

# Research Notes

Findings from Religion & Urban Culture 2.0

February 2021

## Advent during the Pandemic

**Problem:** The pandemic worsened in the fall, requiring many congregations to return to virtual worship. Disparities in audio-visual technology and the capacity to engage with members through digital media were evident. Moreover, Christians were entering one of their two most sacred seasons and many other religious traditions were celebrating their own winter festivals. How did congregations and clergy adapt to an emotion-laden high season under pandemic conditions?

**Methods:** We designed a focused research project to look at the holiday preparations of a larger cross-section of Indianapolis congregations. Not all these congregations will be among the 50 we study in detail in RUC 2.0, but the cross-section gave us additional insight into winter holiday preparations.

We began with a sample of 74 congregations meant to cover a wide spectrum of religious traditions, theological orientations, size, ethnicity, race, and location in the Indianapolis area. Of these 74, we could find nothing online for 14 congregations and the information for 10 others was sparse or unclear. Ultimately, we got usable data on 50 of these congregations. In addition, our GAs observed five congregations in more detail.

Out of the 50 in our larger scan, 34 decided to conduct ONLY online holiday celebrations, 12 conducted ONLY in-person services, and two had both. Two of the congregations holding in-person services decided to conduct them outside (drive-in style). This may be the only “drive-in Christmas” in any of our lifetimes, so it was a privilege to get to observe it, even if only through the virtual lens.

**Findings and Implications:** This summary focuses on three areas: Role of clergy in preparing for the winter holidays, administration and management, and a shift in messages.



**1. Clergy:** Clearly, clergy experienced new pressures in the holiday season. A number of clergy have already told us how difficult it has become to perform their pastoral functions during the pandemic, but parishioners have especially high expectations during the holidays. It is a time when even people who do not attend regularly plan to be present. There are deeply engrained cultural attitudes toward music, decorations, and highly traditional sermon topics or liturgy.

Some pastors became more emotional in their online sermons. It was not uncommon for pastors to show this emotion when talking about Covid-19. One pastor paused intermittently when talking about the 90-year-old British woman being the first person to get the Covid-19 vaccination. He shared his own feelings with the congregants, saying that “he cried when he first read the news and then cried again in the morning and before the sermon and that he was experiencing both sadness and joy at the same time.” We also observed pastors sharing the frustration of being “unable

to focus on things because (they have) no control.”

*Questions:* How should we interpret this shift? Did clergy intend a change in tone? How difficult was it for clergy to make the anticipated emotional connection over the holidays?

**2. Difficulty in administration and management:** We noticed how difficult it was to accomplish activities that traditionally define the season religiously. For instance, several congregations celebrate Advent with a wreath and lighted candles. This year, everyone was doing this at home. kits, complete with candles. Some also mailed communion elements or other worship necessities, but in-person community-building activities had to be done in each private home with the hope of creating some sense of community online.

More than one congregation tried to create this online community through video. We saw productions in which each person made a short video of herself handing a candle to someone off screen, with the next frame being someone else receiving the flame onto their candle.

For those congregations that met in person, there were new limits. Fifty-person gathering limits in some counties meant multiple Christmas Eve services so people could attend in shifts. For outdoor meetings, especially drive-in meetings, congregations without a/v staffs had to figure out how to manage amplification.

Some of our focus congregations have large paid staffs, some run almost entirely on volunteers. Even among the 13 congregations we are currently tracking in Daily, two do not have even one full-time clergy person. The high



expectations of the holidays caused congregations to see a flurry of volunteer and staff activity, but they also pointed out the complexities involved in managing such activity virtually.

*Questions:* How difficult was it for clergy and for congregations to administer holiday observances? Were these new experiences helpful in any way? Did they result in anything lasting or beneficial for the congregation or clergy?

### 3. Shift in perspective: Justice-Hope-

**Justice:** We found the fall of 2020 was full of sermon themes and congregational programming revolving around social justice. George Floyd's death was clearly a pressing matter, but the pending November election also weighed on people's minds. Many congregations eschewed direct mention of political events, but evident polarization was shaping the way we talked about many different issues.

In December, we saw a clear shift—sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious—toward *hope* as a theme. Hope is expressed in different ways—hope for God's direct intervention, hope for Jesus to return, hope for a system, even simply hope for cultural change. Even discussion of racial justice shifted from judgment and accountability toward hope for reconciliation.

The events of January 6 shifted everyone's attention back toward polarization and justice, with just a little theme of "hope" resurfacing in some circles on January 20. We do not mean to oversell this shift in tone. The structural nature of justice, including racism, was never far from people's minds. At least one pastor from a mainline, predominantly white, church mentioned Malcolm X during a drive-in Christmas Eve service, which is a first in



our 35 years of observing similar congregations. For some clergy, the *structural* nature of our social problems has now moved to center stage, making it impossible to frame theological talk in purely individual terms of salvation and attitude, no matter how much other traditions might be about individual redemption.

*Questions:* Was this shift of tone intentional or was it traditional and cultural? Were clergy seeking to reframe issues to fit the theme of the season?

**Broader Questions:** Do these practices, necessary though they may be, carry any implications for the traditions, rituals, or even theology embraced by congregations? How will the long absence from in-person worship change or reshape congregations as bodies of believers and as institutions responsible for preserving and advancing a faith tradition? How will the pandemic change the role of clergy, including congregational expectations for clergy?