

Executive Summary

This report examines the current impact and possible long-term consequences of the pandemic for American Orthodox Christian parishes. Each chapter can be read separately depending on the reader's particular interests. Data were gathered May 4-9, 2020 through an online survey of 234 parish priests from all parts of the country, representing seven Orthodox jurisdictions. The following major subjects are discussed in the report:

- ❖ Bringing liturgical life online, plus additional adaptations to worship services, religious education, small group meetings, and children's ministries
- ❖ New ways of offering Sacraments and new practices in serving Holy Communion
- ❖ Changes in parish finances caused by the pandemic
- ❖ Physical, spiritual, emotional well-being of the clergy, types of outside support they need, and their principal sources of help
- ❖ Meeting the challenge of "digitally disconnected" parishioners, and how parishes try to assist members with special needs resulting from the pandemic

Special attention was paid to understanding how various membership demographics, as well as distinctive local cultural elements of parishes (their "identities"), have influenced parishes' responses to the pandemic. Several open-ended questions allowed us to learn about creative strategies and innovative practices developed by the parishes which help them through this crisis. Descriptions of these strategies and practices are included in the report.

A few examples of key results are given below:

- ❖ Prior to the pandemic, only 13% of parishes posted online recordings or live-streamed their services. By the beginning of May, the percentage of such parishes reached 64%. Nearly two-thirds of clergy in the parishes with live-streamed services measure their online attendance. Remarkably, 44% of these priests reported greater current online attendance as compared to in-person attendance prior to the pandemic.
- ❖ The use of Zoom (or other videoconferencing platforms) seems to be increasingly popular for offering online religious services *instead of* or in addition to live-streaming. Some priests felt that videoconferencing creates a more engaging experience than simply live-streaming. The report presents several descriptions of how Zoom is used for worship services.
- ❖ Compared to the success of a great majority of parishes in bringing their liturgical services online, religious education and other ministries did not recover as rapidly. Less than half the parishes have organized online meetings for their religious education classes (45%) or small groups (37%).
- ❖ No other area of the parish life was hit harder by the pandemic than the Sacraments. In the case of Holy Communion, more than one-third of parishes (36%) have stopped offering the Eucharist entirely. The

plurality of parishes (48%) serve Communion only to a very limited number of members who are permitted to attend services. Just 16% of parishes have found ways to continue offering Holy Communion to *all their members*. The report presents the creative approaches and practices these 16% of priests are using.

- ❖ Clergy most frequently reported feeling an “extreme or strong” need for help in “finding ways for offering personal spiritual support and nourishment to individual parishioners while being physically remote from them” (44%). About one in three priests felt an “extreme or strong” need for “tips on surviving the financial crunch” (38%), “tips on how to encourage parishioners to give” (36%), and “help with organizing youth ministries and activities under conditions of social isolation” (32%).
- ❖ When asked to assess their physical, spiritual, and emotional/mental well-being, a significantly greater percentage of senior (65+) priests, as compared to middle-aged (46-65) or younger (up to 45) clergy, described their spiritual health as “excellent” or “good.”
- ❖ A vast majority of parishes have a sufficient financial “cushion” for a few months if the pandemic continues: 51% of clergy feel that their finances are sound enough to run the parishes without any changes during that period, while 35% would need to make only minor adjustments to their budgets. At the same time, nearly half the parishes have already experienced a decline in giving as compared to what was typical before the pandemic. The median decrease reported by these parishes was 31%. The report presents a number of the respondents’ comments on changes in their parish finances.
- ❖ The median percentage of “digitally not connected” households in American Orthodox parishes is 10% (i.e., households that either have no access to equipment/connectivity or are not capable of using computers/email/Internet). However, the problem is greater than it may appear from this modest percentage. In one-fifth of the parishes, *at least* 30% of their membership cannot be remotely reached by online means. When asked about various obstacles to offering online services, by far the greatest percentage of clergy (67%) indicated that a major (27%) or moderate (40%) obstacle was that some parishioners do not have either adequate access to the Internet or the necessary computer skills.
- ❖ Only 10% of parishes provide special assistance for households that were especially strongly affected by the pandemic. Clergy of these parishes were asked to describe what they were doing, and their responses are summarized in the report.