

“Churches are Changing—Sometimes for the Better”

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all aspects of our lives. Our churches and our lives of faith most certainly have been affected. One is tempted to view the pandemic as only having negative impacts. There is no denying the death toll and ubiquitous stress are not positive outcomes. But one can legitimately see the work of God in the midst of it all.

Many Christian congregations (estimated at 175,000 congregations nationwide) have stepped up to “be the church” for not only their own people but for the larger community. More than one half of American Christian congregations have started a new ministry or expanded an existing ministry during the pandemic. And, on average, these congregations have expanded three or more outreach activities. One fifth of congregations had ministries related to the pandemic—vaccine clinics, mask making, etc.

Additional evidence of adaptability is shown by the survey result of now 86% of churches being willing to change to meet new challenges as opposed to only 73% just prior to the pandemic.

The Hartford Institute for Religion Research summarized recent research by saying, “The level of new and intensified social outreach and community ministry undertaken by the nation’s churches is monumental.”

- Do you see God at work in new and faithful ways in your congregation these last two years?
- Is your congregation offering online streaming services?
- Is your congregation now asking question about how to reach out to those folks who are viewing online worship services?
- Did your congregation host a vaccine clinic?
- Did your congregation engage in a study and reflection on systemic problems in our society?
- Did your congregation host a food pantry or feeding program?



It seems to me that when we are under great stress, we are naturally drawn to the deeper existential questions. What is the purpose and meaning of my life? And the parallel existential questions of Christian communities: What is the purpose of my congregation?

Most congregations in the ELCA worship on average 100 or fewer people a week. Most congregations in all denominations tend to be rather small. But small can be beautiful. Small can be powerful. Small can allow you to pivot more quickly. Small can still be very significant.

The metaphor of the “remnant” is part of the Old Testament narrative. When the faith community was fractured and broken up because of many factors including disobedience as well as outside forces, a small and faithful remnant remained. God wasn’t through bringing life out of death dealing situations.

The prophet Ezekiel was asked by God, “Shall these dry bones live?” (Ezekiel 37)

You and your congregation might feel pretty stressed and dried up. God is still God. God is not through with us. The Sovereign God has power to add sinew and life to bones that seem useless and dead.

As one church member from our synod said, “We’re still here.”

(Note: Much of the information for this article was taken from a new report by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, “Congregational Response to the Pandemic: Extraordinary Social Outreach in a Time of Crisis” as cited in an online article by Adelle Banks in Ministry Watch, December 22, 2021.)