RESEARCH NOTES

Findings from Religion & Urban Culture 2.0

The Pandemic's Bright Light and Dark Shadows

At the mid-point of Religion and Urban Culture 2.0, we have observed more than 30 Indianapolis congregations, completed dozens of interviews, and conducted several hundred observations of worship or other congregational meetings. What have we learned, and where to do we go from here?

This *Research Notes* frames our findings, albeit tentatively. We still have observations to do and analyses to undertake. Other research notes will offer more specific findings as we press forward with data collection and analysis.

THE 800 POUND GORILLA

In 2019 we proposed to study the way congregations adapted to the large-scale changes of the past two decades. We imagined technological changes such as the explosive growth of digital and audio-visual capacities, and social changes, such as the legalization of gay marriage. We considered issues internal to congregations, such as the changing role of senior pastors, and issues largely external to their daily operations, such as political polarization in the wider culture.

By the time we began our work, every change we had wanted to explore was re-shaped by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic had changed congregational practice *and* it had changed our ability to do the kind of research we intended.

EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

What we have learned is that clergy are concerned that *congregations face an **existential** crisis*. Specific issues occur in the context of concern about the future. Questions about technology or anti-racism or political polarization are also questions about survival.

We do not use the term "existential" glibly. In-person groups, the form of association most common to older generations, have weakened over the past few

decades, as Robert Putnam noted long ago in *Bowling Alone*. For younger generations especially, virtual (digital) association often take precedence over traditional forms.

Congregations are certainly different from other forms of voluntary association, but does this difference make them immune to other social changes? One answer is that congregations are about worship, meaning, and matters of "ultimate concern." Any attempt to define congregations solely by their functions misses the point. But the balance between doing what God requires and meeting the expectations and desires of members can be difficult. Of course, religious communities are likely to believe that meeting the needs of members is one of the things God requires, it is just not the only thing.

Congregations also emphasize the relational and transformative over the transactional and instrumental. They not only mean to *do* something—a goal shared by nearly all voluntary associations—they also mean to *be* something. Many congregations want to challenge the utilitarian, individualistic, consumerist logic of society, but this is much easier to say than to accomplish.

We have come to realize that all specific reforms or adaptations must be seen through this lens. When congregations talk about extending their digital outreach or improving their streaming, they are not just upgrading their customer service. They are trying to reshape themselves to carry out their mission in a changing environment. When the Episcopal diocese talks about a new spoke-and-hub model, they are not just experimenting with the latest management strategies. They are figuring out what worship and service will look like, must look like, in the future. Every strategic decision is located under the larger questions of calling, relevance, and meaning. Some things continue, some things change.

The pandemic revealed this crisis in sharp relief. When congregations could not continue doing what they had always done, they had to ask: "What is essential to our mission?" which includes the question, "What must we always do even if we can do nothing else?" In short, we have watched as the pandemic forced congregations to come to terms with their identities.

IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

Questions about essence, identity, and persistence raise new questions about *the nature of the congregation as a **community***. Congregations are re-evaluating what it means to be a member, a participant, or even a client. We have heard over and over that "regular attender" does not mean what it once did. Many people, especially younger people, are comfortable with looser ties; they have lower expectations about the number of "touches" they have with the pastor or other congregational members.

When services became all-virtual in the spring of 2020, congregations wrestled with the nature of the ties that bind. Could congregations produce the quality of worship people expected? Could virtual worship experiences be meaningful enough for those participating from their homes? Would people continue to support the congregation financially when the offering was digital? How would congregations as bodies of believers give time or effort to their missional activities? For sacramental traditions, what did it even *mean* to worship virtually? Can mass be done any way other than in person? Perhaps most importantly, how does the notion of virtual community change the way congregations approach worship and communion? Put simply, can virtual association be community in the way congregations mean to be?

EVEN CONGREGATIONS WHO RESIST CHANGE REALIZE THEY MUST CHANGE OR DECLINE.

We saw congregations adjust, under pressure, to streaming worship, digital giving, and virtual contact with members. We have seen digital attempts to maintain rituals, including communion or lighting the advent wreath. But the pandemic also has obscured our vision. We watched the surface because it was all we could see, even though we were aware that the adjustments congregations were making likely affected parishioners in significant, if not fundamental, ways. We do not know yet what these changes feel like to the wider membership. We also suspect many congregations are not sure themselves how much things have changed or how lasting the changes might be.

SO MUCH CHANGE, SO LITTLE BANDWIDTH

The pandemic made every attempt at change more difficult at a time when nearly all congregations and clergy were *out of emotional and intellectual **bandwidth***. When problems collectively look like a tsunami, the impulse is to survive and let tomorrow take care of itself.

Congregations are full of people over the age of 65. Surveys tell us that each successive generation of American young people is more secular than the previous one. The cascade of social problems is unrelenting–racial injustice, climate change, gun violence, economic inequality, political polarization, etc.

So how do congregations generate greater interest among young people, expand their use of technology, fulfill the needs of older members, oversee all of life's major rites of passage, build a sense of belonging among members, minister to the surrounding neighborhood, and engage fruitfully on each of the social issues listed above, plus others not listed? Here, the combination of longstanding concern

Photo courtesy of *IndyStar*.

about the future of congregations and immediate anxiety about the pandemic is potent. Even congregations who resist change realize they must change or decline.

TRANSACTIONAL AND INSTRUMENTAL VS. TRANSFORMATIONAL AND RELATIONAL

Congregations exist in tension with the larger culture, even as they seek to influence and shape social norms. The tension we have observed is not only a response to the pandemic but also recognition that faith commitments do not align seamlessly with several dominant cultural norms and practices. Our society elevates the transactional and instrumental, symbolized by market-based exchanges that are primarily individual to individual. But many congregations focus on transformation and relationships, neither of which is easily measured, both of which take sustained effort over a long time.

Some congregations are comfortable with the turn toward the digital and its modes of affiliation that are not familial, but others sense a tension between these poles. Streaming a service, sending out email blasts, soliciting online offerings, and managing engagement with customer service software are all logical responses to an unusual environment that has made it difficult to sustain face-to-face communities. But these actions are also highly individualized and depersonalized types of social exchange. They mirror what every business, every non-profit organization, and every development office in the world is trying to do.

Congregations who strongly resisted streaming services or could not have imagined sharing communion online, from their homes, learned to adapt.

Perhaps we see the pandemic as significant for understanding congregational responses to change because the inability to gather as a community pushed all congregations toward a more producer/consumer model. Even if this change is temporary, it has lasted for our entire project thus far and looks likely to continue, at least in some hybrid fashion. In this context, it certainly appears that the congregations who had already mastered production values and "customer experience" (CX) before the pandemic are best positioned to emerge from it stronger.

For decades now, the share of Americans who consider themselves congregational members has declined. In 2020, it dropped below half (47%) for the first time since people have been counting, down 20% just from the year 2000. If not for immigration, the decline would have been even steeper. At the same time, the share of attendees at the largest 1% of congregations has continued to grow.

In Indianapolis, the large, independent Christian Churches of the restorationist movement take up an enormous amount of space. They are full of twenty- and thirty-year-olds—and their families—from the

alphabet generations. They have been streaming services and using CX software for years. Pastors or researchers can't miss the comparison.

We are reasonably confident, based on our observations to date, that clergy in many faith traditions believe that congregations face an existential crisis. We know they feel overwhelmed by the amount of change facing the institutions they serve. As they consider new strategies for changing their approach, they are anxious about the ways these strategies might change the personal, relational way they build community. The pandemic has revealed these strains in ways and with a force that we could not have imagined even two years ago.

Like most comparisons, this one should not be characterized as all or nothing. Congregations have different kinds of ties that will hold for a long time even in a world that is rapidly digitizing. Ethnic bonds, racial bonds, sacramental practices—these do not disappear overnight. But the pressure to maintain these norms in the face of a society that is shifting to other modes of belonging will only get stronger.

We have seen creative responses to unusual times during the pandemic, just as we have observed serious questioning of previously unquestioned assumptions. Congregations who strongly resisted streaming services or could not have imagined sharing communion online, from their homes, learned to adapt in a pinch.

But we have also seen a strong—and understandable—desire to return to normal. What we do not know yet is what normal means for congregations in a rapidly changing and uncertain world. Is it better services to parishioners that keep them bound to the congregational community or is it a new set of relationships and connections aimed at transformation, as defined traditionally, but happening now for a new environment? At heart, perhaps we are observing the struggle to answer this question and to understand what this answer implies.
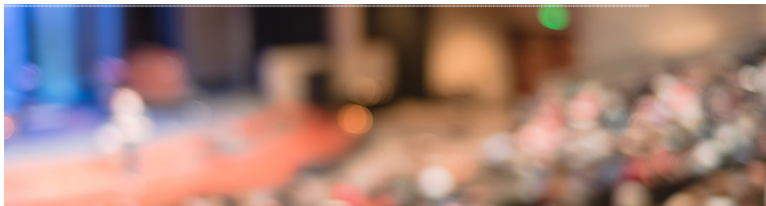
Questions

1. What is essential to your congregation? Is it essential because it fulfills a theological imperative or because congregants expect/demand it? Did the pandemic fundamentally reshape this essential thing (or things)?

2. What are the large changes your congregation has faced during the pandemic? Have any of these challenged previously held ideas about what it means to be a worshipping community?

3. Has your congregation instituted new initiatives during the pandemic? If so, were the changes driven by new realities created by the pandemic? Has your congregation recently put any needed initiatives on hold? Was this delay caused by the pandemic's limitations?

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