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Holy Cross Lutheran Church: The Impact of a Virtual Service

For this ethnography, I researched the impact of COVID-19 on Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Albuquerque, New Mexico. For the past few weeks while New Mexico has been on stay at home orders due to the virus, Holy Cross has been holding virtual services through Zoom. This change has been very significant, because the church used technology very little (other than email announcements) prior to the development of the virus. For my project, I decided to examine the impacts of going online on the atmosphere of the service and the strength of the church's community. I have attended Holy Cross for the past five years, so all of the changes to the service are impacting me as well as the other members of the congregation. In this report, I attempt to present an unbiased analysis of the data I gathered. While being a member provided for the possibility of bias, it also provided an advantage because I was easily able to access the community and conduct research through participant observation, a survey, and interviews.

Entering into this research, I had two hypotheses. First, I believed that older members of the church would have difficulty using the video technology, and therefore the service would be less accessible to them. Second, I hypothesized that the congregants would generally dislike the online format and feel that it weakened our sense of community. Both assumptions, as I will show, ultimately turned out to be incorrect. All ages reported feeling equally comfortable using the new technology and therefore equally included in the service. Also, rather than feeling that our community had been broken, people reported that the strength of our community was maintained, with many even arguing that it had increased. Ultimately, I conclude that despite any

difficulties created by the new online service format, our community has ultimately drawn closer together as we depend on each other to get through this difficult time.

For the participant observation component of my research, I took notes on the Palm Sunday service on April 5, 2020. There were about 35-40 video participants in attendance, many of whom were families or couples. This turnout was quite impressive, since it added up to about usual number of service participants, showing that we didn't lose a significant number of people since moving online. (A couple of missing people were also able to make it the following week to the Easter service.) There were several significant differences in the structure of the service. The first difference I noticed was that the children's sermon was moved to the very beginning of the service. This change appeared to give the children a chance to get involved before the service really got started. Other significant changes in the structure of the service that I noticed were that it felt shorter than usual and that most of the intermediate songs and hymns had been cut out of the service.

For the few songs we did sing, everyone was muted, so our voices would not conflict with each other due to feedback and the delay in Internet connections. We still attempted to say some prayers together, but for the same reason, the words from other members still sounded jumbled and unsynchronized. Throughout the service, there were occasional technical difficulties and confusions. One person was placed in charge of muting and unmuting everybody, which generally worked well but sometimes caused delay if the leader could not find the correct person to unmute for a couple seconds and that person did not know how to unmute themselves. A couple times, someone was accidentally unmuted for a couple minutes when they were not supposed to be.

We needed to provide ourselves with everything that would usually be provided by the church, from having our own palms (or virtual palms) to wave on Palm Sunday to setting out our own crackers and wine for Communion. During Communion, the members of each family said to each other what the assistants usually say during in-person service. In real life, we always have coffee/socializing time after the service, which we continued to do online. However, instead of giving people the usual freedom to mingle, the socializing hour was led by the Pastor, who called on people one at a time to give everyone an update on their life. Of course, everyone provided their own coffee.

In order to get a broad sense of the congregation's thoughts on the online service, I sent out a Google Forms survey. I sent the survey out through email, which was reasonable because members of the congregation already receive the newsletter through email. In order to prevent any technologically based bias, I also announced the survey during one online service. I received a total of 19 responses: a reasonable response rate considering the small size of the congregation. My sample was representative of the church population. Of the responses I received, 63.2% came from females and 36.8% came from males. All respondents self-identified as Caucasian, which is not unexpected since the majority of the church members are Caucasian. The population is well educated, shown by the fact that 68.4% of respondents had a graduate or professional degree and 21.1% had a bachelor's degree. The remaining people either had an associate's degree or attended some college but did not have a degree. The age distribution of respondents was skewed to the left (in other words, more older people responded than younger people), which again is representative of the congregation. The lowest age reported was 35, while the highest was 79. The ages were reasonably well distributed so that all age groups between 35 and 79 were accounted for. There was no correlation between the gender and age of respondents.

Finally, the respondents were reasonably split between the four socioeconomic categories represented by income level (see Appendix A).

In the survey, I asked four questions that the respondents were instructed to answer on a scale from one to five. The first question was “How comfortable do you feel using technology?” 18 out of the 19 people (95%) rated their comfort level a four or a five, showing that most people in the congregation feel confident using general technology. The second question I asked was “How difficult was it for you to access and learn how to use Zoom for worship services?” The responses showed that most people had little difficulty accessing and using Zoom. 17 out of the 19 people (89%) rated this question a one or two. The remaining two people rated this question a three and a four. Third, I asked, “How well has Holy Cross been able to maintain a sense of community while online?” This question received a strong, positive response. 58% of respondents gave a five (meaning “extremely well”), and 89% of the total gave a four or a five. The lowest rating on this question was a three (11%). The final question I asked was, “Overall, how do you feel about the online service format?” The majority of people (58%) gave this question a four, meaning that they like the format overall. An additional 26% actually gave this question a five, corresponding to the response “I love it.” The lowest response on this question was a two (1 person).

As I mentioned in the introduction of this paper, I was particularly curious to examine the impact age had on the four variables I measured. Surprisingly, I found no association between age and reported comfort with technology, nor did I find any association between age and difficulty accessing or learning to use Zoom. While I had hypothesized that the older population would report less feeling of community and less satisfaction with the service, I once again found no such effect. During the course of my analysis, I also examined how the other demographics

related to the response variables. Ultimately, I found no correlation between class, race, gender, or age and any of the four measured variables.

Later in the survey, I asked, “What has been the worst part about Holy Cross going online?” I received a variety of responses, but by far the most popular complaint was that we could not all sing hymns together; everyone needed to be muted because of the sound delay. Music and singing are usually extremely important parts of the service, and it was clear that people missed them. As one member, Elaine, summed up during her interview, “Because of the different systems we all are on and different networks for our computers and everything, how the sound comes across no longer feels like unity. It feels sort of like a marching band or something... I miss having all the music in sync.” Related to this concern, people also voiced general technological complaints about sound delay, Internet clunkiness, and occasional issues connecting to Zoom. Another concern brought up a couple of times in the survey involved difficulty focusing due to distractions at home. One respondent succinctly summed up, “It’s hard to focus on the sermon, hard to hear the music, and generally doesn’t feel like church.” This statement encompasses the general discomfort people are experiencing as they attempt to adjust to virtual services.

The second important concern that people voiced was an overall lack of personal, individual interaction. On the survey, people pointed out “the in-ability to carry on conversations,” missing “the physical presence of others,” and, of course, “no hugs.” As another member, Roger, pointed out in his interview, not only are we unable to converse with others individually, we also interact differently now (more formally, as I observed) with the young kids in the congregation. Many people in the congregation really enjoy interacting with the kids each week, so talking to them is another element of usual church interactions that is different. In

another interview, Donna expanded on this lack of personal interactions, pointing out missing the Peace, hugs, and handshakes. She also pointed out that in the new, formal coffee hour it is impossible to hold individual conversations and difficult to interject in response to someone.

In the survey, I also asked, “What has been the best part about Holy Cross going online?” By far the most common response I received was appreciation for being together and maintaining our connection to each other. People talked about this concept from many different angles, mentioning maintaining our community, staying connected to other people, seeing familiar faces, fellowship, and working to maintain personal relationships with other members. People also emphasized the importance of continuity and continuing the regular church routine. One respondent wrote, “It has been wonderful to still be able to connect with members of the congregation. Especially important during this very scary uncertain time.” We can observe through comments such as this one—as well as the high Zoom attendance rate—that people are placing a high priority on continuing to practice religion during quarantine and connecting with others in the church.

Rather than feeling that our community had been torn apart, the common opinion was that not only had we maintained our community; it had actually grown stronger. A couple interviewees expressed appreciation for the fact that the new coffee hour structure allowed them to learn about everyone’s lives rather than those of just a few people. Elaine made the interesting and unique observation that “during the worship, usually we just see each other’s backs while we’re in church. And now we get to see each other’s faces… it’s a stronger sense of community seeing people the way we do.” The change has also helped to strengthen our community in old-fashioned ways, argues the Pastor: “I have noticed that people have been calling each other more… I’ve noticed that people are more in this time wanting to stay on the phone longer and

have longer phone conversations, and also I know some people have been dropping things off to one another and dropping things off for neighbors.” Several people from different states have also been able to join in our Zoom services, which expanded the community even outside of its usual range of people. Though the manner of our connections have changed, for the vast majority of the congregation this time has fostered stronger connections and support between people.

Finally, I was also able to gather some insights on what the youngest generation thinks about the online services by asking parents about it on one of my survey questions. The children gave pretty mixed reviews. A couple children reported that they liked it, but others were confused by the development and just wanted to be back with their friends. Some parents reported that their children had short attention spans for the service, and one child responded, “It’s cool but taking turns [speaking] is hard.” An older child disliked the Zoom service, simply preferring worship in person.

In class, we learned about the importance of religion as a coping mechanism. For instance, our textbook explains that religion “[serves] emotional needs as well as cognitive (eg., explanatory) ones. Religion can help people face death and endure life crises” (Kottak 190). I see this statement reflected in the changes that have occurred in Holy Cross Lutheran Church. People are demonstrating their dedication to faith more than ever during this time. For example, most people are consistently showing up to online services, including people from far away states, people at home with kids and/or distractions, and older people, some of whom may have been initially intimidated by the new technology.

In addition, I can clearly see people’s Lutheran values manifesting through their actions toward others in the church community. Kottak explains, “If the faithful truly internalize a system of religious rewards and punishments, their religion becomes a powerful influence on

their attitudes and behavior, as well as on what they teach their children" (194-195). In other words, the phenomenon of congregants checking in on each other and supporting each other can be seen as a reflection and manifestation of the values and beliefs ingrained in them already by the church. Koenig describes this concept beautifully, writing, "Religious persons provide support to others not only because they want to but because 'loving thy neighbor' and caring for the needy are part of the religious belief system itself. It is especially when the other is in need and unable to return social favors that people of faith are called to care for one another" (57). So we can observe that not only are members actively working to involve themselves in religion, they are also displaying their religious values more to others during this time of difficulty.

It is hard to say whether or not my observations can be generalized beyond this particular church. However, I suggest that other small congregations in the United States are likely to be experiencing similar changes. The Pastor explained during his interview that because we are a small church, "it's been easier for us to be nimble and adaptive" and to quickly transition to online services. Large churches, on the other hand, have not been doing live video services because they could not coordinate such changes quickly enough. In addition, the other community-oriented benefits we have experienced are likely also unique to small churches. "The United States Congressional Life survey found that, despite their financial difficulties, smaller congregations scored higher than the biggest churches on measures such as fostering spiritual growth, sharing faith, having empowering leaders, being places where more worshippers are actively involved, and caring for children and youth" (Horsfield 279-280). Many of the changes we have experienced involve these factors of community and involvement and therefore likely apply only to small churches. Even so, the results of my research are still more widely generalizable than they may appear at first glance. After all, "59 percent of weekly worshippers

[in the United States] worship at a church of less than one hundred members, and 94 percent at churches of less than five hundred members" (Horsfield 279). Based on these statistics, the majority of churches are likely experiencing similar phenomena to Holy Cross as they transition to online services during the COVID-19 epidemic.

In conclusion, my research illustrates that COVID-19 and the resulting transition to online services have strengthened the bonds of our community and the expression of our faith. The research raises two further questions to investigate. First, how do the changes at Holy Cross compare to those at large churches? Second, will any of the changes we have made persist after we return to a normal service? In order to answer these questions, I could continue to use similar research methods as the ones described in this paper both at various large churches and at Holy Cross after we return to in-person worship.

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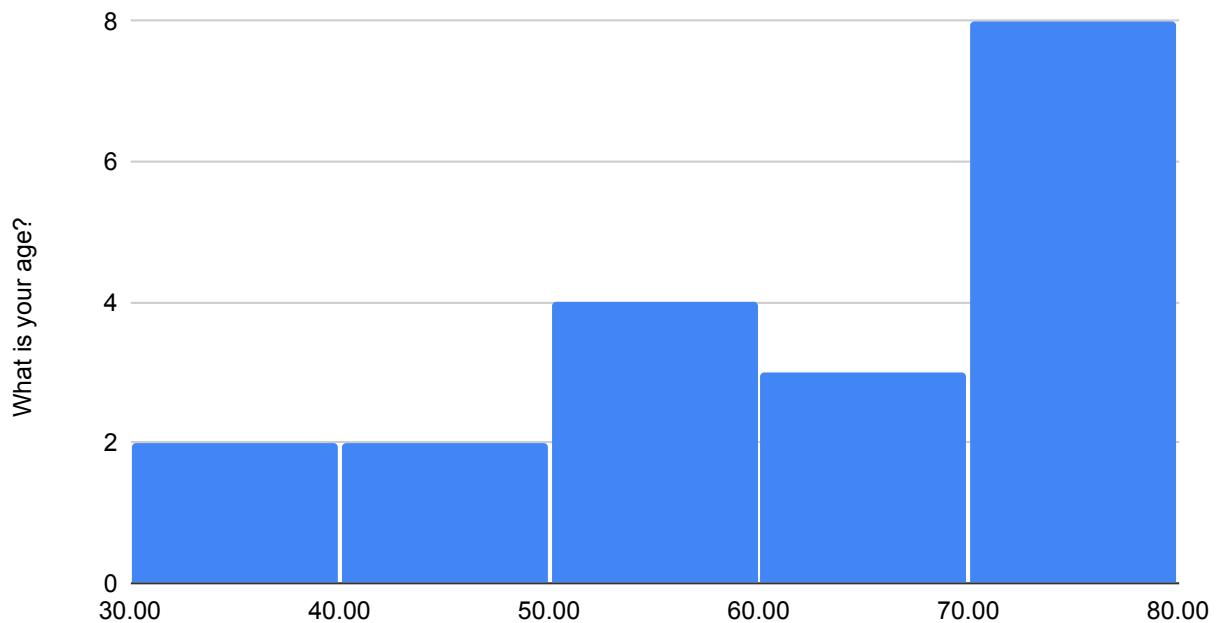
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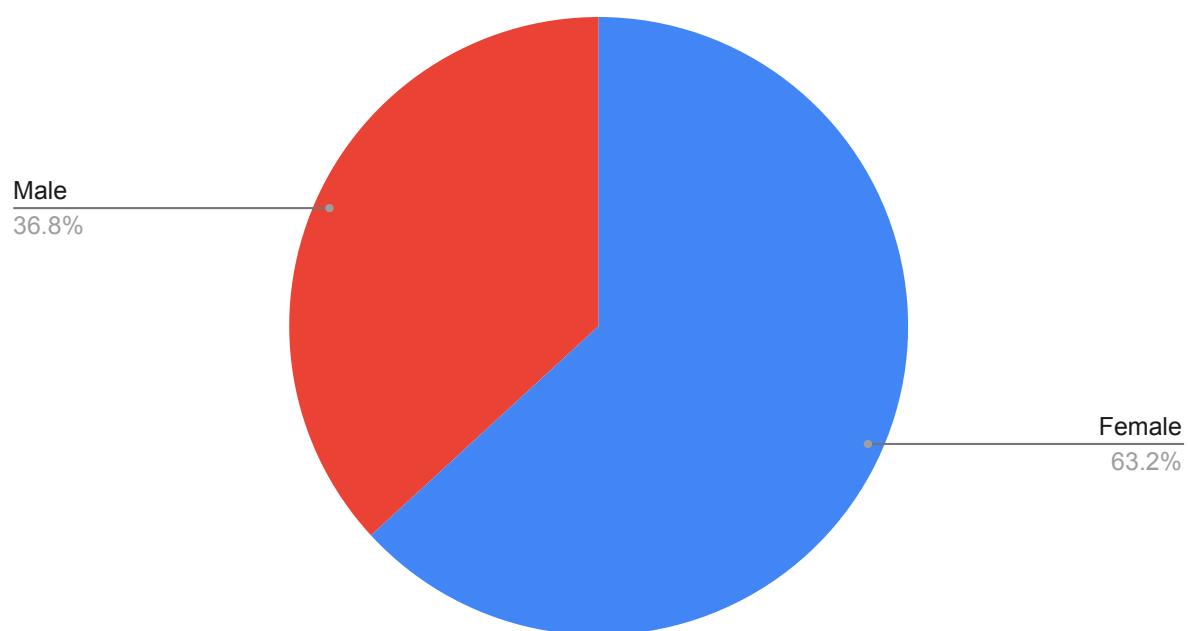
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Appendix A—Survey Graphs

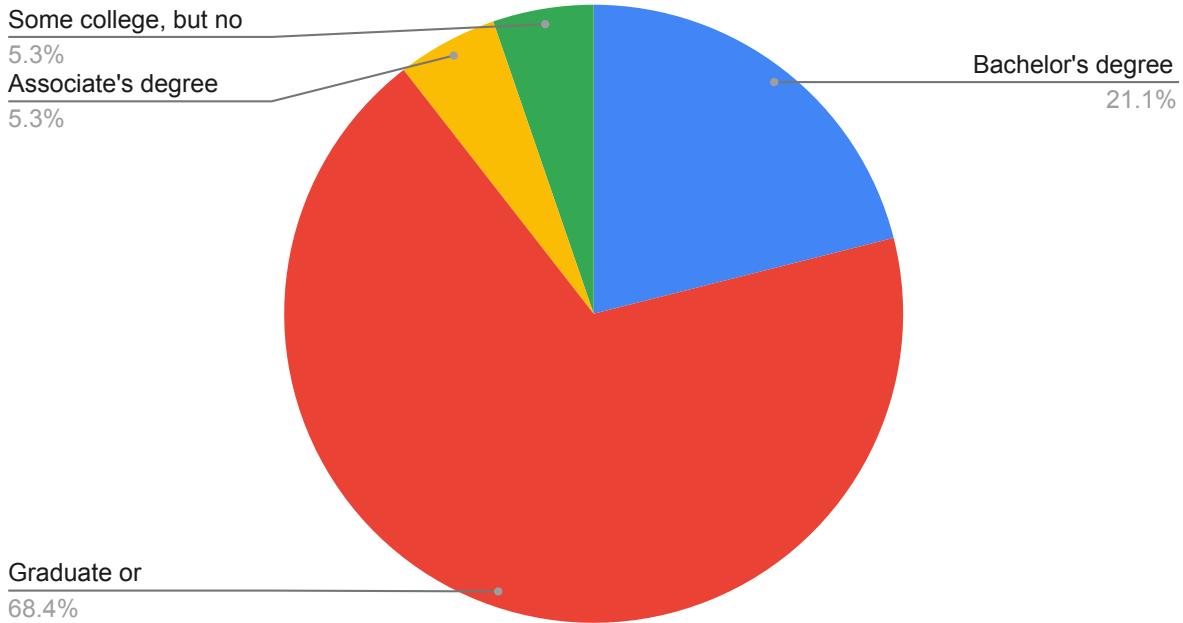
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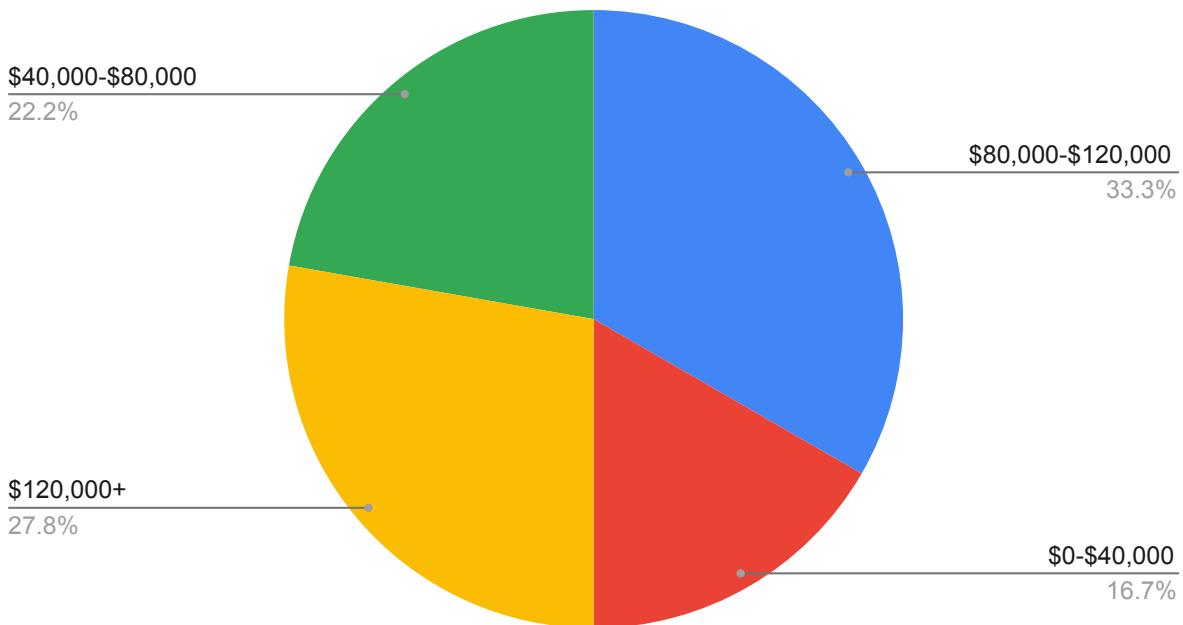
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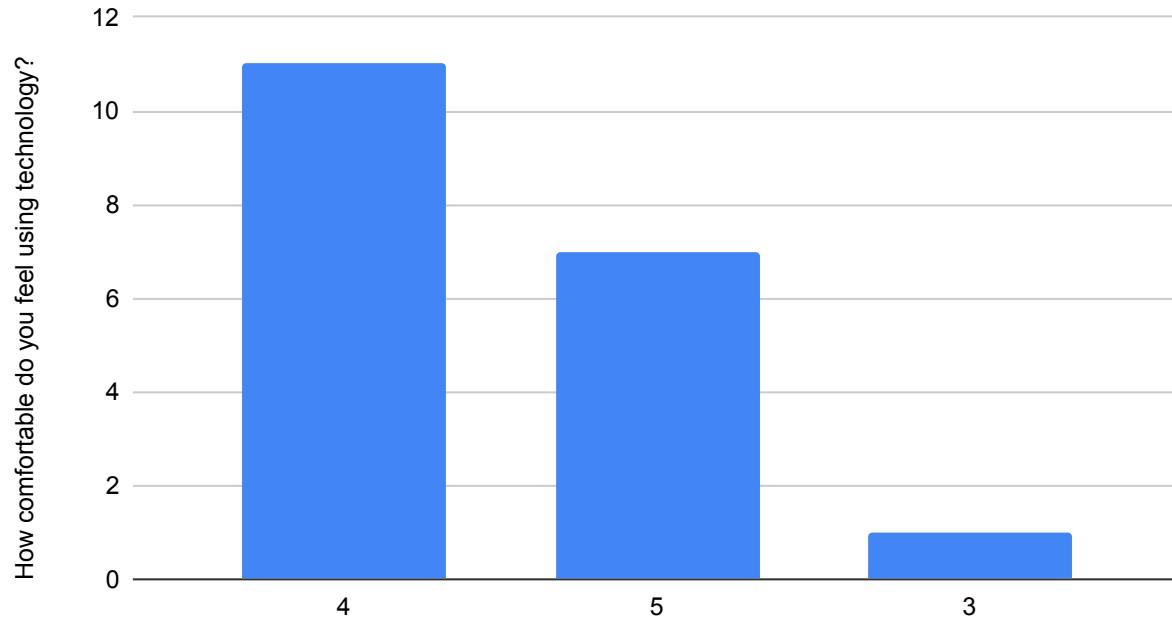
Education



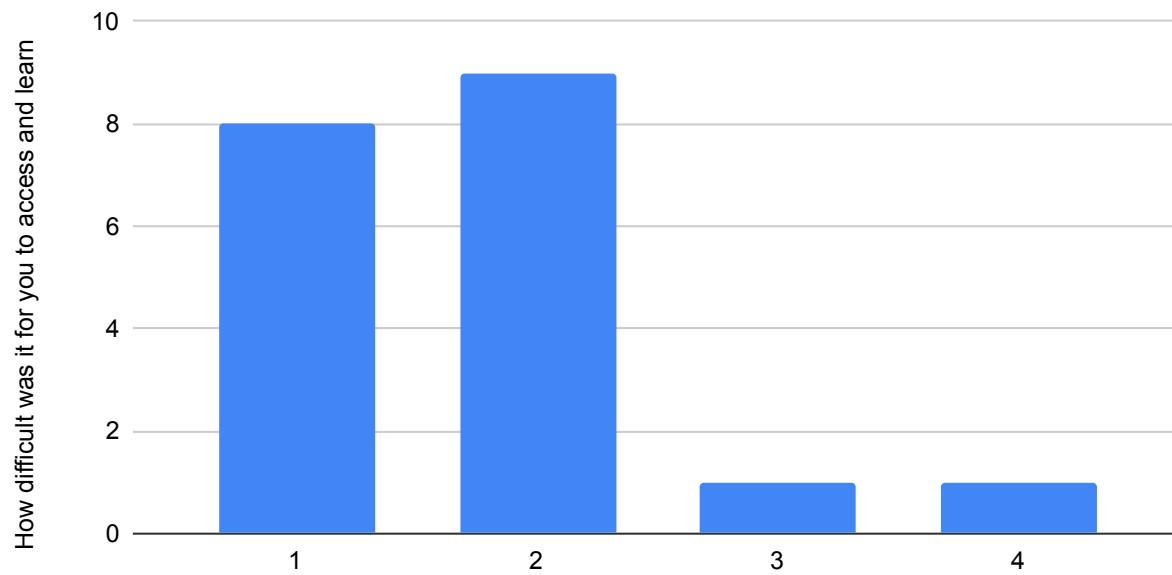
Income Describing Socioeconomic Status



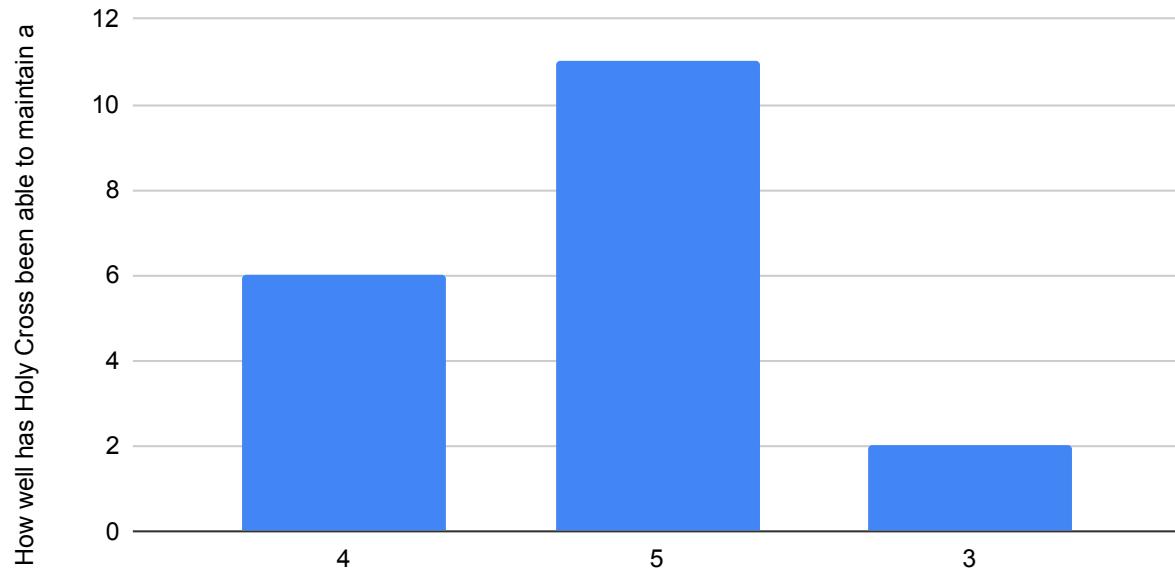
How comfortable do you feel using technology?



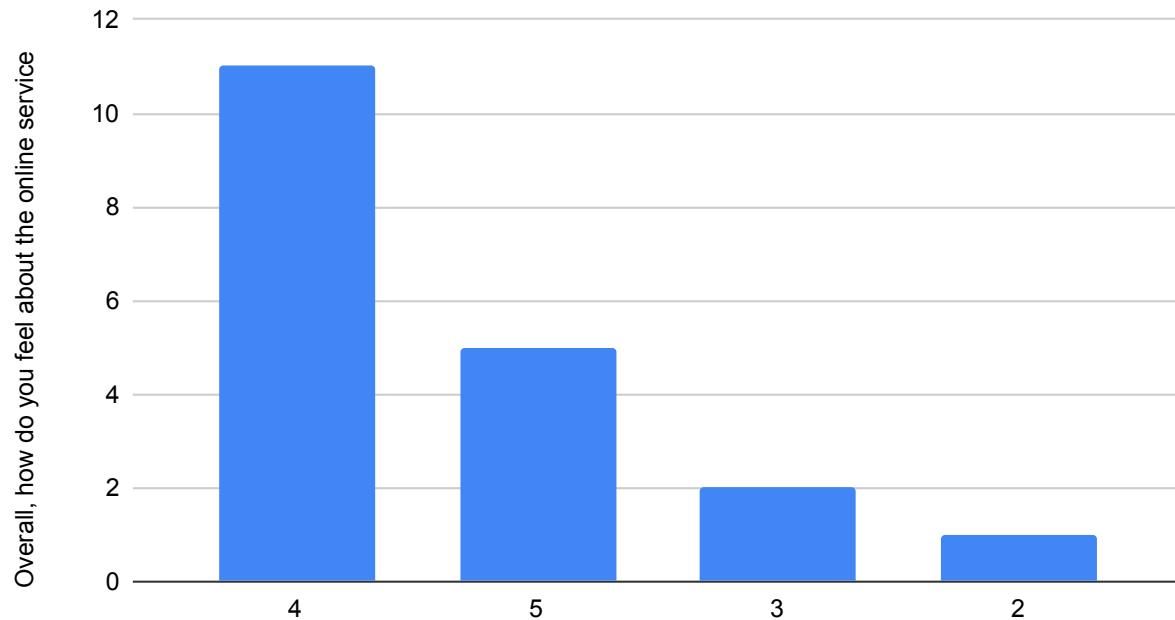
How difficult was it for you to access and learn how to use Zoom for worship services?



How well has Holy Cross been able to maintain a sense of community while online?



Overall, how do you feel about the online service format?



Appendix B—Transcriptions for Sections of Interviews

Interviewees: Susan, Roger, Elaine, Donna, William, and Pastor*Names have been changed for anonymity**Note: not all were directly cited in this paper, all interviewees also filled out survey****“Since we’ve gone online what are the biggest differences that you’ve noticed?”***

Roger: “Well it’s not being able to get together with folks face-to-face and talk individually with them. It’s a different kind of feel for how we’re interacting with the little kids and what’s really disappointing is not being able to see [newborn baby] because we got to see him maybe one or two Sundays and now they’re in isolation.”

“What are the biggest differences that you’ve noticed since the change online?”

Elaine: “Well, because we don’t have a pipe organ in the background, I really miss the pipe organ. And because of the different systems we all are on and different networks for our computers and everything, how the sound comes across no longer feels like unity. It feels sort of like a marching band or something, and so I miss having all the music in sync. That would be the word. But it was still good to hear music.”

“What changes have happened that you feel have been good?”

Elaine: “One of the changes that I think is really good is that during the worship, usually we just see each other’s backs while we’re in church. And now we get to see each other’s faces. And I don’t mean that to be critical because we all scratch our faces or do strange things but it’s a stronger sense of community seeing people the way we do. And then when we are doing the worship, I really feel actually very involved in the relationship with others, not that it isn’t in regular service, it just seems more powerful now. And it could be because we’re having the social isolation. It’s really...I don’t know, rewarding? Comforting? To feel in community with other people that way.”

Donna: don’t have direct transcription: recording malfunction

“How well overall would you say that we’ve managed the transition online?”

Pastor: “I would say I’ve been impressed with us being a smaller congregation, I think it’s been easier for us to be nimble and adaptive. Larger congregations have been less—because I’ve been talking to my colleagues, at least—but larger congregations have been less willing to try live online worship because they did not feel they could communicate to everyone in their community fast enough about how to do it. And with us being smaller and nimble, we know how to get ahold of one another and get the word out. So I do think that we’ve been able to do it fairly well.”

“How well do you feel we are continuing to maintain a community using the online format?”

Pastor: “I think it’s been pretty good overall, certainly some hiccups along the way, but what I have found is that the online sense of community that we’ve been trying to connect with one other also has led to some older fashioned ways of connecting, so I have noticed that people have been calling each other more. And when I’ve been calling to check on people—not just using Zoom but just calling to check on people—I’ve noticed that people are more in this time wanting to stay on the phone longer and have longer phone conversations, and also I know some people have been dropping things off to one another and dropping things off for neighbors. So I do think that it’s intertwined. I think that digital connections have fostered some of the old-fashioned connections as well.”