



Council of Religious Leaders
of Metropolitan Chicago

RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS RESPOND DURING COVID-19

A SURVEY OF ILLINOIS RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS



Stephen Baker, PhD

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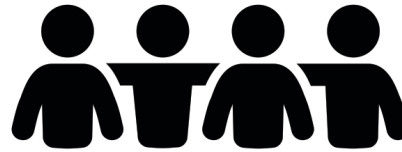
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RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS ARE ESSENTIAL SUPPORTS TO MEMBERS AND OTHERS



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.



WE DON'T KNOW ENOUGH ABOUT HOW A BROAD RANGE OF FAITH TRADITIONS ARE RESPONDING TO COVID-19

We know from our own experiences, from news reporting and other sources that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the faith community.

Some have started to more formally assess these impacts, at least for some faith traditions.

- The “State of the Plate” surveys of Evangelical Christian churches in August 2020 identified some stabilization in congregation finances (though more than a third of congregations experienced decreases in funding) and pastors experiencing high levels of stress.
- An assessment of Protestant pastors at three points (March, April, and May and June 2020) identified a range of personal, financial, and operational challenges.

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

WE CONDUCTED A SURVEY BETWEEN JULY 3 AND AUGUST 10, 2020



The Council of Religious Organizations of Metropolitan Chicago used a “snowball” sample to recruit respondents from across diverse faith traditions.

Data was collected using the Qualtrics online survey platform.

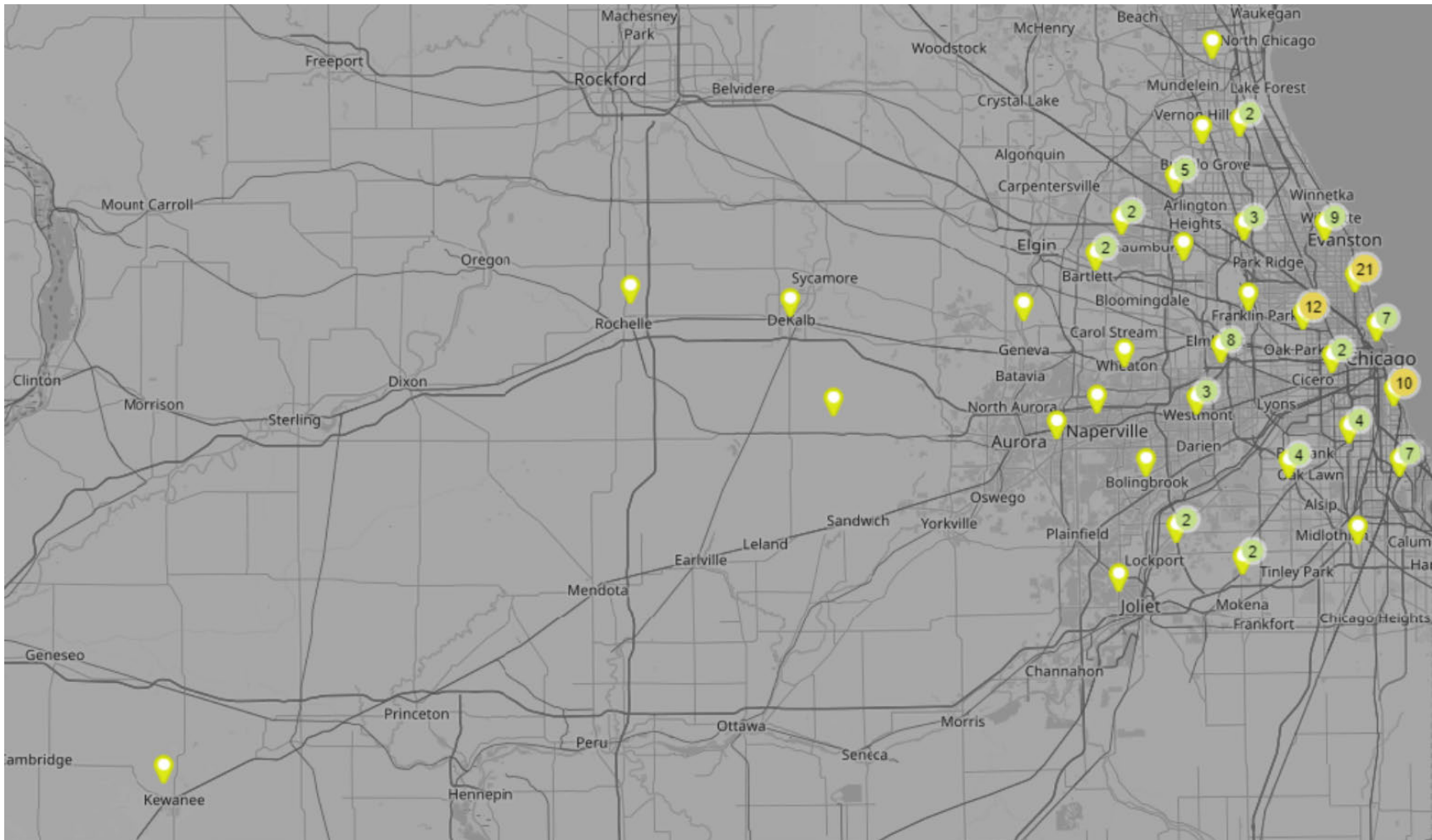
One hundred and twenty-two surveys, each representing one congregation, were completed by pastors, lay leaders, and other religious leaders.

Who completed surveys

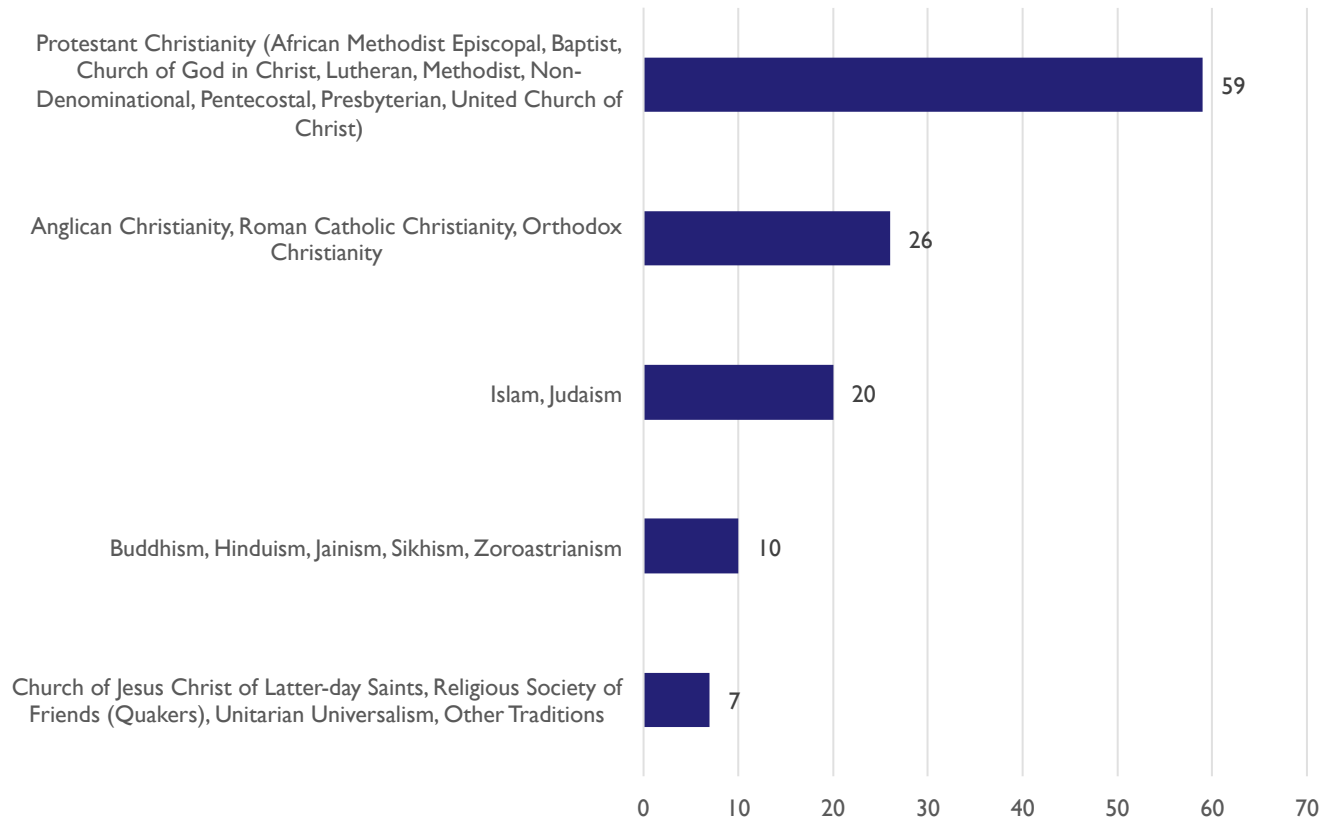
- + One hundred and twenty-two leaders responded from across Northern Illinois*
- + Twenty-four denominations are represented*
- + Congregations vary in size, budget, and neighborhoods*

01

RESPONDENTS ARE FROM ACROSS CHICAGO AND NORTHERN ILLINOIS

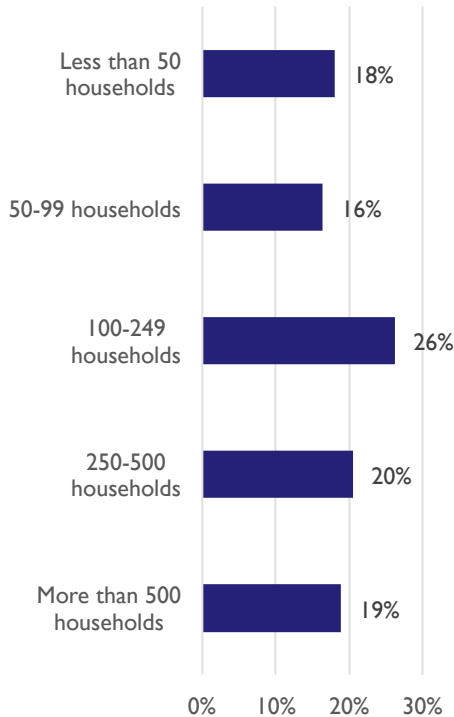


24 FAITH TRADITIONS PARTICIPATED

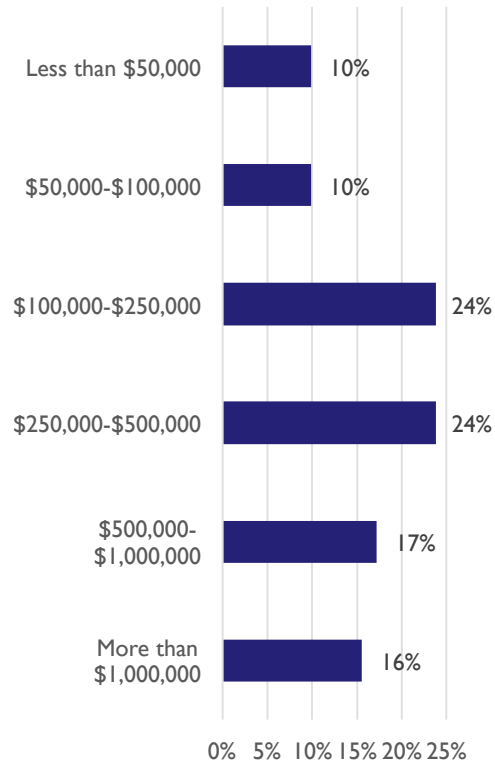


RESPONDENTS ARE FROM CONGREGATIONS OF DIVERSE SIZES, BUDGETS, AND NEIGHBORHOOD WEALTH

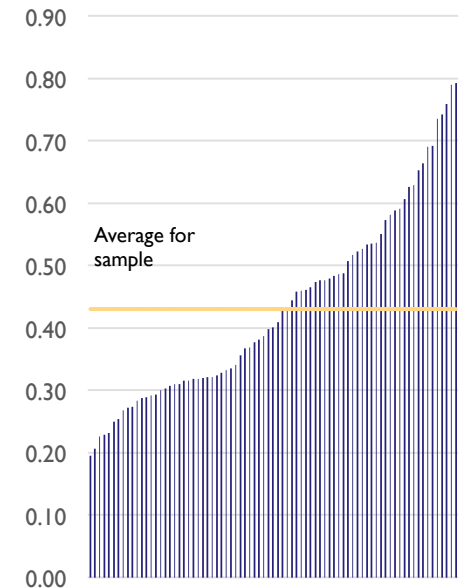
Respondents were from small, medium, and large congregations



Congregations had a wide range of budgets



Zip Codes of congregations varied in the proportion of families with \$50,000 annual income or less (2017)





THE EXPERIENCES OF CONGREGATIONS OF VARIOUS FAITH TRADITIONS, SIZE, AND BUDGETS HAVE MUCH IN COMMON

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*

02

*“Sometimes
it feels like a
dream.*

*Sometimes I
get angry.*

*Most of the time I am
resigned to the fact that
this is life right now*

*and I try to find creative
ways to reach out to
people*

*and I allow myself to be
in whatever emotional
space I need to be in at
the time.*

*I am usually a
very optimistic
person, so
being
depressed is not
where I want to
be or who I want
to be.*

But it just is.”

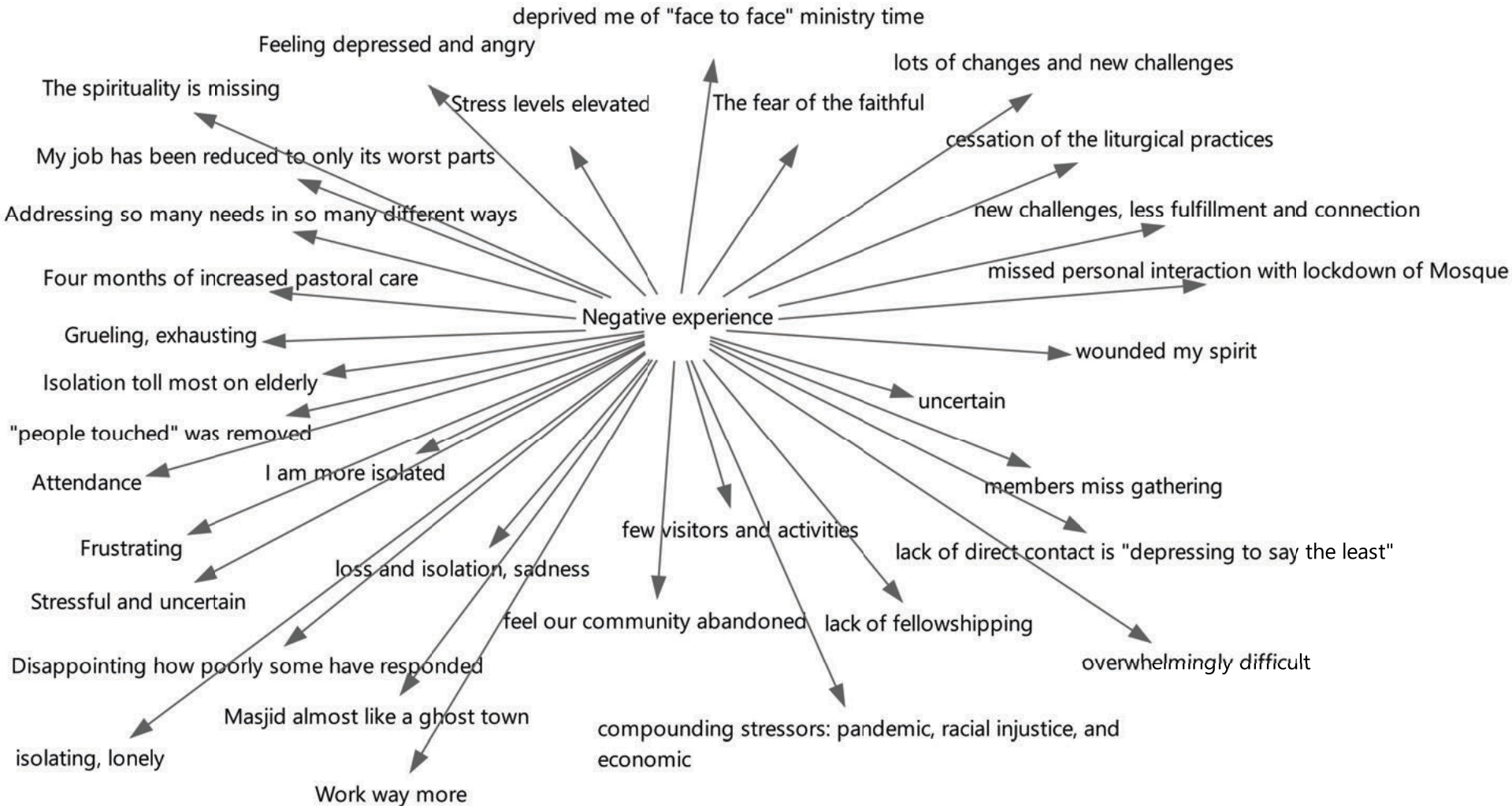
LEADERS' PERSONAL EXPERIENCES HAVE BEEN COMPLICATED AND OFTEN DIFFICULT

- The changes required by COVID-19 have been emotionally taxing for many leaders of faith organizations, who frequently cite **loneliness, isolation, exhaustion, the expansion of their work, and the loss of interpersonal interactions.**
- *"It has been very difficult to be a pastor during this time. It is a lot of the challenge of the work, plus new challenges, with less fulfillment and connection."*
- As one respondent summarized the experience, *"my job has been reduced to only its worst parts."*



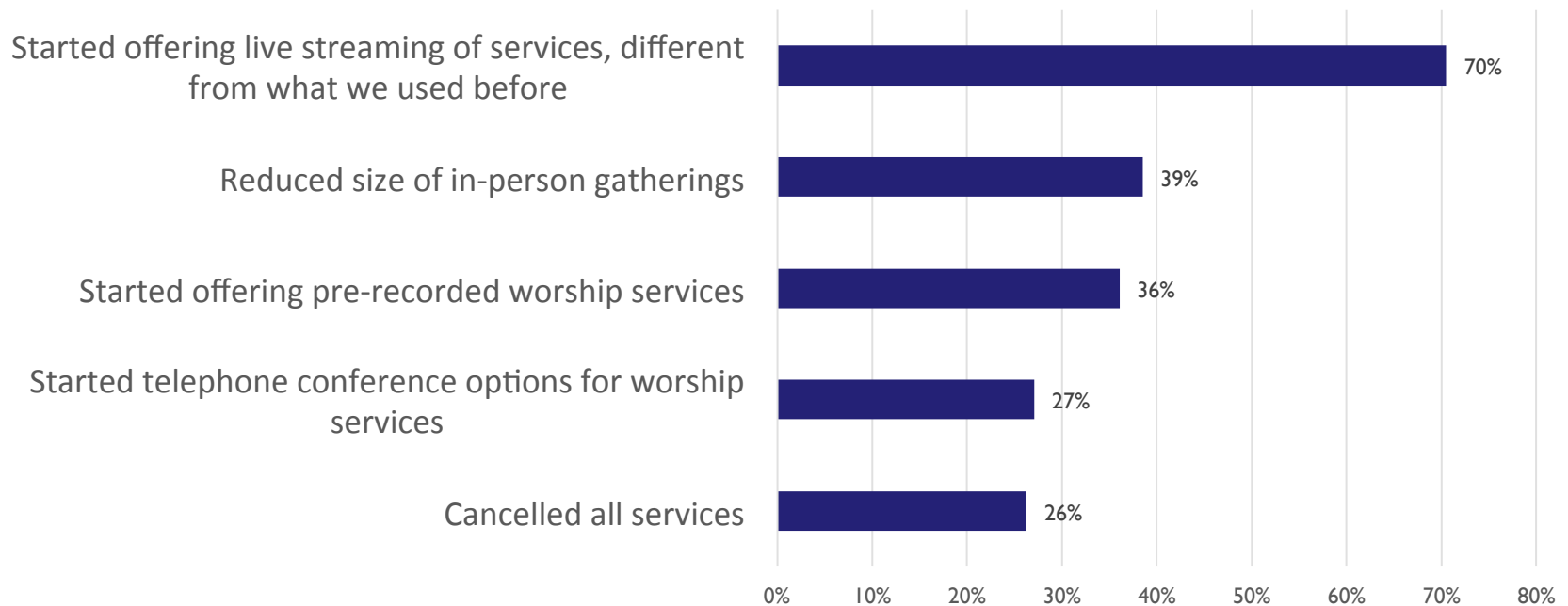
These emotional impacts have been *personal, congregational, and larger*, including a feeling that "our community has been abandoned."

LEADERS' CHALLENGING EXPERIENCES IN THEIR WORDS



COVID-19 HAS CHANGED KEY OPERATIONS IN CONGREGATIONS

Congregations changed worship service formats



COVID-19 DISRUPTIONS HAVE CREATED CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES



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.

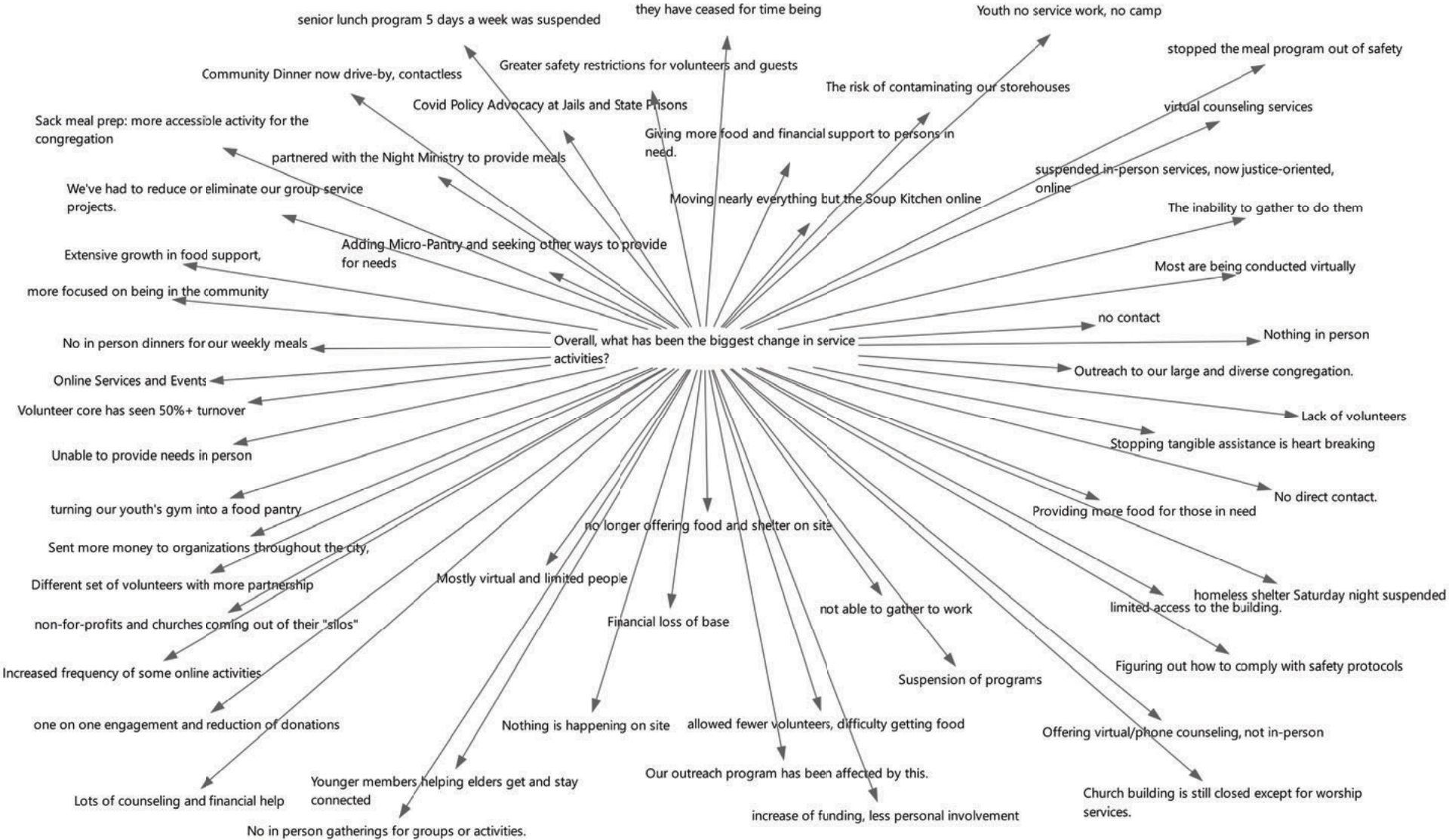
COVID-19 HAS PROMPTED LEADERS TO CONSIDER STRATEGIC CHANGES

These emotional and operational demands have led leaders at some organizations to consider how they might restructure and reprioritize their work. This is especially true because the COVID pandemic co-exists with urgent demands to respond to racial injustice.

“It has felt like I’ve needed to be more creative and innovative at a time when I was also feeling overwhelmed and uncertain.

I have found there are opportunities for changing long ingrained situations which needed to be changed.”

BIGGEST CHANGE IN SERVICES ACTIVITIES





CONGREGATIONS ARE SOMETIMES EXPANDING THEIR MISSION OUTWARD, SOMETIMES REFOCUSING ON MEMBERSHIP AND FAITH

Some describe refocusing on the opportunities of this disruption, including to "grow deeper into our identity" and for non-profits and churches to come "out of their 'silos.'"

The "responsibility to the community" has become more evident, the need to maintain new forms of outreach and connection with members who are newly available with virtual programming, and the need to keep "building relationships across city boundaries.

But congregations are also sometimes pulling back from broader social missions, as with a congregation where the "culling of extracurricular activities" led to a "refocus on worship as the central experience of our faith."

Congregations can support each other

- + Now is a good time to reflect and respond*
- + Most congregations face the next 6-12 months without their traditional mechanisms*

03

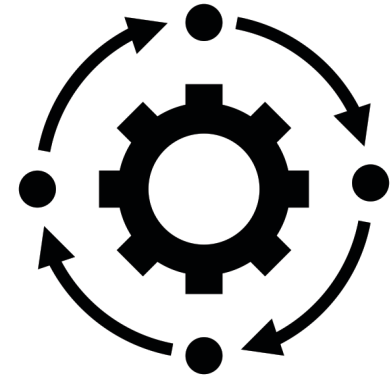
Now is a good time to reflect and respond



Congregations experienced rapid disruption.



Congregations developed new individual ways to respond.



Congregations are now reflecting on these changes and how they fit their vision, mission, and operations




MOST CONGREGATIONS FACE THE NEXT 6-12 MONTHS WITHOUT THEIR TRADITIONAL “RHYTHMS AND MODES”

Fellowship does not happen in the same communal way for each faith. But on the whole the individuals and organizations surveyed are having many shared experiences and common needs.

What would it look like to capitalize on the confluence of the similar **emotional, operational, and strategic experiences** of individual religious institutions?

How could leaders support each other emotionally, learn from peers about how to meet operational challenges, and think together about what to keep and what to improve in the work moving forward?



“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.”

“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!”

CONTACT

Nisan Chavkin (Mr.), Executive Director | nchavkin@crlmc.org | (773) 595-4012 | www.crlmc.org



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.

African Methodist Episcopal Church
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
American Baptist Churches of Metro Chicago
Archdiocese of Chicago
Armenian Orthodox Church
Baptist General Convention of Illinois
Buddhist Council of the Midwest
Chicago Area Unitarian Universalist Council
Chicago Bahá'í Community
Chicago Board of Rabbis
Church of God in Christ
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago
Episcopal Diocese of Chicago

Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship International,
Midwest Region
Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Chicago
Jain Society of Metropolitan Chicago
Metropolitan Chicago Synod, Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America
Orthodox Church in America
Presbytery of Chicago
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
Serbian Orthodox Church
Sikh Religious Society
Ukrainian Catholic Church
Ukrainian Orthodox Church
Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association,
Chicago Chapter

United Baptist State Convention of Illinois
United Church of Christ
United Methodist Church
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Community Renewal Society
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View/Find helps non-profit organizations understand their work and impacts.

Stephen Baker, PhD | s-baker@uchicago.edu | (312) 632-9221