

America

Will they return?

Millions 'skip' church during the pandemic

WALDOBORO, Maine, June 29, (AP): With millions of people having stayed home from places of worship during the coronavirus pandemic, struggling congregations have one key question: How many of them will return?

As the pandemic recedes in the United States and in-person services resume, worries of a deepening slide in attendance are universal.

Some houses of worship won't make it. Smaller organizations with older congregations that struggled to adapt during the pandemic are in the greatest danger of a downward spiral from which they can't recover, said the Rev. Gloria E. White-Hammond, lecturer at the Harvard Divinity School and co-pastor of a church in Boston.

On the Maine coast, the pandemic proved to be the last straw for the 164-year-old Waldoboro United Methodist Church.

Even before COVID-19 swept the world, weekly attendance had dipped to 25 or 30 at the white-clapboard New England church that could hold several hundred worshippers. The number further dwindled to five or six before the final service was held Sunday, said the Rev. Gregory Foster.

The remaining congregants realized they couldn't continue to maintain the structure, and decided to fold the tent, Foster said.

"We can't entirely blame everything on COVID. But that was just the final blow. Some people have not been back at all," he said.

In Virginia, the Mount Clifton United Methodist Church experienced a similar fate. The church can seat more than 100 but the number of weekly worshippers dwindled to 10 to 15, even before the pandemic.

The small white church built on a hill in the Shenandoah Valley in the 1880s may be rented to another congregation, or it may be put up for sale.

"It's a complicated picture overall, but the pandemic was the straw that broke the camel's back," said the Rev. Darlene Wilkins, who oversaw Mount Clifton. "It just became next to impossible to sustain."

Challenge

In the United States, the latest challenge for places of worship comes against a backdrop of a decades-long trend of a smaller share of the population identifying as religious.

It's too early to know the full impact of the pandemic. Surveys do show signs of hopefulness - and also cause for concern.

About three-quarters of Americans who attended religious services in person at least monthly before the pandemic say they are likely to do so again in the next few weeks, according to a recent AP-NORC poll. That's up slightly from the about two-thirds who said in May 2020 that they would if they were allowed to do so. But 7% said they definitely won't be attending.

Those findings are in line with a Pew Research Center survey of U.S. residents last summer. It found that 92% of people who regularly attend religious services expected to continue at the same or higher rate, while 7% say they will attend in-person services less often.

Nashville, Tennessee-based Lifeway Research, an evangelical research firm, says many churches lost steam when in-person services shut down. A small but concerning number churchgoers are coming out of the pandemic in limbo without a church home, said Scott McConnell, Lifeway's executive director.

"That's a lot of momentum to lose and a lot of people stepping out of the habit" of weekly worship, McConnell said.

Those that are successful in reemerging from the COVID-19 lockdowns will likely be those that did a better job adapting to the pandemic, said White-Hammond. Eight in 10 congregants in the U.S. reported that their services were being streamed online, Pew said.

Those that kept a connection with congregants and relied less on the physical passing of the plate for donations stand a better chance of emerging unscathed, White-Hammond said.

In Charlotte, North Carolina, Temple Beth El was closed during the pandemic but kept congregants in touch through events like "challah day." Volunteers baked over 900 loaves of the bread, which were delivered to homes so worshippers could share them over a Shabbat meal.

There will be no returning to "normal" after the pandemic, said Rabbi Dusty Klass. "There were people who went home and may never come back to the sanctuary. They may just pray from their couch. It's up to us to make sure they have the opportunity."

Locations

The All Dulles Area Muslim Society, whose main campus is in Sterling, Virginia, said some of its 11 locations have reopened to worshippers with safety measures.

"If COVID is gone 100%, I firmly believe our community would be fully back because people crave ... to be together," said Rizwan Jaka, chair of interfaith and media relations.

In San Francisco, the historic Old St. Mary's Cathedral survived when members rebuilt after a fire following the 1906 earthquake but it has struggled mightily during the pandemic to stay open.

The 160-year-old Roman Catholic church, which is heavily dependent on older worshippers and tourists, lost most of its revenue after parishes closed during the pandemic. During those "dark hours," the Rev. John Ardis had to dismiss most of the lay staff, cut the salary of a priest and close the parish preschool.

The plaster is crumbling, the paint is peeling off the walls and dozens of its stained-glass windows need to be replaced.

"But those are secondary at the moment," Ardis said. "Because I'm just basically trying to try to keep the doors open."

Here in New England, any slide could be more acute since a smaller proportion of residents identify as religious.

In Maine, Judy Grant, 77, was a newcomer to Waldoboro who started watching the services online and then began attending in person.

She's upset by the closure.

"I'm extremely disappointed," she said. "A lot of churches are closing. I think COVID had a big part in this latest shrinkage, but they were shrinking even before that," she said.

The final service on Sunday was emotional, with both smiles and tears, as nearly 60 gathered in the sanctuary. Foster preached about new beginnings and encouraged people to continue their faith.

Afterward, people began removing some of the church's contents, including religious paintings, some furniture, and other items.

Grant said many hope the building will come alive again with a new congregation: "We have to be positive - and pray."



Hammond

Biden to visit Florida building collapse on Thursday

Florida condo search stretches to Day 6

SURFSIDE, Florida, June 29, (AP): The slow work of sifting through the remnants of a collapsed Florida condo building stretched into a sixth day Tuesday, as families desperate for progress endured a wrenching wait for answers.

"We have people waiting and waiting and waiting for news," Miami-Dade Mayor Daniella Levine Cava told reporters. "We have them coping with the news that they might not have their loved ones come out alive and still hope against hope that they will. They're learning that some of their loved ones will come out as body parts. This is the kind of information that is just excruciating for everyone."

The work has been deliberate and treacherous. Thunderstorms rolled through the area Tuesday morning, and debris fell onto the search area overnight from the shattered edge of the part of the building that still stands. That forced rescuers to mark a "don't go beyond here" line and focus their efforts parts of the debris pile that are farther from the structure, Surfside Mayor Charles Burkett told Miami television station WSVN.

Also Tuesday, the White House announced that President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden would travel to Surfside on Thursday.

Just two additional bodies were found Monday, raising the count of confirmed dead to 11. That leaves 150 people still unaccounted for in the community just outside Miami.

Authorities meet frequently with families to explain what they're doing and to answer questions. They have discussed how DNA matches are made to help identify the dead, how next-of-kin will be contacted and explained in "extreme detail" how they are searching the mound, the mayor said.

With that knowledge, she said, families are coming to their own conclusions. "Some are feeling more hopeful, some less hopeful, because we do not have definitive answers. We give them the facts. We take them to the site," she said. "They have seen the operation. They understand now how it works, and they are preparing themselves for news, one way or the other."

Rescuers are using bucket brigades and heavy machinery as they work atop a precarious mound of pulverized concrete, twisted steel and the remnants of dozens of households. The efforts include firefighters, sniffer dogs and search experts using radar and sonar devices.

Authorities said it's still a search-and-rescue operation, but no one has been found alive since hours after the collapse on Thursday.

The pancake collapse of the building

left layer upon layer of intertwined debris, frustrating efforts to reach anyone who may have survived in a pocket of space.

"Every time there's an action, there's a reaction," Miami-Dade Assistant Fire Chief Raide Jadallah said Monday during a news conference. "It's not an issue of we could just attach a couple of cords to a concrete boulder and lift it and call it a day." Some of the concrete pieces are smaller, the size of basketballs or baseballs.

Excavate

From outside a neighboring building on Monday, more than two dozen family members watched teams of searchers excavate the building site. Some held onto each other for support. Others hugged and prayed. Some people took photos.

Authorities insisted they are not losing hope. Deciding to transition from search-and-rescue work to a recovery operation is agonizing, said Dr. Joseph A. Barbera, a professor at George Washington University. That decision is fraught with considerations, he said, that only those on the ground can make.

Barbera coauthored a study examining disasters where some people survived under rubble for prolonged periods of time. He has also advised teams on where to look for po-

tential survivors and when to conclude "that the probability of continued survival is very, very small."

"It's an incredibly difficult decision, and I've never had to make that decision," Barbera said.

The building collapsed just days before a deadline for condo owners to start making steep payments toward more than \$9 million in repairs that had been recommended nearly three years earlier, in a report that warned of "major structural damage."

Meanwhile, President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden will travel to Surfside, Florida, on Thursday to visit with the families of victims of the collapsed Miami-area condominium tower, the White House said.

Biden has offered federal help and extended his concerns to the community as people "grieve their lost loved ones and wait anxiously as search and rescue efforts continue," as he said in one tweet.

"They want to thank the heroic first responders, search and rescue teams, and everyone who has been working tirelessly around the clock and meet with the families who have been forced to endure this terrible tragedy waiting in anguish and heartbreak for word of their loved ones," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said

News in Brief

**'Thank you, Benedict':** Pope Francis on Tuesday offered an affectionate, public thank-you to Benedict XVI, whose retirement from the papacy in 2013 shocked the Roman Catholic Church and the world.

Addressing tourists and Romans in St. Peter's Square, Francis triggered applause when he recalled that it was the 70th anniversary of Benedict's ordination to the priesthood in his native Germany.

Joseph Ratzinger later became a powerful Vatican official as the church's official guardian of doctrinal orthodoxy. Then, in 2005, Ratzinger was elected by fellow cardinals as pontiff and chose the name Benedict XVI. He announced in February 2013 his decision to retire two weeks later, the first pontiff to resign in 600 years.

Benedict, now 94 and frail, is devoting his remaining years to prayer in a monastery in Vatican City. Francis said: "To you, Benedict, dear father and brother, goes our affection, our gratitude and our closeness." (AP)

**Supreme Court says no:** The Supreme Court ruled Tuesday that the government can indefinitely detain certain immigrants who say they will face persecution or torture if they are deported to their native countries.

Over the dissent of three liberal justices, the court held 6-3 that the immigrants are not entitled to a hearing about whether they should be released while the government evaluates their claims.

Justice Samuel Alito wrote for the court that "those aliens are not entitled to a bond hearing."

The case involves people who had been previously deported and, when detained after re-entering the United States illegally, claimed that they would be persecuted or tortured if sent back. One man is a citizen of El Salvador who said he was immediately threatened by a gang after being deported from the U.S. (AP)

**Russian jets flew low:** Russian fighter jets repeatedly flew low over a Dutch navy frigate in the Black Sea last week and carried out "mock attacks," the Defense Ministry of the Netherlands said Tuesday.

The incident involving the Dutch ship Zr. Ms. Evertsen happened last Thursday southeast of Crimea, the ministry said in a statement.

It came a day after after Russia said one of its warships in the Black Sea fired warning shots and a warplane dropped bombs to force a British destroyer out of an area near Crimea that Russia claims as its territorial waters. Britain denied that account and insisted its ship wasn't fired upon.

The Evertsen has been patrolling in the Black Sea with HMS Defender, the British ship that was involved in that incident.

Defense Minister Minister Ank Bijleveld-Schouten called the Russian actions "irresponsible." (AP)

**Boaters watch collapse:** A cliff wall broke away at a national park along Lake Superior in northern Michigan, stunning some boaters who captured it on video.

Sandstone and dirt crashed into the lake Saturday at Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The park's cliffs are 50 feet to 200 feet (15.2 meters to 60.9 meters) above the lake.

"We could hear the cliff wall popping and cracking and within 60 seconds a section of cliff approximately 200 feet wide fell before us," Jahn Martin told WLUC-TV.

"The splash and swell wave were very dramatic," Martin shared his video with the TV station.

"Back up, Brad!" someone yelled as waves rolled toward the pontoon-style boat. (AP)

No injuries were reported. No one at the park could immediately be reached for comment Tuesday, though the park's website warns that rocks can fall at any time and shows a photo of rocks falling. (AP)

Alshaya Group celebrates the launch of 100 eCommerce sites and apps across MENA

Alshaya's ongoing digital transformation marks a milestone



As customers in the Middle East become increasingly digital-first, Alshaya Group this week celebrated the 'go live' of its 100th online trading site and app across the MENA region with the launch of new apps for American Eagle + Aerie in Egypt and Qatar.

Recognised as one of the leading retailers of international brands in the region, Alshaya has massively accelerated its digital roll-out over the last year as it responds to a permanent shift in customer shopping habits. Today Alshaya has the largest eCommerce footprint in the region complementing its portfolio of thousands of stores, cafes, restaurants and leisure destinations.

Alshaya customers can now find more and more of their favourite brands online in markets across the GCC, as well as in Egypt; brands including American Eagle, BBW, Boots, Foot Locker, H&M, Mothercare, Muji, Pottery Barn, West Elm and Victoria's Secret. Further sites and apps are in the pipeline. Details of all live sites can be found in the Customer Zone on www.alshaya.com.

Commenting on the pace of Alshaya's digital transformation, Paul Morris, Chief Digital Officer, Alshaya Group said: "Customers, particularly the under-30 mobile-first generation, have embraced new ways to shop. We have worked hard to meet their needs by bringing their favourite brands to their fingertips through a rapidly growing number of sites and apps. It's clear when we look at performance that we are delivering what customers want - some of our sites are already accounting for over 30% of total brand sales.

As we continue to grow our digital footprint across MENA we are focused on offering choice and making the shopping experience as effortless as possible, regardless of whether customers want to shop in store, online, or a mixture of both. It has been really exciting to deliver this change in recent months, thanks to the amazing teamwork of Alshaya colleagues."

Alshaya's digital expansion responds to an overall shift to online shopping across the region, which has been turbo-charged in the last 12 months as customers looked for new ways to shop their favourite brands during Covid-19 lockdown. Data varies, but overall digital retail purchases in MENA have increased by over 35% compared to a year ago, with consumers in KSA, Egypt and the UAE leading the charge.

Huawei Kuwait cooperates with MoH to hold vaccination drive for its employees



As part of its commitment to support the government's efforts to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic, Huawei, a leading global provider of information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure and smart devices, has joined forces with the Ministry of Health in Kuwait to hold a vaccination drive for its employees.

Rico Lin, CEO, Huawei Kuwait said: "We would like to extend our gratitude to the Ministry of Health in Kuwait. They have supported us to ensure the success of this vaccination

drive and are playing an important role in protecting our employees as well as Kuwait's society as a whole, in line with the government's efforts to preserve the health and safety of this nation. Together, we will overcome the effects of the pandemic

towards a stronger community."

Huawei has held strong in the face of adversity and kept innovating to create value, help fight the pandemic, and support both economic recovery and social progress. Since the very

early days of the pandemic, Huawei has been working closely with the local governments, customers and partners to respond effectively to the widespread pandemic and protect the health and safety of all the people and employees.

