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# Pandemic Paradoxes: New Patterns of Engagement in a Post-Pandemic World

Observations and Insights from Narrative Responses to the 2022 Parochial Report

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**In 2022, Episcopalian parishes from across the country provided over 11,000 individual responses to the questions:**

- **What opportunities and challenges did the congregation face in 2022?**
- **Looking toward the future, what changes do you hope to see in your faith community? What does your community need in order to bring about these changes?**
- **We invite you to tell stories of how you have spent the last year naming, addressing, and dismantling the injustices of racism in yourselves, congregations, and your communities.**

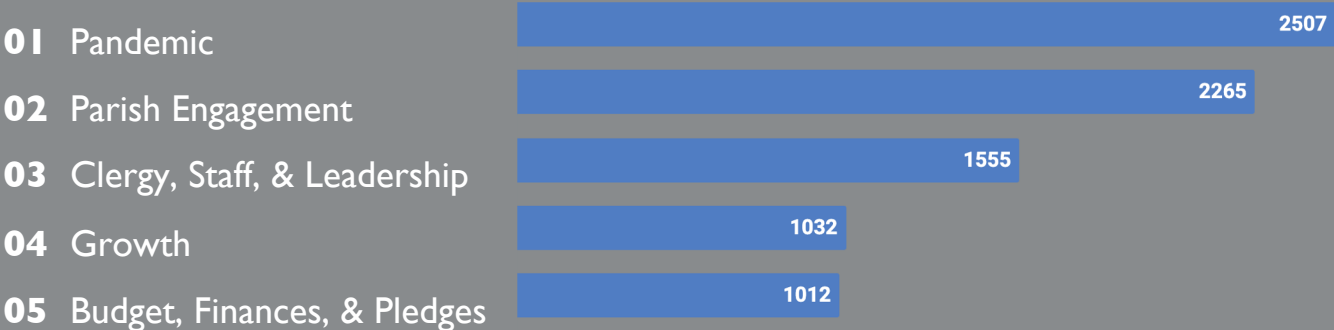
# Top Five Opportunities Across Parishes

Across all parish comments, respondents reported that the following five **opportunities** were most prevalent in their faith communities. Programming and ministry was the most frequently mentioned opportunity, with respondents indicating that more relaxed pandemic safety measures offered an opportunity to resume previous programming and ministry or imagine new programming and ministry for their post-pandemic communities.



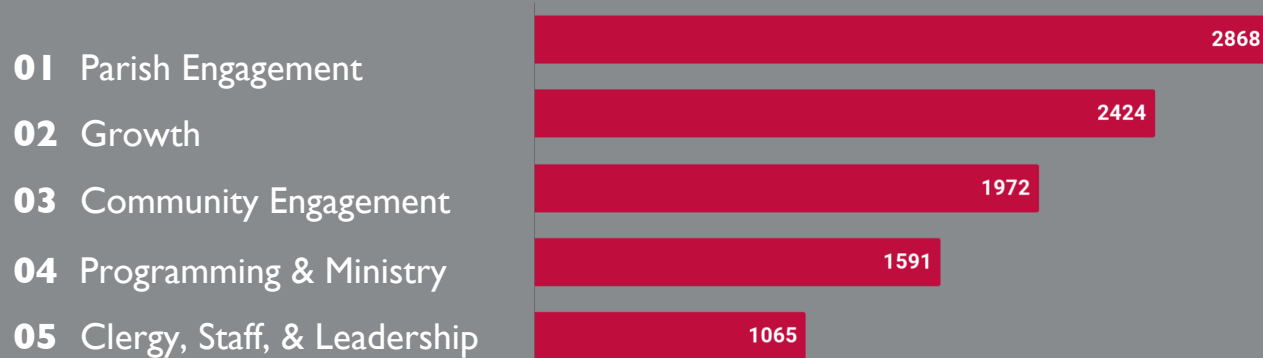
# Top Five Challenges Across Parishes

Across all parish comments, respondents reported that the following five **challenges** were most frequently encountered in their faith communities. The pandemic was the most pressing challenge among parishes (with 2507 respondents mentioning this in their comments), which heavily impacted parish engagement; the availability and hiring processes of clergy, staff, and leadership; parish growth; and parish budget, finances, and pledges.



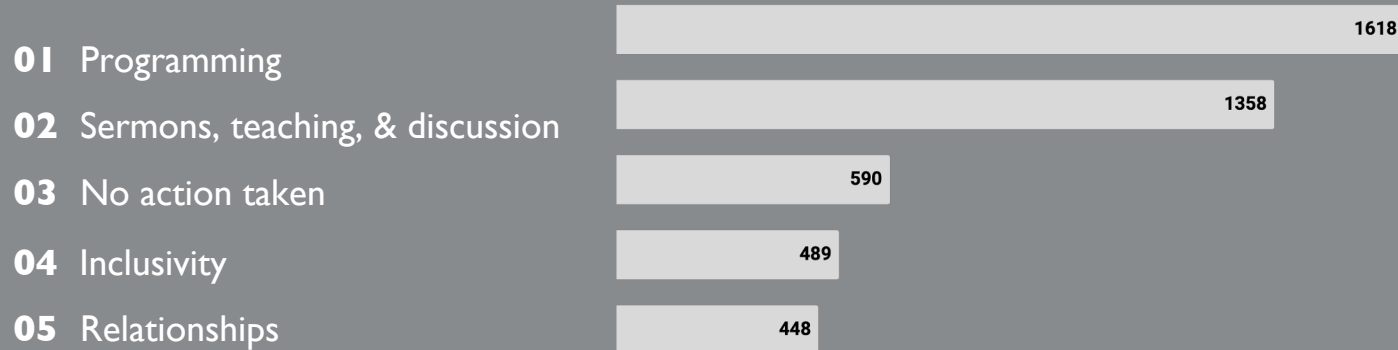
# Top Five Hoped-for Changes across Parishes

Respondents reported that the following five changes were most hoped for in their faith communities. A desire for a more parish engagement moving into post-pandemic fellowship was most frequently mentioned, followed by parish growth (in numbers and in diversity); community engagement; programming and ministry; and clergy, staff, and leadership



# Top Five Antiracism Actions Across Parishes

When asked about addressing racial injustice, respondents reported that the following five actions were most frequently engaged in their faith communities. The most common way of naming, addressing, and dismantling racism was through creating and engaging in anti-racism programming, such as Sacred Ground, diocesan programs, or parish-led programs. Just under 600 parishes indicated that they took no action at all.\*



\*Parishes indicated varying reasons for not naming, addressing, and dismantling racism. For some parishes, 2022 was still a rebuilding year from the pandemic, and their time & resources were spent on regrowth. Many parishes also indicated that their efforts were focused on LGBTQ+ populations. However, another group of parishes indicated that this was not a priority for them, that they did not see racism as an issue, or that they were angry that this question was included on the survey.

# Major Themes

**01** RETURNING TO WORSHIP  
A desire to reengage former parishioners in worship & ministry.

**02** SUSTAINING GROWTH  
A vision for how to incorporate newcomers into the parish.

**03** RECOVERING GENERATIONS  
A plan for supporting generational growth in parishioners.

**04** PLANNING FOR LONGEVITY  
An uncertainty in how to grow financially and invest in buildings.



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## Returning to Worship

Most parishes expressed a desire for a time of **returning to worship** and fellowship in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Responses indicated that many parishioners were hesitant to return to in-person worship in 2022, despite cautious pandemic safety measures. Many parishes speculated that parishioners had developed new routines on Sunday mornings or had become too comfortable with online worship. For parishioners who were comfortable attending in person, responses indicated a high degree of burnout and fatigue among lay leadership.

While engaging existing membership proved to be difficult, many parishes noted that they had an influx of new visitors and membership in 2022.

### Quotes from respondents:

*“Returning to a full service in person while sustaining an online ministry with diminished staffing was challenging and generative. Grieving losses of the pandemic and enduring fatigue from the heavy lift of having worked to hold the community together through such difficult times was challenging but also created opportunities for new ways to connect virtually and in person once restrictions lifted.”*

*“The big challenge was and is still inviting people to reconsider the church in their new routines on Sunday mornings. Another big challenge is to change or add to the routine of those still attending church that there are six other days to also be church for those who might need it.”*

*“Getting people excited and comfortable to be in the building again was both a challenge and a great opportunity to try new things. We are now growing in numbers and that’s fueling the excitement.”*



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## Sustaining Growth

Another common theme among responses was a desire to **sustain growth** they had begun in 2022. Though many parishes struggled to re-engage existing membership, newcomers and visitors offered an opportunity to grow and engage a new group of people. After the disruptions of the pandemic, however, parishes often didn't feel like they had rebuilt the necessary infrastructure to sustain new membership.

Parishes indicated a desire to create new programs to accommodate the needs of newcomers, to rebuild existing programs that were beneficial to visitors and new members, and to continue outreach into the community to keep the momentum of growth going.

### Quotes from respondents:

*“A number of new families joined the parish and enrolled children in our Sunday School. We intend to build upon the momentum generated in 2022. It will be necessary to involve more members of the parish as volunteers to sustain and/or build upon the programs of the past year. That is perhaps the biggest need we have for 2023.”*

*“Our congregation mostly dealt with challenges associated with rapid growth. Managing spaces and human resources for an active engaged congregation proved to be a delightful challenge for our parish.”*

*“The COVID omicron variant became so rampant that in January and February we reduced our services to one per Sunday and instituted tight protocols that eliminated all in-person formation. This drastically depressed the in-person average Sunday attendance for the first nine Sundays of 2022, for which our ASA was only 26. The rest of the year became a long rebuilding process, but our attendance numbers began to grow by the end of the year. What's more, during this recovery we are seeing much of our growth from newcomers, and we now have an opportunity and a challenge to enfold these newcomers into the life of the parish in both formation and discipleship.”*

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## Recovering Generations

Another major challenge for parishes in 2022 was managing a shift in the generational composition of their congregations. Many parishes struggled to reengage families and young people, while also experiencing loss of older membership to death. Parishes acknowledged that in order to continue the life of their congregations, they needed to diversify their membership generationally and create opportunities and resources for younger generations to engage in the congregation.

### Quotes from respondents:

*“Our biggest ongoing challenge, hardly surprising in mainline churches today, is an aging congregation and the consequent loss of elderly members and their wisdom and financial support as they pass away. A corollary of this challenge is the paucity of young families with children, to the extent that we have had to move away from traditional Sunday school programs.”*

*“Our ongoing challenge is finding ways to minister to an older congregation while at the same time trying to come up with new ways to do ministry in our community.”*

*“Coming out of COVID, we found ourselves to be a significantly smaller church. We lost many parishioners through death in 2020 and 2021, and those who chose not to come back after we resumed regular, in-person worship following the pandemic in late 2021/2022. Our giving was greatly diminished for these reasons and we've had to eliminate staff, streamline operations, and cut costs dramatically. We are an older, smaller congregation, so participation in ministry is affected by that. We have no more families with small children.”*

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## Planning Longevity

A final underlying theme in most comments is a need to find more sustainable ways of engaging congregational life in the wake of the pandemic. Many parishes are experiencing increasing costs associated with older building maintenance and utility use while also experiencing a decrease in available finances from income and pledges. Some parishes have had to dip into endowment funds to keep up with building maintenance, some have been fortunate to secure grants, and others have had to face the difficult decision of closing the parish because they were no longer financially able to support a congregation. With inflation affecting costs and pledging, parishes are faced with difficult decisions about how to plan for their futures.

### Quotes from respondents:

*“One of the challenges in the coming year is financial. but we are forecasting a deficit budget for 2023. This is due to several contributing factors: The downturn in the market has impact our investment income. Inflation has impacted everything from our heating expenses to office supplies. We cannot make deep cuts in programs or personnel without negatively impacting our ability to effectively minister to God’s people. Instead, we need to focus on income. We need to look for new and different ways to raise funds. Does that mean adding a number of smaller events? Or a **fourth** major fundraiser? Does that mean soliciting additional pledges and means of financial support?”*

*“Increased operational expenses with pledges remaining relatively static from 2021 presented an opportunity to better communicate need and further incorporate more intentional giving. This, along with maintaining lower than anticipated expenses, allowed for a positive balance at the end of the year that fostered a spirit of encouragement where there had been anxiety.”*

For additional questions about the  
data, analysis, or results, please contact  
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