

Episcopal Church releases 2021 parochial data report

by [David Paulsen](#)

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The Episcopal Church on November 22 [released the parochial report data for 2021](#). The summaries of churchwide [membership, attendance, and revenue figures](#) offer the fullest statistical picture yet of the unprecedented disruption to parish life caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As [a one-year snapshot](#), the release includes some sobering numbers, including a sharp decrease in Sunday attendance during the first full year of the pandemic, when COVID-19 vaccines were just becoming available, subvariants were fueling new outbreaks, some congregations still worshipped only online, and many

worshippers remained reluctant to gather in person. Churchwide, average Sunday attendance in 2021 [barely rose above 300,000](#), down by 43 percent from pre-pandemic counts.

The 2021 reports offer the first churchwide data on pandemic attendance; [the 2020 reports](#) only counted attendance for the first 12 weeks of that year.

Other figures from 2021 were more positive. The [number of active baptized members](#), though down by more than 3 percent for the second straight year, is nearly in line with recent historical trends, showing a more gradual decline that is mirrored by other mainline Protestant denominations. The pandemic, meanwhile, did not halt the ongoing trend of rising pledges. The average Episcopal pledge [increased in 2021 to \\$3,339](#), and overall plate and pledge income was [up more than 3 percent for the year](#).

“The pandemic called us to get real about what matters, and we’ve learned some things that I hope we don’t forget,” Michael Curry, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, said in an interview. “The truth is, we do need human community,” he said, and faith communities are “vitaly important” in fostering connection between people.

“We also learned something about the need for something greater than ourselves,” Curry said. “We’re not enough. We’re part of the equation, but we’re not the whole thing. The truth is, we need God.”

This year, some congregations are experiencing a return to normal parish life, or a “new normal,” that isn’t reflected in the latest parochial report data. “We’re starting to have Sundays that feel like they used to feel,” said Nathan LeRud, dean of [Trinity Episcopal Cathedral](#) in Portland, Oregon.

Before the pandemic, the cathedral’s three Sunday services were drawing up to 500 worshippers. Then, in March 2020, in-person services were suspended across the Episcopal Church. Since the initial lockdowns, the cathedral has been among the congregations that have followed widely varying paths and schedules in reopening and resuming many of their former liturgical practices, including in-person services. The recent trend at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral is encouraging: This fall, Sunday attendance sometimes has approached 400.

“Almost certainly it’s going to be different,” LeRud said. “Attendance patterns have shifted for a lot of folks.” Some families still have not yet returned to in-person services and might never come back, he said. At the same time, the cathedral has welcomed many new people, some of whom started attending the cathedral’s online services during the pandemic.

And even if the cathedral doesn’t see 1,000 people turn out for its Christmas and Easter services, as was typical before the pandemic, “there’s nothing in the Gospels that says you have to have 1,000 people in the room to experience God,” LeRud said.

In Columbia, South Carolina, [St. Martin’s-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church](#) had a pre-pandemic average Sunday attendance of about 300 at its two Sunday services. During the pandemic, after briefly suspending in-person worship, those services resumed—not inside the church, but outside in the parking lot under a tent. Families sat at a safe distance from each other, within boundaries marked in chalk on the pavement. Patio heaters and fire pits kept them warm.

Those initial pandemic services were small, no more than 50 people, according to Mitch Smith, the rector, but the core group of attendees developed a sense of camaraderie, “like, we’re worshipping together no matter what,” he said. “And I don’t think that feeling has left. There was a sort of dogged determination that we’re going to make it through this.”

Now, services at St. Martin’s-in-the-Fields are back in the nave and have nearly recovered to pre-pandemic attendance levels. The church also spent about \$40,000 to install cameras, microphones, and other equipment that are used to livestream the Sunday services, as well as weddings and funerals, for those who still prefer to watch from home.

“It’s absolutely valuable, particularly when we have folks who are homebound,” Smith told ENS.

Other congregations, particularly those with fewer members and resources, have struggled to varying degrees to bounce back from pandemic disruptions. The 2021 fact sheet released by the Episcopal Church indicates the number of US congregations dropped to 6,294, nearly 100 less than the 6,393 that were counted in 2019.

Most churches that remain open were small before the pandemic and appear to be even smaller now, with 90 percent of congregations reporting attendance of 100 or less. Median Sunday attendance plunged to 21 in 2021 after hovering around 50 in recent years.

“To me, 2021 is still an asterisk year, kind of like 2020. A lot of churches were not open for in-person worship,” said Chris Rankin-Williams, who chaired the committee that drafted revisions to the parochial report. “I still think reporting on 2022 is going to be the first real indication of how the pandemic has impacted worship and membership.”

The Episcopal Church remains a predominantly White, aging denomination, though as it seeks to attract new members, it has attempted in recent years to confront its past complicity in racist systems, offer a greater welcome to LGBTQ+ Christians, diversify its governance bodies, and raise up young leaders. —Episcopal News Service