

---

# Regrowth, Reconnection, Reengagement, Recovery

Observations and Insights from Narrative Responses to the 2021 Parochial Report

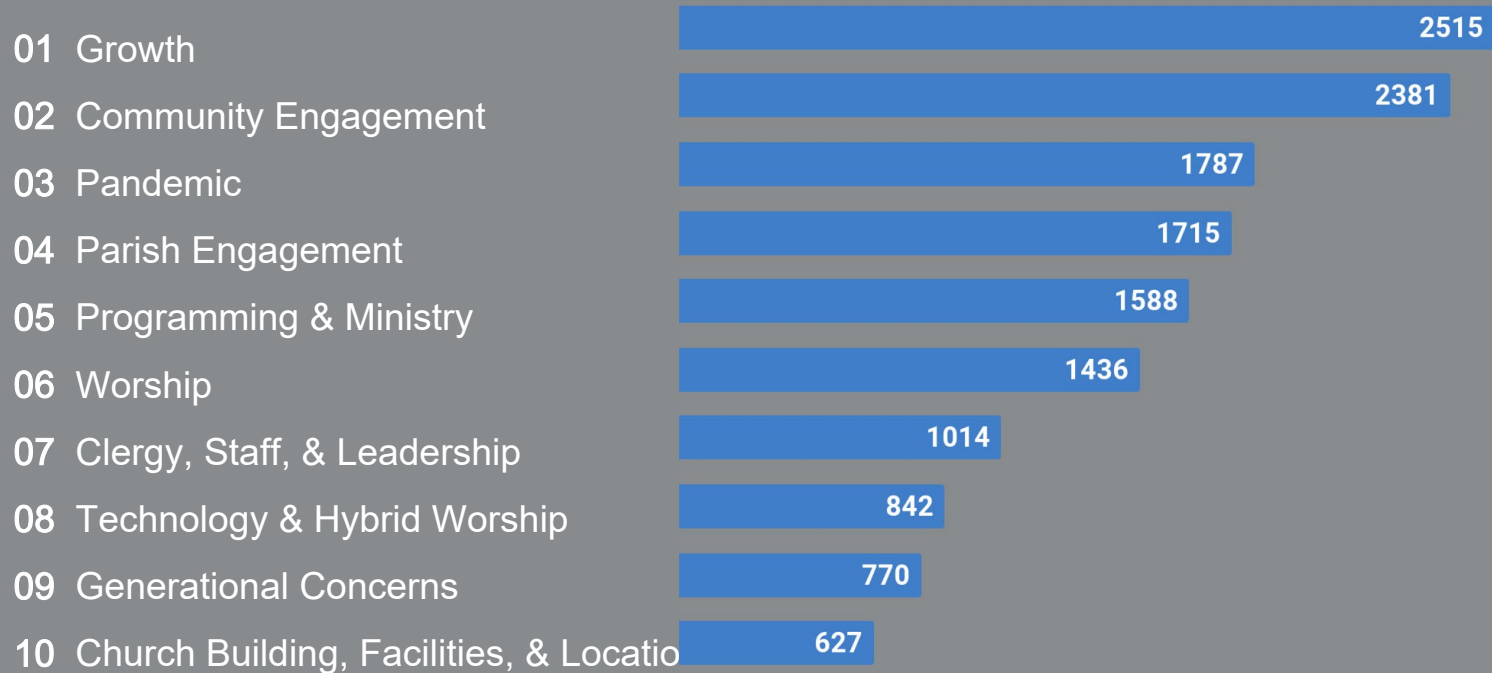
Taylor Hartson, University of Notre Dame  
December 21, 2022

---

**In 2021, Episcopal congregations from across the country provided over 5,000 individual responses to the question, “Looking forward, what changes do you hope to see in your faith community? What does your community need to bring about these changes?”**

# Top Ten Changes across Parishes

Across all parish comments, respondents reported that the following ten changes were most hoped for in their faith communities. A desire for a change in growth and community engagement were most frequently mentioned, with more than two thousand mentions each.



# Top Five Needs across Parishes

Across all parish comments, respondents reported that the following ten changes were most hoped for in their faith communities. A desire for a change in growth and community engagement were most frequently mentioned, with more than two thousand mentions each.



# Major Themes

01

## REGROWTH

A focus on regrowing the congregation and ministry.

03

## RECONNECTION

An intentional reconnection of parishioners.

02

## REENGAGEMENT

A desire to reengage with the parish's wider community.

04

## RECOVERY

An emphasis on providing space for recovering from the pandemic.



---

## Regrowth

Most parishes expressed a desire for a time of **regrowth** in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Responses most often specified a desire for growth in the parish's attendance and membership, but spiritual growth, generational growth, and growth in diversity were also recurring themes.

In order to grow membership and attendance, respondents suggested tactics such as increased outreach to their immediate communities and focusing on engaging specifically with families and young adults. Common barriers to growth include limited staffing, financial resources, and space; lingering hesitation around pandemic safety; and broader community demographic changes.

### Quotes from respondents:

*"Regarding the impact of the pandemic on our church community: We hope to see an increase in the number of people attending in person services, an increase of activity in our ministries, and returning to more-in person services, gatherings, and events. With continued opportunities for our faith community parish to participate in worship and encouraging spiritual strengthening and growth with activities and continued communication via several platforms (in person, phone, internet, email, website, and advertising) we look forward to promoting growth and spiritual healing and strengthening of our church and wider community."*

*"We would like to grow our size. Our church used to be full but no more. We have only 3 families that regularly attend equaling 9 people. One family has 4 children ages 10 & we would like to do more for them. We also feel at a disadvantage to attract people as we don't have (can't afford) a regular priest or an organist."*

---

## Reengagement

The second most common theme that respondents mentioned was a desire to **reengage** with their parish's surrounding community. Respondents were eager to restart community programming and events, and many comments highlighted a hope for increased visibility and connection with members of the broader community.

However, before they can begin this process, many respondents indicated that they would like to see a decrease in the severity of the pandemic in their communities. In the meantime, many congregations are continuing to do pandemic-safe programming as resources and capacity allow.

### Quotes from respondents:

*"[Our parish] seeks to be a church serving at the heart of an ecosystem of interdependent communities, organizations and ministries reflecting the breadth of God's people and creation. We seek to build bridges among existing organizations to deepen trust and empower action for the common good; incubate new initiatives and ministries to break down barriers and foster new partnerships; collaborate with others who share our commitment to strive for justice and respect the dignity of every human being. We seek to be a Christ-centered community providing for the pastoral, liturgical, sacramental and spiritual needs of the community, serving as beacons of God's love for all.*

*To move into this future will require us to invest our time, talent and money into the community beyond the parish. We need to form ourselves into a community of disciples and equip our parishioners to engage in relationships in and beyond their neighborhoods as we focus more intentionally on embodying Jesus' love in the community."*

---

## Reconnection

In addition to reengaging with the broader community, respondents reflected on the need for intentional reconnection among current parishioners. Respondents suggested that a return to in-person worship, restarting programming and education opportunities, and creating opportunities for informal gathering would help reignite parish relationships.

However, the pandemic has left many parishioners with a hesitation about in-person worship and programming, and many respondents indicated that they are struggling to find the best strategies to remove that barrier.

### Quotes from respondents:

*“My prayer is that as the pandemic moves from pandemic to endemic that we see a return to in person worship discipline. I also look forward to folks remembering that we are a part of a body, together, and that there is good in coming together, praying together, laughing together, and growing in our faith together.”*

*“We hope to see a continued renewal and revival of our parish worship and programs as people feel safe getting reconnected. We understand now perhaps more than ever what the most essential aspects of our common life are—people, worship, service, fellowship. We are making long term plans and investments to do more with streaming and hybridizing programs. We need...the end of the pandemic. But what we really need is each other. That's what matters.”*



---

## Recovery

An underlying theme in most comments is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a desire to recover from the challenges imposed by the pandemic and to find effective strategies of navigating this new landscape.

Many respondents reflected on the ways that the pandemic has drained their congregations: financially, emotionally, and socially. Some congregations have deferred maintenance on their buildings, some have lost parishioners to COVID 19, and some have experienced disengagement from parish life. Despite a clear desire to innovate and adapt to the future, respondents also expressed needing space and support to reflect on, process, and heal from the pandemic.

### Quotes from respondents:

*“Like all parishes, we need to recover from loss of attendance during pandemic. We need to regain the joy of being together without the fear that the pandemic has ingrained in us. We need to recapture the love and care for one another that was prominent before. With renewed faith and trust in our Savior, we are confident that this will happen.”*

*“After the experience of the last few years, we wish to find a path toward new growth in our community. This does mean growth in our numbers and attendance, but it also means growing and deepening our spirituality; it means finding ways to become more diverse; and it means reaching out to the spiritual needs of young people.... To accomplish both recovery and growth, we need first to deepen the spirituality of our community and find the strength of our tradition. Then we need to explore ways to do ministry beyond the church building. Some of this will require a spirit of experimentation, a willingness to try new things, some of which may fail. But we need to realize that the church is in a new era that will require new commitment to spiritual growth and reaching out beyond our community.”*

---

## Additional notable themes

### DIVERSITY, EQUITY, & INCLUSION

Respondents frequently mentioned the importance of welcoming and engaging with a more diverse group of people, especially people of color and LGBTQ+ people.

### DIOCESE RESOURCES

Many parishes are in need of teaching, programming, financial, and human resources and support from their dioceses.

### FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Congregations are still suffering the financial effects of the pandemic, especially with regard to decreased giving, increased and deferred building maintenance, and technology costs.

### HUMAN RESOURCES

Several respondents indicated that their parishes were in a transition of clergy, leadership, or staffing before or because of the pandemic.

For additional questions about the  
data, analysis, or results, please contact  
Taylor Hartson at [thartson@nd.edu](mailto:thartson@nd.edu).

---