
2020 Little Rock Congregations Study Executive Report

Prepared for public distribution to the
Little Rock Community by
Students and Faculty of the
University of Arkansas at Little Rock





For more information, contact Dr. Rebecca Glazier at raglazier@ualr.edu
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About the Little Rock Congregations Study


The Little Rock Congregations Study (LRCS) is a community-based research project that engages students in learning about the impact of faith-based community engagement. The long-term project, housed at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, has three main goals:



Learn more about the impacts of local faith-based community engagement



Get students out of the classroom and into the community



Provide relevant and meaningful findings to the community



The Little Rock Congregations Study is led by Dr. Rebecca Glazier in the School of Public Affairs, together with an interdisciplinary research team at UA Little Rock, including Dr. Gerald Driskill in Applied Communication and Dr. Kirk Leach, an expert on nonprofits. The research team includes both graduate and undergraduate students--since the study began in 2012, over 180 students have been involved.

When we surveyed congregation members in 2012 and 2016, we distributed paper surveys by hand at the worship services of participating congregations. In October 2020, however, we worked with congregation leaders to distributed electronic survey links to members. This made it possible to reach many more participants and to keep everyone safe during the Covid-19 pandemic.

As a longitudinal research project, we plan to repeat our survey of congregation members again in four years. We welcome all interested congregations to participate and we will provide a professional report for each congregation on their members' responses. Those specific reports and this executive report of all aggregate data are some of the ways we are sharing our research findings in relevant and meaningful ways.



2 *A student researcher shares some of her findings at a Little Rock Congregations Study event in 2017.*



Little Rock Congregation Study student researchers in 2018.

Methodology and Demographics

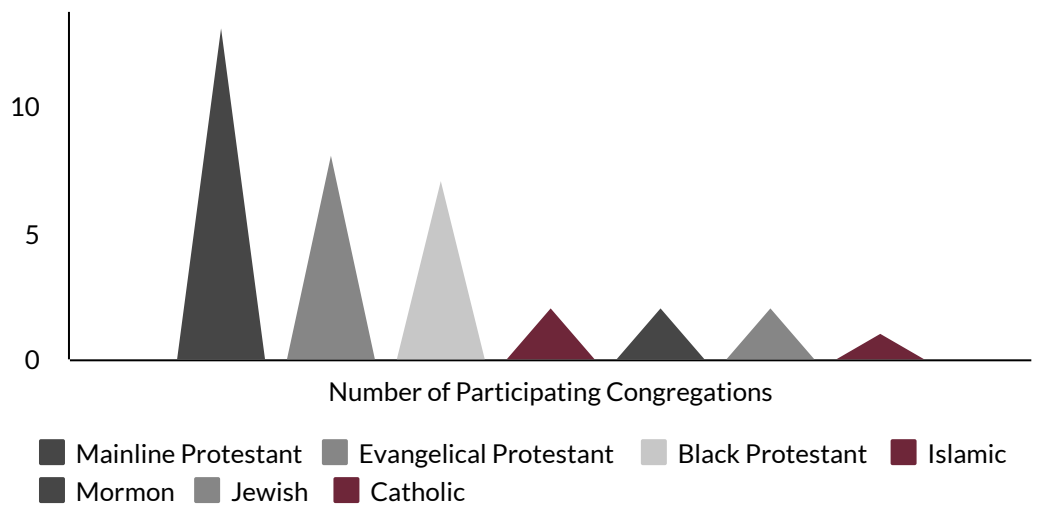
Invitations to participate in the 2020 Little Rock Congregations Study were sent to all religious leaders of places of worship within the city limits of Little Rock (n=365). Sixty-six completed the clergy survey for the first stage of participation, with fifty-eight providing contact information for our research team to reach out for an interview. We interviewed 37 congregation leaders in the second stage and 35 ultimately participated in the congregation survey portion of the project. This is double the 17 congregations that participated in 2016. A total of 2,293 people across these 35 congregations responded to the survey.

As the demographic data show, the sample is overwhelmingly white. Although 20% of our participating congregations were Black Protestant, they tended to be smaller congregations, while some very large Mainline Protestant and Catholic congregations in the sample had mostly white memberships. We hope to recruit more, larger, and more diverse congregations to participate in the future. We found the Covid-19 pandemic in particular made that difficult in 2020.

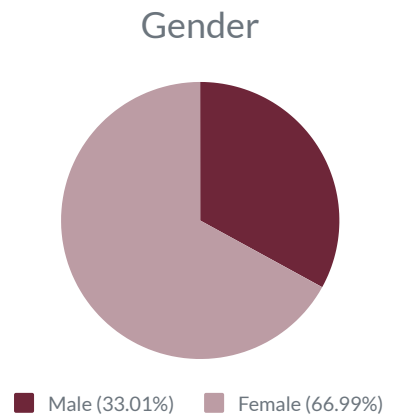
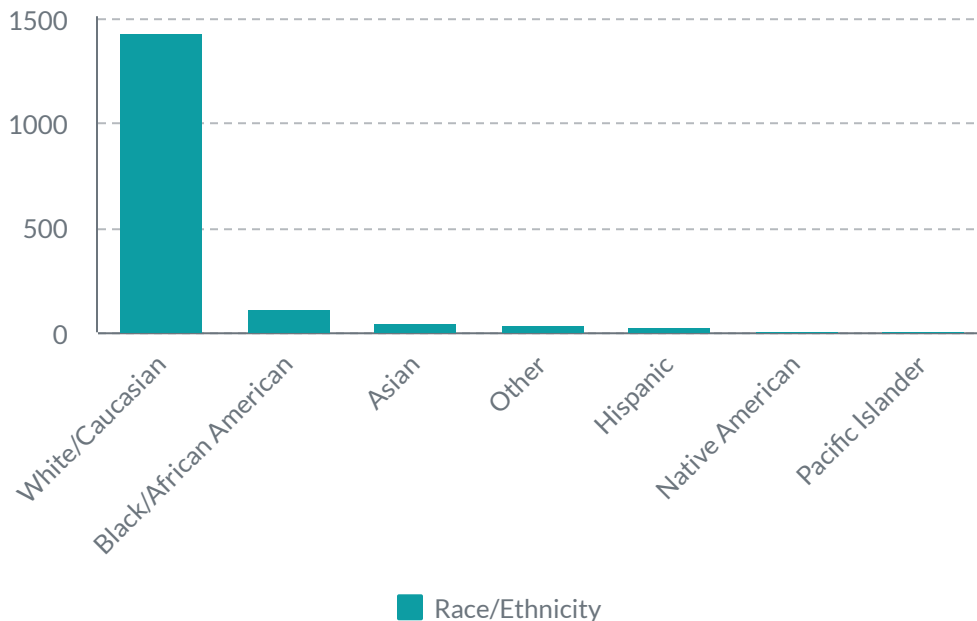
Number of Participating Congregations by Religious Tradition

Average Age of Respondents

57



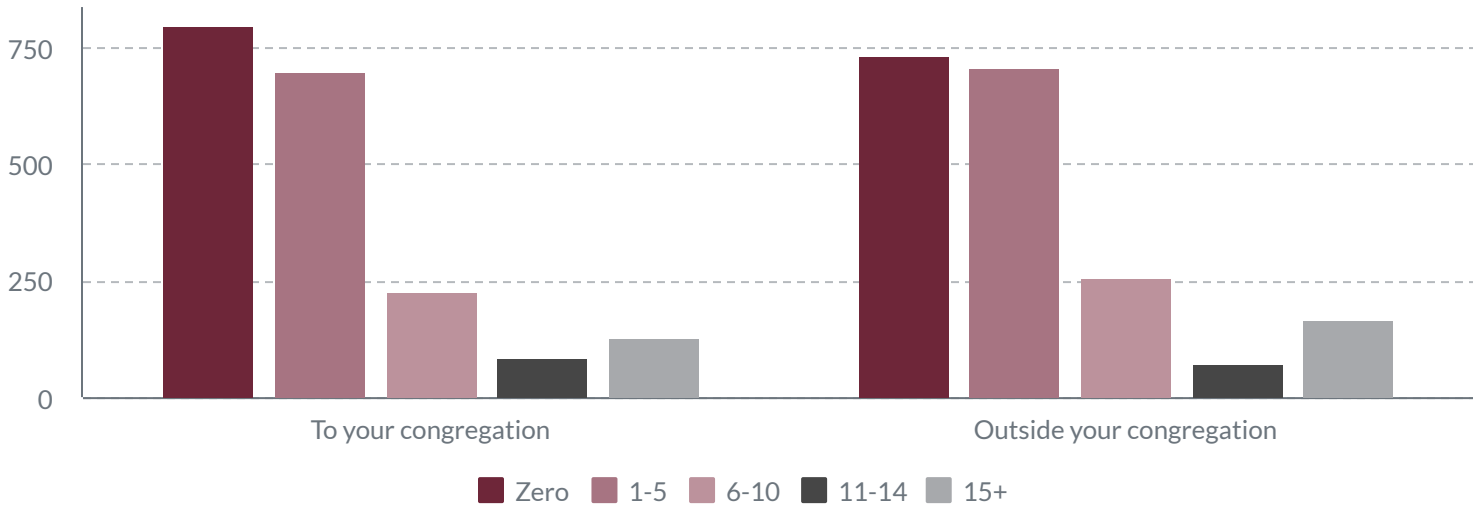
Respondent Demographics



Engagement and Service

Even during these challenging times, people are staying engaged and serving. The 2020 Little Rock Congregations Survey included questions about how much people are serving both inside and outside of their congregations, as well as the priorities they would like to see their places of worship focusing on during these difficult times.

Hours of Service Provided in the Past Month



Our research team has looked closely at what contributes to a "culture of service" in congregations. We have found that higher levels of congregation warmth lead people to give more service to their congregations. You can read more about how congregation can foster a "culture of service" both within their congregation and in the broader community, in this blog post on the Little Rock Congregations Study website: [Creating a Culture of Service](#).



Congregation Priorities During Challenging Times

(each priority was ranked 1-4, with those ranked closer to 1 being more important to members)



Spiritual Growth (1.92)



Social Connection and Fellowship (2.51)



Helping the Poor and Needy (1.97)



Other (3.57)

Serving During the Pandemic

Data from our research show that many people view helping the poor and needy as an important priority for their congregation, especially during the pandemic. More than 1/3 of respondents put it as their top priority and an additional 38% put it as their second priority. We can see the importance of helping the poor and needy playing out in a very real way in the actions of many people and places of faith across Little Rock who are helping those in need.

The Madina Institute

The Covid-19 pandemic changed life for many people this past year. Ramadan, the holiest religious holiday for Muslims, occurred early in the pandemic (April 23rd – May 23rd) and made worshipping together very difficult. At the Madina Institute, people pulled together to create the Coronavirus Benevolence Fund. This fund helps individuals who are struggling financially during the pandemic pay for essential items such as bills, food, and medical expenses. According to Ms. Sophia Said, the Madina Institute Founder, "more than \$32,000 were donated by our congregation within the first two weeks of the fund's creation."

Working with other local mosques, the Madina Institute also started a Community Mask Campaign early in the pandemic, to financially support the women who have lost their jobs by giving them sewing machines to help stitch face masks and donating masks to those in need. Although small at first, Ms. Said stated that "now we are not only helping Muslims and immigrant communities, but we are also providing face masks to several faith communities, nursing homes, and churches whose congregations primarily consist of colored, marginalized, or low-income communities in Central Arkansas."



St. James United Methodist Church

Service and outreach is part of the DNA at St. James United Methodist Church--one of their core values is to "engage and impact our city and the world with compassion." When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, they didn't stop serving, they adjusted their ongoing mission work and added additional service projects to meet new needs as they arose.

For instance, meals with the homeless shifted to to-go boxes, the on-site food pantry moved to a drive-thru model, and care bags were safely distributed to people and families in need all over Little Rock. Additionally, the members at St. James UMC brought meals to the medical staff at UAMS and the VA hospital, and they sewed thousands of fabric face masks to donate.

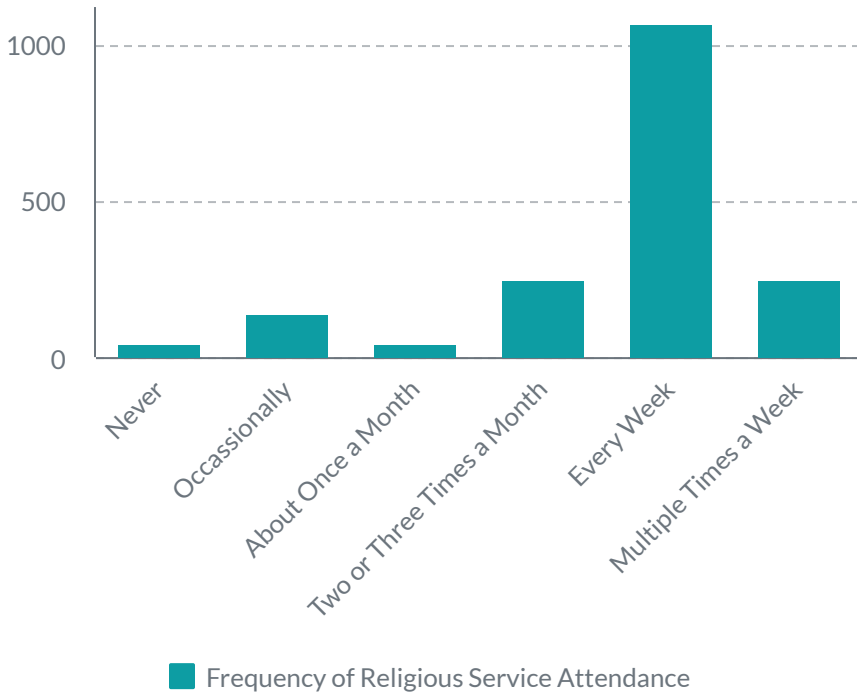
In speaking about the spirit of service that is so central to his congregation, Reverend Carness Vaughan says, "there's a hunger in people to find ways to make a practical difference with their faith. As our people are getting more deeply connected with Christ, and then they're searching for that outlet to exhibit their faith and to live out their faith."



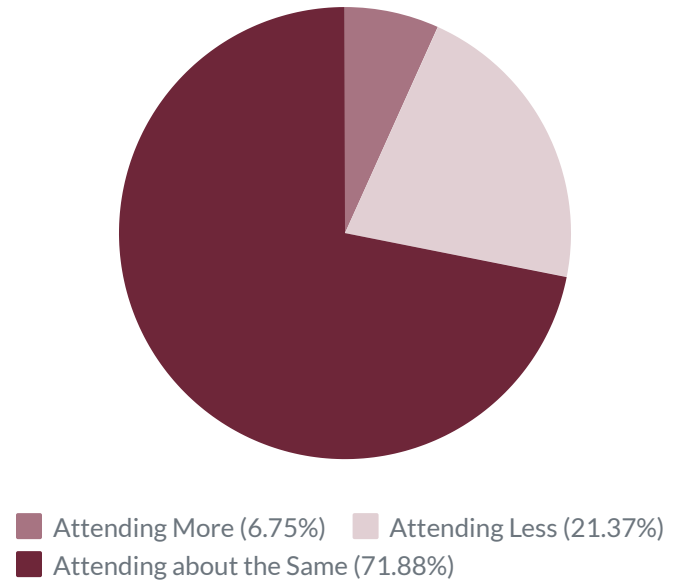
Attendance

Worship service attendance has changed dramatically as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and our survey questions are able to provide a closer look at this phenomenon.

Worship Service Attendance



Change in Attendance



Our research team analyzed the open-ended responses about why people may have changed their attendance patterns. The Covid-19 pandemic was the most frequently cited reason for people attending both less and more. The disruption of regular services and the lack of in-person worship opportunities made attending less appealing for some, but the addition of virtual worship services increased accessibility and frequency of attendance for others. These findings may have important long-term implications as congregations think about what worship services will look like for the future.

Below are some selected responses to illustrate the reasons people gave for attending worship services more or less often.

Why are people attending more?



Actually because of streaming into our homes.

Covid restriction showed / retaught me what a gift it is to attend mass.

Helps me get through the week considering these difficult times.

Learning more and getting closer to God

Why are people attending less?



Because I do not feel safe from the virus.

Got out of the habit during Covid pandemic.

Difficult for me to connect with streaming worship, but still feel connected to my church family.

It's hard to participate in services at home because my children are constantly interrupting.

Adapting Worship Services

Many congregations changed how they are holding worship services as a result of the pandemic. Some of these changes were temporary, but some of these changes may last into the future as congregations find new ways of reaching people through technology. Below, we spotlight a couple of congregations who responded to the challenges of the pandemic with unique solutions to meet the needs of their members.

Second Baptist Church Downtown

Second Baptist Church, Downtown hosts both a preschool and a summer camp at beautiful Lake Nixon, just a short drive from the city. When the pandemic made large, indoor gatherings difficult, 2BC got creative and used the space at Lake Nixon for outdoor worship services. Pastor Preston Clegg says of the events, "Worshipping at Lake Nixon allowed us to remain safe during the pandemic, and it also allowed us to join the chorus of all creation in praising God. We may worship outside more often even after the pandemic is over."



City of Refuge Community Church

City of Refuge Community Church faced the same challenge as many places of worship during the pandemic--how to bring people together for important religious rituals while also ensuring their safety? In order to maintain the tenets of their faith, they came up with an innovative solution: Curbside Communion! Pastor A. Neal Scoggins says, "We married the sacred with safety. Using what the culture had shifted to in order to survive financially, our local church used the same principle to survive spiritually. It's the simple things that stand out. Driving a car to our church parking lot, while remaining physically distant, our masked and gloved servers were able to accomplish convenience, community, connection, and communion."



CURBSIDE COMMUNION

Today AT 10:30AM

Join us at 6811 Brookview Dr. Little Rock

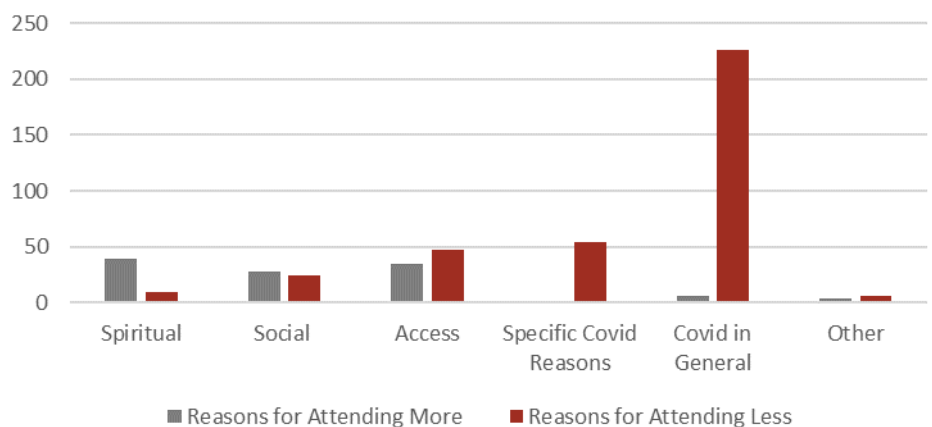
Drive up, receive your communion & a prayer, and drive off.

Social Distancing will be enforced.

When we coded open-ended responses about why attendance patterns had changed, we found that Covid-19 was far and away the largest reason. Access to services--specifically through offering additional online worship services--led some people to attend more and some people to attend less. If these services were an option, instead of the only choice at some congregations because of the pandemic, we might see higher overall attendance.

Another finding we see in the data is the spiritual reasons provided for attending more now. In the face of the challenges many people are confronting because of the pandemic, they are finding comfort in religion and religious community.

Open-ended Responses for Why Attendance Changed, Compared to a Year Ago

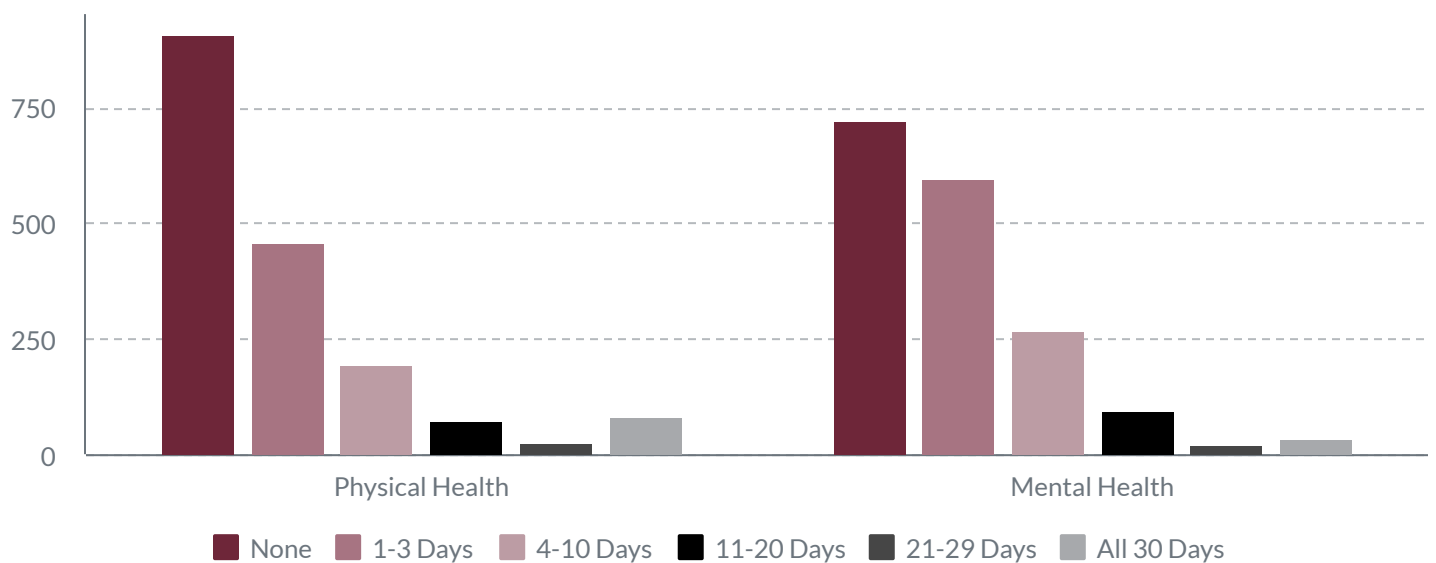


Religion and Health

Places of worship contribute to quality of life far beyond the time people spend together at worship services. Studies show that people who have a supportive community of faith are happier and healthier. Our data reflect that as well.

Keep in mind, these numbers only reflect the people who responded to the survey. Those who are struggling with mental health challenges may be particularly likely to be isolated and not responsive to overtures like requests to participate in congregation activities. The data provided here are just a snapshot of those who responded.

Thinking about your health, for how many days of the past 30 days was your health NOT good?



Those who reported having better mental health were also significantly more likely to:



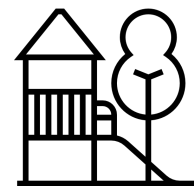
attend worship services more often



feel warmly towards their congregation



give more hours of service to their congregation



give more hours of service to their community

It is important to note that in conducting these analyses, we are only able to make a correlation between positive mental health and these other behaviors; we don't know for certain which way causation runs. We do know from other research, however, that participating in a religious community and giving service tends to support good mental health.

Spiritual Health

We know that religious leaders care deeply about the spiritual health of the people they lead. Additionally, we know that people attend places of worship primarily to be spiritually fed. This was the top priority of respondents to our survey. We included a number of questions to gauge how people are doing spiritually, and the consequences of their spiritual health for the congregations and beyond.

What are the topics of sermons?



Quotes that respondents provided in the surveys illustrate how people are turning to faith now more than ever:

"Prayers needed especially during these difficult times."

"Since the pandemic, I am appreciating Jesus so much."

"Turning COVID isolation into a form of retreat."

"To fulfill a spiritual need to gather together, and be in fellowship with God and each other."

"Spiritually needed."

In asking about how people are doing spiritually, we found that some people--about 1/3 of the sample--are more deeply spiritual, compared to the rest of the sample. These are people who feel closer to God today than they did a year ago, who regularly feel thankful for their blessings, who regularly experience God's love, and who often feel a deep sense of spiritual peace.

We would expect these people to be more committed to their faith and their place of worship--and they are. They are significantly more likely to provide service to their congregation and to attend worship services. But their spirituality also has positive consequences for the broader community.

Deeply spiritual respondents are significantly more likely to:



provide service to the community beyond their congregation



believe that they can make a difference in their community

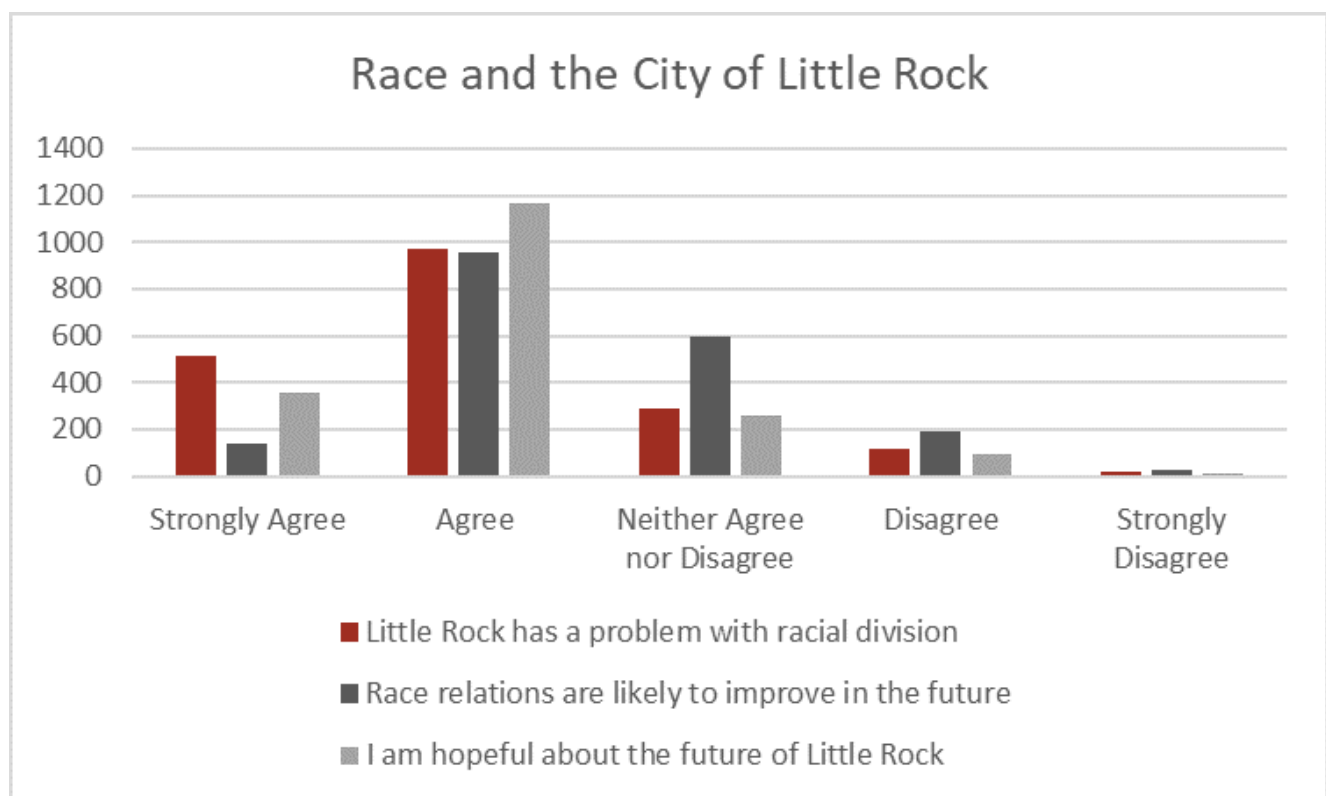


be engaged in talking about and working on local community issues

Race and Religion in Little Rock

As our research team has studied faith-based community engagement, we have learned just how important issues of race and religion are in our city. In our surveys and interviews with clergy over the past 8 years, race relations has increased in importance as a community issue to clergy (see this blog post on our website for more: [Understanding Race and Faith through the Data of the LRCS](#)). In 2020, 88% of responding clergy leaders agree or strongly agree that Little Rock has a problem with racial division, but the vast majority also believe that things will get better. People and places of faith are often critical to helping make those improvements.

Our 2020 congregation survey included a number of questions about race relations and our research team plans to continue work in this area going forward.

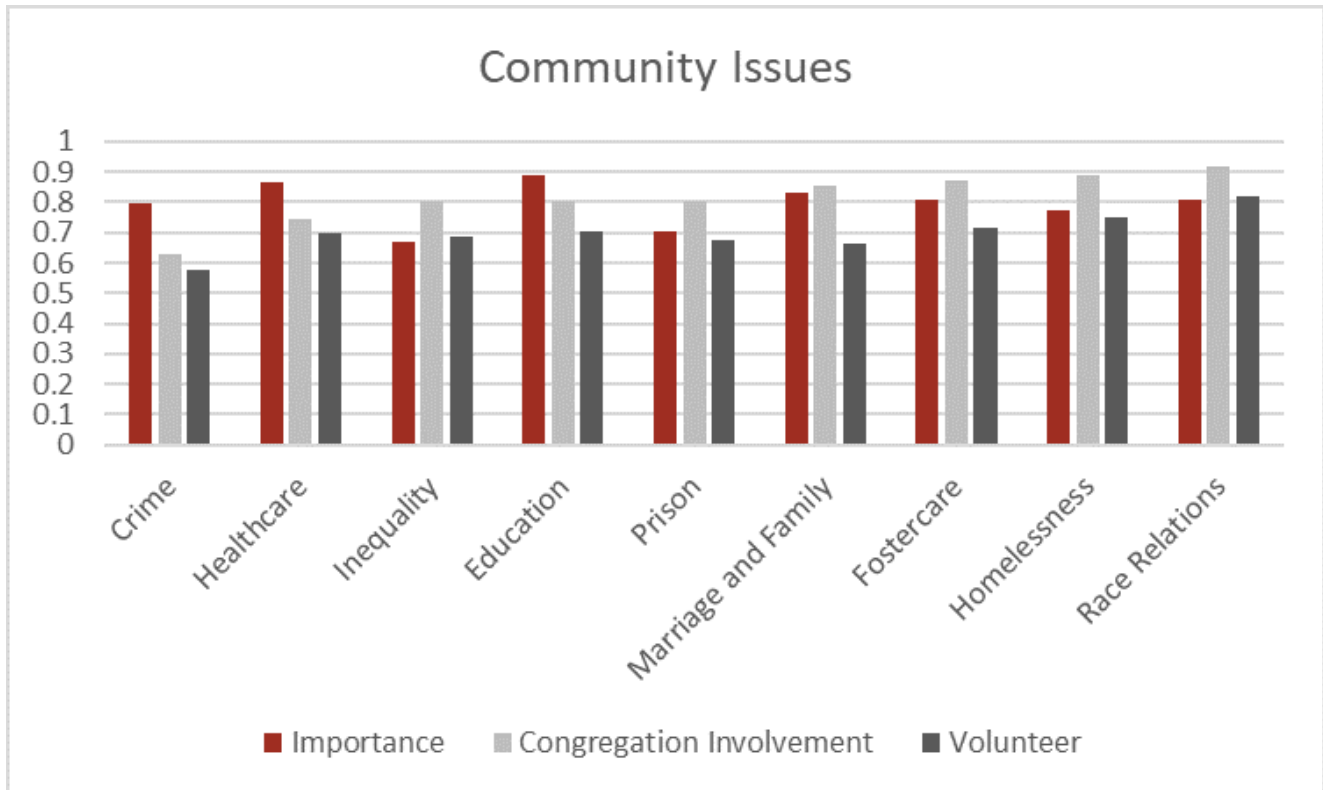


The data from congregation members in 2020 shows that 77% of people in this sample Agree or Strongly Agree that Little Rock has a problem with racial division, a number that is lower than the 88% of clergy.

Talking about issues of race can be difficult, especially in a city like Little Rock, with a living history of racial injustice, but religious leaders have the moral authority to lead these difficult conversations. Indeed, as the data on the next page show, more than any other community issue, people believe their places of worship *should* be involved in helping to address the issue of race relations.

Community Issues

What community issues matter most to the people we surveyed in Little Rock? We asked the members at these 35 congregations about nine issues and for each one, they rated its importance, whether they wanted their congregation to be involved in helping to solve the issue, and, if so, whether they personally would be willing to volunteer for the effort. Each of these measures is displayed in the chart below.



The most important issues to the people in our sample are Healthcare and Education, but the issues that they most want their congregations to get involved in helping to address are Race Relations and Homelessness. The issue of Marriage and Family is unique in that it scores highly on both of these measures--it is important to many people in our sample and many people see it as an issue their congregation should address.

Addressing community issues takes more than congregations alone. Our research shows that many nonprofits are also working on these important issues and are interested in partnering with people and places of faith. We have plans to help make that happen in 2021 and are already talking with some partner organizations about facilitated dialogues.



Where do we go from here?

We are planning facilitated dialogues around some key community issues, thanks to help from a team of graduate students from the Clinton School of Public Service. There are three facilitated dialogue groups planned for the spring of 2021. Both places of worship and nonprofit organizations will be invited to these conversations to talk about collaboration opportunities and how to best work together to find solutions to the problems that are so important to people of faith in our city.

Healthcare

Marriage &
Family

Education

Learn More about the
LRCS Online

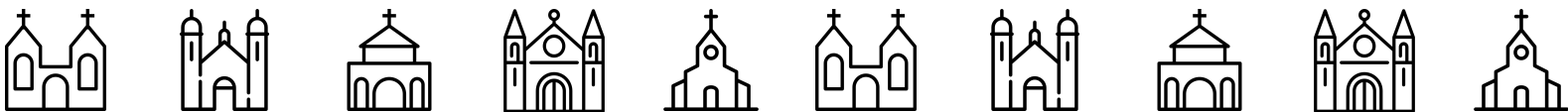
On our website:
<https://research.ualr.edu/lrcs/>

On our Facebook page:
[https://www.facebook.com/
LittleRockCongregationsStudy/](https://www.facebook.com/LittleRockCongregationsStudy/)



Looking Ahead to 2024

The Little Rock Congregations Study is a longitudinal research project, which means we plan to keep doing work in our community for the long term. We are planning to survey congregations again in four years, in 2024, and we are inviting all interested congregations in Little Rock to be part of the research then.



If you have questions about future research, or want to talk about your congregation or organization can get involved, please feel free to contact: the Little Rock Congregations Study Director, Dr. Rebecca A. Glazier, raglazier@ualr.edu, 501-813-2079 (cell)

Research Team



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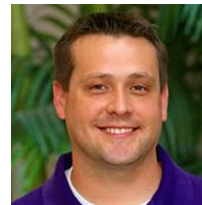
Clergy Advisory Board



Rev. Ryan Davis
Bullock Temple
Christian Methodist
Episcopal Church



Pastor Ray Williams
Fellowship Bible Church,
City Church Network



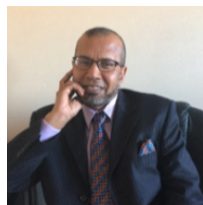
Pastor Preston Clegg
Second Baptist Church
Downtown



Rev. Lindy Vogado
Second Presbyterian
Church



Fr. Mark Wood
St. Theresa
Catholic Church



Imam Mahmoud
Hassanein
Islamic Center
of Little Rock



Pastor Earnest Thomas
Saint Mark
Baptist Church



Outreach Minister
Ceanne Warner
Church of Jesus Christ
of Latter-day Saints

The Little Rock Congregations Study Clergy Advisory Board is made up of religious leaders from diverse backgrounds across our city. They advise the research team both on methods (question selection, survey distribution, inclusive question wording, etc.) and on outreach (congregation recruitment, networking, etc.). Board members serve rotating two-year terms.



Website: <https://research.ualr.edu/lrcs>
Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/LittleRockCongregationsStudy/>

