congregations—mostly larger churches—have served as vaccine or test sites.

Researchers found that the pandemic is not affecting churches’ attendance equally.

Since 2019, 35 percent of churches saw a decline of 25 percent or more. But 28 percent of congregations said they grew in the past two years, with 18 percent reporting growth of 25 percent or more.

The mode of delivery of worship services was a major factor in whether median attendance increased or fell. For example, the 15 percent of churches that met solely in person saw the steepest decline in attendance—15.7 percent. The 5 percent of congregations that offered only online worship had a decline of 7.3 percent.

But the 80 percent of congregations offering hybrid worship experienced an overall growth of 4.5 percent.

“These congregations tended to be larger with younger clergy, reporting moderate willingness to change, and expressing some struggles to adapt,” the study stated. “They also reported the most infections of Covid-19 of staff and members, as well as the most congregational deaths. These congregations represent 60% of Catholic/Orthodox congregations, 62% of Mainline, and 90% of all Evangelical congregations.”

Overall, the study found that 17 percent of churches had one or more members die of COVID-19 and 37 percent had at least one staff member test positive for the virus.

The study also found widely varying giving patterns. While four in ten churches saw an increase in giving, another three in ten reported a decline.

The study, titled *Navigating the Pandemic: A First Look at Congregational Responses*, is the first of a new five-year project led by the institute at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace (formerly known as Hartford Seminary). It is based on a collaboration among 13 denominations from the Faith Communities Today cooperative partnership and institute staffers. —Religion News Service