



Council of Religious Leaders
of Metropolitan Chicago

Religious Congregations Respond during COVID-19

**A Survey of Illinois Religious Organizations
for the Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago**

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Executive Summary

Context

Faith communities are the locus of worship, celebration, instruction, and renewal for their members. Faith communities address unmet needs and underserved populations in their communities. City, county, and state officials turn to religious leaders and their facilities to respond to people's basic needs. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the faith community dramatically, and congregations experienced rapid disruption.

Survey

This survey is the first that we are aware of that assesses a broad range of faith traditions.

- Conducted in July 2020
- One hundred and twenty-two leaders responded from across Northern Illinois
- Twenty-four denominations are represented
- Congregations vary in size, budget, and neighborhoods

Findings

There are some modest differences in how congregations have responded to the pandemic, but congregations across these differences are grappling with many common issues.

- **Different faith traditions** — Some faith traditions have fewer instances of communal gathering, and so are less affected by in-person gathering limits.
- **Different sizes** — The smallest congregations were less likely to have reduced the size of in-person gatherings compared to the largest congregations. Cash donations at the largest congregations (more than 500 households) also dropped more than at the smallest (less than 50 households). Staff layoffs were more likely at these larger congregations as well.
- **Different budgets** — Congregations with the smallest budgets expressed higher levels of concern about their ability to continue operating beyond the next year.

Leaders' Experiences

- Leaders' personal emotional experiences have been complicated and often difficult
- COVID-19 has changed current operations in congregations
- COVID-19 has prompted leaders to think about strategic changes

"Addressing the needs of so many people in so many different ways using new and innovative approaches during such a confusing time changes a person forever."

COVID-19 Disruptions have created challenges but also opportunities for Congregations

- **In-person routines have given way** to myriad other ways to enact the rituals of fellowship and worship, mourning, and celebration. Many of these are new and oftentimes incomplete.
- Some congregations are **finding new benefits** to regular telephone calls, more frequent contact, and more attention to those most in need of companionship and safety.
- **Congregations have revamped arrangements** for providing material support, and food in particular, sometimes working with new partners, sometimes creating new internal programs, and engaging volunteers in new ways.
- **Financial supports have become more uncertain.** Some income loss is partially offset with fewer in-person activities and associated costs. But 40% of respondents express concern (from slight to extreme) that they will not be in operation at all within 12 months.
- **Some describe refocusing on the opportunities of this disruption**, including to "grow deeper into our identity" and for churches to come "out of their 'silos.'"

"I am starting to see the seeds of some creative, out of the box thinking on the part of members now as well. I think they were just in shock the first few months. This could be the great shake up the church needs!"

For More Information

Access the full report

www.crlmc.org

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The Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago

The Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago, a non-profit organization, is comprised of the head religious leadership of practically every major religious tradition in the broader Chicago area, representing nearly six million people. Through its activities, The Council speaks with a unified moral voice on issues of the day; creates a climate of better interfaith understanding and cooperation; and works to advance the common good.