

# Returning to the Pews: A Case Study of Mass Attendance Following Covid-19 at St. Paul the Apostle, Lyford Cay, The Bahamas

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## Abstract

Following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic on the March 15, 2020, public worship was prohibited in The Bahamas on March 18, 2020. Using weekly Mass attendance figures at a Roman Catholic church serving western New Providence, The Bahamas for the period October 18, 2020 to June 11, 2023, this paper shows the steady rebound in the number of people attending Mass. Despite the stress and loss of life caused by COVID-19, the data indicate the willingness of worshippers to return to communal worship.

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## Introduction

### Religious Landscape in The Bahamas

There is no clear separation between church and state in The Bahamas as found most places in the Western world. One Bahamian prime minister has even stated that the two should not be separate (“PM wants no separation of church and state”, 2013). Further, Bahamian politicians regularly make religious references in their speeches in the House of Assembly (Davis, 2024). This would seem to acknowledge the influence that religion and therefore their church leaders have on influencing public opinion. However, this has not stopped civil leaders from disregarding the opinion of church leaders in their legislative agenda, as was evident in the legalisation of previously unregulated gambling establishments (colloquially known as webshops; “Bahamas gambling referendum rejected”, 2013; Gaming Act, 2014). The wider religious

landscape in The Bahamas is summarised by a U.S. State Department report (U.S. Department of State, 2022), which indicates that there is a high degree of religious freedom in The Bahamas, despite the uneasy relationship between church and state.

Overall, the Roman Catholic population in The Bahamas is not relatively large, comprising 12% of the population in 2010 (Bahamas Department of Statistics, 2012). However, what should be noted is that its members are doctrinally encouraged to participate in weekly communal worship in the celebration of the Eucharist, otherwise known as the Mass. In this respect, it makes a useful case study to assess the effects of the COVID-19 restrictions, and what lasting effects they may have had on attendance at religious services.

## The COVID-19 Pandemic in The Bahamas

On March 15, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 in The Bahamas was reported (Bahamas Information Services, 2020) and on May 5, 2023 the World Health Organization declared the pandemic over (United Nations, 2023). In 2020, the Bahamas Government moved swiftly to lock down the country in an attempt to slow the spread of the virus (Emergency

Powers [COVID 19][No. 1], 2020). The restrictions included the closure of churches on the March 18, 2020 (“Churches to temporarily close”, 2020). The number of cases remained low until travel restrictions were eased in July (Lynden Pindling International Airport, 2020), which allowed the virus to be imported and trigger additional and more severe waves, see Figure 1. Once established, further waves of infection occurred.

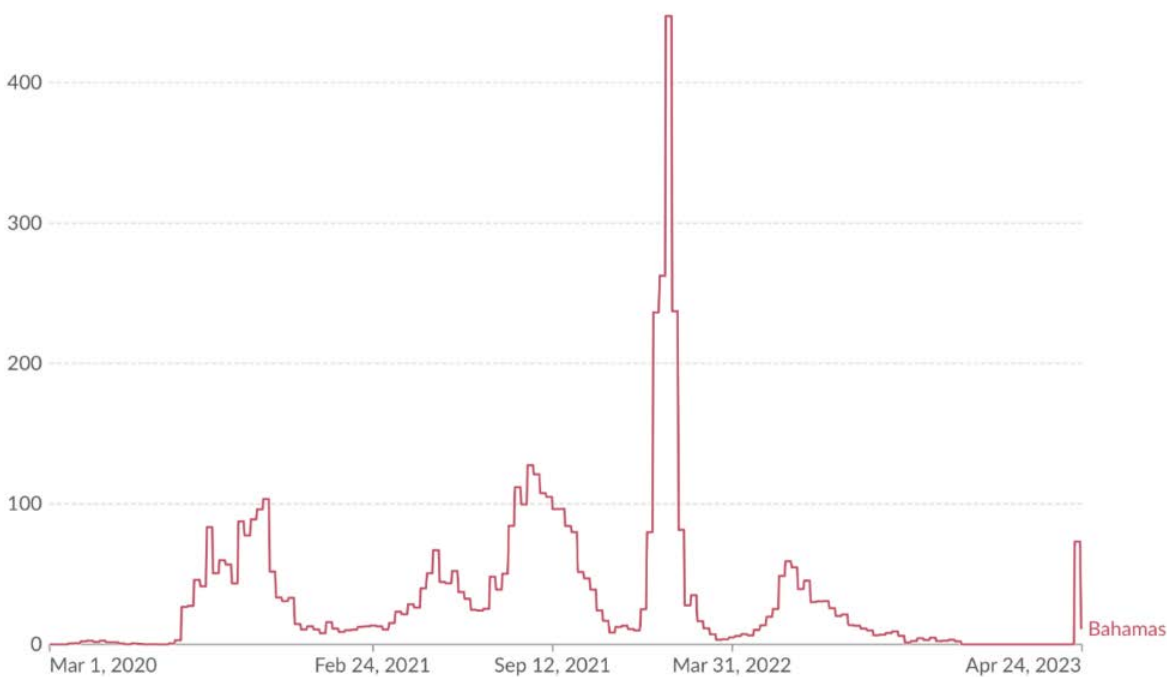
### Figure 1

#### Seven-day Moving Average of New COVID-19 Cases

#### Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases

7-day rolling average. Due to limited testing, the number of confirmed cases is lower than the true number of infections.

Our World  
in Data



Data source: WHO COVID-19 Dashboard

CC BY

*Note:* Mathieu et al., 2020.

Figure 2 shows the changes in restrictions imposed by civil authorities. These changes demonstrate how from July 2020, there was a gradual lifting of the original restrictions. These included the reopening of churches with restrictions. Some of these related to the

seating arrangements (such as, six feet between each person, the wearing of masks, and the length of services and when they could be held, initially only on Sundays; Smith-Cartwright, 2020).

## Figure 2

### COVID-19 Stringency Index, The Bahamas.

The stringency index is a composite measure based on nine response indicators including school closures, workplace closures, and travel bans, rescaled to a value from 0 to 100 (100 = strictest).



Data source: Hale, T., Angrist, N., Goldszmidt, R. et al. A global panel database of pandemic policies (Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker). *Nat Hum Behav* 5, 529–538 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01079-8>  
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The restrictions imposed by the civil authorities on regular worship services (“Churches to temporarily close”, 2020), although ultimately accepted by congregational leaders, caused controversy (Ward, 2020) throughout the period of their closure (“PM urged to open doors on churches”, 2020). As far as the author is aware, March 2020 was the first time in the history of The Bahamas that the state had forced churches to be closed (with some exceptions) and so brought into focus the tension between church and state, and perceived boundaries of the authority of civil leaders.

From September 2, 2020, indoor church services were permitted (Emergency Powers [Covid 19 Pandemic][No. 4] Order, 2020; Saint Francis Xavier Cathedral. 2020a). However, Archbishop Pinder still imposed

these restrictions:

- Each parishioner should wear a cloth mask.
- Hand sanitizers should be made available near the entrance of the church.
- The number of persons permitted inside the church at one time must be limited to ensure that the requirements of social distancing can be achieved.
- Pews should be roped off to allow for physical distancing.
- The Priest and other ministers of the altar should remain six feet apart at all times.
- Parishes should have the proper signage to indicate where people are to stand for communion to ensure proper spacing between individuals.
- Parishes should have the maximum fresh air circulating in the building during

worship. Air-conditioning should not be used at this time.

- Doors should be propped open to avoid frequent handling of doorknobs.
- The verbal exchange at the reception of Communion should take place six feet away from the Minister of Communion. (Saint Francis Xavier Cathedral, 2020b)

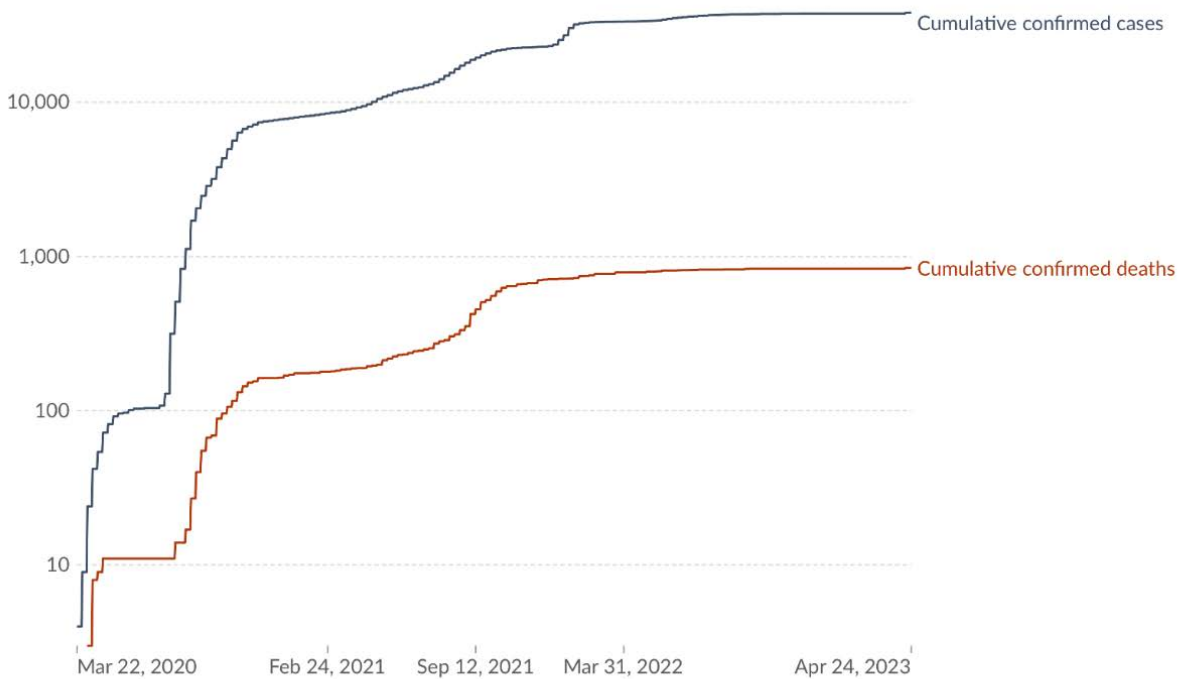
In 2021, COVID-19 was the leading cause of death in The Bahamas (Figure 3). The fear of catching COVID-19 was real, and so

influenced people’s behaviour, including attendance at Mass. During this period, the requirement to attend Sunday mass was suspended by the Archbishop and people were encouraged to participate in live-streamed masses (Saint Francis Xavier Cathedral, 2020b). As vaccinations became available in 2021 (Figure 4), more liberal restrictions were imposed on vaccinated compared to unvaccinated persons (Figure 2).

**Figure 3**

*Cumulative Totals of COVID-19 Cases and Deaths.*

Limited testing and challenges in the attribution of cause of death mean the confirmed case and death counts may not reflect the true counts.



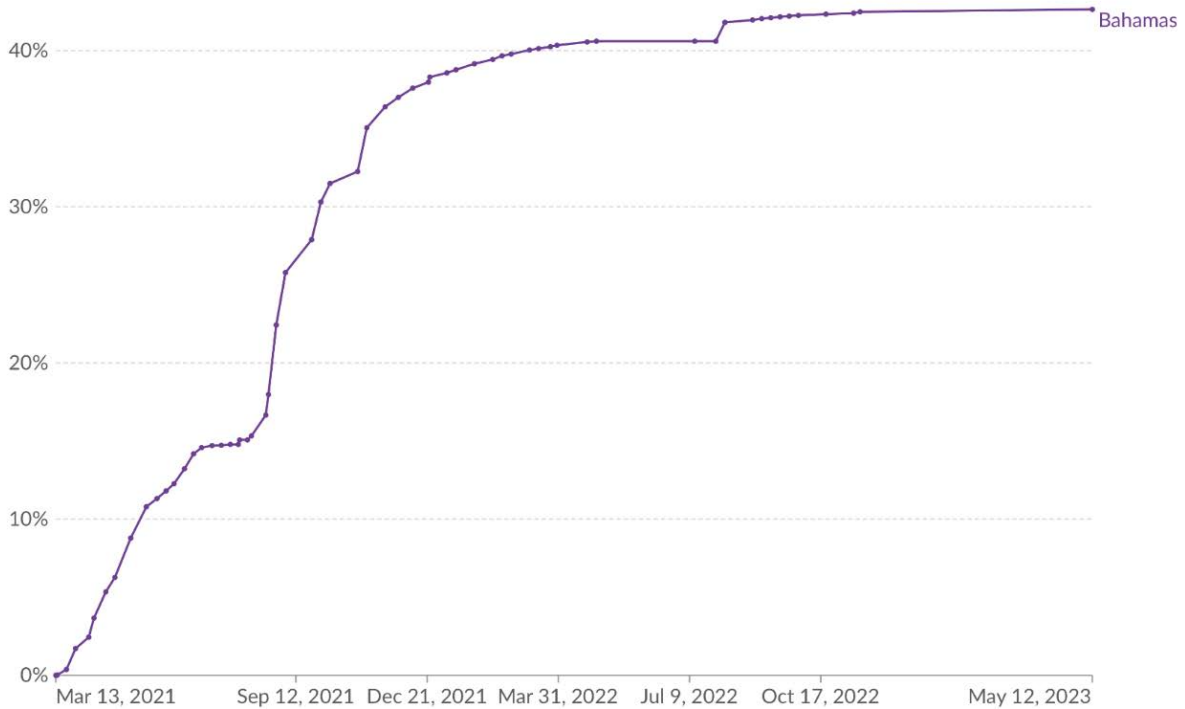
Data source: WHO COVID-19 Dashboard

[OurWorldInData.org/coronavirus](https://OurWorldInData.org/coronavirus) | CC BY

**Figure 4**

**Cumulative Percentage of Persons Receiving a Dose of COVID-19 vaccine**

Total number of people who received at least one vaccine dose, divided by the total population of the country.



Data source: Official data collated by Our World in Data – Last updated 8 March 2024 [OurWorldInData.org/coronavirus](https://OurWorldInData.org/coronavirus) | CC BY

While the World Health Organization declared the pandemic over on the May 5, 2023, no such declaration appears to have been made in The Bahamas, and in January 2024, the Ministry of Health and Wellness was still issuing information on COVID-19 related deaths (McKenzie, 2024).

**St Paul’s**

The architectural design of St. Paul the Apostle church (for an overview see Fielding, 2020) has been shown to be ideal to conform with the restrictions imposed on liturgical services during the pandemic, in particular having doors along the length of the nave which when opened allow fresh air to ventilate the building. In addition to erecting a tent over the plaza and having seating on the lawns around the church, speakers were placed around the outside of the church. This

allowed those sitting outside, who outnumbered those inside the church, to still participate in Mass.

**Attendance, 2020-2023**

From October 16, 2020, ushers at St. Paul’s commenced counting the number of people attending weekend Masses. We should note that many parishioners did not actually enter the church itself, consistent with the social distancing rule (and Holy Communion was taken to those outside the church to avoid this requirement being broken). This posed difficulties in obtaining an accurate count of the congregation, due to the lack of a single entrance to the church, so the figures recorded may be subject to errors.

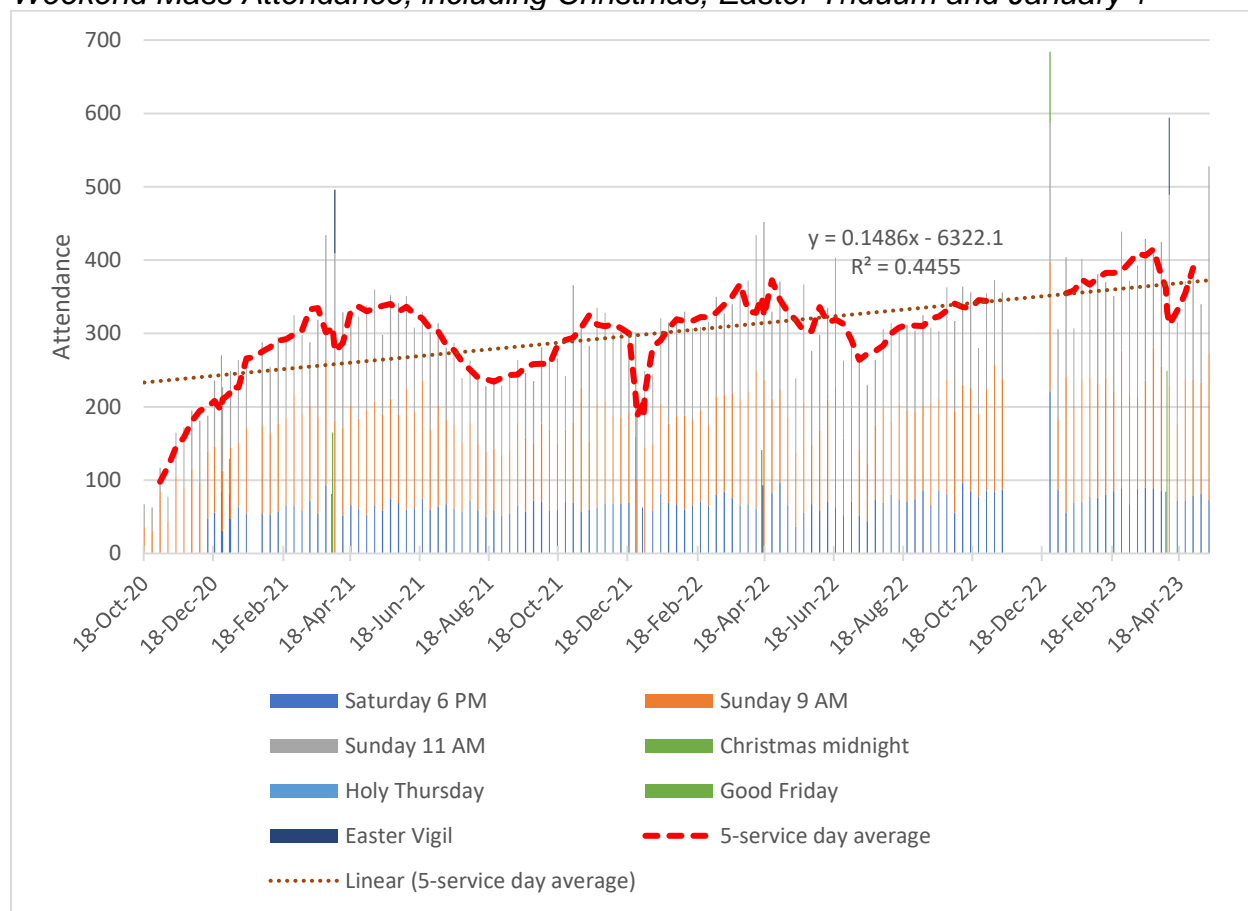
Among the diverse constituents that St. Paul’s serves, there are two distinct

populations. It serves a resident population that attends Mass throughout the year and it also serves a transient population of “winter residents”. The first group can be expected to take their vacation (and so be absent from Mass) during the summer months when both schools and the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine teaching of the Catholic faith (colloquially known as Sunday School) are not in session. Winter residents typically arrive from October and leave after Easter. Therefore, there is a clear seasonality in the composition of the parish. Further, attendance is typically higher at Christmas

and Easter due to holiday visitors and the festive nature of these celebrations. Due to St. Paul’s Church being able to open its louvered doors along the nave, and the seating provided outside of the church (not all of which was tented) some of the congregation was somewhat at the mercy of the weather, particularly rain and wind. Consequently, the weather adds another source of less predictable variability in Mass attendance. These sources of variability, among others, influence the counts displayed in Figure 5.

**Figure 5**

*Weekend Mass Attendance, including Christmas, Easter Triduum and January 1*



*Notes:* Some data were lost which accounts for the gap in the fall of 2022. January 1 is a Holy Day of Obligation for Catholics in The Bahamas (not plotted separately)

In order to show the underlying trend in attendance a 5-service moving average was plotted (Figure 5). This is based upon the weekend totals, where the Saturday Virgil Mass (6 pm) is included in the Sunday total (typically two Masses, at 9 am and 11 am), and other major liturgies, such as Christmas and Easter. The linear regression line enables us to appreciate that there was no flattening off in attendance during the period under consideration.

Figure 5 shows a shallow but consistent recovery in the attendance from the start of the period under consideration. The fact that the moving-average had not stabilised, by the

time counting ceased, indicates that the attendance had not fully recovered despite the stabilisation in the number of Covid-19 cases and deaths (Figure 3) and restrictions (Figure 2).

**Discussion**

The Chancery Office was able to provide historical data on the maximum and minimum number of people attending weekend masses. These numbers are clearly estimates as they are rounded to the nearest 100 persons and are the same for a number of years, as can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Total Number of People Attending Weekend Masses at St. Paul’s, 2015-2023.*

Weekends (omitting Christmas and Easter, January 1st)					
Years	2015-2019*	2020	2021	2022	2023
Minimum	500	63	129	141	249
Maximum	700	236	434	452	528

*Note:* \*Provided by the Chancery Office. Observed data were only available for part of 2020 and 2023. January 1, the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, is a Holy Day of Obligation in The Bahamas.

The maximum and minimum numbers provided by the Chancery Office for the period 2020 to 2023 were also the same, namely 500-700. Consequently, little credence can be given to the official figures, particularly the 2020/21 figures when restrictions were most severe (Figure 2). Therefore, it is not possible to determine with confidence if the 2023 attendance has indeed returned to pre-pandemic levels. What is evident is that the attendance at St. Paul’s has been increasing since the church reopened in 2020. If we assume that the historical figures from the Chancery Office are correct, we can see that the most recent figures are still below the pre-pandemic figures. A 2014 survey

indicated that religion was less important to younger than to older residents of The Bahamas (Fielding, 2015), so this might be translating into lower Mass attendance. Why religion is of less interest to younger people would be a useful topic for future research and may suggest that broader influences are contributing to declining Mass attendance in The Bahamas as elsewhere (see, for example, Jones, 2024).

Despite the fear and stress caused by COVID-19 (Hutcheson et al., 2020), the data from St. Paul’s indicates resilience in the face of adversity, through the number of people attending Mass during the pandemic. This

suggests that despite fears for personal safety, the need for communal worship was important to parishioners. However, the long-term negative effects on Mass attendance cannot be ignored, as the attendance numbers continued to increase during the study period. It remains to be seen, when and at what level, the figures will stabilise.

## Acknowledgements

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