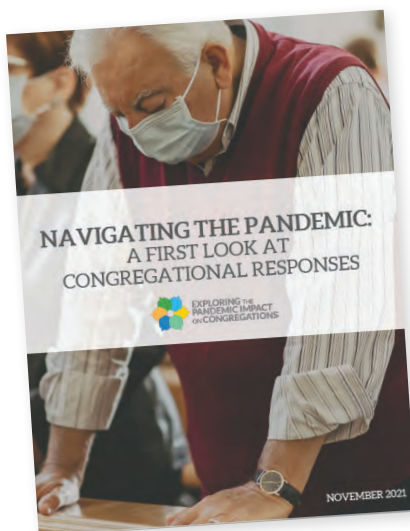


RESEARCH NOTES

Findings from Religion & Urban Culture 2.0

Exploring the Pandemic's Impact on Congregations

A national project, “[Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations \(EPIC\)](#),” based at Hartford International University for Peace and Religion (formerly Hartford Seminary), is looking at the effect of the pandemic on eight representative cities across the U.S. beginning in 2022. Indianapolis, of course, is one of these cities.



RUC 2.0 is a partner in this research. EPIC is learning from our 18-months of fieldwork, and we will profit by being able to compare our findings to others across the country. Hartford researchers have just released EPIC's first national, key-informant survey, which included responses from 2074 participants from 38 Christian

denominations. What does it tell us about the pandemic's impact on congregations, and how does it compare to what we have learned from our observations and interviews from thirty-five Indianapolis congregations?

Attendance

The EPIC survey found that 88% of churches suspended in-person worship for some time. All 40 of the Indianapolis congregations we have studied thus far also suspended their worship, at least for a short time. The EPIC survey also found that 93% of those congregations had now resumed in-person worship. We believe this also to be generally true for our Indianapolis group.

However, this is a place where ethnographic research sheds some light on broad survey samples. We know,

for instance, that certain factors are clearly correlated to the resumption of in-person worship. Chief among these is race. Predominantly Black congregations were much more likely to wait much later to begin in-person worship. In fact, the only congregations we know of that are not meeting in person even now are African American. Black churches that are meeting in-person are also more likely to give strict guidance about maintaining distance in seating and to discourage congregating before or after worship.

The second factor clearly correlated to the in-person decision is theological orientation, which often is broadly tied to political orientation, even if the congregation rarely discusses secular politics in worship. Put most bluntly: Liberal/progressive congregations stayed “virtual” for longer and continue to exercise considerable caution. More conservative congregations, whether theologically or politically conservative, returned to in-person services more quickly. Even when they followed the letter of the law on state and county guidance, they pressed up against the limits on size and spacing. In this way, congregations mirrored the stance of the population they most resembled.

As anyone who studies congregations knows, Black and white churches diverge on the linkage between conservative theology and conservative politics. African American congregations can be very conservative theologically—say, on views of scripture or sexuality—but still liberal/progressive on other social issues. In this instance, progressive social orientation is more predictive of pandemic response.

On this topic, especially, it is important to note the experience of Hispanic congregations. We have five such congregations in our project—one Protestant, the other four Catholic. Catholic congregations were inclined to return to in-person worship at the earliest opportunity. Catholic worship is not complete

without the eucharist. Our Catholic congregations were among the first to resume in-person worship and the Hispanic groups who attend Spanish-speaking masses came back at essentially full strength. Our Catholic congregations have not focused on virtual or hybrid experiences.

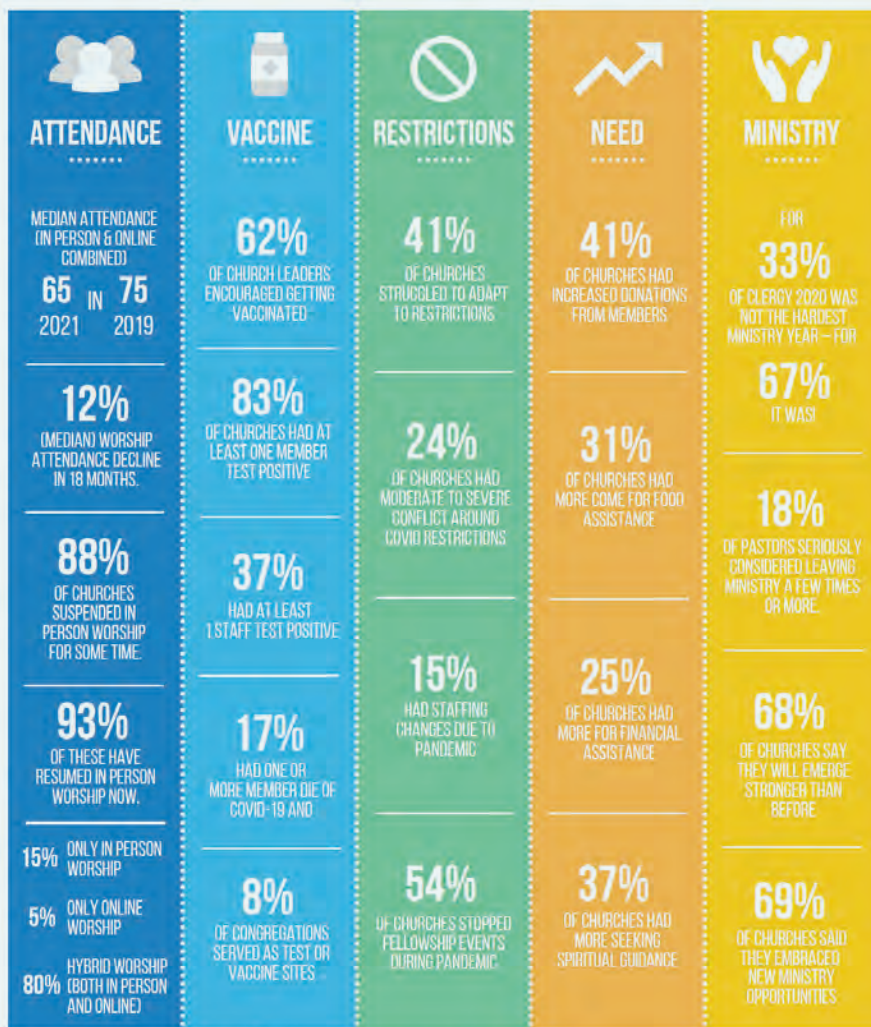
Other immigrant congregations we are observing followed a similar pattern of early in-person return. The two mosques and one gurdwara we are observing provide crucial information resources for their members and are, in some cases, the most important link between their members and the wider community. They provide services to fellow immigrants who may not have good alternative sources. They are also, on average, younger than many of our Protestant congregations and may have assessed their personal risk tolerance differently.

The hybrid experience—providing both in-person and virtual options from the same programming schedule—has been a mixed bag in congregations, as it has been for schools and universities. All our congregations tried to move online in some fashion, at least for weekend worship, although the efforts ranged from groups who had full audio-visual production facilities already in place to groups who pulled out their iPhones and started streaming. Quality improved over time for most, but the range of audio-visual competence among congregations is still very wide. Most congregations now run some sort of hybrid programming, but it is too early to say how satisfactory this is for participants in terms of worship experience, community-building, and more mundane matters such as giving.

Vaccine

The EPIC survey found that 62% of church leaders encouraged their members to get vaccinated and 8% of congregation served as test or vaccine sites. In Indianapolis, our observations suggest that clergy rarely discussed vaccinations explicitly during

EPIC: Churches and the Pandemic



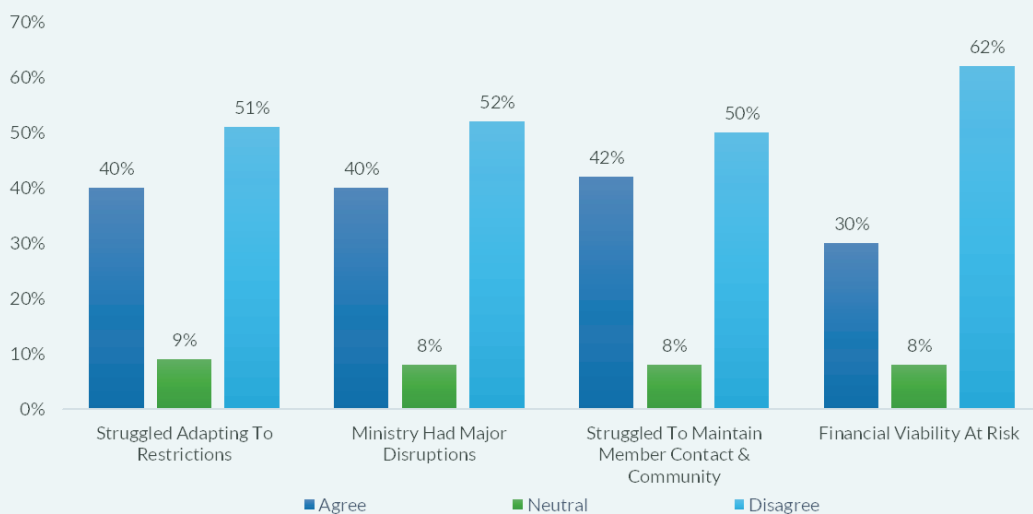
Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

worship. To some degree this also depended on the orientation of congregations being surveyed.

Once again, though, race is an extremely important variable. Several African American religious leaders openly encouraged vaccination, going so far as to have their own shots shown on video. One local Imam who got long-haul Covid regularly streamed video of his struggles, even his difficulty breathing, so his congregants would understand the severity of the disease.

African American pastors were put in a difficult position. They understand the hesitancy of their members about government-sponsored health experiments. But they also understand the risk their

EPIC: Some Churches Are Struggling



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

members, especially their older members, face from the virus. At one of the largest congregations we are studying, the pastor repeatedly told members that she understood and respected their concerns, but emphasized the importance of taking precautions. Her congregation did in fact hold vaccine distribution days, including one of the first ones for adolescents when the vaccine became available for their age group.

Restrictions

The EPIC survey reported that 41% of congregations struggled to adapt to Covid restrictions. The key word here is “struggle.” Adapting was not easy for anyone, but some congregations were more easily able to adapt than others. For instance, large congregations had some true advantages: technology already in place, financial resources to bridge any gaps, larger staffs to help guard against burn-out. However, larger congregations almost certainly had wider ideological spectrums and were likely to experience some internal conflict. Even groups that are relatively homogeneous by race, income, and education had ideological diversity around how to respond to the virus, as the worship opportunities they provide.

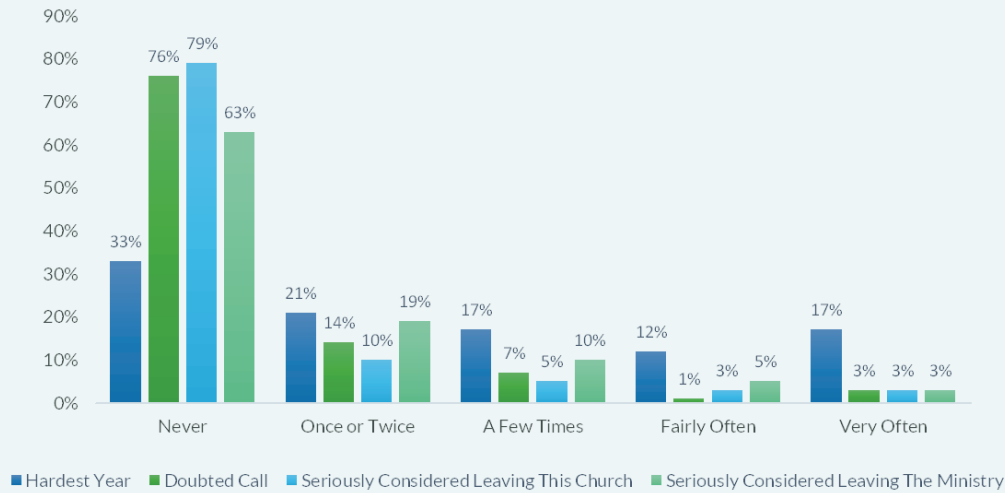
Congregations are not by any means a microcosm of American social diversity, but no group of any size has full agreement on choices of this magnitude. EPIC reported that 24% of congregations experienced moderate to severe conflict around restrictions. In some ways, this is testament to political and ideological diversity within them.

Most research on congregational response to the pandemic has focused on worship, including the attempt to provide virtual worship. But the EPIC survey also reported that 54% of congregations stopped “fellowship events.” In the long run, this change may prove as important, perhaps even more important, than changes in providing worship experiences. Congregations are communities of mutual support, and the pandemic made it very hard for them to provide community-sustaining programming.

Early in the pandemic, an African American pastor recounted to us that his congregation had stopped offering community dinners after funerals. This was a crucial component of his older congregations’ life, but now he was faced with more funerals and no community dinners to ease the transition. We have all missed weddings, funerals, and graduations over the past 24 months. It’s a loss for each of us individually and all of us communally. But for many congregations, this is nearly as critical—in some cases just as critical—as the worship opportunities they provide.

Technology has always provided different ways to worship. Many people attended radio worship. Millions have worshipped via television. But streaming, internet-based, worship is truly different for most people because they can attend their own church, not just some media construction elsewhere. My 81-year-old mother attends her own church “virtually” every Sunday. But this single, weekly, experience will not take the place of dinner on the grounds, weddings, funerals,

EPIC: The Hardest Ministry Year Ever



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

volunteering in the nursery, teaching Sunday School, singing in the choir, and a thousand other practices by which people share their lives together.

Need

The EPIC survey found that 41% of congregations had increased donations from members. We heard this increase reported in Indianapolis also at the beginning of the pandemic, though we have also heard oblique reports that the increase slowed down and eventually disappeared. And we know, as do the report's authors, that many small congregations say their giving was flat or that it eventually decreased.

There are multiple dynamics at work here. On the one hand, it is well-known that regular religious attenders are solid givers—although most of what they give winds up in the congregations themselves. So, it is no surprise that in a health crisis these same people gave more. The need was obvious. Their commitment to their congregation was clear. They gave “into” the pandemic.

However, we have observed many congregations ending the practice of passing the plate. And the switch to digital giving has been noted elsewhere by our project and others. In the longer run, as the pandemic dragged on and in-person activities decreased, the risk of total contributions declining was very real. It will take a while to sort the national data on that or even to learn from our congregations what the longer trend is.

Providing emergency food supplies is the single activity undertaken by the largest number of congregations and such efforts have appeared often in our research. Both the need and congregational activity to meet that need has ramped-up during the pandemic. But it is an open question whether congregations can maintain their current levels of staffing longer-term if their members are not present in person.

Ministry

Research from the EPIC project as well as our own RUC project is of greatest interest to clergy or to others who are professionally involved in religion. It is worth noting, then, that in the EPIC survey, 67% of clergy said 2020 was their hardest year for ministry. Anyone who studies survey data knows there is always a “recency bias” in most answers. At the same time, what year could have been harder for the entire population? Individuals and organizations may have had worse years for particular reasons, but the pandemic's effects have changed everyone's social practices.

The survey reported that 18% of ministers considered leaving. In our 40 congregations, we have seen some retirements, but they were all long planned. In one of our congregations, the senior pastor got a case of long-haul Covid and has passed the reins to his son, previously the youth pastor in the relatively small church. Because we are not conducting anonymous surveys, we are not in a good position to speculate about what our partner pastors have “considered.”

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As a matter of description, they have not left their congregations or their ministries.

In the bigger picture, 69% of EPIC's congregations said they embraced new ministry opportunities. Our guess, based on observation, is that most of these were need-based. Groups needed to develop more robust online presences, so they did. Seniors stuck at home needed increased contact, so congregations adapted. Some congregations increased their emphasis on healthcare, especially around vaccine uptake. And most tried to meet increasing economic needs for food, clothing, and shelter.

Finally, 68% of congregations in the survey said they will emerge stronger from the pandemic. At this early stage, the important thing is not to try to guess whether they will in fact emerge stronger, but to consider what factors lead them to believe that they will. Have they improved communication strategies? Have they reinforced or enlarged existing ministries?

Have they identified community strengths and weaknesses and developed plans to act accordingly? The answers to these questions likely will reveal the true cost of the pandemic to congregations as well as help us to gauge how impactful this global crisis was on religion as practiced in our congregations.

Written by Arthur E. Farnsley II



Research Notes is a publication of the Project on Religion and Urban Culture 2.0, a joint initiative of the Polis Center and IU School of Liberal Arts, both at IUPUI. RUC 2.0 examines how Indianapolis-area congregations have adapted to rapid social and technological changes since 2000, using findings from an earlier project (RUC 1.0) as a baseline. Both projects have been supported by a grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc. Subscribe to future research highlights [here](#). Read past issues [here](#). For more information, contact polis@iupui.edu.



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