



THE STATE OF THE CHURCH: YOU'RE NOT ALONE

RESEARCH FINDINGS

 **AMPLIFY** MEDIA

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The United Methodist Publishing House (UMPH) leadership team commissioned the team at 5by5 research to conduct online research to provide insights and data to better understand the current state of the church as it relates to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis.

QUANTITATIVE ONLINE SURVEY

The research team (5by5 and UMPH) collaborated to develop a survey instrument to gather insights from church leaders in the week leading up to Holy Week. The survey was deployed using a combination of social media posts and emails to various lists by UMPH and 5by5. A sample size of more than 1,000 church leaders was achieved. This size was substantial enough to allow for analysis by sub-groups (such as age, geography, church size, etc.).

The statistical validity of the quantitative surveys is illustrated in the following table:

Estimated Population	Completed Survey Sample Size	Margin of Error	Confidence Level	Assumed Response Distribution
1,000,000+ Church Pastors and Leaders	1,070	+/- 2.99%	95%	50/50



GENERAL FINDINGS

Respondents' Roles

The majority of respondents are paid staff at their church.

- Half (49.16%) of respondents say they are a full-time pastor or minister.
- Nearly one-in-five (17.94%) are a part-time pastor or minister.
- Nearly one-in-ten (6.92%) are full-time staff.
- Less than one-in-ten (5.51%) are part-time staff.
- One-in-five (20.47%) are volunteer lay leaders/program leaders. (See Q1, Q2)

The most pressing roles leaders identify at this point are related to providing worship alternatives, maintaining community/communication and providing care to meet the needs of their people.

- Nearly three-quarters (71.12%) of respondents say one of their most pressing roles or functional needs during this crisis is providing alternative worship experiences in place of face-to-face meetings.
- Nearly seven-in-ten (69.16%) respondents say maintaining community/helping people stay connected is one of their most pressing roles at this time.
- More than six-in-ten (61.03%) respondents say one of their most pressing roles is communicating with their congregation.
- Six-in-ten (60.65%) say one of their most pressing roles at this time is providing care to meet the pastoral needs of their people. (See Q3)

Digital Alternatives

The majority of churches are offering a digital alternative to in-person worship, and most did not before the crisis.

- Nine-in-ten (89.16%) churches say they are offering a digital alternative to in-person worship.
- Most individuals say they are providing an alternative via Facebook livestream (53.56%), recording and uploading services to their church website (40.99%) and/or recording and uploading services somewhere online (40.15%).
- Nearly two-thirds (65.09%) of respondents say they did not provide a digital worship option before the crisis.
- Most of the churches not offering a digital alternative say they are not doing so because their members are not online (76.07%), the technology is not available (51.28%) and/or due to pastor/staff technology concerns (25.64%). (See Q4, Q5, Q6, Q7)



GENERAL FINDINGS

Effectiveness of Digital Alternatives

Those who are providing a digital alternative to worship generally believe their efforts are somewhat effective.

- When asked to rate the effectiveness of their current efforts on a 5-point scale, respondents gave a mean rating of 3.74.
- Just a few (5.66%) respondents rated their efforts net ineffective (1+2).
- Nearly one-third (31.55%) gave a neutral rating (3).
- Nearly two-thirds (62.79%) gave a net effective rating (4+5). (See Q8)

Those who view their efforts as effective do so because they are reaching people, communicating and getting positive feedback.

- When asked what they think makes their efforts effective, nearly one-quarter (22.38%) of those who rated their efforts a 4 or 5 gave a response categorized as “number of views/reaching new people.”
- Nearly one-in-five (17.05%) gave a response categorized as “outreach/communication.”
- More than one-in-ten (12.97%) gave a response categorized as “positive feedback.” (See Q9)

Those who don’t think their efforts are effective say digital tools/training, help communicating to the disconnected and increasing their reach/retention could help them be more effective.

- Nearly half (49.18%) of those who rated their current efforts a 1, 2 or 3 gave a response categorized as “digital/tech tools and training” when asked what could help them be more effective.
- Nearly one-in-five (18.69%) gave a response categorized as “help communicating to/helping older and less connected.”
- One-in-ten (10.16%) gave a response categorized as “increase reach and retention.” (See Q10)



GENERAL FINDINGS

Digital Worship Alternatives

Most respondents see their church continuing to offer a digital option for worship when gathering in-person for worship can resume.

- More than eight-in-ten (84.70%) respondents say they see their church continuing to offer a digital option for worship when gathering in-person for worship can resume.
- Those who do not see their church continuing to offer a digital option gave responses categorized as “lack of interaction and community” (29.13%), “serving and reaching elderly/disconnected” (24.41%) and “music/copyright issues” (18.11%) when asked why. (See Q11, Q12)

Digital Small Groups & Sunday School

When it comes to Bible study, small groups and Sunday school, churches are split in their approach.

- Half (50.93%) of churches say they have moved to virtual adult small groups and Bible study.
- Two-in-five (40.37%) churches have suspended small groups, Bible study and Sunday school for now.
- Nearly one-in-five (18.88%) are offering virtual Sunday school for adults.
- Nearly one-in-five (17.76%) are offering virtual Sunday school for children. (See Q13)

Financial Anxiety

Respondents are not very confident that giving during this crisis will be sufficient to meet the financial needs of their churches.

- When asked to rate their confidence that giving during this crisis will be sufficient to meet the financial needs of their churches, respondents gave a mean rating of 2.87.
- One-third (33.92%) of respondents gave a net unconfident rating of 1 or 2.
- Two-in-five (40.28%) gave a neutral rating of 3.
- One-quarter (25.79%) gave a confident rating of 4 or 5. (See Q15)



GENERAL FINDINGS

Most Significant Impacts of Crisis on the Church

Respondents believe the most significant impacts of the crisis on churches will be financial/economic, impacts on attendance and impacts on community.

- When asked what they envision will be the most significant impacts of the crisis on churches nearly half (44.04%) of respondents gave an answer categorized as “financial/economic impacts.”
- Nearly one-in-five (18.84%) mentioned “impact on attendance/membership.”
- More than one-in-ten (13.38%) mentioned “impact on community connection/outreach.” (See Q16)

“New Normal” Post-Crisis

Respondents believe their increased digital presence and communications will remain as part of their “new normal” moving forward.

- When asked what they have learned or changed in the past few weeks that might remain as part of their “new normal” moving forward, more than two-in-five (42.40%) gave an answer categorized as “increased digital presence.”
- One-quarter (25.17%) gave an answer categorized as “increased communication/check-ins.”
- Nearly one-in-ten (6.92%) gave an answer categorized as “unsure/too soon to tell.” (See Q17)

Equipping Disciples and Continuing to “be the Church”

Respondents envision technology and increased communications will equip them to continue to “be the church” once the crisis has passed.

- When asked how they are finding creative ways to equip disciples, one-third (32.86%) gave an answer categorized as “more integration with technology.”
- One-quarter (24.58%) gave a response categorized as “more check-ins and communication.”
- More than one-in-ten (13.97%) say they are “unsure/don’t know yet.” (See Q18)



GENERAL FINDINGS

Demographics

Most respondents are over the age of 50.

- One-in-ten (9.82%) respondents are under the age of 40.
- One-in-ten (11.78%) are ages 40-49.
- One-quarter (24.02%) are ages 50-59.
- Two-in-five (38.22%) are ages 60-69.
- Nearly one-in-five (16.17%) are 70 years and older. (See Q19)

Most respondents say the average worship attendance at their church is 100 or less.

- More than half (54.11%) of respondents say the average worship attendance at their church is 100 or less.
- One-in-five (20.00%) say the average worship attendance at their church is 101 to 200.
- One-in-ten (12.80%) say the average worship attendance at their church is 201 to 350.
- One-in-ten (13.08%) say the average worship attendance at their church is more than 350. (See Q20)

The majority of respondents serve a United Methodist church.

- More than two-thirds (68.04%) of respondents serve a United Methodist church.
- Nearly one-in-ten (6.26%) serve a Presbyterian Church (USA). (See Q21)

KEY FINDINGS

The crisis has forced church leaders to deal with and embrace a new reality in four key areas of focus: worship, community, communication and care. An urgent focus on these has put other normally important areas effectively on hold.

- At the outset of the research, the pastors and leaders surveyed were asked to identify their top five most pressing roles or functional needs during this crisis. They were provided with a list of 13 areas where they might be focused.
- Four areas stood out considerably as those requiring leaders' focus and attention. In fact, they were identified twice as frequently as any of the others on the list. It is clear these four needs are driving their priorities, how they spend their time and use available resources during this crisis. This new reality has dramatically impacted what these leaders are doing every day as the crisis continues. (See Q3)

1. Alternative Worship Experiences

- When presented with the 13 possible areas of need, leaders reported they are focused on “providing alternative worship experiences (in place of face-to-face meetings)” more than any other task area. Seven-in-ten (71.12%) leaders say this has been their most pressing area of need.
- Weekly worship has always been a major priority for churches. Research with pastors and other church leaders reveals that much of their energy is spent focused on these times when the entire church gathers. However, their focus now has gone from typical worship planning to making sure it is even possible for their people to experience some form of “corporate worship.”

2. Maintaining Community and Connection

- Without the capacity to meet in person, leaders are understandably concerned about the need for their people to stay connected. “Maintaining community/helping people stay connected” is a significant concern for more than two-thirds (69.16%) of the leaders surveyed; it was ranked number two from the list of 13 potential needs.
- Obviously community involves people connecting in relationships, and this has always been important to those who lead churches. UMPH-sponsored research conducted over the past two years with pastors and other leaders has confirmed this again and again. With the recent downward trends in attendance consistency and the rise of social media and digital avenues, connection and community have changed for churches and become more challenging than ever. It is not surprising that leaders, whose people are being asked to maintain a safe social distance from others, are concerned that the sense of connection and community in their church will be adversely impacted.

KEY FINDINGS

3. Communicating with the Congregation

Communication has generally been a subject pastors and church leaders reference frequently when discussing challenges. In this crisis, the third-most referenced area of need is “communicating with my congregation.” Six-in-ten (61.03%) leaders identify this as one of the critical areas on which they are focused in the crisis.

- Sunday service and other regular gatherings are natural opportunities for pastors and leaders to communicate with their people. In this crisis, the challenge of not gathering exacerbates the ongoing challenge of communicating.
- Communication is especially challenging for churches in which congregants are older and not accustomed to using technology. The following are comments from leaders whose alternative worship is not working well -- coded as “help communicating to/helping older & less connected” -- that clarify this issue: (See Q11)
 - Finding a way to communicate effectively in a simple way for older adults and/or those who are not tech savvy or who don’t have internet access.
 - Something senior citizens could access easily and free. Most of my congregation is elderly and is afraid of technology
- Where communication is working, most leaders are being very intentional and many are utilizing digital channels their people are already using. The following are a few representative comments from leaders whose alternative worship efforts are going well -- coded as “outreach/communication”: (See Q10)
 - We’re all working hard to keep lines of communication open
 - Making sure that members are aware of the alternative means of worship, study, and continuing care
 - Use of the Facebook network and asking that congregation share with friends and family.

KEY FINDINGS

4. Providing Care

- The challenge of caring for their “sheep” is an important calling of the spiritual leader and always has been. The current crisis presents new challenges in this area. Almost identical to the priority of communicating, six-in-ten (60.65%) of the leaders surveyed report “providing care to meet the pastoral needs of our people” as one of their top priorities.

5. Important but not Urgent

- The fact that these top four priority areas are so much more highly rated than others reveals the dramatic impact of this crisis on church leaders. These are the fires leaders are putting out -- the urgent things. Balancing the many priorities in a church is always difficult, especially for pastors and leaders who have little help. Crises always challenge our balance, and this one has decreased the focus on some really important areas.
- These areas are not as urgent in this moment, as confirmed by their being identified so much less frequently as current priorities. However, many of them are important and cannot wait indefinitely to be addressed. Inability to focus on some of these must surely be putting some pressure on these leaders. Sadly, even the critically important “caring for the needs of my family” is in the lower-half of priorities (7th of 13) and only selected by one-quarter (27.20%) of leaders as among their top 5 needs.

KEY FINDINGS

Nearly all churches have responded to the top priority, loss of in-person worship, by providing some kind of a digital alternative. This is new for most of them.

- Even though this research was conducted only a few weeks into the COVID-19 crisis and resulting social distancing, already almost all (89.16%) of the churches in the research are offering a digital alternative to in-person worship. (See Q4)
- This is the task area with which leaders have been most occupied in this time. Their energy and creativity have been focused on providing some kind of alternative so they can continue to “be the church.” Their concerns with maintaining a sense of community and taking care of their people are clearly connected with their desire to offer some kind of corporate worship. (See Q3)
- It is fascinating that almost two-thirds (65.09%) of these churches did not offer a digital worship option before the crisis. In only a few weeks they have worked out some way to provide an alternative to meeting in-person. (See Q6)

Only churches with significant technology barriers are not offering digital alternatives. The multiple challenges they face seem to be overwhelming.

- For the small percentage (10.84%) who have chosen not to offer any digital alternative to worship for their people, the issue is all about technology - or lack thereof. Responses with multiple themes were coded more than once to be sure to capture the ideas they meant to convey. From looking at the responses it seems these leaders see the challenges related to technology as just too difficult for them to overcome.
- More than three-fourths (76.07%) explained their reasons with comments coded as “church members are not online or lack know-how to connect.”
- One-half (51.28%) responded with comments coded as “available technology” indicating they do not have access to or know how to use the kinds of tools that would allow them to offer a digital worship experience.
- Another one-quarter (25.64%) of respondents made comments classified into the category “technology concerns of pastor/staff.” (See Q7)

KEY FINDINGS

The vast majority of churches have made the leap to producing and distributing digital worship content, and they do not intend to look back. Many see their digital innovations and technology changes as part of a “new normal” moving forward.

- Whether or not these churches offered digital worship alternatives before the crisis, nearly all of them (84.70%) say they will continue to offer a digital option for worship when gathering in-person can resume. They are in it for the long haul, and there is no turning back. (See Q11)
- At the end of the survey, these leaders were asked to reflect on some of the impacts of the crisis they believe will last. When asked “what have you learned or changed in the past few weeks that you think will remain as your ‘new normal,’” more comments were coded as “increased digital presence” than any other by far. Four-in-ten (42.40%) made such comments (See Q17)
- Leaders were also asked at the close of the survey how they are finding creative ways to equip disciples and how they envision they will continue to “be the church” after the crisis has passed. Their most common category of responses was coded as “more integration with technology.” (See Q18)

Because it is here to stay, many of them see the need to do it more effectively. This is especially true of smaller churches and those new to digital communications.

- Overall, when asked to rate their own effectiveness in providing a new digital alternative, these leaders rate themselves as moderately effective. Overall, their mean rating is 3.74 on a 5-point scale. (See Q8)
- Church size correlates with perceptions of how effectively these leaders are providing digital alternatives for worship. Those who are part of smaller churches (fewer than 500 average attendance) rate themselves lower (3.70) than leaders in churches with 500 or more average weekly attendance (4.12), who see themselves as significantly more effective.
- Those who are new to the digital world (have only begun offering a digital worship alternative during the crisis) see themselves as less effective (3.67) than leaders who were already providing a digital worship alternative (3.88).

KEY FINDINGS

Leaders with less effective alternative worship programs definitely know they need support to make improvements. They lack technological expertise and production/communication skills. They also need help finding the best tools and techniques to engage people effectively.

- Leaders who are struggling to make their digital alternative worship programs more effective are aware they need help in many areas. For many of them this is new. The top three reasons with a few sample comments follow (See Q10):
 - Digital/Tech Tools & Training (Media & Production) (49.18%)
 - Help Communicating to/Helping Older & Less Connected (18.69%)
 - Increase Reach & Interaction (10.16%)

Even though churches have responded in this crisis to provide alternatives to in-person worship, they face some significant limitations they have not been able to solve. Maintaining community, and keeping their people connected, especially older members, is a concern. They also struggle with some of the live components - especially music, which is not at all the same.

- The good news that churches are offering alternative worship options is offset to some degree by the challenges they face in this new endeavor. Some of these correspond with and even exacerbate challenges they were already facing. For the most part, this situation is not making things better. The following are the top three categories of unresolved issues, with some sample comments to provide insight into their perspectives. (See Q12):
 - Lack of Interaction & Community (29.13%)
 - Serving & Reaching Elderly/Disconnected (24.41%)
 - Music/Copyright Issues (18.11%)

KEY FINDINGS

When they are honest, leaders are concerned their church may have a financial shortfall in this crisis. They wonder most of all about the long-term impact on their church's financial position. These concerns seem to be shared no matter the church size.

- Of all the 5-point scale questions posed to more than 1,000 church leaders, the lowest mean rating was in response to the question “how confident are you that giving during this crisis will be sufficient to meet the financial needs of your church?” The mean rating of 2.87 reflects their concern. Only one-quarter (25.79%) are “net confident” (4+5 on the scale).
- This is an issue about which there is little difference between larger and smaller churches. Ratings are similar across the board, reflecting that this is a real concern for all of the leaders surveyed. (See Q15)
- When asked what they believe will be the most significant impacts of this crisis on their church and other churches, by far the most common concern was “financial/economic impacts.” Almost one-half (44.04%) of the word-for-word responses were coded into this category. (See Q16)

Leaders are also rightly concerned that the crisis may adversely impact attendance.

- Second to the economic and financial impact, leaders see their empty churches and wonder if people will come back. When asked what they think may be the most significant long-term impact of the crisis on their church and others, the second-most common category of comments (made by 18.84%) was coded as “impact on attendance/membership”. (See Q16)

KEY FINDINGS

There is some good news in all the challenges caused by this crisis. Leaders have been encouraged by the increase in contact and check-ins they and others are doing, which they hope is actually deepening community and connection.

- Throughout the research, there is a tone of underlying optimism and hope, not only that churches have become more agile and made adjustments to offer digital options, but also with an increase in interactions between their people. This may be one silver lining resulting from the combination of social distancing and the many ways people can not connect with each other.
- At the end of the survey, leaders were asked a few questions that gave them an opportunity to share their observations about what all of this means or may mean for their church and others. On all three, they expressed their optimism about this phenomenon they are observing. In response to the question “what do you envision will be the most significant impacts of this crisis on your church and other churches?” the fourth-most common category of responses (after finances, attendance and community/connection) was “appreciation for community/connection,” given by one-in-ten (9.59%). In all the challenges, they talked about this hope. (See Q16)
- When asked “what have you learned or changed in the past few weeks that you think will remain as your ‘new normal’ moving forward?” the second-most common response category (after digital) was “increased communications/check-ins, given by one-fourth (25.17%) of these leaders. (See Q17)



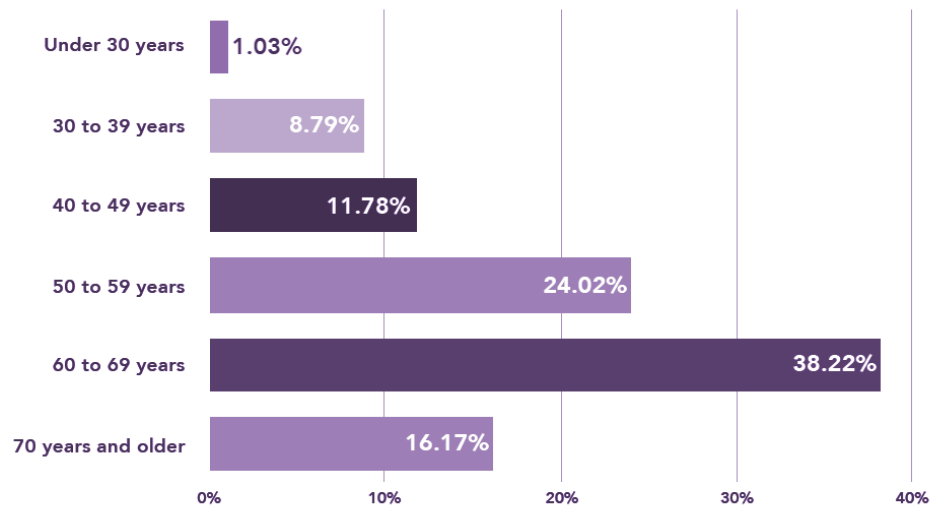
EXHIBITS

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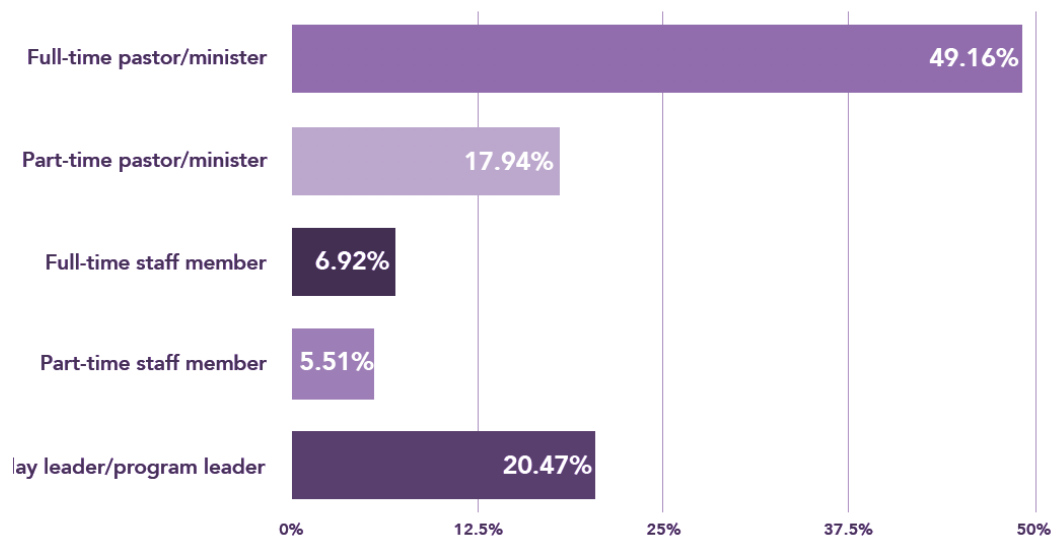


1,070 RESPONDENTS

Age



Position

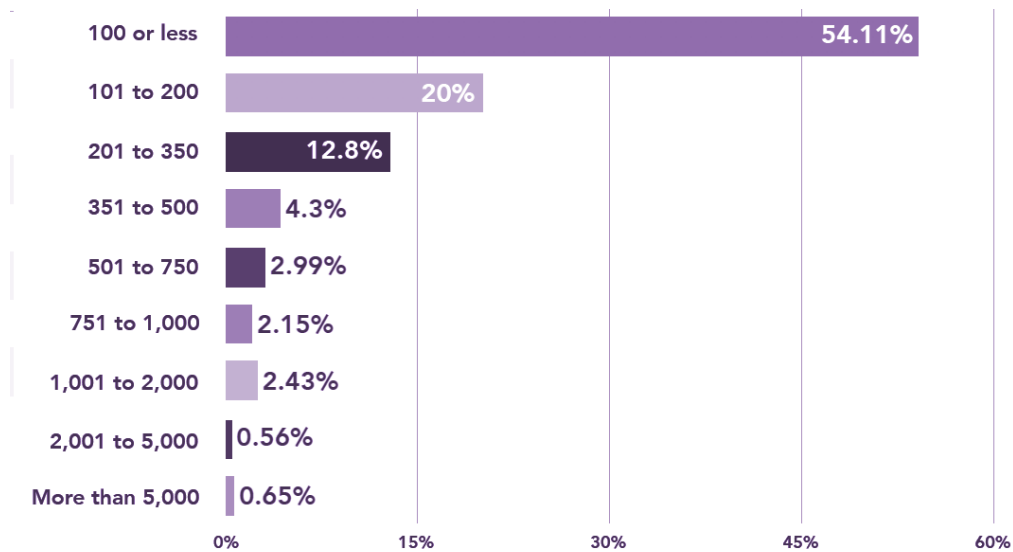


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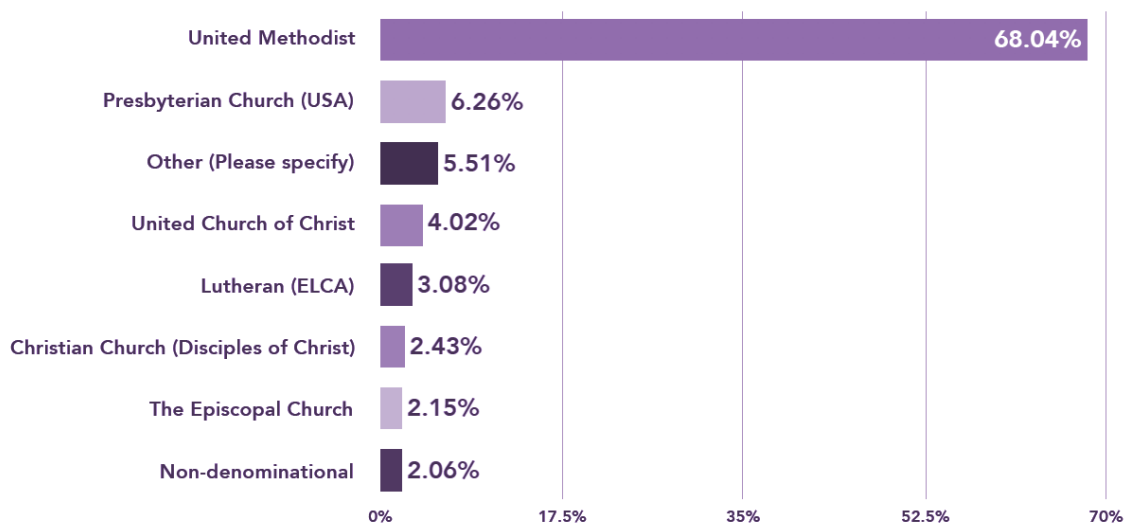


1,070 RESPONDENTS

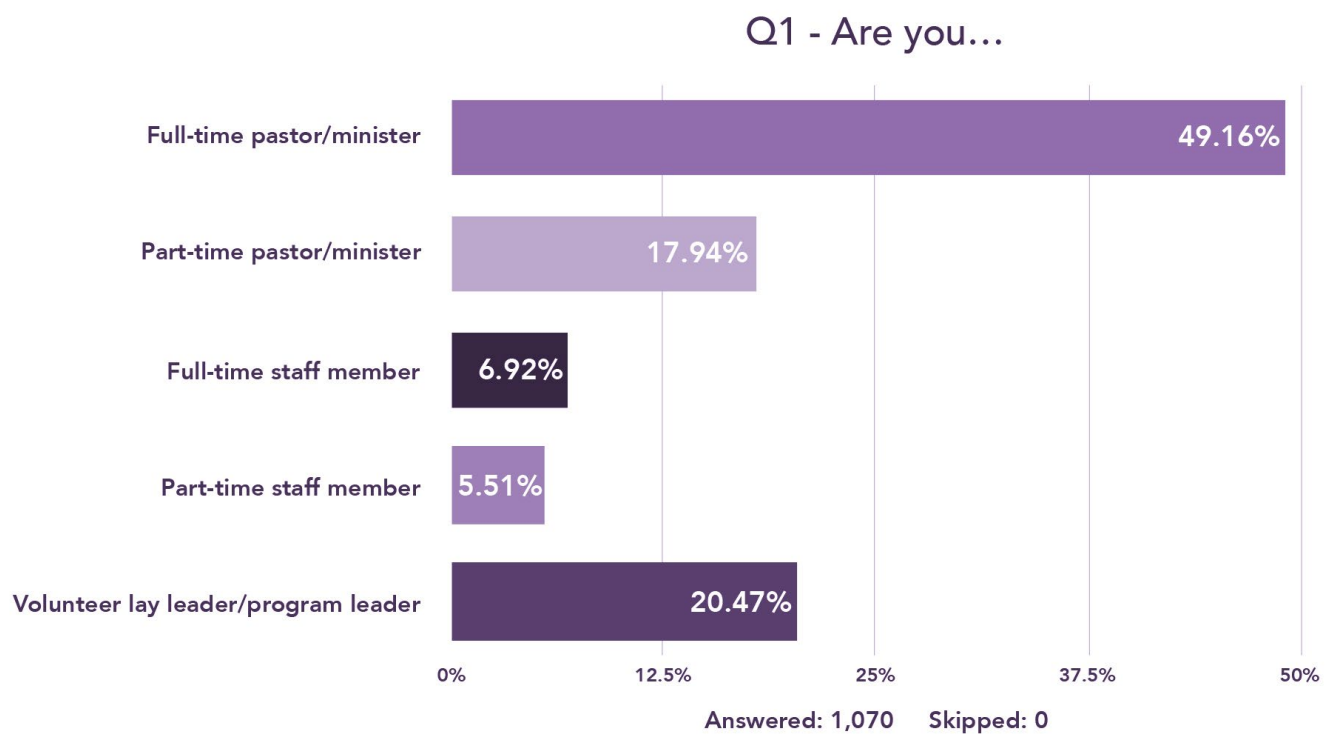
Church Size



Denomination

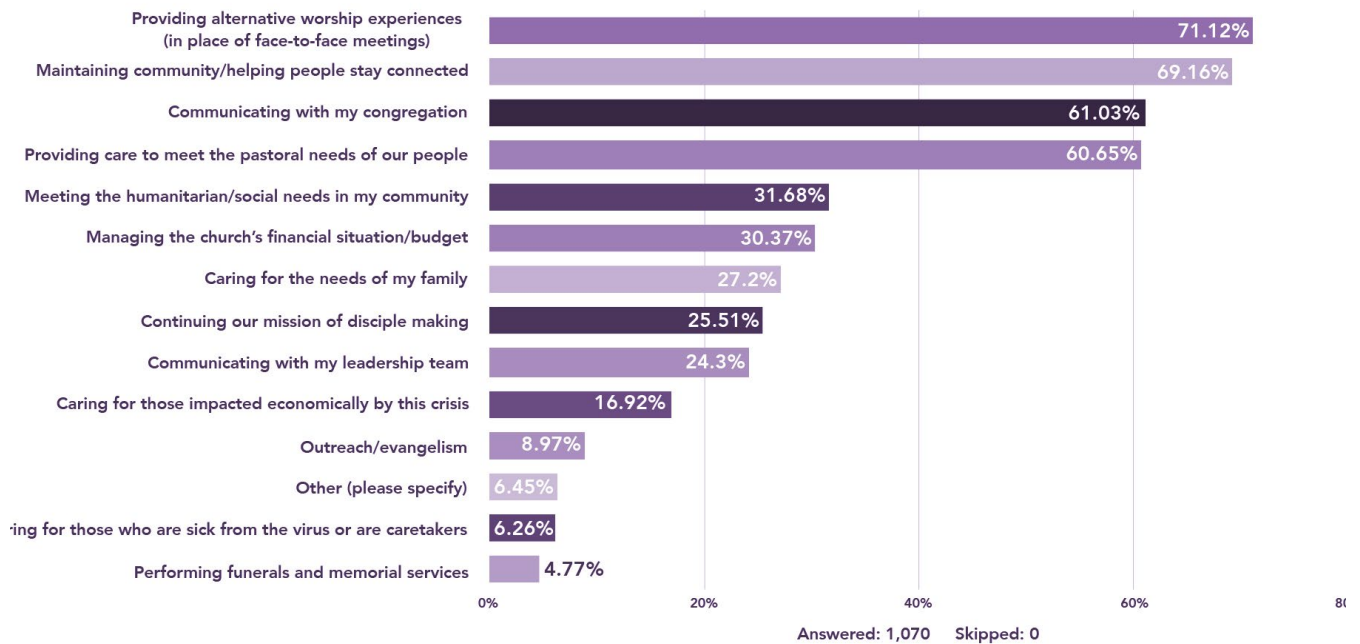


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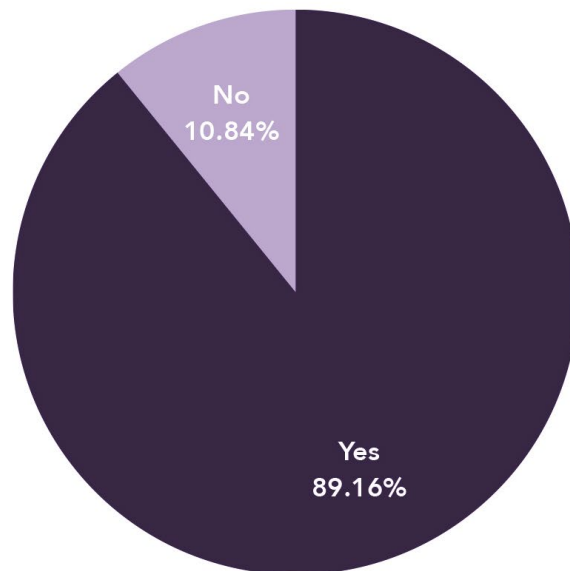
EXHIBITS

Q3 - What are your most pressing roles or functional needs during this crisis? (Choose the top five)



EXHIBITS

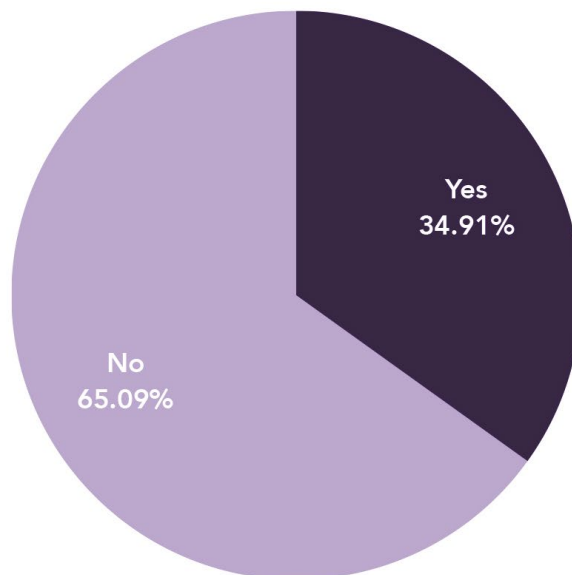
Q4 - Does your church offer a digital alternative for in-person worship?



Answered: 1,070 Skipped: 0

EXHIBITS

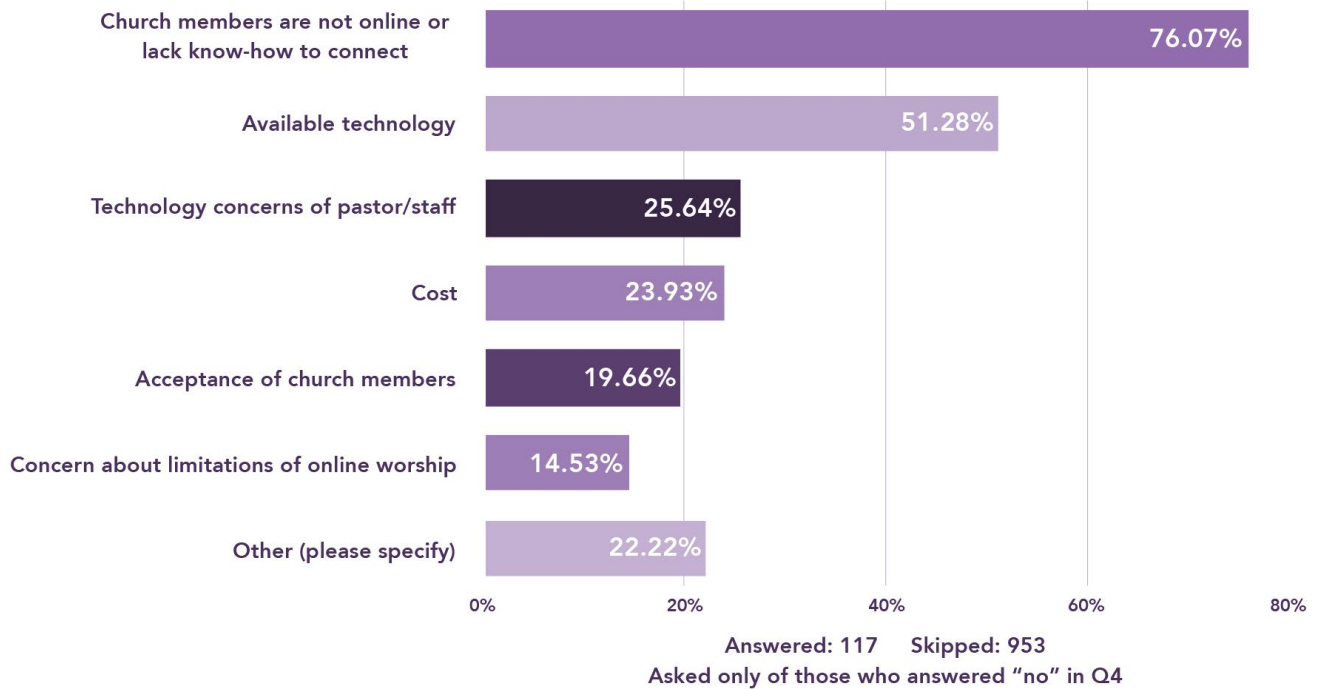
Q6 - Did you offer a digital worship option before the crisis?



Answered: 954 Skipped: 116
Asked only of those who answered "yes" in Q4

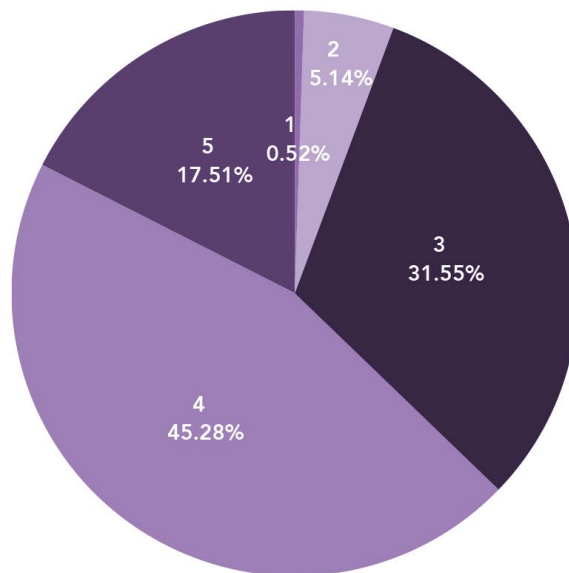
EXHIBITS

Q7 - Why has your church chosen not to offer a digital worship alternative? (Check all that apply)



EXHIBITS

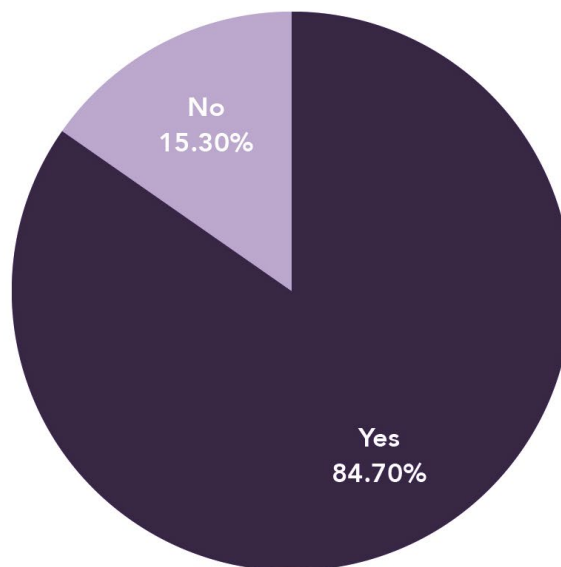
Q8 - How effective do you think your efforts are to provide a digital alternative to in-person worship? Please answer using a 5-point scale where 1 is not at all effective and 5 is very effective.



Answered: 954 Skipped: 116
Asked only of those who answered "yes" in Q4
Mean rating: 3.74/5

EXHIBITS

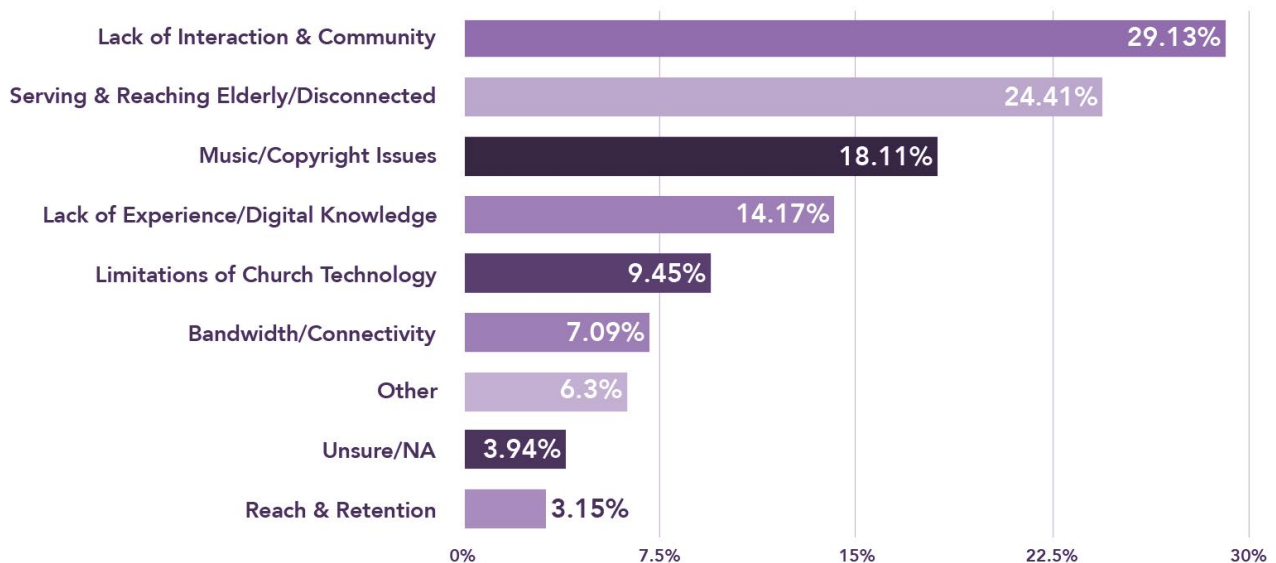
Q11 - Do you see your church continuing to offer a digital option for worship when gathering in-person for worship can resume?



Answered: 954 Skipped: 116
Asked only of those who answered "yes" to Q4

EXHIBITS

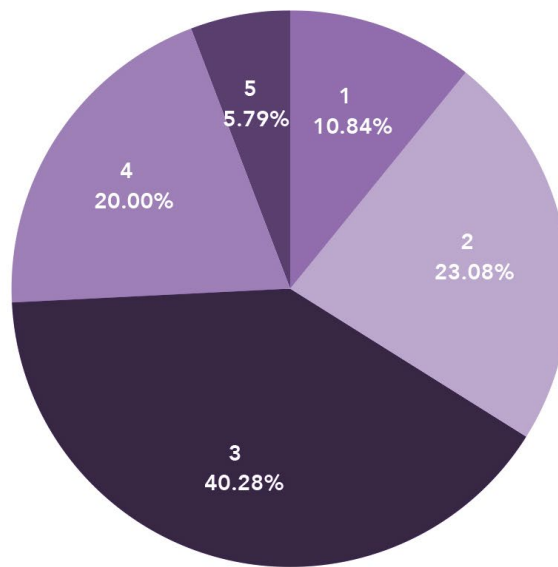
Q12 - What do you see as the limitations of online worship that you have not been able to solve?



Answered: 130 Skipped: 940
Asked of those who answered "no" in Q11
Open end responses coded into categories

EXHIBITS

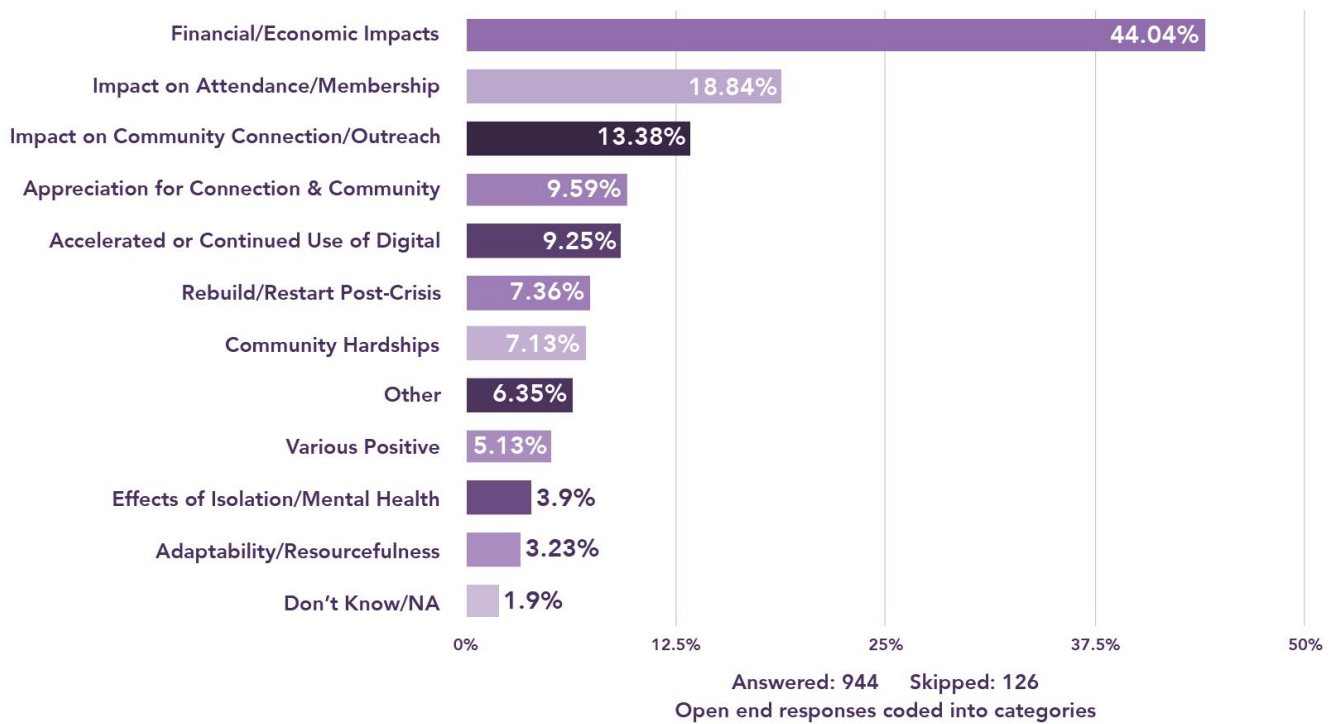
Q15 - How confident are you that giving during this crisis will be sufficient to meet the financial needs of your church?
Please answer using a 5-point scale where 1 is not at all confident and 5 is very confident.



Answered: 1,070 Skipped: 0
Mean rating: 2.87/5

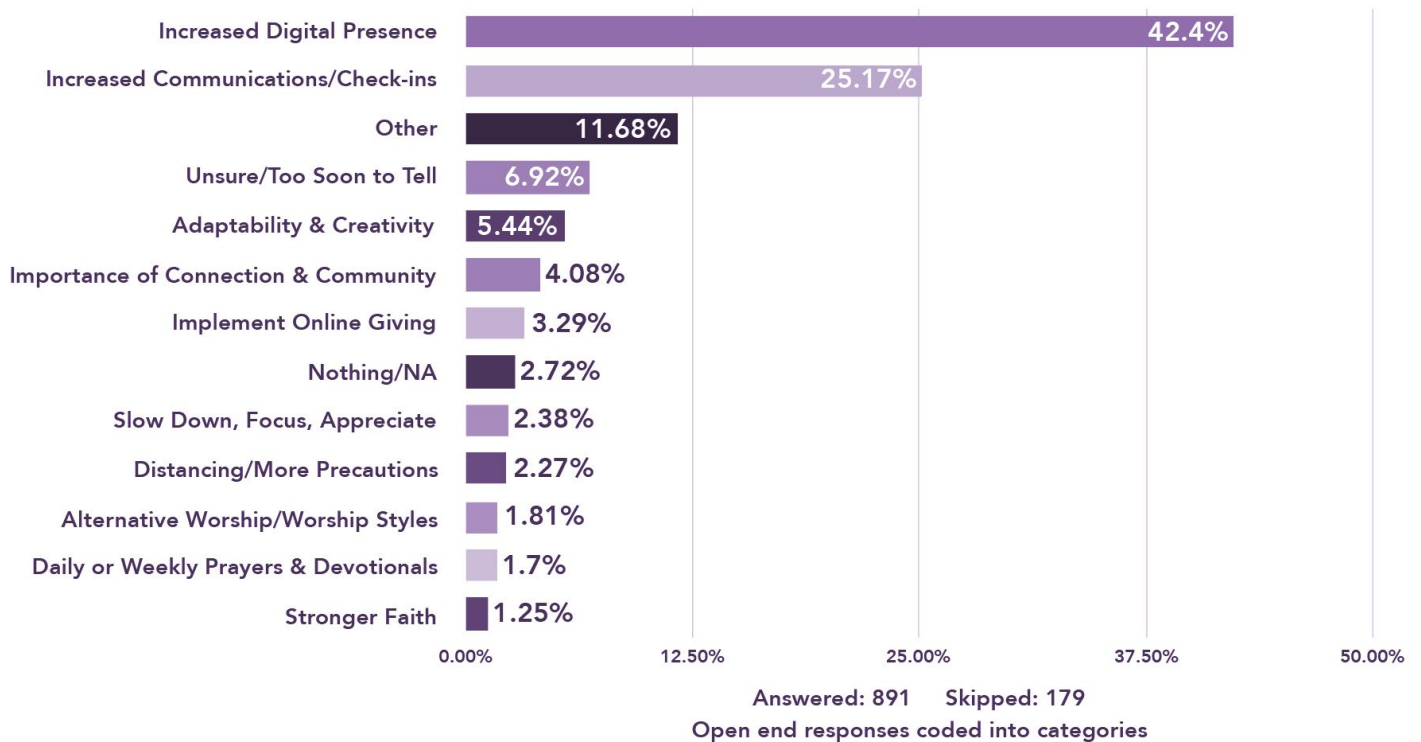
EXHIBITS

Q16 - What do you envision will be the most significant impacts of this crisis on your church and other churches?



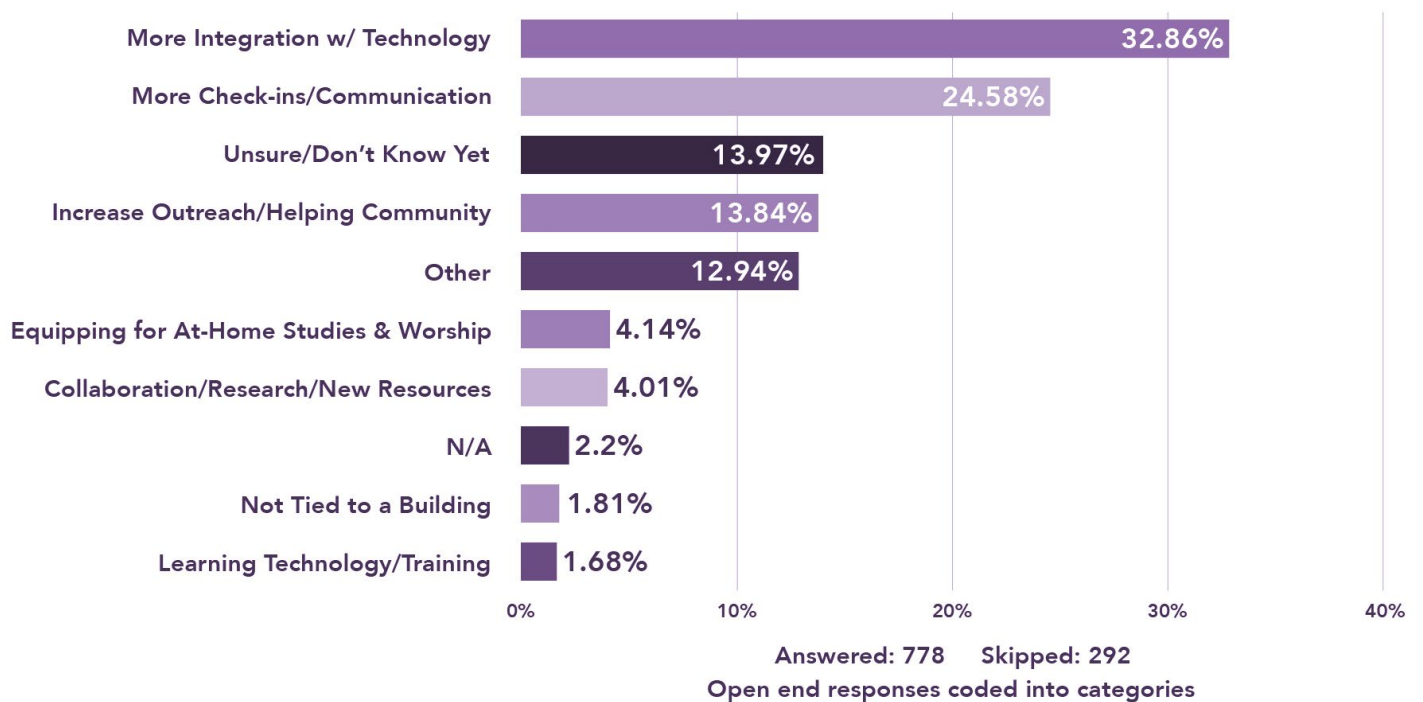
EXHIBITS

Q17 - What have you learned or changed in the past few weeks that you think will remain as your "new normal" moving forward?



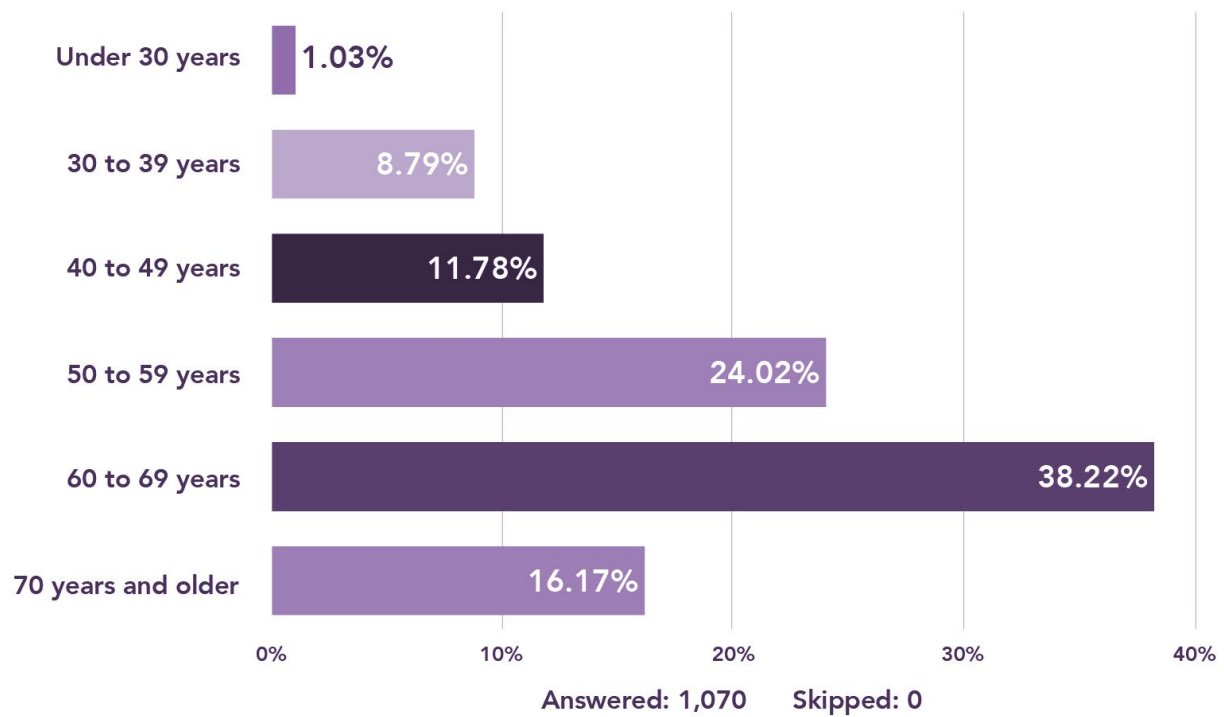
EXHIBITS

Q18 - How are you finding creative ways to equip disciples and how do you envision that we will continue to "be the church" after this crisis has passed?



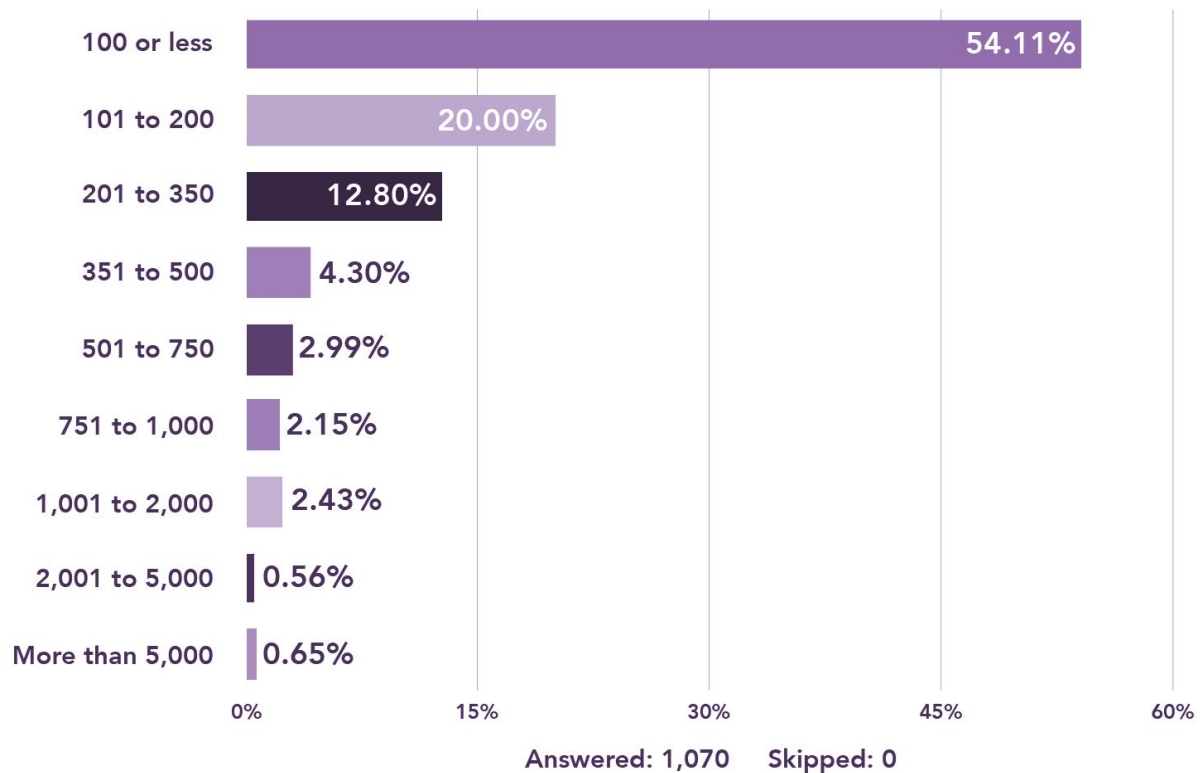
EXHIBITS

Q19 - Which category contains your age?



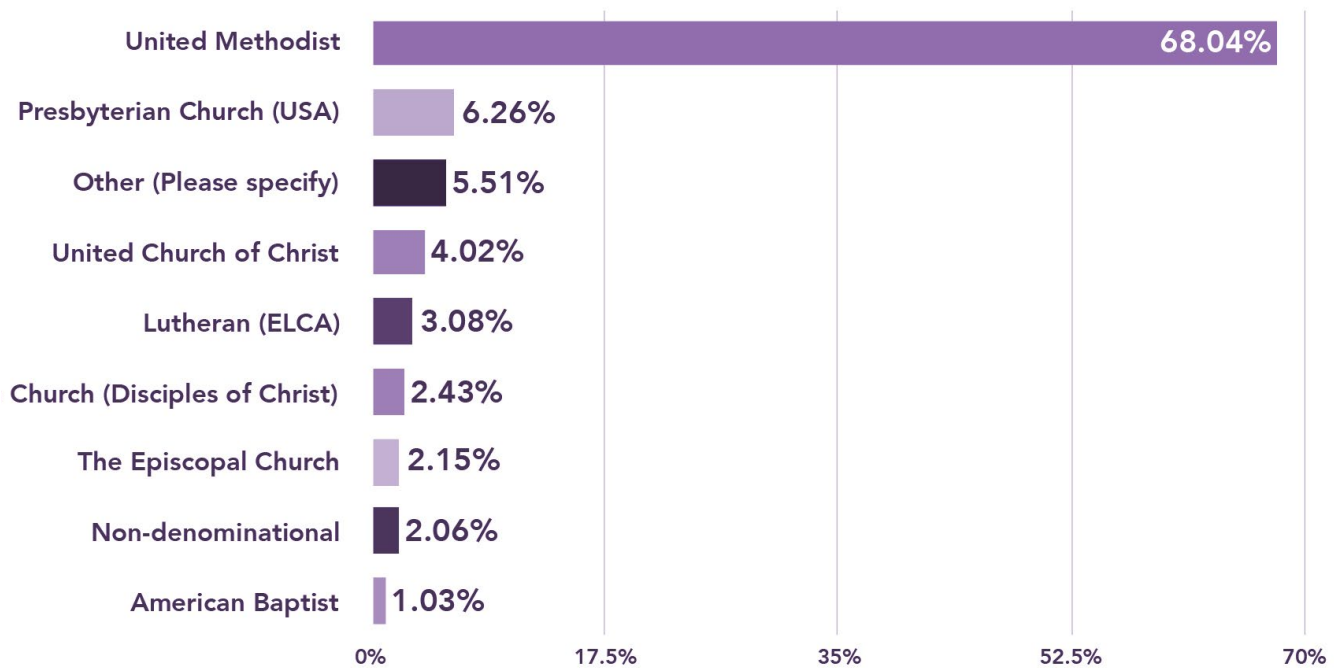
EXHIBITS

Q20 - What is the average worship attendance at your church?



EXHIBITS

Q21 - What is your church's denominational affiliation?



Answered: 1,070 Skipped: 0
Top ten response categories reported in chart

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