

Survey on the Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Catholic Parishes in Zambia

This study of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Catholic Church in Zambia surveyed Catholic priests, religious sisters who work in Parishes as Pastors, Parochial Vicars, Pastoral Sisters and Catechists. They all responded online using a link provided by the researcher.

Zambia Catholic Church at a Glance

Zambia, officially the Republic of Zambia is a Landlocked Country at the crossroads of Central, Southern and East Africa, but it is usually considered as being in Southern Central Africa. Zambia's neighbours are the Democratic Republic of Congo to the North, Tanzania to the North-East, Malawi to the East, Mozambique to the South-East, Zimbabwe and Botswana to the South, Namibia to the South-East and Angola to the West.

Zambia is undeniably one of the Continent's best Safari destinations. The physical features of Zambia is mostly high plateau, with some hills and mountains. Zambia's population is estimated at 18, 383, 955 people with about 3,000,000 Catholics, representing approximately a fifth of the total population.

The Roman Catholic Church in Zambia is composed of nine (9) Dioceses, including two Arch Dioceses. The researcher contacted the Secretary General for Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops (ZCCB) to explain about the survey and to be given permission to speak to the Bishops. All the Bishops and Arch Bishops of Zambia were contacted and all were very supportive. At least one respondent from a parish from each of the Dioceses and Arch Dioceses responded.

In Zambia, Catholics also practice their faith in the midst of a large number of other believers. The Constitution of Zambia declares the country a Christian nation but also has provisions that guarantee religious freedom and uphold the country's religious composition. "It also prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of conscience and belief". (International Religious Freedom Report for 2019).

How COVID- 19 has affected the Country in Zambia

The first case of COVID-19 in Zambia was confirmed on 17th March, 2020. As a Landlocked Country relying on imported supplies for fuel, some food and most medications, it was determined that the negative impact of a total shut down would outweigh any benefits. As at 31st December 2020, the cumulative total of confirmed cases was 20,725, while 18,660 had fully recovered, 1,677 were active cases and mortality rate stood at 388. All these numbers were drawn from a total number of cumulative tests amounting to 601,003.

COVID- 19 affected Zambia in the first wave in that Schools, Colleges and Universities were closed, limits were placed on public gatherings, and many businesses including government offices changed work hours and allowed people to work from home to promote social distancing.

Impact on Education: The impact on education generally is that more than 4.4 million children and adolescents' schooling was disrupted, potentially regressing progress made in attaining Sustainable Development Goal number 4, including the attainment of quality primary and secondary education. Children's routine is also not the same resulting in unprecedented stress among many. The most vulnerable, including those living with disabilities and migrant children are mostly affected by the impacts of COVID-19 because they face additional vulnerabilities. Access to education is entirely in jeopardy during the period of the pandemic when gatherings and School access are limited. Most institutions of learning had to adjust to various eLearning platforms such as Zoom, Moodle, Google meet, in order to continue their interaction with students. The other challenge that was worth noting was the disruption in examination and non-examination classes, as the student calendar was adversely affected.

Impact on Economy: According to the Policy Monitoring and Research Centre in Zambia, Zambia has already begun to experience the exogenous effects of the pandemic as a result of the global economic slowdown. Zambia being an import dependent nation meant that the locked downs in various parts of the world, especially Zambia's main trading partners, cut supply chains. Despite the country following a partial lock down directives, there was generally a reduction in imports. The pandemic came at the time when Zambia was facing serious economic challenges around a depreciation of the local currency, an increase in fuel prices, shortages of maize-staple food, erratic power supply and high electricity tariffs, high unemployment, and high inflation rates. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened the economic situation in the country. The major sectors that were vividly affected were the hospitality, entertainment and aviation industry.

In order to mitigate the effects on these sectors, the government provided support to these sectors by lowering corporate taxes from 35% to 15%. Additionally, the Zambian government put in place the Targeted Medium-term Lending Facility (TMTLF) amounting to K10 billion (US\$465 million). The main aim of the Facility was to strengthen and enhance financial sector resilience, particularly in the wake of the outbreak of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) and its potential devastating impact on the domestic economy. The facility was also be made available to support non-financial corporates in other sectors as well as households. The Zambian government further issued COVID-19 bonds intended to be utilised in mitigating the negative impact of the pandemic on economic activities.

Impact on Social Status: Following food insecurity in most Zambian families, the government of Zambia in 2020 launched the COVID-19 Emergency cash transfer through the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services, which started providing cash assistance to vulnerable households impacted by COVID-19. For an economy like Zambia, it also meant that most individuals that are into small business ventures especially on the streets and do 'hand to mouth' activities were negatively affected as they saw a fall in demand for their products and services. The other social challenge came through loss of employment, especially in the hospitality and entertainment sectors.

How the Church in Zambia Has Responded to the Pandemic

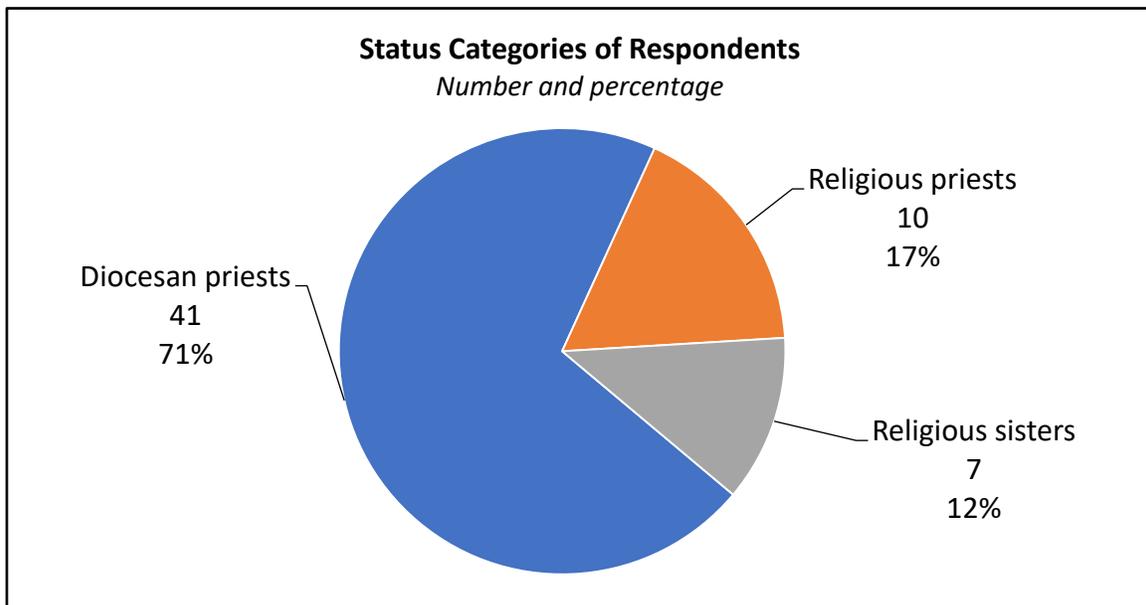
The Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops (ZCCB), on its part, has put in place some measures and out-reach initiatives in a bid to strategically contribute towards this fight against the Coronavirus Pandemic. Through its Health Department, the Church is utilizing the 22 Mission Hospitals and 37 Health Centres scattered throughout the country in the eleven (11) Dioceses. These health facilities are strategically located for effective sensitization and primary intervention within the local communities.

At the same time, the Church continues to stand by its moral principle of preferential love and option for the poor, whose needs and rights are given special attention in God's eyes.

The church in Zambia through the Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops has responded very well using technology and the gospel is still reaching the people as we continue to seek God's intervention.

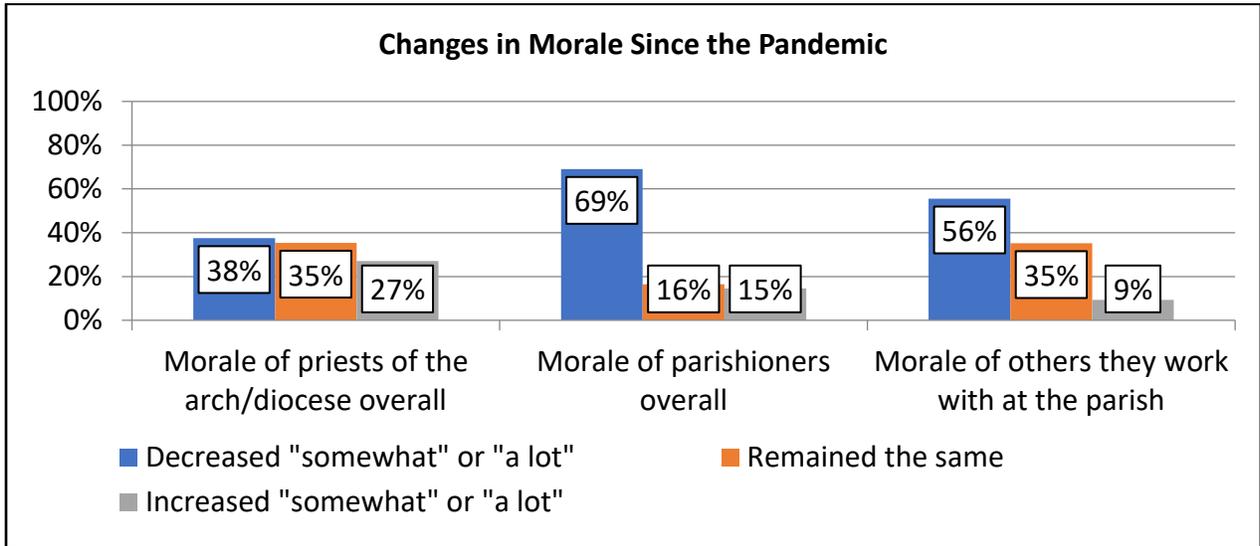
Characteristics of Survey Respondents

This study surveyed only four (4) categories of staff members of parish communities: diocesan priests (41 respondents or 71%), religious priests (10 respondents or 17%), religious sisters (7 respondents or 12%) and catechists (0 respondents). Three (3) respondents did not specify their relationship to their parish community. Altogether, there were 61 respondents. Responses came from eleven Dioceses (nine Dioceses and two Arch Dioceses) in Zambia.

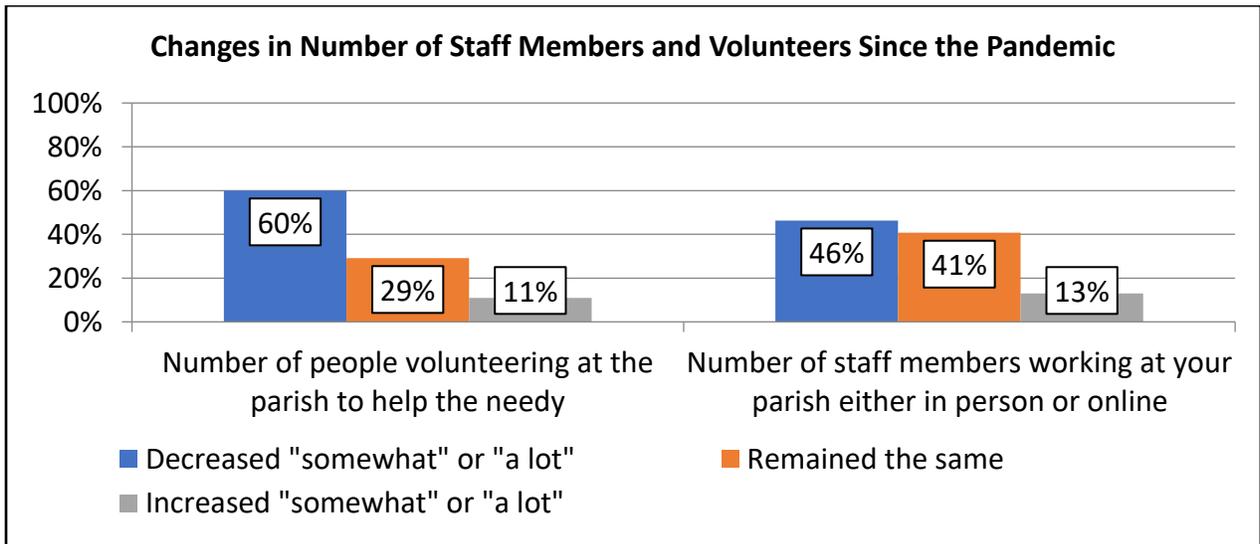


Evaluation of Parish Morale and Presence of Staff and Volunteers

Generally, since the pandemic, morale has decreased most among parishioners overall (69%) and among others besides the priests who work at their parish (56%). Parishioners overall (16%) are slightly less likely than other workers at the parish (35%) to be said to have had their morale remain the same. Finally, the morale of priests overall is almost equally likely to have decreased (38%) or to have remained the same (35%). Just over a quarter say morale has increased among priests (27%).

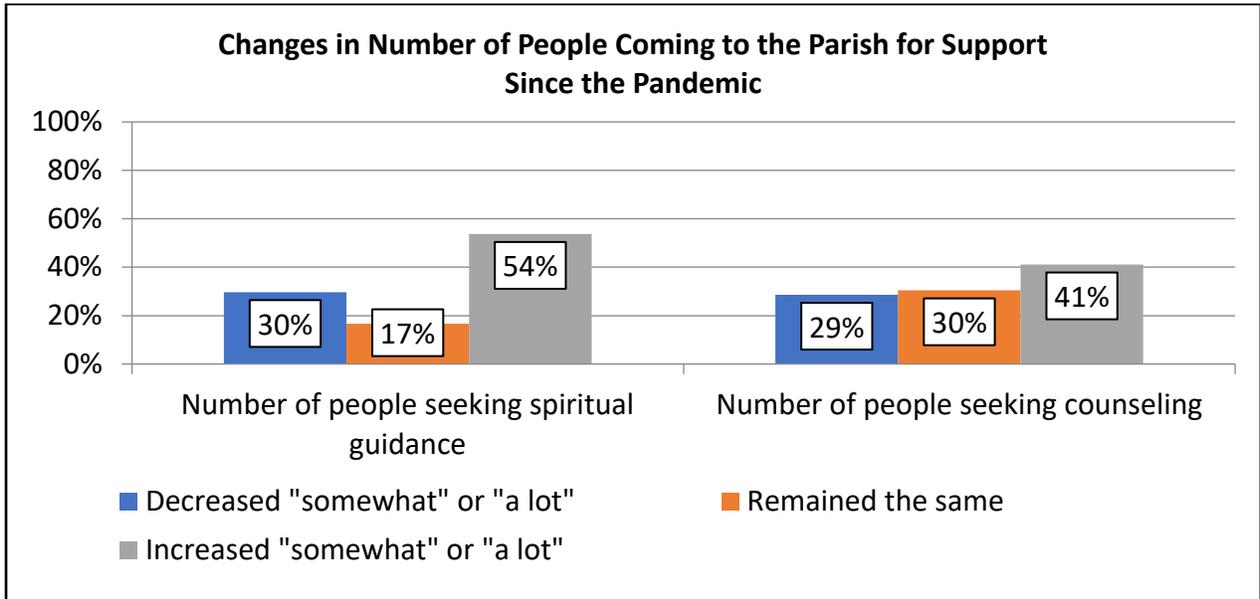


Sixty percent of the respondents say that there has been a decrease in the number of people volunteering at the parish to help the needy, while 29% said the situation remained the same. However, 11% of the respondents said that the number of people volunteering at the parish to help the needy increased. In terms of the number of staff members working at parishes either in person or online, 46% of respondents say that there was a decrease, 41% say there was no change, while 13% stated that there was an increase.

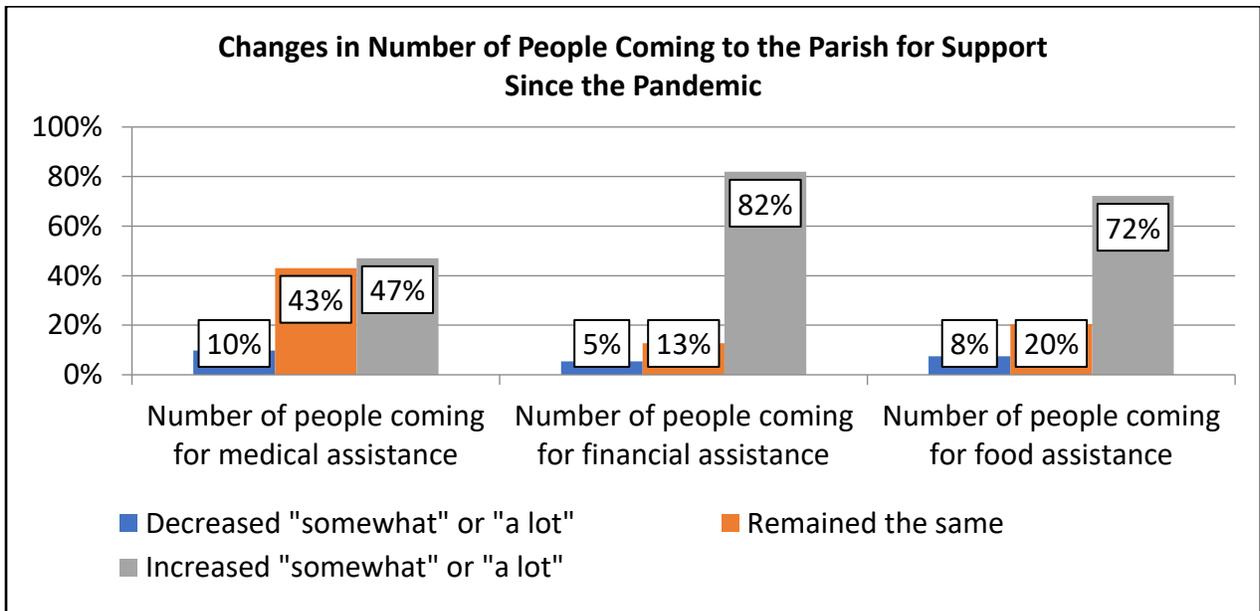


Frequency of People Seeking Parish Support

At least four in ten say that the number of people seeking spiritual guidance (54%) and seeking counseling (41%) have increased since the pandemic arrived. About three in ten (29%-30%) say the numbers of people seeking both types of support decreased, with at least one-sixth (17%-30%) saying it has remained the same.

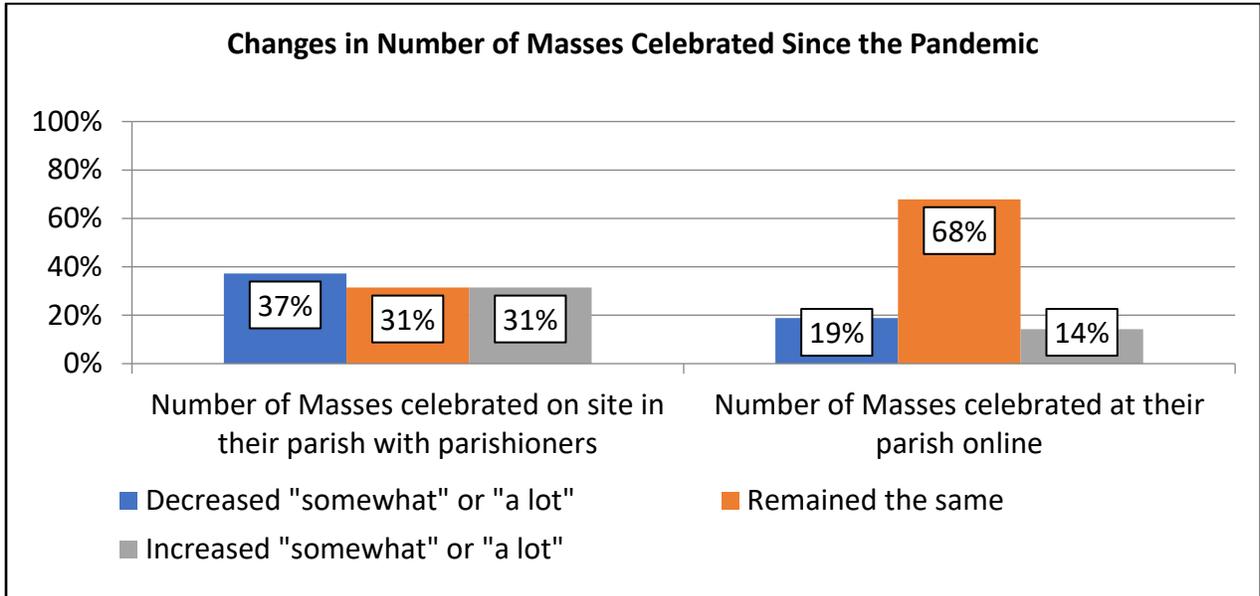


More than seven in ten say the number of people coming for financial assistance (82%) and for food assistance (72%) have increased. Fewer – 47% – say the number of people coming for medical assistance has increased.

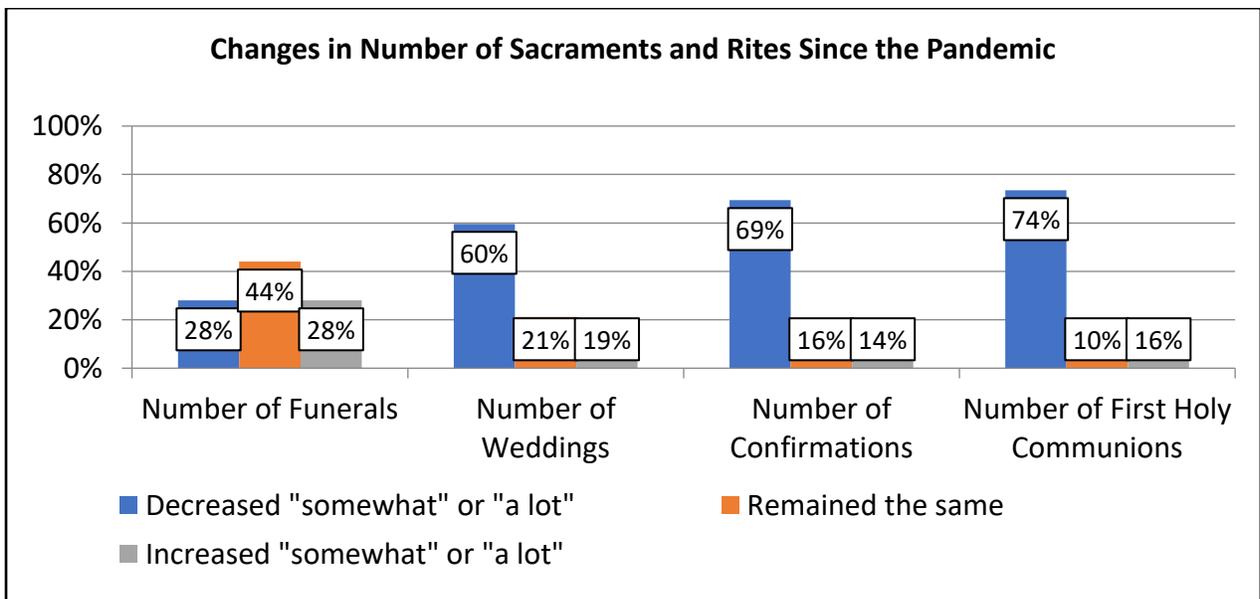


Masses, Sacraments and Rites Offered

Respondents are split in whether they say on-site Masses since the pandemic have decreased (37%), remained the same (31%) or increased (31%). The number of online Masses reported, however, is reported to have remained the same by 68% of responding persons at parishes.

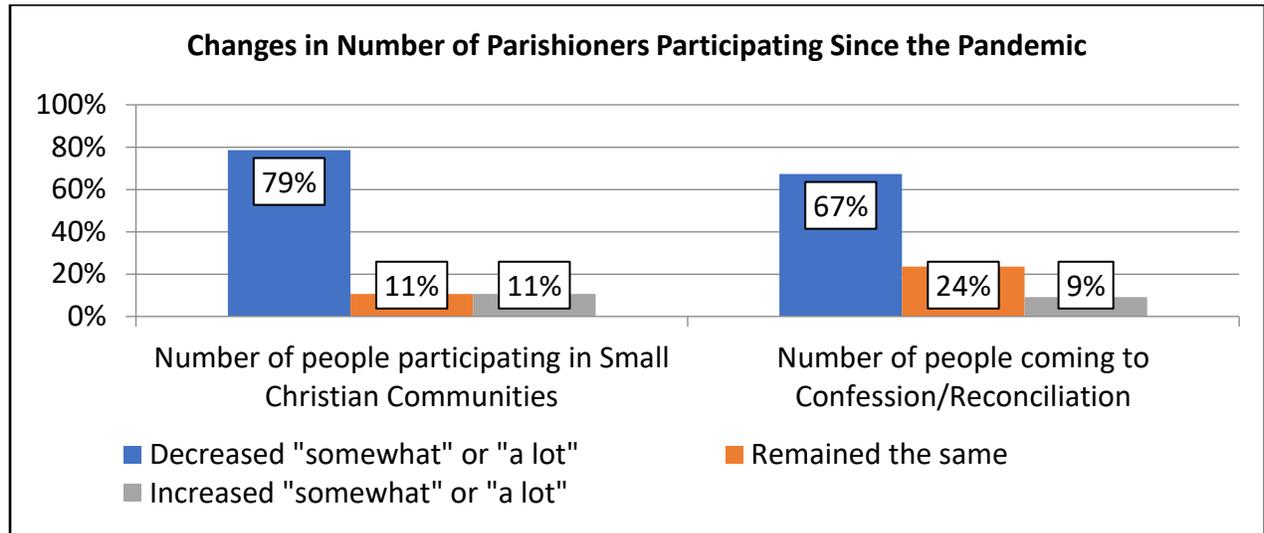


The survey also reviewed the changes in the number of sacraments and rites since the pandemic, focusing on funerals, weddings, confirmations and First Holy Communion. Whereas First Holy Communion (74%), Confirmations (69%), and Weddings (60%) have decreased at most parishes, 44% report that the number of Funerals has remained the same.

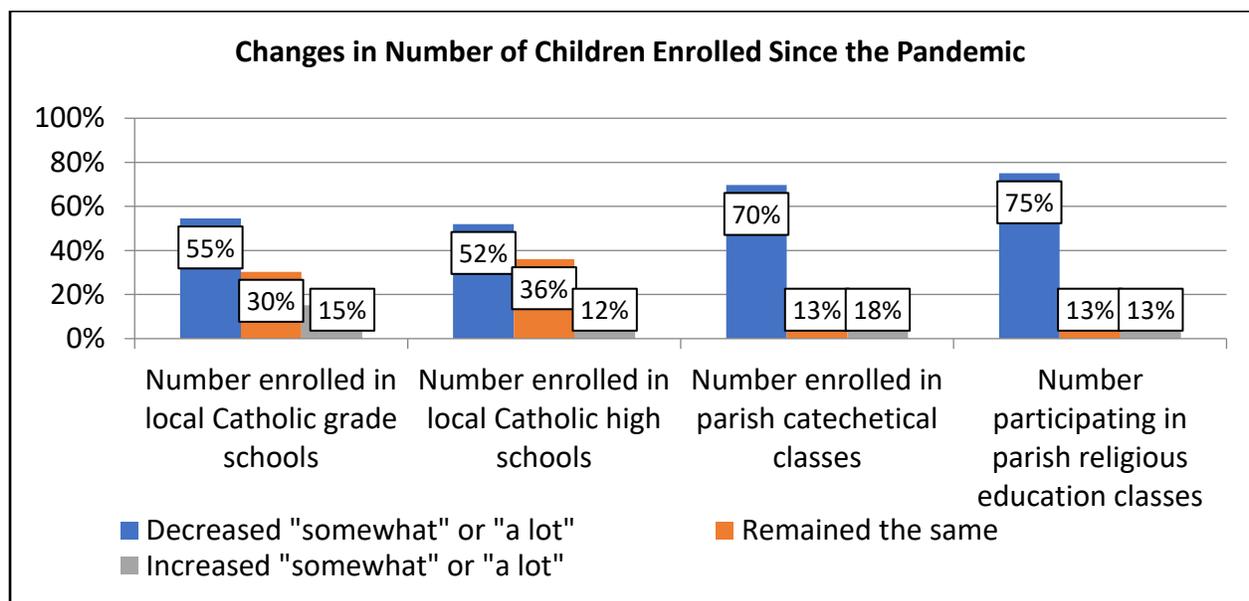


Number of Parishioners Participating in Sacraments and Programs

Besides the number of sacraments offered, the survey also asked whether the number of people participating in parish sacraments and programs have increased, decreased, or stayed the same. Most parishes report that the number of people participating in Small Christian Communities (79%) and coming to Confession/Reconciliation (67%) have decreased.

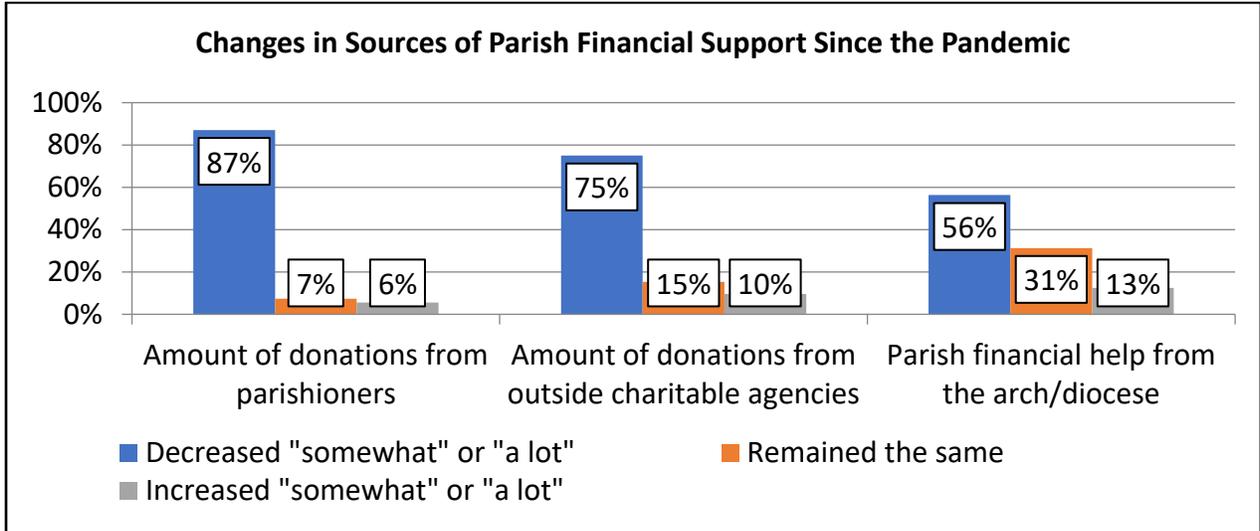


Child enrollment and participation in parish religious formation programs and Catholic schools have decreased since the pandemic. More than half of respondents report a decrease in the number of children/students enrolled in parish religious education classes (75%), in parish catechetical classes (70%), in local Catholic grade schools (55%), and in local Catholic high schools (52%). Catholic grade schools (30%) and high schools (36%) are more likely to have had the number of children remain the same than parish catechetical classes (13%) or parish religious education classes (13%).



Financial Health of the Parishes

Most parishes report a decrease in financial support from parishioner donations (87%) and donations from outside charitable agencies (75%). At the same time, 56% of parishes report a decrease in the financial help they receive from their arch/diocese.



- From the qualitative feedback received from respondents, it was reported that the financial health of their parishes has significantly decreased. It was reported that the pandemic has had a detrimental effect on the economic activities of members. This caused poor turnover in terms of financial and material donations from members to the parishes. Complementing the adverse effects of the current COVID-19 pandemic, is the fact that the economic environment in the country has also posed a huge financial challenge for households, the church and firms. Most respondents do recognize the impact of the rise in the cost of living for households and cost of doing businesses for firms.
- The COVID-19 pandemic presented financial challenges that called for cost reduction through laying off of some parish staff, paying less stipends to all workers as well as reducing unnecessary costs. With the surge in the number of COVID-19 cases in the country, the government announced a number of pronouncements that discouraged gathering including churches. This meant that most ministries continued religious activities through a blended approach online and physical services as usual but with caution.
- Respondents reported that there was some form of resilience in terms of financial support accruing from their Dioceses or Archdioceses. Furthermore, gestures from diocese or Archdiocese were well received through emotional support, encouragement and sensitization on how to deal with the pandemic.

Recommendations

1. COVID-19 messages can also be merged into sermons and prayers to be shared with communities. It will be important for community members frequently to hear these messages and updates on different channels and message platforms.
2. Faith leaders should be encouraged to use faith channels such as organizational web pages; newsletters; emails; phone tree; and faith publications, radio, or other broadcast media. Social media technologies offer religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and communities of faith new ways to share life-saving messages.
3. Religious leaders should inspire their communities to take steps to cope with their stress and to preserve optimism during such times of isolation, fear, and uncertainty. The constant surge of news reports about COVID-19 can cause anyone to feel worried.
4. There is need to use low-technology which will allow for maintenance of faith-based practices in the community. This will facilitate the conducting of faith activities remotely/virtually to reverse the reduced number of Parishioners participating in sacraments and programs due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
5. There is need to strengthen the mental and spiritual health, wellbeing and resilience, through individual contact (while observing appropriate physical distancing) and through social and other communications media.
6. There is need to increase financial help from the Diocese/Archdiocese to supplement the reduced financing coming from parishioners and charitable agencies.
7. There is need to ensure that plans to strengthen capacity in eLearning and reverse the reduced the number of children enrolled since the pandemic.

For More Information

Sr. Joan Chisala CSJB B. ED(Primary) – Visiting Scholar at CARA from Zambia – conducted the research for this report and wrote up the findings with CARA researcher Jonathon Wiggins, Ph.D. This research is funded through a grant from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation to further the research of women religious and Catholicism on the continent of Africa.