

On the Eve of Easter 2020: Coronavirus and US Orthodox Christian Parishes

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"As the pastor, I feel that the pandemic and the resulting home confinement of the members have resulted in a renewed hunger for prayer, worship and receiving the Sacraments. So, in a sense, the crisis has forced a cell-like experience of the faithful which will hopefully result in more faithful attendance at the divine services and more active participation in parish life by the members once the Coronavirus has abated."

(A comment offered by one of the respondents, the middle-aged parish priest in the Antiochian Archdiocese)

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Introduction: Explanatory Note about This Report.

This mini-report about the impact of Coronavirus on American Orthodox Christian Churches is extracted from an ongoing (as of April 15, 2020) national survey, the "Orthodox Parish Life Study." The full report will be released in summer 2020. The "Orthodox Parish Life Study" is being undertaken as part of a much larger study of American religious congregations titled "Faith Communities Today" (FACT) organized by the "Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership" (CCSP). CCSP is an interfaith coalition of religious researchers representing a broad spectrum of American faith communities. More about the CCSP research partnership and its numerous reports on American religious congregations can be found at: www.faithcommunitiestoday.org. Eastern Orthodox Churches have been actively involved in the FACT/CCSP partnership since its beginning in 2000.¹

The "Orthodox Parish Life Study" is being conducted via an online survey of the clergy Orthodox Christian parishes throughout the USA. When the study was launched in January of 2020, no one could anticipate that less than two months later we would all find ourselves in the midst of the Coronavirus outbreak. Many things have changed dramatically since that time in the daily lives of Orthodox clergy and their parishes. Therefore, when the second round of invitations to participate in the study was emailed to clergy on April 6, 2020, several timely and relevant questions examining the impact of the pandemic on Orthodox parish life were added. Within one week (April 6-13, 2020), 87 Orthodox priests responded to the revised questionnaire and offered feedback from their parishes. This mini-report is based on information and insights coming from these parishes. Three introductory remarks should be made.

First, we realize that 87 parishes cannot be seen as a statistically sound national sample of American Orthodox Churches. Yet, we believe that it is important to share these first and highly current findings with other parishes and a wider Orthodox and non-Orthodox audience in the hope that these data can be helpful to them and also will encourage more Orthodox clergy to take part in the ongoing study (see more about this in the last section of the report).

¹ Two most recent reports about US Orthodox Churches coming out of FACT/CCSP studies can be viewed and downloaded here: ["Orthodox Christian Churches in 21st Century America"](#) and ["Young Adults and Young Adult Ministries in American Orthodox Christian Parishes."](#)

Second, we invite all readers to offer their feedback and indicate which particular questions related to the impact of Coronavirus on Church life should be further examined. To do so, please send your comments and suggestions to: orthodoxdata@usreligioncensus.org.

Third, the questionnaire used in the "Orthodox Parish Life Study" explored many areas of American Orthodox parish life (including, worship, programs and ministries, membership, use of modern technologies, etc.) of American Orthodox parish life. This mini-report, however, is limited to discussing only the nine added questions on how parishes have been coping with the outbreak of the pandemic.

I. Characteristics of the Orthodox Parishes Participating in this Study

The information offered on the following pages came from the parishes representing eight national Orthodox Church jurisdictions. See Fig. 1

Fig. 1 Percentage (%) of Parishes of Various Jurisdictions Responding to Nine Questions on Coronavirus (as of April 13, 2020)

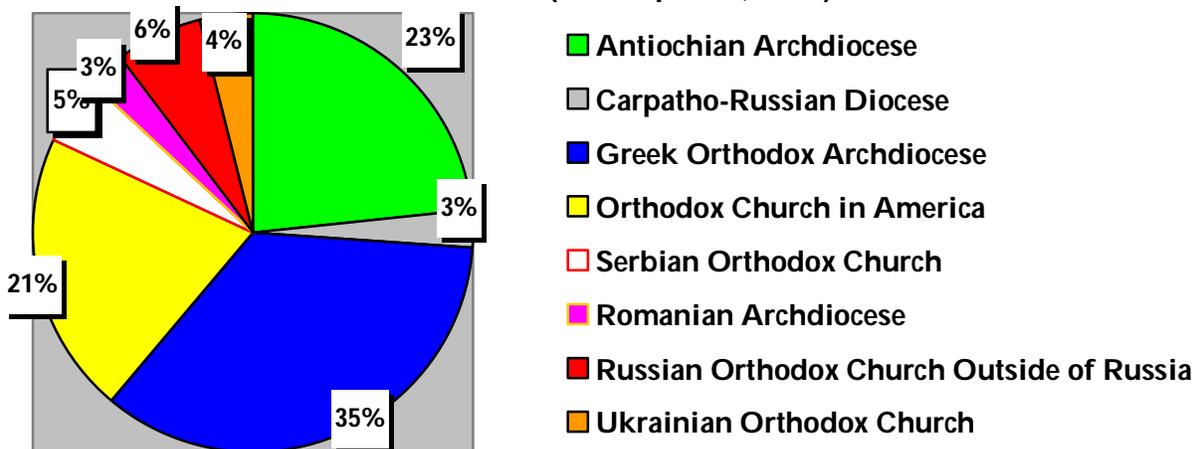


Table 1 offers a snapshot of various membership characteristics in the participating parishes. For each characteristic, it shows median percentage of parishioners who belong to a certain demographic category. "Median" means that in half of the parishes this percentage is higher while in the other half it is lower than the median value.

Table 1 Demography of Membership in the Parishes Participating in the Study

Of all parishioners are:	Converts to Orthodoxy	US born	Recent immigrants to US (within five past year)	Live within 15 min. of the church	College graduates	Volunteer regularly in a parish	Live below poverty line	Female parishioners
Median percentage	50%	80%	5%	50%	60%	30%	5%	55%

Later, in section VII, we will take a look at how the demography of parishioners may possibly affect parish's respond to Coronavirus.

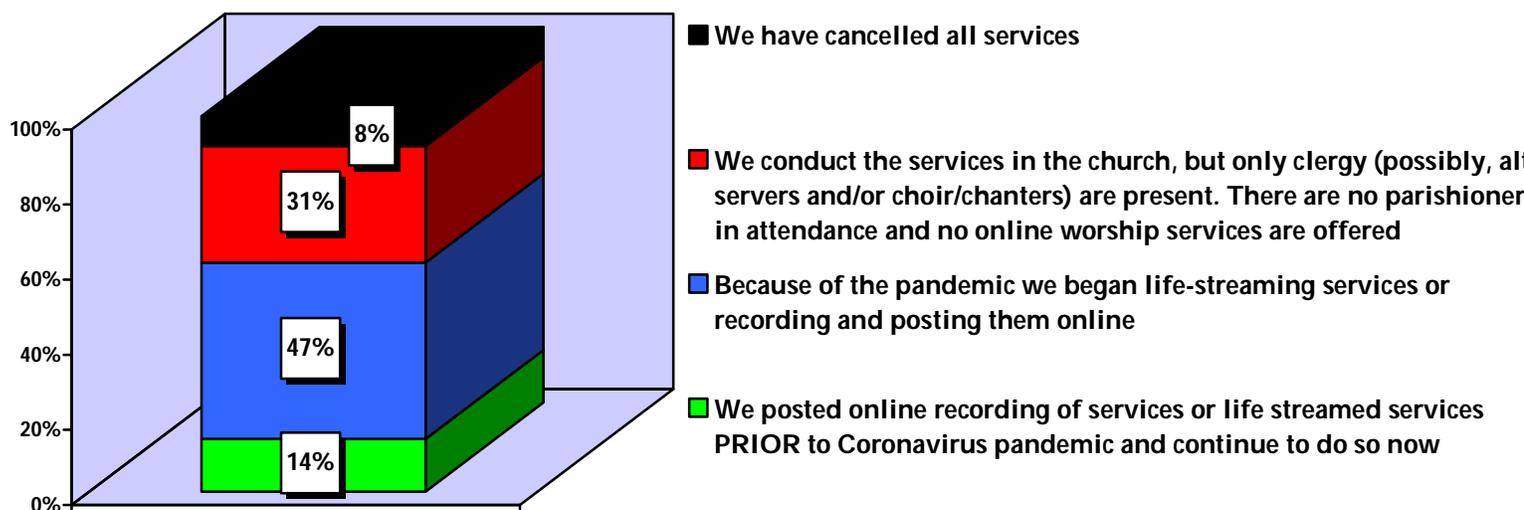
II. Adjusting Liturgical Services and Small Group Ministries to New Circumstances

The legal restrictions enforcing social distancing and banning public gatherings which were introduced in most states combined with Church guidelines issued by many dioceses and national Orthodox Church jurisdictions have made it impossible for the vast majority of Orthodox parishes to continue their worship services in the usual format: with clergy, choirs, readers, altar boys, and faithful being physically present. And the Coronavirus pandemic has had the same effect on many other parish-based activities that would normally involve gathering together. Parishes had to stop these in-person meetings, putting a temporary halt on religious education classes and small group activities, as well as whole parish socialization and community services.

How - if at all - have parishes and clergy adjusted to these changed realities? Fig. 2 shows that only 14% of the parishes were "prepared" to face these new circumstances, because they had already experience of recording and posting online or even live-streaming their services *prior* to the outbreak of pandemic. However, nearly half the parishes (47%) have managed to quickly address the challenge and establish worship services which can be viewed online. Still, in two out of five parishes, the liturgical life has become inaccessible to parishioners. Indeed, 31% of the parishes now conduct services behind closed doors without parishioners being present and without going online, while 8% have simply ceased all services.

Fig. 2 Worship Services in US Orthodox Parishes amidst Coronavirus Outbreak

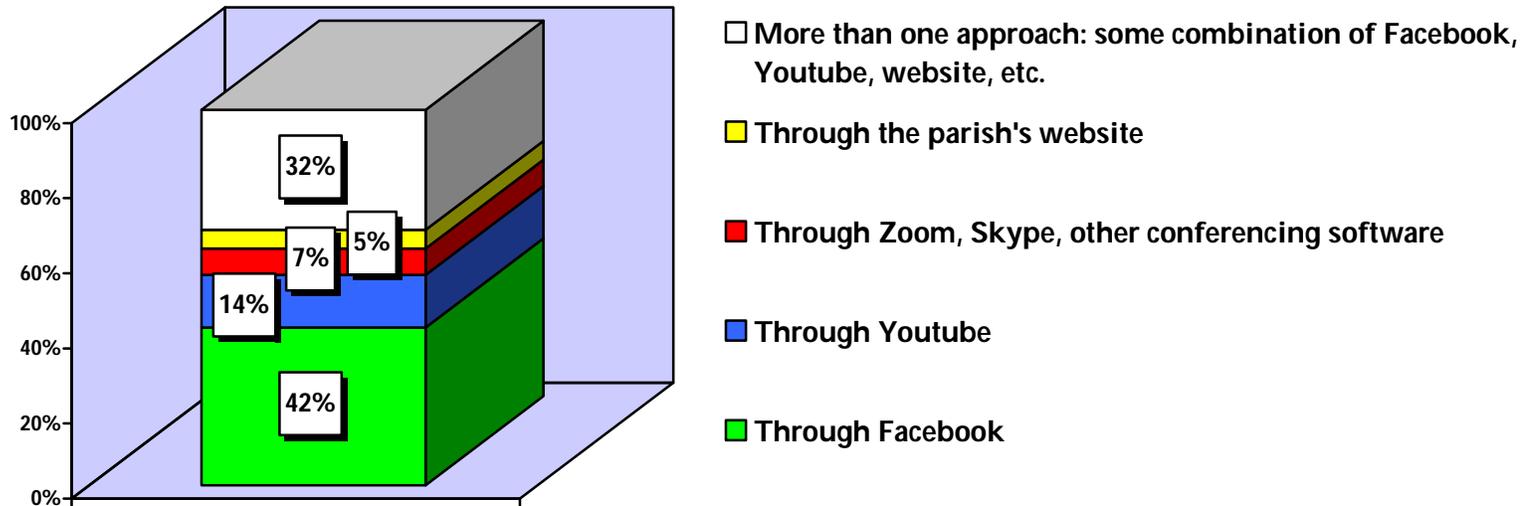
"Which best describes your current situation with worship services?"



How do exactly parishes broadcast their worship online: where do they post or stream? Fig. 3 shows that Facebook has been chosen by plurality of the parishes (42%) as the preferred platform. YouTube and various video-conferencing software platforms are much less popular: only 14% and 7% of parishes respectively rely on them as the main tool for offering liturgical services via the Internet. And remarkably, only 5% of parishes utilize their own websites as major gateway for offering online services.

Fig. 3 Platforms for Online Worship Services in US Orthodox Parishes

"If you are using life-streaming or posting online worship, where are you streaming?"



Compared to liturgical life which – in some form - continues in nearly all churches, religious education classes and small group activities in parishes have suffered much more from the Coronavirus outbreak. See Fig. 4.

Fig. 4 Religious Education and Small Group Ministries Suffered Significantly from Coronavirus

"What is the current status of your small group ministries or religious education classes?"

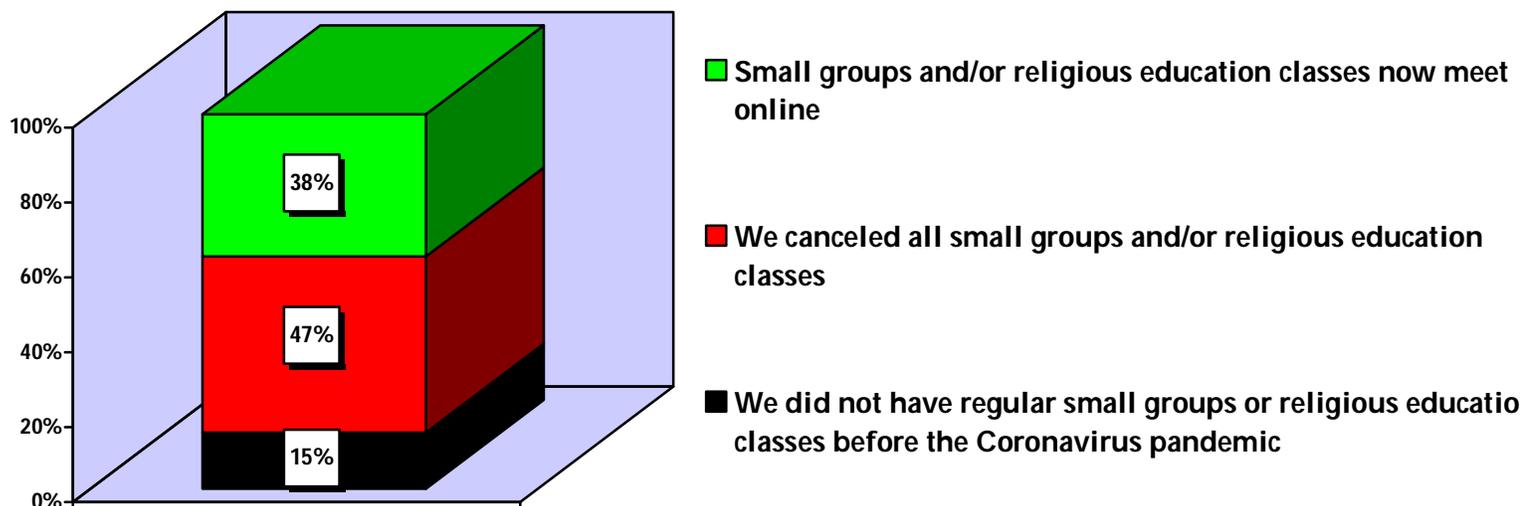


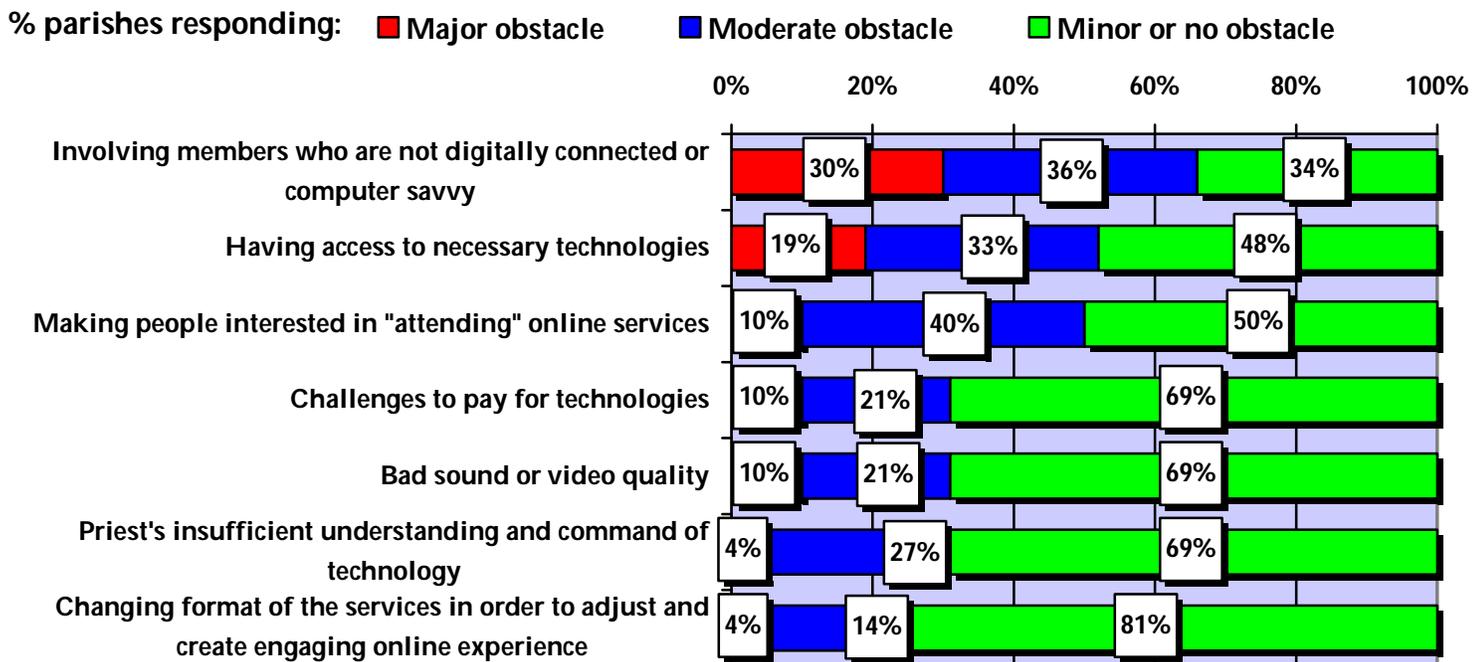
Fig. 4 shows that, prior to the pandemic, only 15% of the parishes had neither religious education classes nor small group activities. Today, in a dominant majority of the parishes (62%), religious education classes and small group ministries are non-existent. Only 38% of the parishes were able to organize regular online meetings for these activities. It should also be noted that one of the possible responses to the question, "What is the current status of your small group ministries or religious education classes?" was "We continue to meet in person (perhaps, in smaller groups)." Not a single parish participating in the study chose this option.

To summarize: as of now, nearly 40% of the parishes have been unable to offer online worship services and about 60% of them did not introduce online religious education classes or small group meetings. What are the major obstacles for having "virtual" parish life?

III. Challenges of Switching to Online Worship Services

Regardless of whether they presently offer their services on Internet, all parishes were asked the question, "Are you finding any of the following to be an obstacle to offering online services?" Fig. 5 shows, by far the greatest challenge for achieving this goal from the perspective of the clergy are "technologically disabled" parishioners who do not have either sufficient access to Internet or basic computer skills. Two thirds of the parish priests quoted this reason as a major or moderate obstacle for offering online services.

Fig. 5 Challenges to Offering Online Worship Services in US Orthodox Parishes
 "Are you finding the following to be an obstacle to offering online services?"



About half of the parishes are struggling seriously or moderately with access to necessary technologies (52%) or simply with the absence of interest in virtual – instead of live – liturgical services on the part of parishioners (50%). Remarkably, while parishioners’ insufficient computer literacy appears to be the greatest challenge, Fig. 5 also shows that the vast majority of clergy say they have no or little problem in terms of their own command of the technologies required for broadcasting their services over the Internet.

A question can be raised as to whether clergy in parishes with and without online services have the same opinions about various obstacles to bringing their services onto the Internet. The short answer to this question is: their opinions are very similar. In both groups the top three challenges are the same as shown in Fig. 5. And in both groups only about one-third of the clergy feel that their own insufficient understanding of technologies creates serious or moderate problems. The only difference between the clergy in the parishes with and without online services is that the latter quoted “Having access to the necessary technologies” more often as being a major or moderate obstacle.

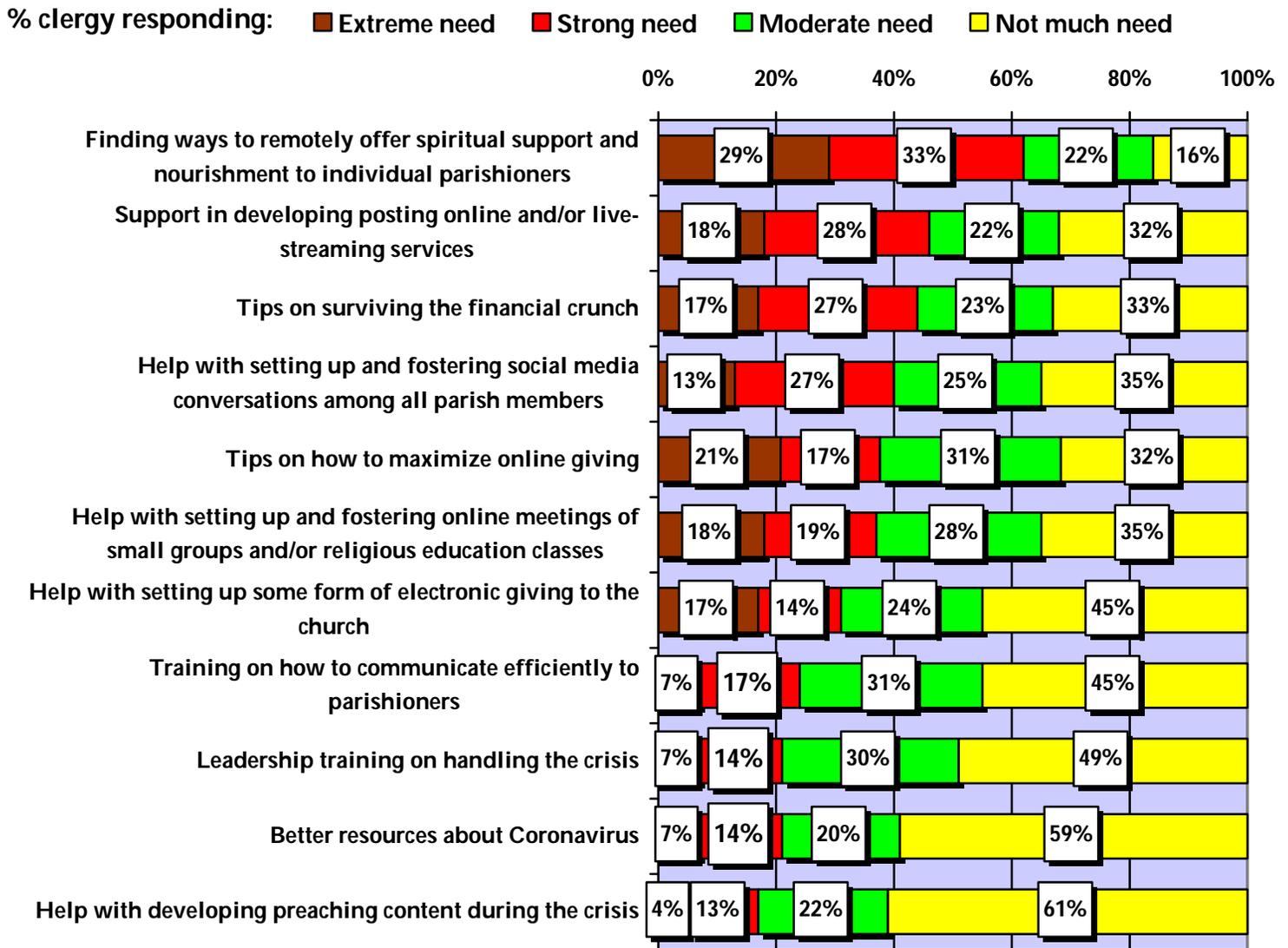
IV. What Help is Needed by Parish Clergy during the Coronavirus Pandemic

Granted, in every parish, there is a core group of highly engaged members who feel ownership for many aspects of the church’s affairs and deeply invest themselves in the life of the parish. Undoubtedly, these members are currently taking a significant lead in helping their parish community deal with the current difficult times. Yet, in the vast majority of churches, it is the clergy who feel (and generally are) ultimately responsible for all that happens within their parish. What type of support do Orthodox priests presently need in the uncharted waters of dealing with a pandemic?

Fig. 6 shows that the area in which clergy experience today by *far the greatest need* for help is in finding new ways for offering personal spiritual support and nourishment to individual parishioners while being physically remote from them. Clearly, everyone would agree that one-on-one interaction with church members, and offering intimate spiritual guidance or life advice to them are at the very heart of the pastoral vocation. Yet the data in Fig. 6 are telling how crucial being face-to-face is for these communications. Figuratively speaking, “laying on hands” has been and remains central to the pastoral calling. Compared with many other faith communities, this is, perhaps, especially true for the Orthodox Church which places great importance on the Sacraments of Confession, Holy Unction, and Holy Communion.

Fig. 6 What Resources Would Be Most Helpful for Orthodox Parish Clergy to Take Their Parishes Through the Pandemic?

"How strong is the need for the following resources for you as a parish priest in these times of the Coronavirus pandemic?"



Three other concerns are dominant in the minds of Orthodox clergy: over 40% of the priests feel “extreme” or “strong” need for support in following three areas. One is the technology question already discussed in sections II and III of this report: how to bring worship services online in order to make church’s continuing liturgical life accessible to all members - not just conducting the services by themselves behind closed church doors.

The second big issue is dealing with financial pressure that the parishes began to feel as a consequence of the Coronavirus pandemic. The next section of the report will discuss this matter.

Finally, a big and challenging question for many priests is how to keep “conversation going” among all parishioners while they are sheltered-in and physically separated from one another. Indeed, people come to church not only to worship, but also to socialize with or gain emotional support from like-minded members and friends. No wonder, then, that 41% of the clergy feel “extreme” or “serious” need for “help with setting up and fostering social media conversations among all parish members.”

V. Financial Impact of Coronavirus on Orthodox Parishes

There are at least three reasons why the Coronavirus outbreak will have a strong negative impact on the budgets of many American congregations in general and US Orthodox parishes in particular. The first is the unavoidable decrease in the engagement of members in the lives of their local Christian communities. Not all parishes were able to bring their liturgical services online, but even if they did, not all members probably are feeling that this is an adequate substitute for being physically present in church and experiencing the worship together with the clergy and their fellow parishioners. Similarly, even smaller number of parishes (see section II) have managed to organize online meetings for their religious education classes or small groups. And, if they did, it is very likely that not all members who used to come for physical meetings would be actively participating in their online versions. Finally, as noted in section IV, people come to church not only to worship but also to socialize with friends and like-minded parishioners. Nothing fully replaces this aspect of parish community if the church doors are locked. This decrease in engagement means that many members will give less to their congregations.

The second reason is that in many parishes the physical “passing of the plate” in church remains an important way of gathering donations. Many parishes have yet to develop some form of online giving that would allow members to easily give electronically. And even if parishes offer such option on their websites, many clergy have paid thus far little attention to promoting online giving versus more traditional envelopes with checks, pledge cards, etc.

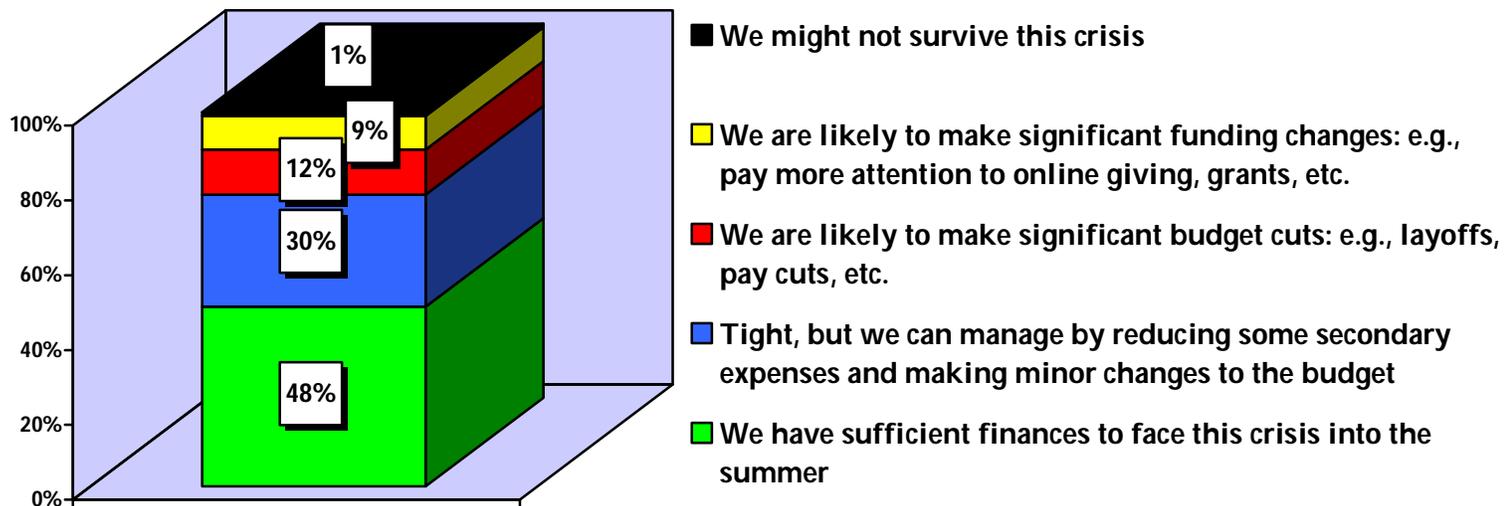
The third and most economically driven reason for the financial crunch being experienced by many congregations is the growth of unemployment and decrease in income among those parishioners who have lost their jobs or are being furloughed as the consequence of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Are parishes strong enough to withstand this financial storm brought by Coronavirus? The questionnaire asked, “How prepared is your church financially to face this crisis if it continues well into the summer?”

The good news is that more than three-quarters of the parishes can handle the new financial circumstances without significant budgetary changes and cuts at least through the summer. Fig. 7 shows that 48% of the priests feel that their church's finances are sound enough to run the parishes exactly the way they run now, while 30% of the clergy would need to make only some minor adjustments in their expenses and budgets. The somewhat troubling message from Fig. 7 is that among the remaining 22% of parishes (i.e., those that do not think they can manage through the pandemic by simply maintaining the status quo) less than half of them intend to find new ways to replenish their revenues such as online giving, grants, etc. Instead, more than half of these hardest-hit parishes are planning to make significant budgetary and pay cuts.

Fig. 7 Parishes Face Financial Uncertainty in Times of Coronavirus Pandemic

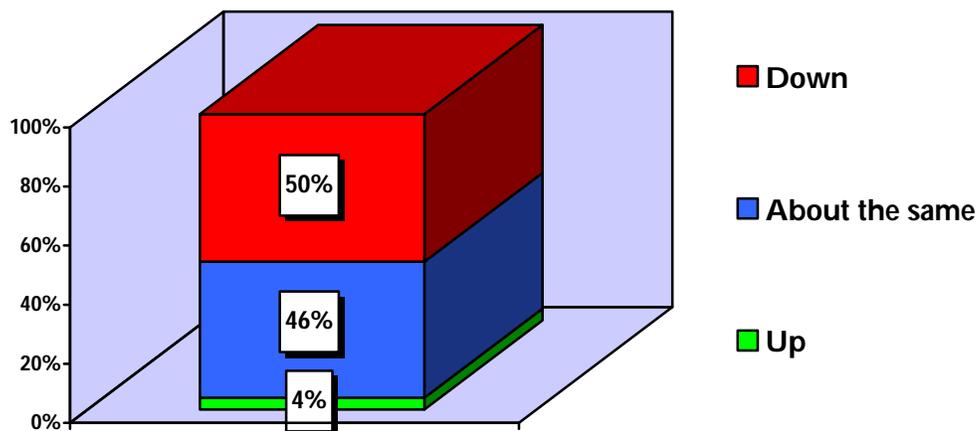
"How prepared is your church financially to face this crisis if it continues well into the summer?"



While overall strong majority of the parishes appear to be prepared for possible future economic hardships, the reality is also that half of them (50%) have already experienced a decline in giving. See Fig. 8.

Fig. 8 Members Give Less to their Parishes

"So far, is giving to your church during this crisis, up or down?"



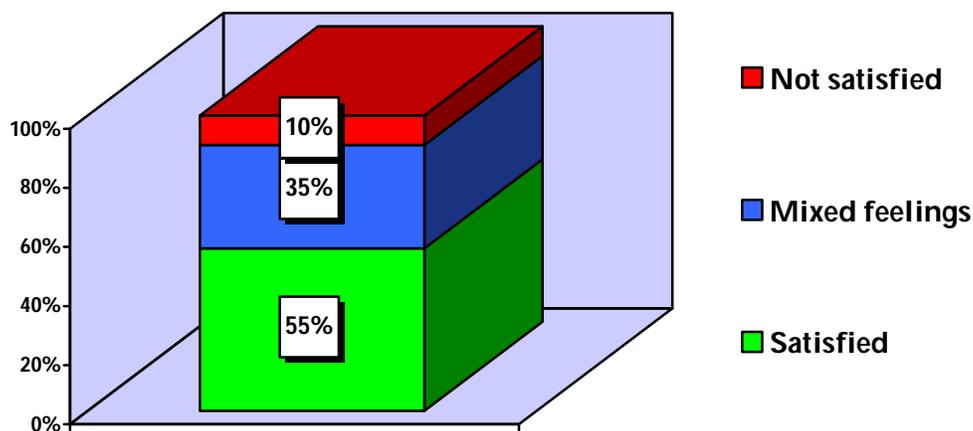
The parishes which have experienced a decline in giving were also asked to estimate how significant this decline was so far (as a percentage of their original level). On average, clergy reported a decline of 30% in members' contributions.

VI. Does Church Leadership Provide Sufficient Support to the Parishes?

It was noted in section II of this report that the national headquarters of various Orthodox Church jurisdictions, as well as individual dioceses and bishops, have responded to the Coronavirus outbreak with a variety of guidelines for their parishes and clergy. Sometime in the future, the analysis of all these documents may become an interesting subject for a research report on its own. Presently, the key question is, "Overall, how satisfied are parish clergy with the support offered by their national or diocesan leaders?" Fig. 9 shows that most clergy (55%) are satisfied, while 35% have mixed feelings and 10% are not satisfied.

Fig. 9 Satisfaction of Clergy with Support from Church Leadership in the Time of Pandemic

"How satisfied are you with the resources and support being provided by your national and diocesan leaders during this crisis?"



The final question on Coronavirus was open-ended, "If you would like to share with us and other parishes any important (either negative or positive) experiences of dealing with Coronavirus epidemic, please do so."

Although the total sample was not large and there was a significant variety in responses to this question, several themes were brought up repeatedly.

A number of priests expressed their frustration with the flow of diverse, changing, and sometimes contradictory directives coming from both secular authorities and their respective church administrations. For example:

- ❖ “Appalling lack of connection between federal expectations/guidelines and those issued by state and local (municipal) authorities, on the one hand--which themselves are often at a disconnect, and--on the other hand-- the numerous confusing and constantly changing official statements made by diocesan and archdiocesan and patriarchal jurisdictions and authority figures. As a priest, I don't know what will happen first: excommunication by my jurisdictional leadership, or jail time by disgruntled politicians, or being sued if someone contracts the coronavirus at this parish!”

Somewhat related to this theme were the comments made by those clergy who emphasized that the guidelines from the bishops should take into account the variety of local circumstances under which different parishes operate. Here are two examples (one is positive and another negative):

- ❖ “I'm glad that our bishops are free to make decisions for their own dioceses. One blanket directive across the entire country would kill the parishes that aren't very heavily impacted by this viral pandemic.”
- ❖ “I am angry about Church leadership's inflexibility to accommodate local situation.”

The clergy wrote about the difficulties of bringing the genuine experience of Orthodox liturgy into online services. For example:

- ❖ “Very hard to do our services and sacraments when the bulk of our faithful are not able to be present, as our worship/sacraments are a very incarnational, face-to-face, physical and spiritual experience. That does not completely translate into a virtual experience when the climax of all our worship is the physical/spiritual Communion with God in the Holy Liturgy and Eucharist both personally and corporately.”

On a positive side, some clergy felt that after going through the challenges of pandemic, their parish communities would return to normal life being rejuvenated and becoming more close-knit, stronger communities. We quoted such a response at the beginning of the report and here is another:

- ❖ The Corona epidemic has in a strange way proven positive to the health of the parish. Parishioners have discovered the importance of the church in their life, they realized what a central role the church had in their life. I wish there were a way to keep the positive influence of the Corona without people having to suffer from its bad consequences.

VII. Not Everyone Is the Same: Some Parishes Handle the Pandemic Better than Others

There is an important caveat regarding this section of the report. The sample of the parishes which responded to the nine questions on Coronavirus as of April 13, 2020, was relatively small. Therefore, any conclusions drawn from the comparisons of different groups of parishes within this sample should be taken with caution and seen as tentative. As the study will continue and gather more responses (and we hope that this mini-report will encourage more priests to participate), the following preliminary observations could be revised and refined. Also, when describing these preliminary findings, are not offering the exact percentages or the supporting numbers, as these figures are likely to change.

The first observation is that parishes with a high proportion of converts to Orthodoxy appear to be better prepared to handle the financial difficulties caused by the Coronavirus outbreak. They are more likely to report having sufficient financial resources to last through the summer without making any significant changes in their budgets if the Coronavirus crisis continues. The convert-populated parishes also tend to report a smaller decrease in giving than do the parishes with a higher percentage of cradle Orthodox.

Those parishes with a high percentage of college graduates (which usually correlates with higher income level) are similar to convert-populated parishes in reporting sufficient financial resources to continue to operate without budget cuts through the pandemic and a relatively small decrease in giving. In addition, parishes with better-educated parishioners are more successful in bringing online their religious education classes and small group activities. The priests in such parishes also feel less challenged with regard to making parishioners interested in "attending" online services.

Similarly to "well-educated" parishes, those parishes with high percentage of persons who regularly volunteer are also more successful in organizing online meetings of their religious education classes and small groups. However, an interesting corollary of such parishes' greater involvement in various online activities under "shelter-in" conditions is that their priests appear to experience greater pressure in organizing these activities and are more likely to report great need for "help with setting up and fostering online meetings and religious education classes."

When it comes to differences among the parishes of the three largest Orthodox jurisdictions (the other have too few parishes in the sample for drawing meaningful conclusions), it appears that the clergy in Antiochian parishes are more satisfied with the resources and support provided by their national headquarters and

diocesan bishops than are the priests in the churches of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese and the Orthodox Church in America.

A final observation is that the younger (up to 45 years old), middle-aged (45-64) and older (65 and older) clergy are equally successful in switching their parishes to online worship services, although a smaller percentage of the older clergymen have managed to also organize online meetings for religious education classes and small groups. When it comes to the question of what type of support clergy need in these times of the Coronavirus pandemic (the subject discussed in section VI), the older clergy **consistently** reported a smaller need for help in all possible areas. Older priests were also more likely to indicate that their parishes had sufficient finances to go through the summer without making any significant changes in their budgets under conditions of continuing Coronavirus pandemic.

VIII. Our Invitation to You

The “Orthodox Parish Life Study” is continuing. If you are an Orthodox parish priest and have not participated so far, we invite and encourage you to complete the online questionnaire. This will greatly help your Orthodox jurisdiction to be better and more accurately represented in the overall national picture of American Orthodox Churches. Send your request to orthodoxdata@usreligioncensus.org and we will email the link to questionnaire. We also plan to email a final reminder and invitation to participate to all parishes soon after Bright Week.

We also invite both clergy and laity to offer ideas and suggestions for additional or deeper questions related to the Coronavirus impact on Orthodox Church life should be examined and addressed. It is likely that we will launch a separate study on this important and urgent subject. Everyone’s comments and feedback are important and welcomed!