

Most churches provide hybrid worship as result of pandemic

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Eight in 10 U.S. churches now provide hybrid services, offering options for congregants to worship either in person or online during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a new [study from the Hartford Institute for Religion Research](#).

Almost a quarter of churches, the report said, have moderate to severe conflicts about pandemic restrictions.

Amid technological adjustments, decisions about government and their own denominations' COVID-19 restrictions on gathering, and greater requests for food and financial assistance, 67 percent of clergy said 2020 was the hardest year of their ministry.

The new study, which surveyed 2,074 churches from 38 denominations online this summer, is the first look from the institute's project on the state of churches in the wake of the ongoing pandemic.



Scott Thumma

“These findings from the summer clearly show that the pandemic has had a profound impact across the religious spectrum, and that some churches are faring better than others,” Scott Thumma, principal investigator, said in announcing the study.

“The fact that 83 percent of churches had at least one member test positive shows that almost no congregation was spared, but over two-thirds feel they will emerge stronger than before implies these faith communities are

a resilient bunch.”

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. “Overall, it really shows that, I think, there are a good many congregations that have survived in pretty decent form but then there’s also a large chunk of them that are in kind of still a very bad way.”

Most churches have resumed in-person worship

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.

A recent [Lifeway Research](#) study showed an even more overwhelming 98 percent of U.S. Protestant churches were meeting in person in August. The Hartford Institute study includes Catholic and Orthodox congregations.

Despite the switch for so many congregations to a hybrid model, 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.

But more than 30 percent of congregations saw growth in requests for food assistance, counseling and spiritual guidance and a quarter received more requests for financial help.

Decline in volunteers noted

The rise in demand for these community services came as the churches saw an overall decline in the volunteers who might help meet those needs.

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

“In the same way that supply chains have been drastically upended by the pandemic, so too have many congregational ministry systems been disrupted,” the study noted.

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

Eight percent of congregations have served as vaccine or test sites, and most of those were larger churches.



Researchers found 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.

Hybrid worship promotes overall growth

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 percent of Catholic/Orthodox congregations, 62 percent of Mainline, and 90 percent of all Evangelical congregations.”

Overall, the study found 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 4 in 10 churches saw an increase in giving, another 3 in 10 reported a decline in donations from members.

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.

The study has an estimated overall margin of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points.

The multiyear “Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations” project is funded by the Lilly Endowment.