

“THIS PLACE MEANS EVERYTHING TO ME”: KEY FINDINGS FROM A NATIONAL SURVEY OF CHURCH ATTENDERS IN POST-PANDEMIC UNITED STATES

FAITH COMMUNITIES TODAY SURVEY
& THE EXPLORING THE PANDEMIC IMPACT
ON CONGREGATIONS NATIONAL RESEARCH



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ON CONGREGATIONS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes key findings from the 2024 EPIC Attender Survey, which gathered responses from more than 24,000 churchgoers across the United States. These insights reflect how Christian church attenders are engaging with their congregations in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Designed for clergy and church leaders, this report captures the most impactful shifts shaping congregational life today.

- **Most attenders have either remained consistently engaged or have increased their worship attendance.** Two-thirds attend weekly, and over 80% report stable or increased attendance compared to five years ago—especially among newer and younger participants.
- **Online worship is widely offered—but in-person is still preferred.** While 26% use online worship regularly, three-quarters still prefer attending in person. Dual format participation is common among families and younger adults.
- **Virtual attenders actively engage—but often multitask.** While most online worshippers pray, sing, and follow along with the service, about two-thirds admit to doing other things simultaneously. Still, satisfaction with virtual worship is high.
- **Participation in congregational programs is stable or growing.** Most church attenders maintained or increased their involvement in activities like religious education, fellowship and service.
- **Personal religious practices remain strong among attenders.** Nearly 90% pray weekly, and two-thirds read scripture regularly—reflecting high personal devotion alongside congregational involvement.
- **Volunteering and financial giving have rebounded since the pandemic began.** Half of churchgoers volunteer monthly, and over a third have increased their financial giving. Electronic giving is now used by more than half of the respondents.
- **Many worshipers engage with multiple churches, with some even claiming more than one church home.** Forty-six percent regularly attend or view other church services, and 7% identify as having more than one “home” church. But those with multiple “homes” show lower commitment.
- **A sizable 38% of church attenders joined their current church after the pandemic began.** These new members include switchers, returners, and first-time participants, many of whom bring more energy and higher optimism about their church’s future.
- **Alignment with personal beliefs and values is the top reason new attenders choose their church.** Sixty-three percent cited ideological and cultural alignment as a primary draw—outpacing denominational ties, location, programming, or online accessibility.
- **The pandemic strengthened individual faith and deepened congregational trust for many people.** Over half report stronger faith and spirituality post-pandemic, and nearly half feel greater belonging, trust in leaders, and connection to their church.

INTRODUCTION

The past five years have been difficult for many congregations, clergy, and church participants. The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented disruptions for religious organizations to navigate. However, many of these challenges now seem to be in the distant past, and several recent articles suggest that better times might lie ahead for religious life in the US ([NY Post](#), [NY Times](#), [The Lion](#), [WIRED](#), [Pew](#)). Yet, religious life in the country is only as strong as its faith communities and their worshipers.

Our [Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations \(EPIC\)](#) project has tracked the effects of COVID-19 at the congregational level since 2021. Until this point, this data came from one clergy person or leader per congregation who provided a summative wholistic picture of their church. However, this approach does not necessarily encapsulate the experiences of the people in the pews. As such, this latest EPIC survey conducted in fall 2024 aimed to capture the experiences of those who attend congregations to understand their view of church life in the present moment and ask them what has changed over the past few years. We received responses from thousands of new members, marginal attenders, people affiliated with multiple churches or attending multiple services in different churches each week, and even entirely virtual participants. This report summarizes the major themes and key findings from this attender survey.

This report offers an initial sketch of key themes from this attender survey. Specifically, the report explores markers of commitment and how involvement may have changed in the past five years. It also looks at the experiences of those who only joined their church after the pandemic began. Furthermore, we delve into the experience of online worship participants—who they watch with, what they are doing when they tune into worship, and how involved they are. We additionally uncover the phenomenon of being committed to multiple congregations and how this shapes engagement. Finally, the report looks at the direct impact of the pandemic on religiosity.

From the perspective of the 24,000 church attenders we surveyed, the picture that emerges is largely positive. Many more respondents said their religious faith and spirituality had strengthened since the pandemic. Likewise, financial giving has increased, as has involvement and volunteering. Twice as many attendees said their congregation was stronger and more vital in recent years.

In the near future, additional reports from this data will explore these themes more deeply, consider the data from other perspectives, and investigate added themes not addressed in this overview. But for now, let us offer you a first look at the thoughts, attitudes, and practices of these tens of thousands of people sitting in America's church pews.

In their own words, attendees shared hundreds of pages of comments; here are a few of their observations:

"This is a place to be welcomed by an amazing congregation with no judgement based on your beliefs or what has happened in your past. It is truly a place that welcomes EVERYONE. So fortunate my family has found such an amazing church."

"[My] church does an excellent job with helping hands in the community and services are always full of good meaning and how the Bible relates to our lives today. I would also like to give praise to our pastor. She is awesome in her leadership and community giving."

"I want our congregation to be an example of openness, acceptance and love through a different path than the traditional denominational experience. Our congregation speaks of divinity as a much broader experience than 'one god.' We represent spirit in nature and the divine in all things."

"What supports me is that I can come to a place where I can help and understand people. To truly give back and knowing I am helping someone."

"This Church is a beacon of hope, healing and restoration in the midst of a profoundly sick society."

"All of Father's sermons are so on point and what we need to bring us closer to God. The heartfelt welcome that I experienced in this congregation by those who love this parish was transformative for me."

"Becoming a Christian has done nothing but vastly improve my life."

"This place means everything to me. I was a hardcore atheist for over a decade, but Christ and the Church have continued to change my entire being. I'm thankful this isn't something that continues to happen to me alone, but for my wife as well. I couldn't imagine my life without Christianity. I love my parish, I love my Priest and Deacon, I tell them that at least once a week. Christ is Risen!"



Photo credit: Ellinia Gill Unsplash

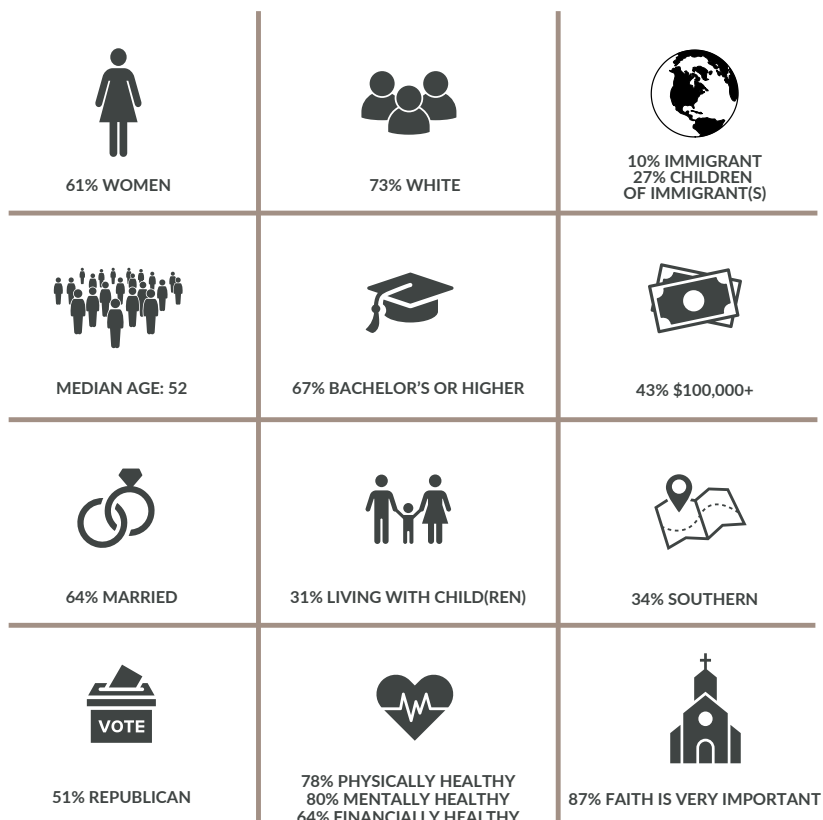
While these quotes do not cover the full range of opinions and perspectives from the many respondents of our survey, their words do begin to humanize the numbers and patterns we will present below. As you read this report, keep in mind that the numbers and figures discussed below represent the actual lives of religious believers and faithful attendees of church communities across the United States.

Data and Sample Description

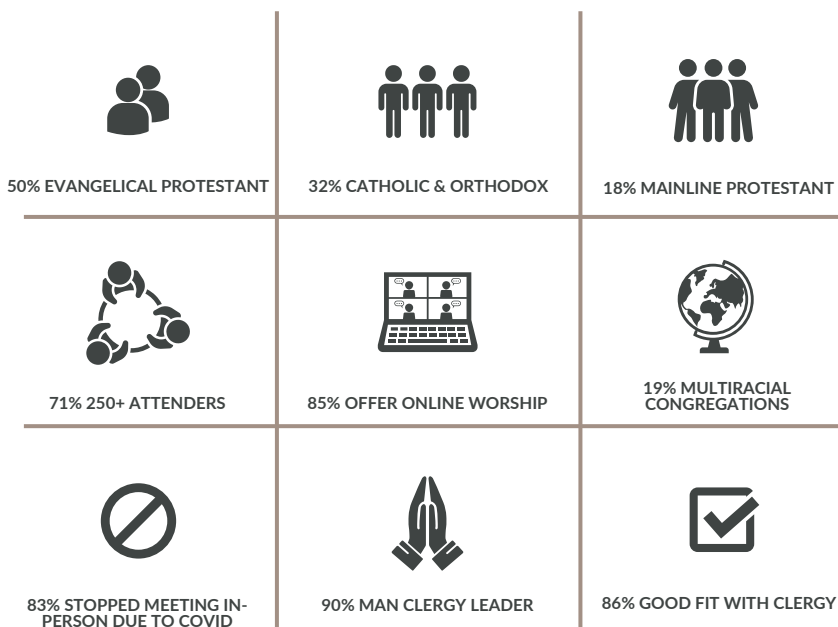
The data for this report come from a survey of more than 24,000 US adult, Christian church attenders (Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox) surveyed between September 2024 and January 2025 (see methodology section for more details). Before diving into the findings from this survey, it is important to note some key demographic characteristics of the respondents (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

ATTENDER DEMOGRAPHICS



CHARACTERISTICS OF THEIR CONGREGATIONS



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

Personal Demographics

The gender breakdown of respondents is roughly 60% women and 40% men, with about 0.2% denoting other gender identities. Three quarters (73%) of respondents are white, 12% are Black or African American, 8% are Asian, and 4% Hispanic. One in ten were born outside of the United States and a quarter (27%) have at least one parent who was born outside of the United States. The median age is 52 years old, about two thirds (67%) have a bachelor's degree or higher, and 43% have a total household income of \$100,000 or more.

Almost two-thirds (64%) of respondents are married while 20% have never been married, 6% are widowed, and 9% are divorced or separated. Thirty-one percent have children under the age of 18 living with them and 19% are adults living alone. About a third (34%) live in the South, almost a quarter (24%) in the Northeast, 27% in the North Central region, and 16% in the West. Also, 51% affiliate with or lean towards the Republican Party, 34% affiliate with or lean towards the Democratic Party, 11% are Independent, and 4% report no party or a different affiliation.

Most respondents report being in “good” or “great” health physically, mentally and financially (78%, 80%, and 64% respectively). And finally, 87% of respondents report that their faith is very important in their lives. While the survey captured a large number of committed participants, the overall averages look quite similar to characteristics of frequent regular attenders in Christian congregations as measured by other polls and surveys ([Pew](#), [NCS](#)).

Characteristics of their Congregations

To better understand the dynamics attenders are encountering, it is important to think about the general characteristics of the churches they attend (see the lower third of Figure 1). For example, most respondents (71%) participate in a church with more than 250 people while very few (6%) attend a small church (50 or fewer weekly attenders). This reality is important to keep in mind as congregational size is a significant influence on church dynamics. Previous research ([FACT 2020](#) and [NCS](#)) shows that while the majority of churches are small, most people attend large churches. This holds true for this sample of respondents as well. As such, the results presented in this report—from the attender perspective—will differ somewhat from our previous findings on the nation's congregational profile, given the strong influence of congregation size.

Survey respondents attend churches from over 80 different Christian traditions and denominations. Half of the respondents attend an Evangelical Protestant church, 32% attend a Catholic or Orthodox parish, and 18% attend a Mainline Protestant church.

Most respondents participate in a church with more than 250 people while very few attend a small church.

Additionally, 85% of the churches that respondents attend offer online worship options, and 83% are in churches that paused in-person meetings in 2020 due to the pandemic. Just under 20% of attendees are in a multiracial congregation, where no single racial group is more than 80% of the participants. Also, 10% of respondents attend a church led by a clergywoman, and those that do are predominately from churches in Mainline Protestant denominations. Finally, 86% of respondents state that the current clergy leader is a good fit for their congregation.



Photo credit: Ismael Paramo Unsplash

COMMITMENT, ENGAGEMENT, AND INVOLVEMENT

There are several ways of capturing a person's commitment to or engagement with their congregation. Some key measures are patterns around worship service attendance, participation in other activities at the church, volunteering at the congregation, and contributing financially to the congregation. Each of these metrics captures a different facet of what it means to be an active participant in a congregation, and we will examine each one individually.

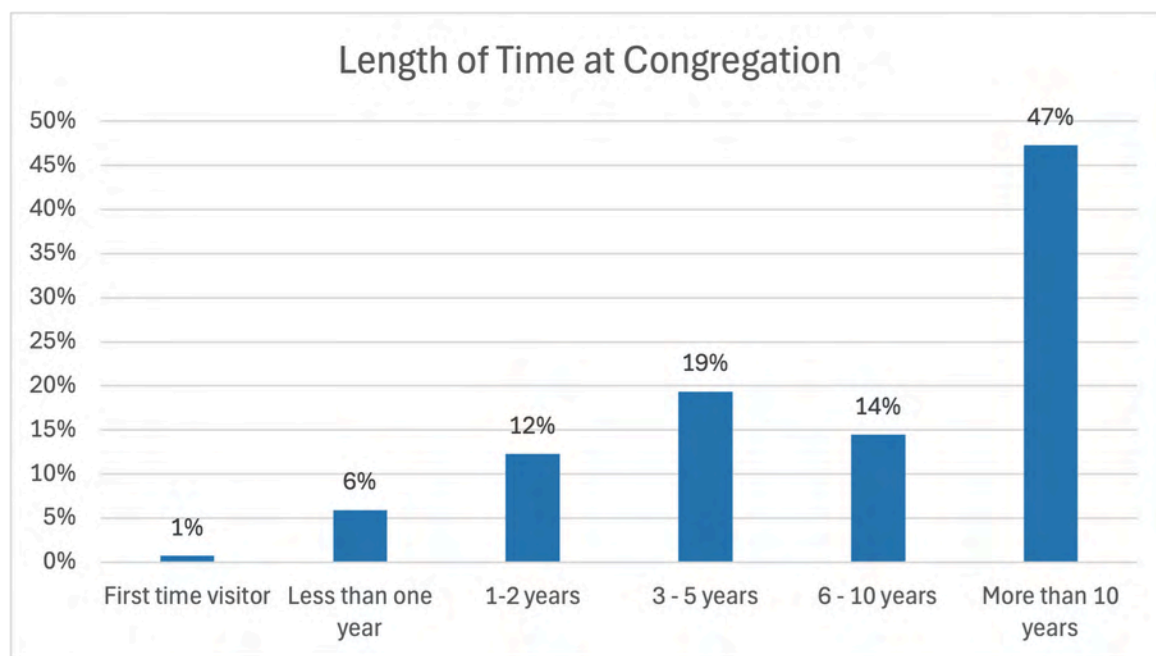
Worship Service Attendance

Most churchgoers have been attending their congregation for years. Almost two-thirds (61%) of attenders have participated in their current congregation since before the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020. Furthermore, nearly half (47%) have been attending their congregation for a decade or more. However, a significant portion of attenders (38%) started worshipping at their present congregation within the past five years (Figure 2); 19% are new attenders who joined their congregation early in the pandemic period (3-5 years ago), about a tenth (12%) came one to two years ago, and 7% have only participated in their current congregation for less than a year. When comparing these newer attenders to the more established attenders, the longer-term participants attend worship more frequently, volunteer in the congregation more often, and give more financially to the congregation. On the other hand, the newer attenders are more likely to have increased their worship attendance over the past five years and are more likely to mix the modes by which they participate in worship services (attending in-person, online, or both ways). A later section of this report will analyze this group of newer attenders in more detail.



Photo credit: Benjamin Watts, Jr.

FIGURE 2

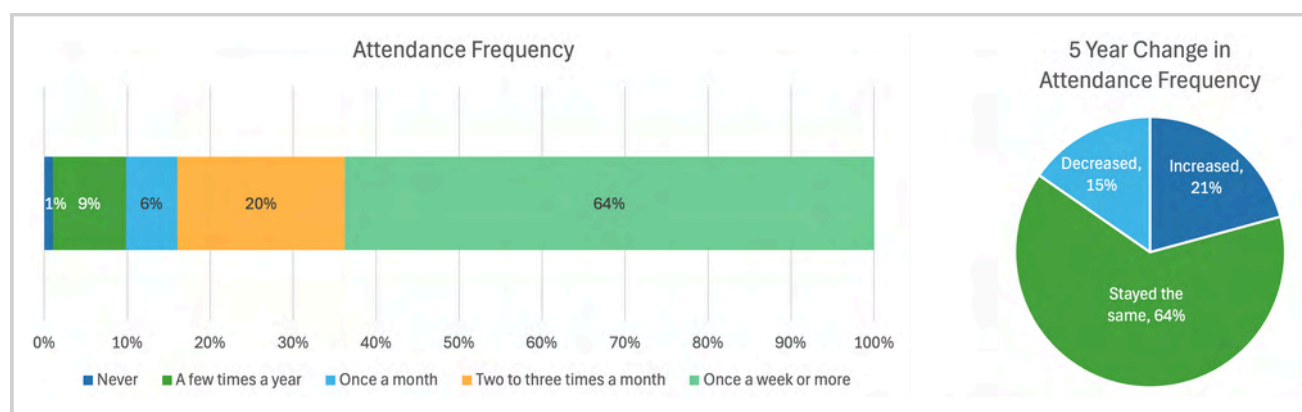


Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

Looking at the frequency of worship service attendance, most survey respondents attend worship services at their church quite regularly as 64% report attending services once a week or more, 20% come two to three times a month, 6% once a month, and only 10% report participating a few times a year or less (Figure 3). Furthermore, most report that they have maintained or increased their attendance as compared to five years ago: 64% report the same level of attendance, 21% have increased, and only 15% have decreased. This finding highlights the importance of recognizing different perspectives and levels of analysis. While our research at the congregational level indicates that the median number of worshippers continues to decline (see EPIC 2023 Report), this report highlights attenders primarily in larger churches that have experienced less decline and from respondents who report being faithful and frequent attenders.

There are a few patterns of worship attendance uncovered when looking at various subgroups. For example, those in Catholic/Orthodox and Mainline congregations are far more likely to have attended for 10 or more years, but less likely to be regular weekly attenders. A larger percentage of those in Evangelical churches have come to their congregation in the past five years and likewise have increased their attendance. The largest churches (over 250 attenders) also have more longer-term attenders as do predominantly white and Asian churches. Conversely, attenders in Latino, Black, and Indigenous churches, or in churches that did not close during the pandemic, are more likely to be newer participants. Finally, older people are more likely to be frequent attenders, while younger participants are more likely to have increased their attendance in the past five years.

FIGURE 3

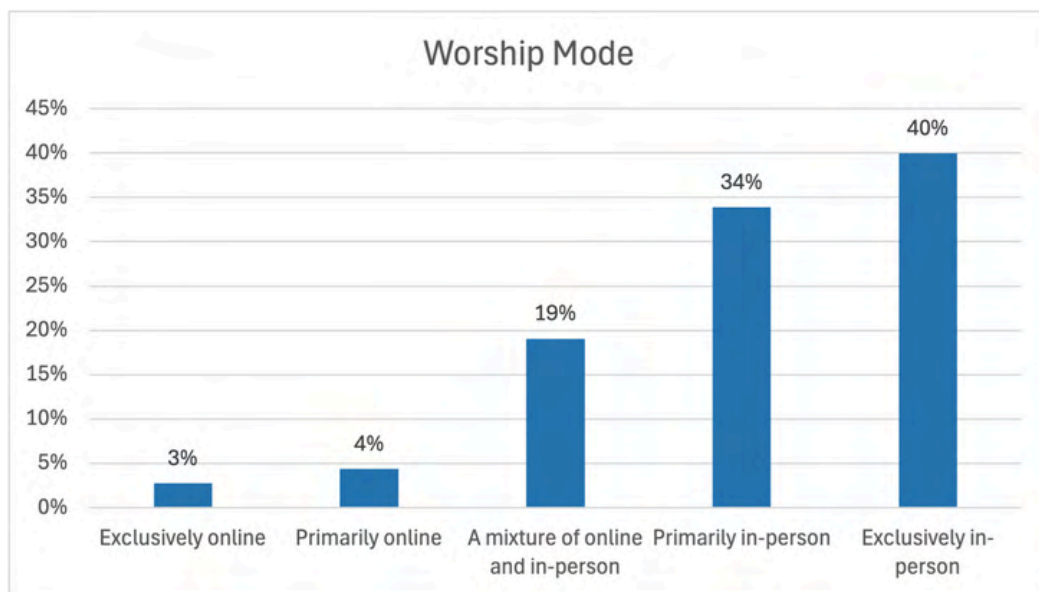


Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

An obvious effect of the pandemic on church life is that many congregations began offering online worship, and most have continued to provide this in the years following the pandemic. This change provides churchgoers with the option of selecting how they choose to attend services. However, even with the ability to worship online, about three out of four participants say that they participate in worship services primarily or exclusively in person. Nearly a fifth (19%) of attenders say that they participate via a mix of online and in-person and only a small handful (7%) are primarily or exclusively online attenders (Figure 4). When comparing the respondents who attend in person with those who tune in virtually, the former are more likely to volunteer with the congregation, attend more frequently, and have more close friends in the congregation. For a deeper look at the motivations and experiences of online worshippers, see the section of this report specifically about online attenders below.

Not surprisingly, those in Catholic/Orthodox churches were significantly more likely to attend in person, likely due to the centrality of the weekly eucharistic ritual. Attenders of Evangelical churches were more likely than those in other faith groups to participate virtually. Black church participants were less likely to attend in person than those of other races.

FIGURE 4



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

As a result of the widespread rise in virtual worship and livestreaming, we asked church attenders about their participation in multiple faith communities—something that is more feasible than ever before yet hardly studied. We found a staggering 46% of respondents report that they participate regularly in other congregations beyond their primary one—either physically attending, tuning in virtually or on TV, or both in-person and virtual. People are not only attending services of more than one church, but 7% of respondents also stated that they have additional “church homes” beyond the home church referenced in the survey. This involvement and loyalty across multiple churches at the same time may be a new pattern of engagement for congregational members, sparked by the rise of livestream worship during the pandemic.

A staggering 46% of respondents report that they participate regularly in other congregations beyond their primary one.

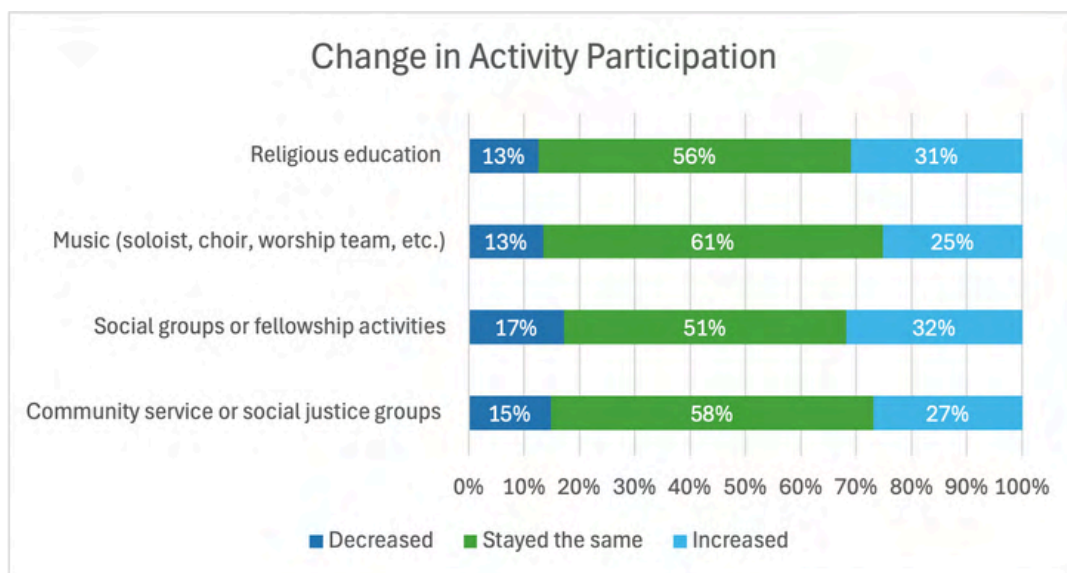
Although we do not have the data to confirm whether this is a new trend, these behaviors are occurring in today's religious landscape, thereby inviting a more nuanced perspective on congregational participation. It is evident in this data that many committed participants are not as tied to a single church as scholars and religious leaders may have assumed in the past. Later in this report we will unpack some of the dynamics occurring among these groups in more detail.

Other Church Involvement

Church participation often encompasses more than just attending worship services. As such, we also explored how participation in other programs and religious activities has changed over the past five years. Across the board, levels of participation have remained the same or increased compared to prior to the pandemic. This is true for involvement in religious education, music groups, social and fellowship activities, and community service or justice efforts. A majority of church attenders maintained their level of engagement with these activities, but between 25-32% of respondents have increased their participation. Only about 13-17% of respondents have decreased participation in these activities (Figure 5).

Compared to other Christian traditions, attenders of Evangelical congregations reported higher participation in nearly all listed activities—except for community service groups, where Mainline attenders were more likely to report increased involvement. Attenders of Black churches reported higher levels of participation across all these activities than those attending other congregations.

FIGURE 5



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

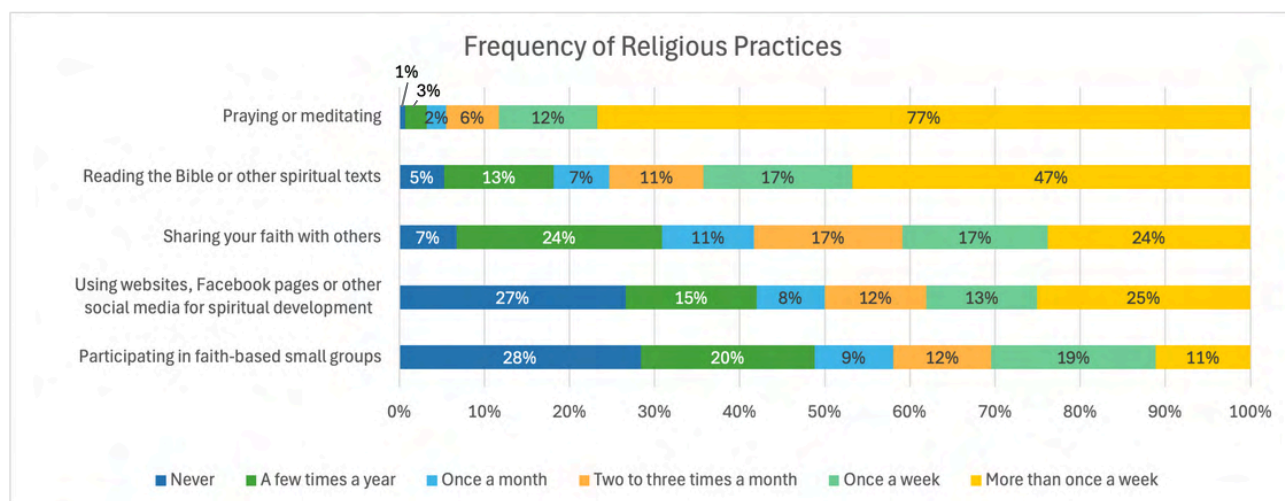


In addition to church activities, most of the respondents also report that they regularly engage in personal religious practices. We asked how often people pray or meditate, read the Bible or other spiritual texts, share their faith with others, use websites or social media for spiritual development, and participate in faith-based small groups. For many church attenders, these behaviors are integrated into their weekly rhythms. Most notably, 88% of respondents report praying or meditating once a week or more. Additionally, two-thirds (64%) read the Bible with the same frequency (Figure 6). Fewer attenders regularly engaged in the other personal practices but nevertheless these patterns of personal religiosity show that for most participants, their faith is an everyday, lived and practiced spiritual reality.

88% of respondents report praying or meditating once a week or more.

When looking at the subgroup comparisons, we found that attenders of Evangelical congregations consistently engaged in these personal practices most often, while Catholic/Orthodox attenders showed similar frequency in prayer practice. Attenders of predominately Asian, predominately Black, and mixed-race churches showed considerable small group participation.

FIGURE 6



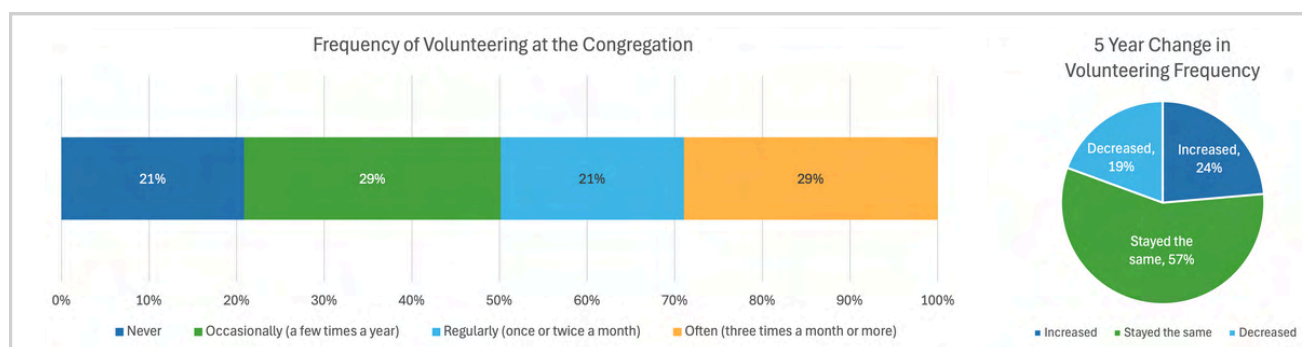
Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

Volunteering

Another important component of religious life is volunteering in the faith community. At the congregational level, previous research shows that roughly 45% of congregation attenders typically volunteered in the church pre-pandemic ([FACT 2020](#)). Over the course of the pandemic, this percentage dipped to its lowest point (15%) in 2021 but has rebounded in recent years to 35% in 2023 ([EPIC 2023 Report](#)). From the attender perspective, 29% of respondents report volunteering with their congregation often—meaning three times a month or more—and an additional 21% volunteered regularly—meaning once or twice a month. A fifth of survey respondents report that they never volunteer at their congregation (Figure 7).

A majority (57%) of these participants report that they volunteer at the same level as they did five years ago; however, nearly a quarter (24%) of attenders indicate that they increased the frequency with which they volunteer while 19% decreased their volunteer efforts. Participants from Mainline churches were most likely to volunteer. Additionally, newer attenders and those in mid-sized churches (51 to 250 people) were more likely to have increased their volunteering over the past five years.

FIGURE 7



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



Photo credit: Erika Giraud Unsplash

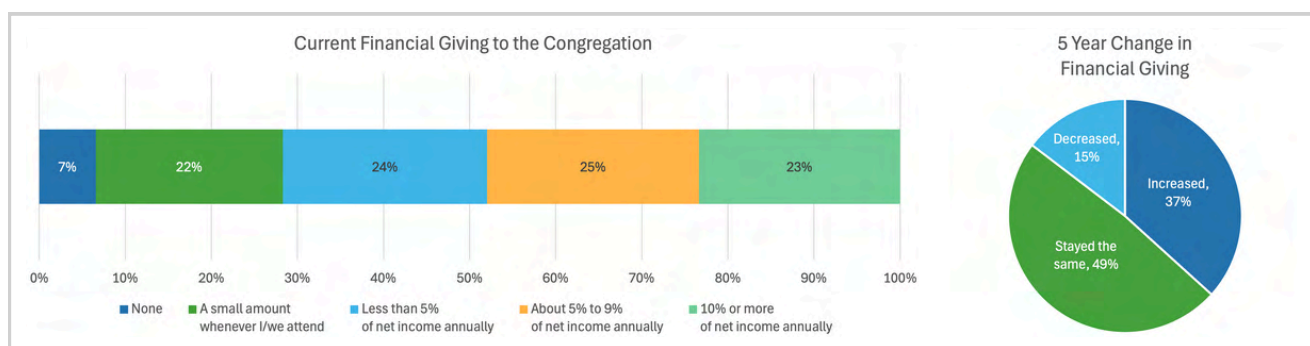
Financial Giving

Another measure of commitment is the financial contributions a participant makes to the congregation. Nearly everyone (93%) reports donating some money to their congregation. Roughly a quarter (23%) of respondents report giving at least 10% of their net income annually, 25% report donating 5-9% of their net income, another quarter report giving less than 5% of their net income, and 22% contribute a small amount whenever they attend (Figure 8). Interestingly, over half of attenders (52%) report using electronic giving to make their contributions.

About half (49%) of respondents say the percentage of their income that they give financially has remained constant over five years. More than a third (37%) report increasing their financial contributions. This is consistent with our previous research at the congregational level which indicates that the average gift per person has increased over time ([EPIC Finance Report](#)). Unfortunately, due to inflation and other societal challenges, these increases are not always enough to keep up with the rising costs and church expenses.

Furthermore, subgroup comparisons show that Evangelical churches were home to the largest group who reported giving ten percentage of their income, but also home to the largest percent of participants who do not contribute financially. This is possibly due to the larger number of new people in these churches who were also less likely to donate. Respondents in Catholic/Orthodox parishes were slightly less likely to give than their Protestant peers, and those in Mainline churches were the most likely to have increased their giving in the past five years. Participants in majority Latino congregations were the least likely to financially contribute but that pattern overlapped with lower giving rates within the Catholic tradition.

FIGURE 8



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

THE NEW FOLKS



As briefly noted in the earlier discussion of attendance patterns, one interesting finding from this data is that 38% of people began attending their current church within the past five years—that is, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. In our previous congregational level research, we estimated that the average congregation gains about 5% of new attendees per year—amounting to 25% over five years. The fact that 38% of attenders joined their congregation in the past five years suggests a higher-than-average rate of new people joining congregations—whether through switching, returning, or conversion.

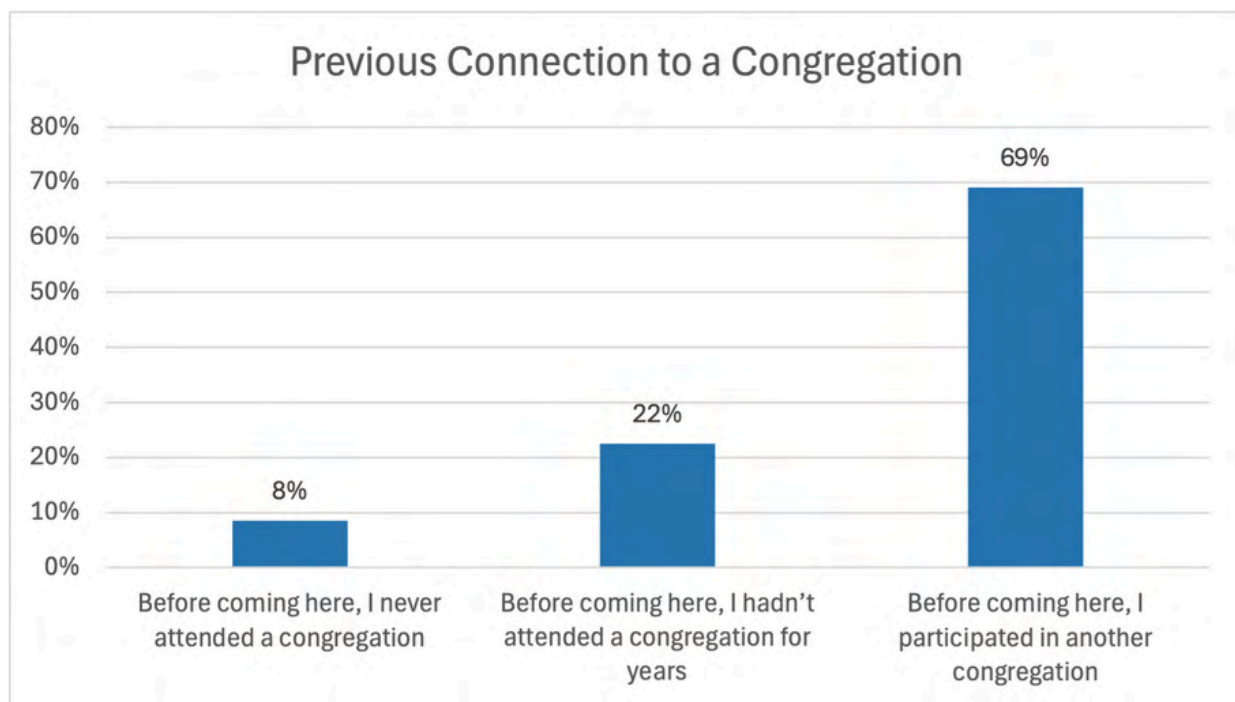
Considerable discussion ([American Survey Center](#), [Lifeway](#)) took place early in the pandemic about attenders moving to churches that better fit them: either those that remained open (or closed) or which were more congruent to their religious, political or health convictions. An indirect indication of this trend is that the level of serious conflict has fallen in the past five years, as we pointed out in our previous research ([EPIC 2023 Report](#)). In other words, ideological sorting through switching congregations in recent years may have reduced the level of significant tension within churches. When participants in our survey were asked about their previous connection to organized religion, over two-thirds of new attenders (69%) reported switching churches—indicating that they had participated in a different congregation before coming to their current one (Figure 9). Unfortunately, we are unable to tell whether this was a local swap or a move from further away. But this growth due to members switching or transferring is not uncommon, and it has long been known as the primary way individual congregations grow (Woolever & Bruce 2002, Bibby & Brinkerhoff 1994). Another way churches grow is through birth, but this survey was for adults only and thus does not represent anyone born in the past five years.

The other primary path into a church is through proselytizing, conversion, or recommitting to a faith community after being away. Given the rise in “nones” (people with no religious affiliation) and increased percentages of non-affiliated youth and young adults in the United States, this path could be one with greater potential as fewer Americans have exposure to faith communities in their childhood. Interestingly, among the new attendees in the survey, 22% report not having attended a congregation for years and 8% indicate they never participated in a congregation before the one they currently attend. This combined 31% of new attendees represent former religious “nones” or congregational converts who are embracing organized religion for the very first time in their lives or returners who have been “re-churched” after a lapse in participation.

31% of new attendees represent congregational converts or returners who have been “re-churched” after a lapse in participation.

When looking at subgroup comparisons, Catholic/Orthodox churches were the most likely to have church switchers (part of which may have been driven by a significant increase of parish mergers within the Catholic tradition). Evangelical churches, true to their name and theological convictions, were more likely than other traditions to have a greater percentage of converts. Lastly, smaller churches were more likely to have converts and returners, while churches over 250+ were most likely to attract switchers.

FIGURE 9



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

It is important to note that this post-pandemic new attender dynamic may present a challenge for clergy leaders in terms of ministering to distinctive groups of people within their congregation who have different perspectives and needs. On the one hand, there is a group of long-term, established attendees who know how “things used to be” before the COVID-19 pandemic. This group experienced the pandemic time as radical change and disruption in order to survive. On the other hand, there is a new group of new attendees who came during the midst of this innovation and change, seeing the opportunities presented by the pandemic.

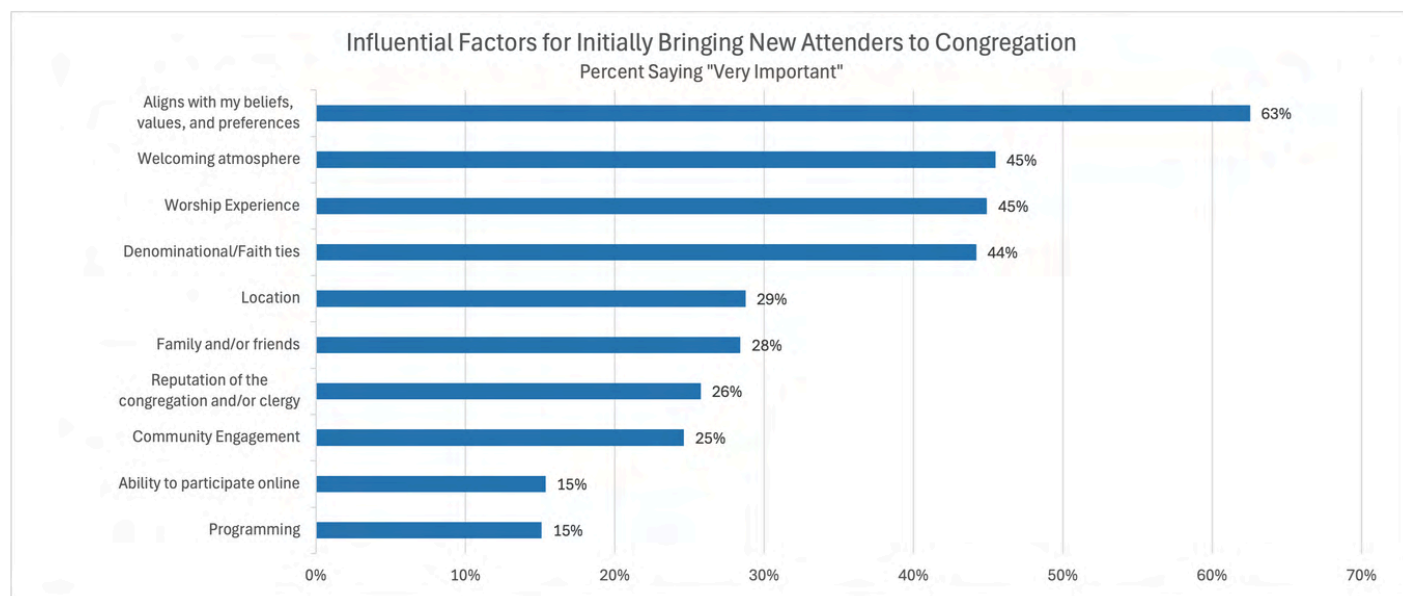
For some recent church attenders, they started with their congregation during a time of radical change, creativity, and openness to new ways of being because of the disruptive nature of the pandemic. As a result, newer attenders rate their congregations higher on openness to change, spiritual vitality, clarity of mission and purpose, and sharing similar values than longer-term attenders. The newer attenders also have considerably greater excitement about the future of the congregation than their peers who have been there longer. However, in previous congregational-level research from the EPIC project, we found that many congregations miss their old patterns—desiring previous in-person attendance patterns, reassessing their programs, and are less open to change now than ever. This retreat to older ways might strike new attenders as a very different reality from the one they joined a few years earlier. The challenge for clergy is how to deliver the stability of formerly established patterns for the two-thirds of long-term attenders while also maintaining the flexibility and openness to change for remaining remaining third of participants who joined during the pandemic.

The most influential factor for nearly two-thirds of new attenders was that the congregation aligned with their beliefs, values, and preferences.

When asked what drew the new attenders to their congregation, some interesting patterns emerge. The most influential factor for nearly two-thirds (63%) of new attenders was that the congregation aligned with their beliefs, values, and preferences (Figure 10). This explanation was more important for people who arrived at the congregation 3-5 years ago compared to those who came more recently. This may additionally offer further evidence for the congregation switching and ideological sorting that occurred early in the pandemic.

The next most important attractive factors for newer folks are a welcoming atmosphere, the worship experience, and the denominational/faith ties (45%, 45%, and 44% respectively). Less important are the church’s location, having friends and/or family there, the reputation of the clergy, and community engagement (29%, 28%, 26%, and 25% respectively). The least important for new attenders is programming and the ability to participate online (15% each).

FIGURE 10

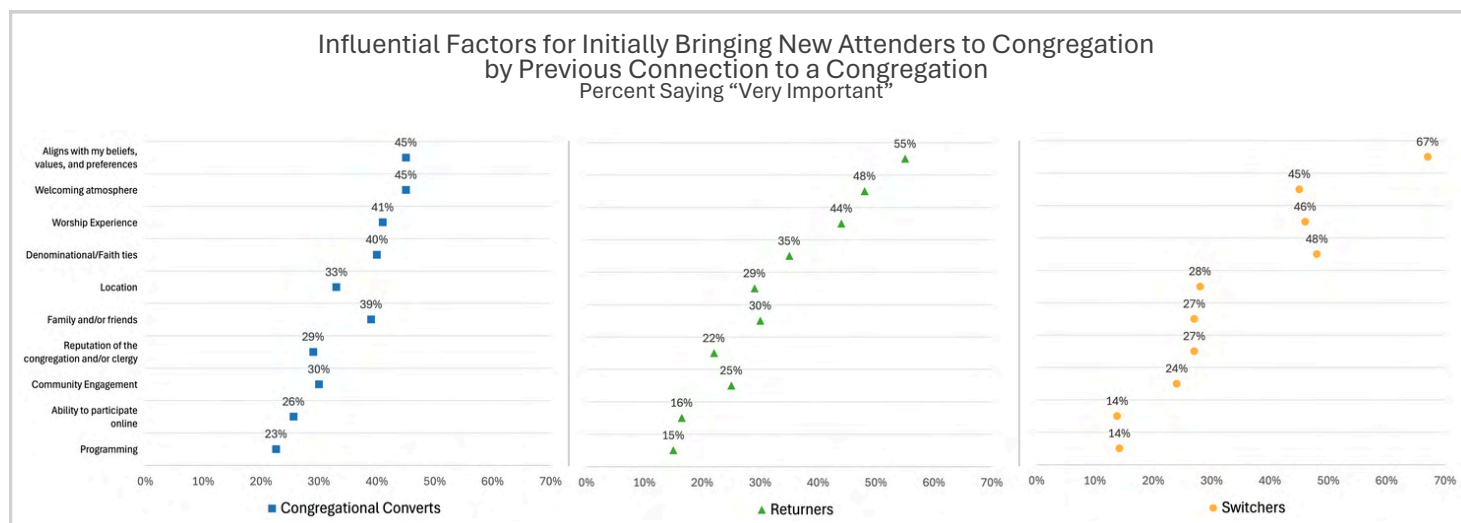


Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

When comparing subgroups, denomination and location were more important for Catholic/Orthodox newer attenders than for Protestants, while Mainline attenders were more likely to emphasize community engagement and worship. The influential factors did not vary based on participant gender, race or the size of the church – barring alignment of beliefs, which was most common for new attenders of the largest churches.

Whether new attenders were converts, returners, or switchers made a significant difference in what drew attenders to their congregation. For converts, a wide range of factors influenced their decision to join, with no single factor standing out as the most important. This might imply that converts are attracted to a well-rounded church and for idiosyncratic personal reasons, with many factors ranking highly important for nearly half of this group. Conversely, for newer attenders who returned to church after a long absence, just three items were highly influential for over half of these respondents – alignment with their personal beliefs, a welcoming atmosphere, and the worship experience. Finally, for those who switched churches, another pattern emerges. Far more of this group found alignment with their beliefs, values, and preferences to be very influential in selecting their church (67% compared to 45% among converts and 55% among returners). Nearly half of the switchers noted that denominational affiliation, welcoming atmosphere, and worship experience were key. While these are similar to the overall top reasons for returners, the intensity with which they were selected by switchers far outweighs the returner group (Figure 11).

FIGURE 11



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

ONLINE ATTENDERS

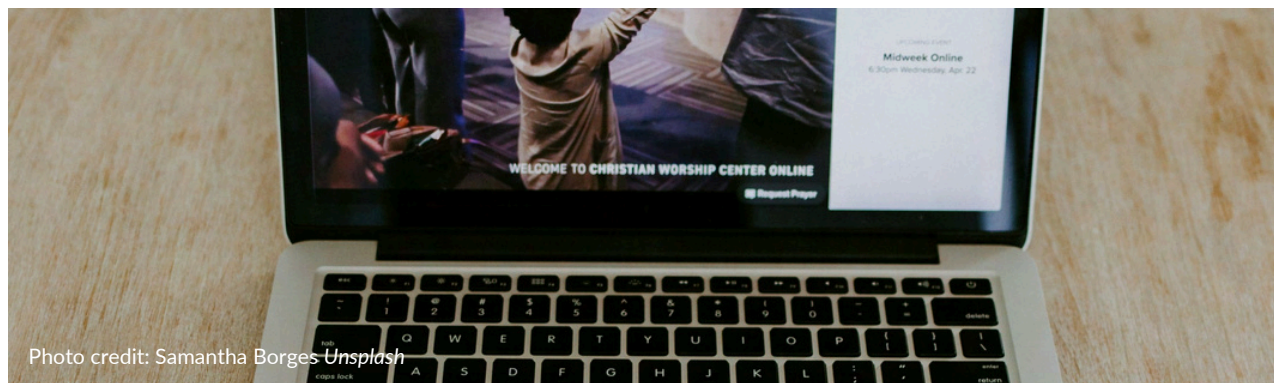


Photo credit: Samantha Borges Unsplash

One significant shift in congregational life resulting from the pandemic is the rise of and emphasis on virtual worship options. Prior to 2020, just 45% of congregations had virtual worship services and only about half of those livestreamed their worship on a regular basis. Once the pandemic lockdown began, however, the percentage of congregations regularly providing virtual worship (via livestream or other methods) quickly rose to 85%. By 2023, 75% of congregations were still providing online worship and 80% of them noted that they would likely continue this into the future. As prevalent as virtual worship is, most religious leaders do not have a grasp of what is happening on the other side of the screen. They do not have an accurate count of how many people are watching or what these participants are doing while they watch the service. Furthermore, they do not know if virtual attenders enjoy the online worship experience nor why they chose to worship online. This survey provides some insight into these questions.

As noted above in Figure 4, 26% of attenders regularly participate in virtual services. Online attenders are different from in-person participants on a variety of metrics. They are more likely to be Black, female, younger, and never married. Likewise, they show lower levels of commitment in terms of financial giving, volunteering, and attendance, whereas in-person attenders have significantly greater engagement with their church in every way. Just 3% of respondents participate in worship exclusively online, and 4% do so primarily online. Those who worship exclusively or primarily online are more likely to be in churches with 100 or fewer attenders. However, the more typical virtual attender (19% of all attenders) varies their engagement between a mixture of in-person and online worship participation. These dual format attenders are different than the smaller online-only crowd. For example, dual format attenders were more likely to have increased their attendance over the past five years, are younger, have families with children, and have higher educational attainment. This could indicate that this group would have previously skipped some Sundays before the rise of virtual worship, but now they can rely on the convenience of virtual participation if they cannot attend physically.

There are a variety of reasons someone might choose to attend worship services online. By far, the most common reason is convenience.

There are a variety of reasons someone might choose to attend worship services online. By far, the most common reason is convenience, cited by almost half (46%) of the respondents (Figure 12). The next most common reasons, cited by about three in ten respondents each, are issues related to illness, accessibility, caregiving, or being homebound. This is followed by concerns about COVID, the flu, or other illnesses (28%). A quarter (26%) of respondents choose virtual participation due to their work schedule or time constraints more broadly. Challenges of family and children are cited as the reason for virtual participation for 19% of online attenders. A few others identify out-of-town travel or weather-related concerns (16% and 15% respectively). Interestingly, only 12% of online attenders do so because they are not local to the church they attend, although this is much higher for the smaller church attenders. And finally, the least common answer is that of preference for the online worship experience, which only 8% of the respondents selected.

Unsurprisingly, these determining factors depend significantly on demographic factors: older adults are more likely to cite concerns about illness and weather, and younger adults are more likely to mention work schedules or family commitments. Additionally, online attenders who mix their participation between in-person and online are more likely to cite reasons related to work, travel, family, and especially convenience. Those in Catholic/Orthodox churches are far more likely to participate in person, and for those who did participate online, they are least likely to claim it was due to convenience and much more likely to identify concerns about Covid-19, the flu or illness. Both Evangelical and Mainline Protestants are more likely to cite convenience as the primary reason. However, the latter are lowest on work schedule, accessibility, and family issues with the former citing just the opposite. Also, the larger the church size, the more participants claim convenience as their reason for doing online worship, whereas those in smallest churches are more likely to opt for this form of worship because they do not live locally or have accessibility and mobility issues.

FIGURE 12

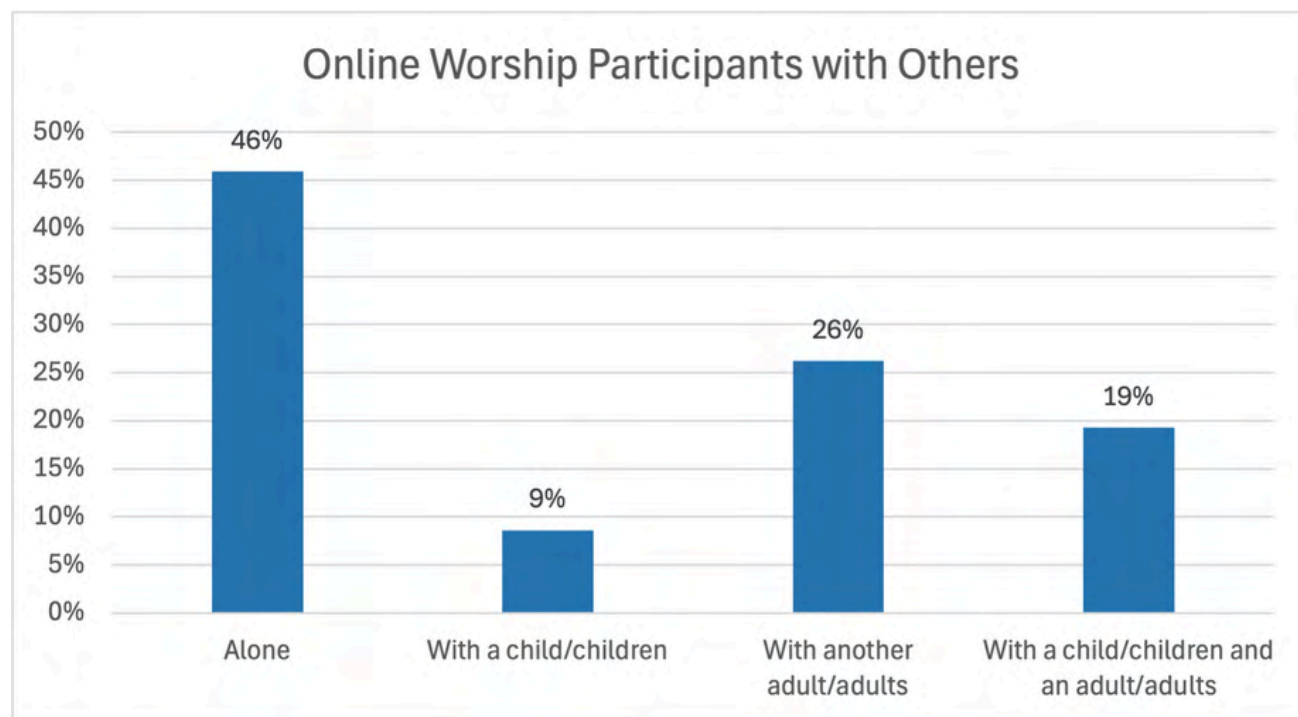


Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

A common challenge among clergy leaders, denominational researchers, and scholars is how to count online attenders in worship attendance totals. While there is no single accepted method, some use a formula to estimate the number of participants while others count each view or connected device as a single attender. Our survey found that almost half (46%) of virtual attenders participate in this experience by themselves (Figure 13). Nine percent of online attenders report doing so accompanied by a child or children but no other adult. Just a fifth of participants (19%) are engaged in virtual worship with another adult and children. Finally, 26% participate as a couple or group of adults. Although these results do not offer a clear attendance formula for leaders to calculate their viewer counts, it does add some clarity to virtual spectatorship. Based on our estimations, a more accurate depiction of how many people are watching online worship might be roughly two participants per connected device.

Interestingly, online attenders who mix their participation between in-person and online are more likely to be watching with a family as compared to the exclusively or primarily online attenders. Mainline virtual attenders are the most likely to participate by themselves and the least likely to do so with children compared to other faith traditions. Conversely, Evangelical virtual attenders participate more often with a spouse or others and children. Lastly, older online participants are most likely to be doing so by themselves, while younger virtual attenders are more likely to participate with a group of adults.

FIGURE 13



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

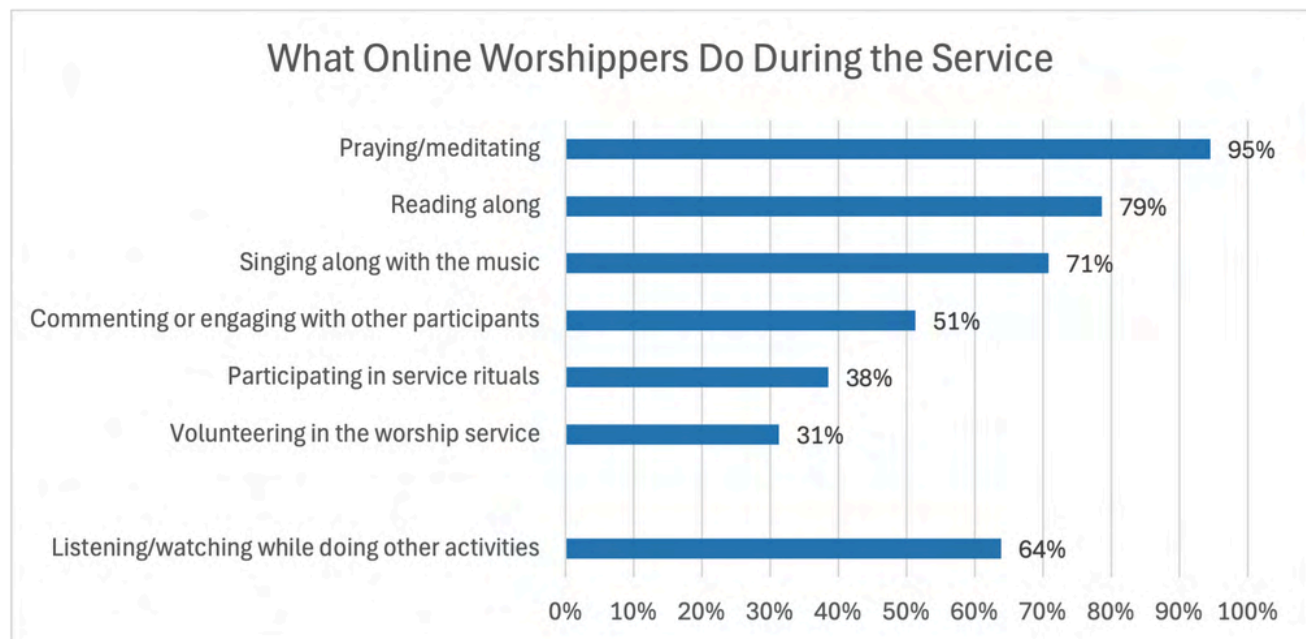


Another perplexing question concerns what online attenders are doing while they remotely participate in the service. We are all too familiar with multitasking while attending zoom meetings; is this also true of virtual worshippers? Are attenders truly engaged with the virtual worship or are they passive spectators, primarily occupied with cooking breakfast, shopping in Costco (we had a case study participant admit to doing this), driving, or tending to their children? Our data indicates that both may be the case (Figure 14). Approximately two-thirds (64%) of virtual participants admit to listening or watching the service while also doing other activities. However, many of these also report active participation in the worship service in several ways. Nearly all of those participating virtually (95%) say that they pray or meditate during the service, and the majority are reading along and singing along (79% and 71% respectively) with in-person service attenders. Additionally, half of participants (51%) report they comment or engage with other participants during the service. Some virtual participants claim that they participate in worship rituals (38%) or volunteer as a part of the service (31%). These latter activities are likely influenced by religious tradition and mode of online worship offered (e.g. livestream versus zoom or video conferencing platforms). Indeed, the smaller the church size, the more these highly participatory activities increase. Nevertheless, those who engage in external activities while participating in virtual services are still likely to participate in the ways mentioned above. On the whole, involvement in other activities during the virtual service does not preclude a participant's active engagement with the worship service.

Nearly all of those participating virtually say that they pray or meditate during the service, and the majority are reading along and singing along with in-person service attenders.

Evangelical virtual participants are both more engaged in external activities while attending a virtual service and more likely to be engaged in all the religious activities while participating in the online service. Mainline virtual participants are the least likely of the faith traditions to be actively participating during online worship services. Catholic/Orthodox are most likely to be engaged in prayer while virtually participating. Older online participants tend to be more passive viewers; in contrast, the younger online participants are the most likely to be doing other things while engaged in virtual worship, but they are also the most actively engaged in religious practices while virtually participating compared to all other age groups.

FIGURE 14



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

And finally, we asked online attenders how satisfied they are with their online worship service experience. Nearly all online attenders (87%) are satisfied or very satisfied with the experience and only a minuscule 4% are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied, with the rest being neutral. The level of satisfaction is even higher among those who are exclusively online participants. Those experiencing virtual worship in larger churches with over 250 attenders report greater satisfaction with the online experience than those in smaller churches. Women are more satisfied with this virtual platform than are men. Younger virtual participants are less satisfied than those of other age groups. However, neither religious tradition nor race distinctions showed any differences in satisfaction with the online worship experience. Overall, online worship seems to be a meaningful and worthwhile experience for those who choose out of necessity or convenience to participate in services in a virtual manner.

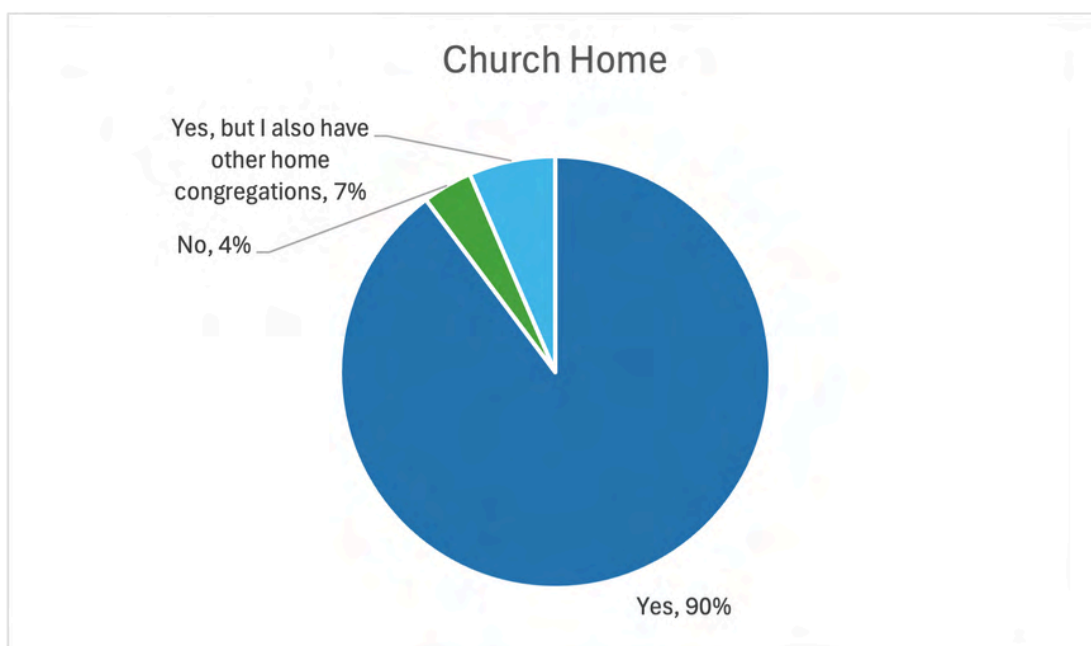
MULTIPLE COMMITMENTS

The increased use of virtual worship and livestreaming post-pandemic has offered an increased opportunity for easy and risk-free “shopping” between congregations or attending multiple worship services. Yet the typical survey asks attenders if they are members of only one church, never offering a possibility of naming dual or multiple affiliations simultaneously. To explore these diverse commitment possibilities, this survey asked if a person’s current congregation is their “home church” and asked if they also have other home churches. Interestingly, 9 out of 10 respondents said “yes” it is their “church home,” 4% said no, but 7% reported having multiple affiliations (Figure 15). It is unclear whether this phenomenon has increased since the pandemic because no earlier nationally representative data exists as a comparison. However, previous research on attenders in US megachurches (churches with 2,000 or more weekly attenders) found that 12% of respondents claimed multiple church homes (Thumma & Bird, 2008). While this 7% is not a significant portion of the congregation, it does uncover a reality that we did not know existed and establishes a marker by which we can track future change. It might also mean that we are overcounting congregational membership nationally.

Those with multiple home churches are significantly less committed to the church they are attending.

Likewise, this dual affiliation has a serious effect on attender commitment. Those with multiple home churches are significantly less committed to the church they are attending, in terms of participation, giving, volunteering, and involvement in activities than those with a single church affiliation.

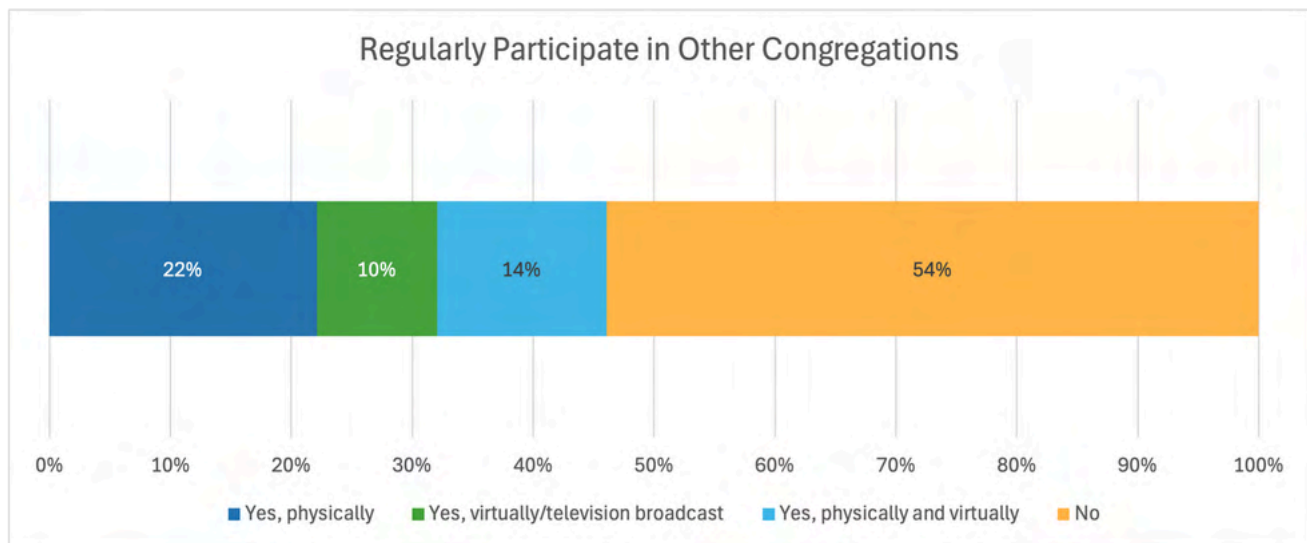
FIGURE 15



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

In addition, respondents were asked if they participate regularly in other congregations either physically, virtually and through television, or both. While this dynamic is different from committing to a church or thinking of it as their “home church,” it is a dynamic that we think has increased since the pandemic since so many congregations now offer virtual services. This data finds that nearly half of respondents (46%) regularly participate in multiple congregations (Figure 16). While expanded virtual access to other congregations may explain part of this trend, 36% of respondents nevertheless report regularly attending at least one other congregation physically. About one in five people who regularly participate elsewhere are doing so with a congregation of a different denomination or faith tradition.

FIGURE 16



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

As stated above, people who have multiple church homes are less committed to their congregation on all the metrics related to congregational commitment. However, the action of regularly attending services at multiple congregations, whether in person or virtually, does not have the same detrimental effect on home church commitment. Participating in other services does not negatively impact how often one attends their primary congregation, donates a percentage of their income, or how frequently they volunteer. Attendance at other congregational services and activities appears to be more of an added spiritual/religious practice than a detraction or reason to split their time, attention, and resources.

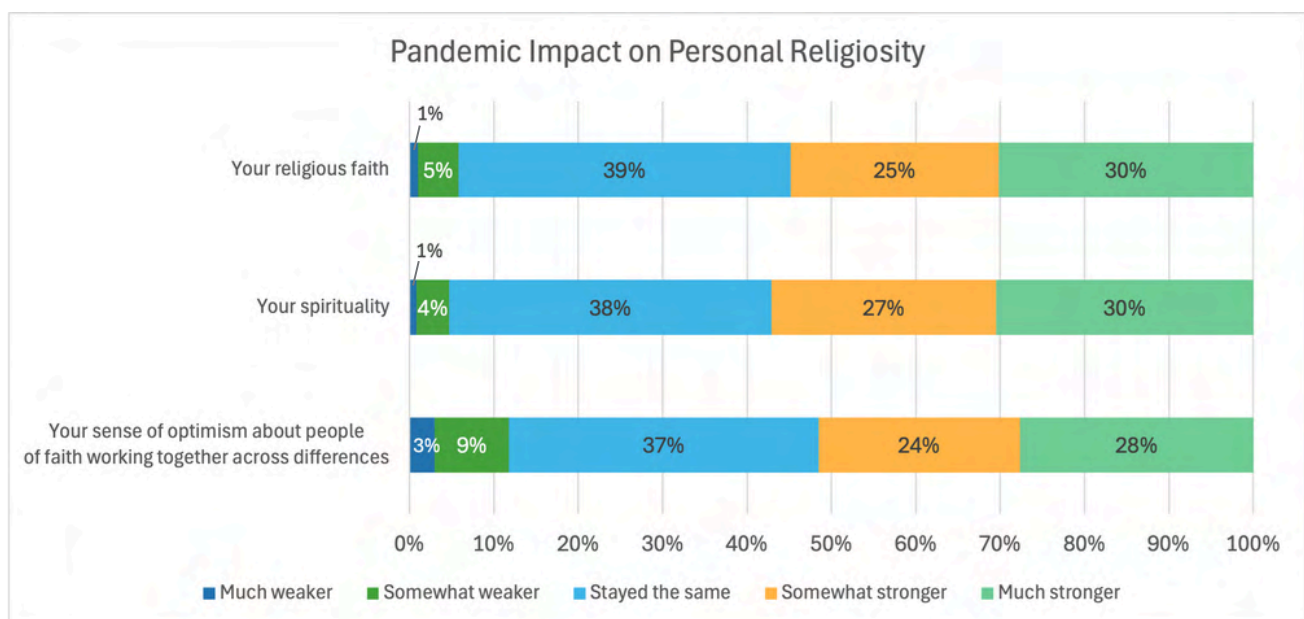
DIRECT IMPACT OF COVID

Finally, to conclude this report we explore some of the direct impacts the COVID-19 pandemic might have had on attenders' perspectives regarding their congregation.

Turning first to the perceived impact of the pandemic on personal religiosity, a majority of respondents report having a somewhat or much stronger religious faith (55%) and sense of spirituality (57%) because of the pandemic (Figure 17). Also, 52% have a stronger sense of optimism about people of faith working across differences as a result of the pandemic. Conversely, almost no respondents report a weakening of their religiosity due to the pandemic. It is important to consider that those who might have lost their faith during the pandemic may have chosen not to respond to the survey or may no longer be attending church at all and therefore are not reflected here. Respondents from Evangelical congregations report more religious and spiritual strengthening, while those from Catholic/Orthodox and mainline churches are more likely to report their faith staying the same. Younger attenders report a stronger positive change in all these measures of religiosity compared to older participants.

A majority of respondents report having a somewhat or much stronger religious faith and sense of spirituality because of the pandemic.

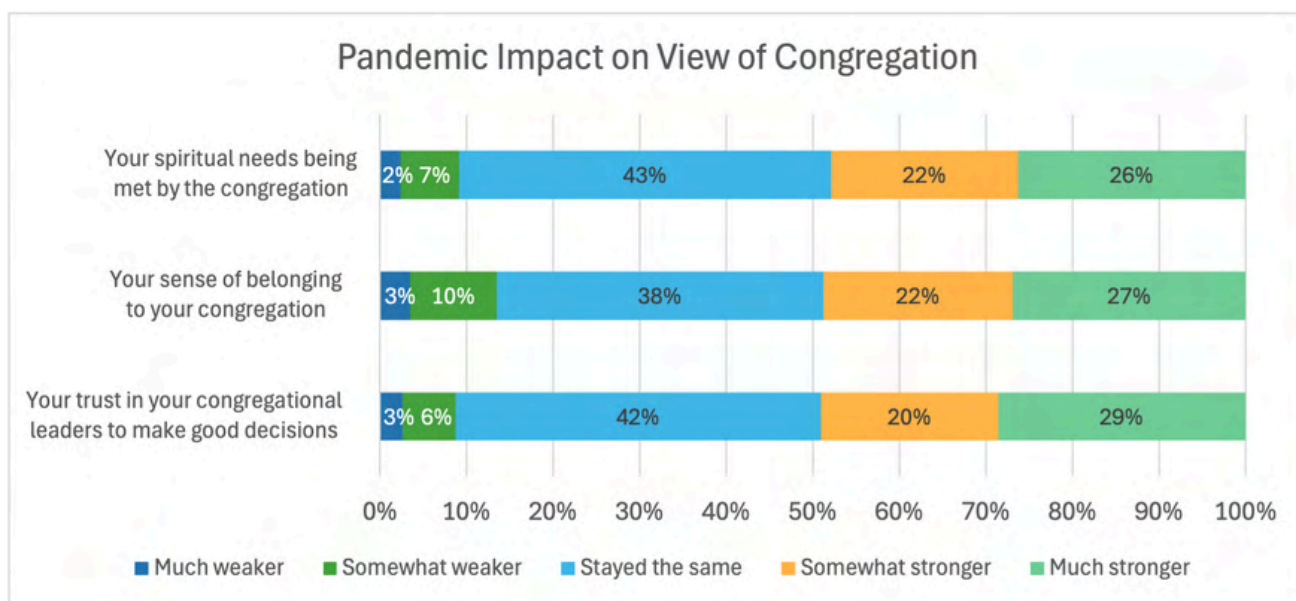
FIGURE 17



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

Regarding the assessment of their congregation as a result of the pandemic, nearly half of respondents have a stronger sense of their spiritual needs being met by their congregation, have a stronger sense of belonging to their congregation, and have stronger trust in their congregational leaders to make good decisions (48%, 49%, and 49% respectively, see Figure 18). The sense of belonging to the congregation is higher for Evangelical attenders, and lower for Mainline attenders. The attender's faith tradition does not result in significant differences regarding spiritual needs being met, trust in leadership, or a sense of optimism.

FIGURE 18

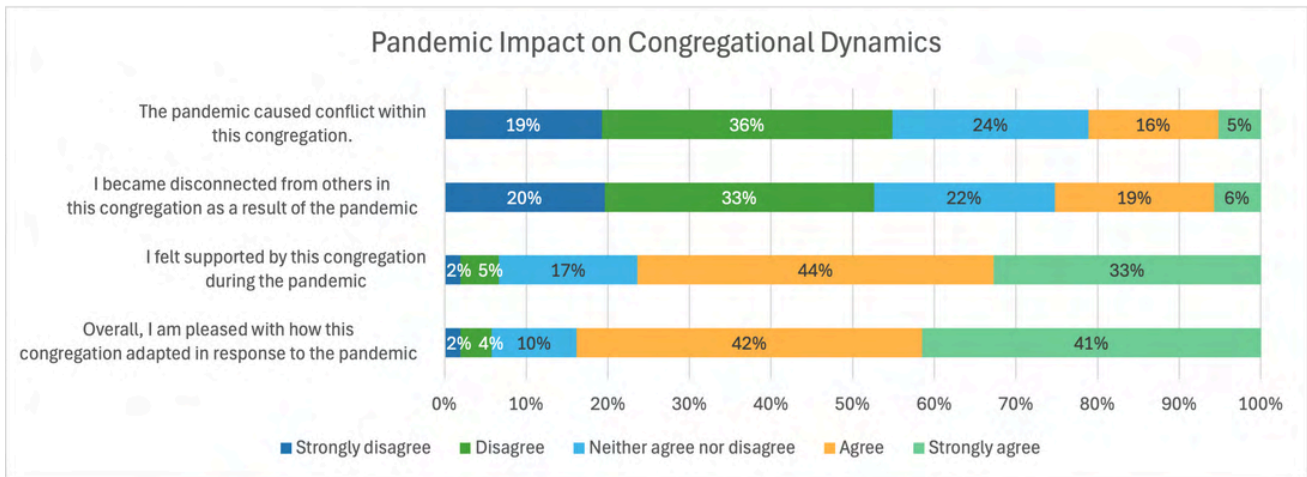


Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

A large majority of attenders report being pleased with how their congregation adapted in response to the pandemic.

Digging deeper, it appears from the attender perspective that the pandemic did not cause conflict within most congregations (Figure 19). Of those who attended their church during the pandemic, only 21% of respondents feel that the pandemic caused conflict within their congregation. Similarly, most respondents did not report becoming disconnected from their congregation because of the pandemic. Just a quarter (25%) felt disconnected, while more than double that (53%) did not. In the same vein, three-quarters (77%) of attenders said they felt supported by their congregation during the pandemic, while only 7% disagreed. And in sum, a large majority (84%) of attenders report being pleased with how their congregation adapted in response to the pandemic.

FIGURE 19



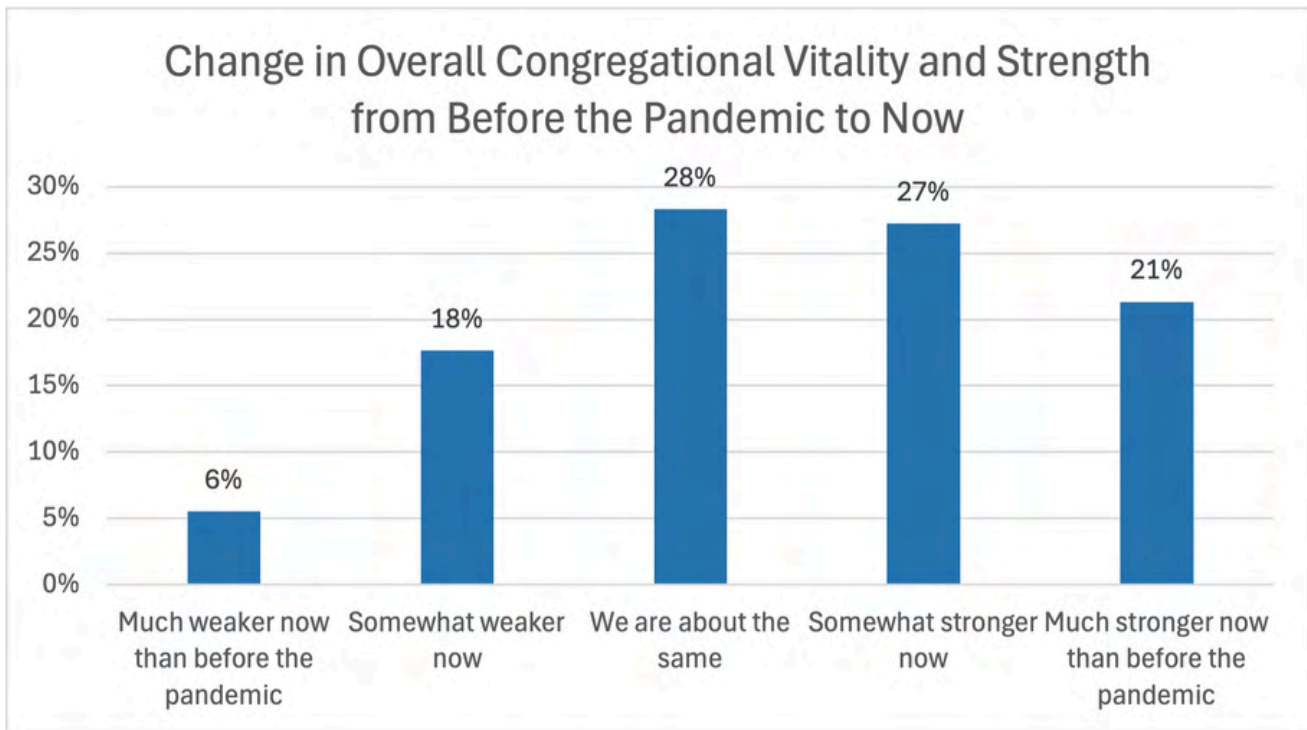
Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

Those in Mainline churches reported slightly higher agreement with being pleased at how their congregation responded to the pandemic. Additionally, the larger the size of the congregation that respondents attended, the more pleased they were with their church's overall response to the pandemic. However, those in the smallest congregations reported the highest feelings of connection to their congregation through the pandemic.

And finally, respondents were asked to assess how the current vitality and strength of their congregation compares to its pre-pandemic situation (Figure 20). Overall, half of the attendees (49%) view the vitality and strength of their congregation as somewhat stronger or much stronger than before the pandemic. Another quarter (28%) reports that their congregation has maintained the same level of vitality. Only a minority of respondents (18%) report their congregation to be somewhat weaker now, and just 6% report their church as much weaker presently. This is likely a result of the fact that most survey respondents are in larger congregations which tended to weather the pandemic better than smaller and less resourced congregations.

Indeed, participants in the largest congregations report the greatest levels of overall vitality and strength since the pandemic began. Additionally, the greater a congregation grew in attendance, the more likely participants are to report greater overall vitality and strength at present. Those in Evangelical churches report greater vitality, followed by Catholic/Orthodox participants, and then those in Mainline churches. Younger respondents are more likely to assess their congregations as vital and strong now, though race, region and gender of participants did not account for major differences in assessing the present vitality of their congregations.

FIGURE 20



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



Photo credit: Rawpixel, iStock

CONCLUSION

Overall, the survey responses from church attenders presented in this report paint a positive view of personal religiosity and congregational religious life since the COVID-19 pandemic. While the view from the congregational leaders may be more tepid (as found in our earlier surveys), attenders mostly seem satisfied with their religious experiences and report weathering the pandemic quite well.

As with most surveys, those who voluntarily respond to a survey are not only more invested in the subject, but perhaps more likely to want to portray their religious experiences and congregations in a positive light. They also may be the most committed members of the congregation. Likewise, it must be remembered that a majority of the respondents within this survey participated in churches of over 250 people, which were the least likely to be negatively affected by the pandemic. Even given these caveats, the findings presented in this report shed light on a host of dynamics that are reshaping congregational life at the present moment.

While many churches suffered because of low attender engagement in the worst phase of the pandemic, patterns in this attender survey demonstrate a rebounding level of commitment and engagement. While for many, involvement remained at the same level as it was prior to the pandemic, clearly a greater percentage of participants have increased their involvement than have decreased. More attenders are volunteering in their congregation and nearly fifty percent report they have increased their financial giving. Similar increases are seen in their engagement in acts of personal religiosity, spiritual practices, and involvement in congregational programs. While this rosy picture is not universal across all respondents, the past few years did mark an intensification of faith for roughly a third of participants.

Additionally, this survey identified a sizable percentage of new participants having joined since 2020. Many of these new attenders switched from other churches to their current spiritual home. However, a third are new to congregational life or have come back after being away for a long time. These newer attenders, while less committed than long-time members, are also more likely to increase their involvement and participation. Although this may create challenging dynamics for leadership, these newer people infuse their churches with energy and enthusiasm as well as new perspectives and ideas.

For three-quarters of new attenders, the primary appeal of their congregation is a congruence between their personal beliefs, values, and preferences and a church's positions. Other significant attractional factors include a welcoming atmosphere, the worship experience, and denominational identity.

This research report explored the diverse ways attenders are able to experience worship in a post-pandemic reality. Clearly, in person worship is still favored by a majority of attenders and correlates with more robust commitment and engagement by participants. However, online worship participation is utilized, at least occasionally, by a quarter of attenders. For those exclusively or primarily virtual attenders, it is an essential window into the life of the church, while for the occasional virtual participant, it is seen as a convenience and likely allows for greater overall participation for this segment of the congregation.

Our data on virtual participants sheds light on the reality of onscreen attenders, exploring who they participate virtually with, what they do while in worship, and their level of engagement in the online service. Overall, their involvement is more active and robust than expected but still it is not quite as vital as that of the in-person attenders.

This research also explored a seldom discussed reality of participants who have multiple commitments to different churches. While the percentage of attenders who fall into this category is small, the dynamic appears to be detrimental to their level of commitment and involvement. Our research also discovered an even larger percentage of attenders -- nearly half of participants -- who seek out additional experiences of worship and church life at other congregations. This additional spiritual engagement elsewhere does not seem to hinder their commitment to their home church participation; in fact, these people are often the most highly involved.

Finally, based on our survey results, the pandemic appeared to have more of a positive than negative impact on the religious and spiritual lives of attenders. Additionally, more participants report increases in their sense of belonging to the congregation and their spiritual needs being met by the church than those who report a decrease in these dynamics. Likewise, twice as many respondents describe their churches as more vital and stronger since the pandemic than those who report them to be weaker. Clearly the people who have remained active and committed to church life, the past five years have been perceived as having a positive effect on their religious and spiritual lives.

Future Directions

This report serves as a first-look, broad overview of what we have started to uncover from this attender survey. There are many fascinating results and dynamics yet to be explored from this rich dataset. We will continue analyzing this data in the coming months as we examine these trends in more depth and explore dynamics not discussed above. Some forthcoming analyses we have planned include looking at personal spiritual and religious practices of church attenders in more detail; examining attender motivations for volunteering and financial giving; uncovering how political party affects involvement and post-pandemic perceptions; exploring differences by demographic factors such as age groups, geographic region, or gender; understanding how first and second generation immigrant status changes participation dynamics; diving into the health and wellness of church attenders; and more. Stay tuned to see what else we find from this data.



Photo credit: Natalya Ukolova Unsplash

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR CLERGY LEADERS

Considering the findings discussed above, here are a few questions for clergy and other congregational leaders to consider:

1. Have you seen significant changes in your church attenders' involvement and engagement? Whether positive or negative, how has the leadership responded to these changes? What changes have you made, or should you consider, to address these shifting commitment levels?
2. Do you have a sizable group of attenders who have started coming since the pandemic? What was the church like when they arrived? What may have changed in their short tenure, and are those changes for the better? Are there creative ways to address the needs of both the newer and longer-term participants?
3. Who are your online attenders, if applicable? Have you inquired into their reasons for opting for virtual worship and if your online service meets those needs? What efforts have you taken to integrate them with the physical in-person congregation?
4. How did COVID-19 affect the sense of community in your congregation? What is the mood of the congregation now? In what ways have you processed the disruption and trauma of the pandemic period and any lingering conflict?
5. Have you and your leadership team felt any tension/challenge as a result of members with multiple affiliations or those who visit other church services or programs? Have you encouraged the creation of partnerships or networked with other churches to increase the programs available for your membership?

ABOUT THIS STUDY

The Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study is generously funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. and led by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace (formerly Hartford Seminary). We will continue to release targeted analyses of more specific findings from our topical surveys breaking down how Mainline/Evangelical, multiracial, Black congregations, Latinx congregations, and churches of differing sizes are navigating the pandemic. Sign up to receive our newsletter and like and follow us on Facebook and X and make sure you receive our reports as soon as they are released.

METHODOLOGY

This Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC) study is the result of a collaborative venture of 20 denominations from the Faith Communities Today (FACT) cooperative partnership, a network of religious groups and Christian denominations who have been working collaboratively to survey congregations for more than 25 years, and Hartford Institute for Religion Research staff. Together, a questionnaire was crafted by this group. A copy of this questionnaire is available at www.covidreligionresearch.org and should be consulted for the exact wording of items used in this report and the question's general frequencies. Data for this attendee survey was collected using two distinctive efforts. The first approach was through the FACT research initiative where 12 participating denominational groups recruited congregational leaders who then distributed the survey to all the people connected to their congregation, including those attending virtually. 764 churches provided 52% of the total responses (n=12,658) between September 2024 and January 2025. The second approach supplemented the FACT data by purchasing responses from two external panels, namely Survey Monkey Audience (12%, n=2,784) and Prolific (36%, n=8,723). These supplemental respondents were screened and selected based on having attended church at least a few times a year for services other than weddings or funerals. Taken together, this participant survey represents a weighted number of 24,165 church attenders from more than 80 denominational groups. We designed survey weights to adjust the sample based on denomination and church size using targets derived from several other surveys as comparisons (Pew Religious Landscape Study, National Congregations Study, Faith Communities Today, Baylor Religion Survey, US Congregational Life Survey). The response rate and sampling error for a survey using this methodology can only be estimated. An estimate for the margin of error is +/- 0.6% at the 95% confidence level. Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding. For more information about this study, its methods, or to participate in future surveys, contact Scott Thumma at sthumma@hartfordinternational.edu or Charissa Mikoski at cmikoski@hartfordinternational.edu.