



Christian
Reformed
Church

Spiritual and Social Trends and Patterns in the Christian Reformed Church in North America

*our journey
2020*

THIRD EDITION

A report on the 2017 to 2020

*“Our Journey 2020” congregant survey,
seventh in a series beginning in 1987*

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Executive Summary

The Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA or just CRC) is a bi-national body of believers with over 1,000 congregations and about 230,000 participating believers in the United States and Canada.¹ The denomination was founded by Dutch immigrants in 1857. The church's headquarters are found in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and the denomination has birthed influential array of agencies and institutions.²

The 2017 to 2020 CRCNA Congregant Surveys (publicly labeled the “Our Journey 2020 Survey,” after a strategic plan adopted in 2015) sought data from individuals at randomly-selected annual cohorts of Christian Reformed churches during the late winter and early spring of each year. The survey's stated purpose was “To help leaders at all levels of the CRC to understand trends and patterns in the composition of the church and the beliefs and practices of the people.”

I. ABOUT THE SURVEY

The Our Journey 2020 survey continued a series of surveys conducted by the Calvin University Center for Social Research every five years from 1987 to 2017, then annually through 2020. Several new features first introduced in 2007 and have been sustained since then:

- a **focus on the five Desired Futures** specified by the Our Journey 2020 plan;
- **church-based sampling and data-collection method** that allowed congregations to recruit anonymous responses that were aggregated and returned to congregations in custom reports;
- economical, **primarily online response collection with a self-mailing paper option**;
- available **Spanish and Korean translations**.

The Our Journey 2020 survey currently includes 6,067 responses from 451 churches. 5,675 of these responses come from 349 churches in the scheduled, randomly selected cohorts. 113 churches returned 20 or more responses each, and each received a custom report. About **9.1 percent of the 113 fully participating churches' members** participated (see **Table 2** on page 8).

An important caveat for this entire report is that there was very little response to substantial efforts to recruit responses from congregations with a primary ethnicity other than Anglo/Caucasian or Dutch, including many that speak languages other than English. This report necessarily does not well represent these important demographics. See **Table 3** on page 10 for estimates of the degree of bias.

II. CRC TRENDS, 1987 TO 2020

Our first set of results draws a thirty-three-year portrait of social and spiritual trends in the denomination. We report the following key trends:

- **Aging population:** The median survey respondent's age³ continued to increase, from 44 years old in 1987 and 54 years old in 2012 to 59.5 in 2020. See **Figure 2** on page 12.
- **Low but stabilizing proportions of children and children in Christian schools:** as a concomitant effect of aging, the average number of children per household fell from 1.00 in 1987 to 0.68 in 2020—slightly higher than the low of 0.61 in 2018. The proportion of households with children in Christian school fell from 41 percent in 1978 to 16.8 percent in 2020, a slight recovery from the low of 14.4 percent in 2018. See **Figure 4** on page 14 and **Figure 5** on page 15.

¹ For an excellent, brief overview of CRC history, beliefs, and membership statistics, please visit <http://www.crcna.org/welcome>.

² CRCNA, “What We Do,” Christian Reformed Church, 2020, <https://www.crcna.org/ministries>.

³ The median age is the age of the person exactly halfway between the ends of a line of all respondents sorted by age; the median is much less sensitive to a few large or small values than the mean, which adds up all ages and divides by the number of people.

- **High, stable socioeconomic status:** relative to national averages, CRC respondents had been becoming steadily more educated and higher-income on average, but both trends have stabilized since 2007, with 62.0 percent having college degrees in 2007 and 64.3 percent in 2020. In 2020, median income of CRC respondents was nearly identical in US and Canadian dollars, about \$79,800, far above each country’s median income—but both countries’ median income has been growing faster than median CRC congregants’ incomes. See **Figure 6** and **Figure 7** beginning on page 16.
- **Stable loyalty both to denomination and to the local church:** In 2020, as in 1997, 70 percent of respondents said they were “very loyal” to their local congregation; for loyalty to the CRC, the figures were 55 percent in 1997 and 53 percent in 2020. See **Figure 8** on page 18 and **Figure 9** on page 19.
- **High, stable weekly morning attendance; evening worship attendance may be leveling out:** weekly morning attendance has stayed close to its 2020 value of 86.4 percent since 1987. The proportion of respondents attending evening worship services hovered around 13 to 16 percent in the four years from 2017 to 2020, after decades of decline. See **Figure 10** on page 20.
- **Declining frequency of devotional activities:** **Figure 11** on page 21 shows that four daily devotional practices (private prayer, Bible reading, family devotions, and personal devotions) have recovered somewhat since 2012, though analysis shows this is likely a side effect of the increasing numbers of Boomer retirees with more time to give to spiritual discipline.

III. DESIRED FUTURES SCALES

The 2017 to 2020 survey is built around the five Desired Futures of the Our Journey 2020 strategic plan:

1. **Church and community:** churches flowing into their communities
2. **Discipleship:** churches nurturing disciples
3. **Leadership:** churches cultivating leaders
4. **Identity:** churches telling our story
5. **Collaboration:** churches working in partnership

The questionnaire includes 56 questions selected to measure specific outcomes from the Our Journey 2020 plan. The survey data says:

- **Church and Community relationships are strong internally and weak externally.** Respondents say that their church strongly encourages them to build relationships with one another (84 percent say “Definitely” or “Mostly true”), the second most-affirmed statement in the survey. But intentionally building relationships with other Christians (78 percent) was much more likely than building relationships with non-Christians (46 percent). A large minority indicated that their congregations are not involved birthing new churches and discipling communities (43 percent “Definitely UNTRUE” or “Hardly true”). See **Figure 12** on page 24. Respondents scored Church and Community an average of 3.77 on a scale from one to five. See **Figure 13** on page 25.
- **Discipleship is stronger for inner piety and weaker for interpersonal accountability.** The most affirmed outcome among all 56 Desired Futures questions was “Our church strongly urges us to apply the Bible to every area of our lives.” 60 percent of respondents said this statement was “Definitely true” and another 28 percent said it was “Mostly true,” for a majority of 88 percent. The least affirmed items in the Discipleship group have to do with discussing one’s spiritual life with trusted others and the church having a clear disciple-making process. Just 39 percent said it was “Definitely” or “Mostly true” that “I speak regularly with others about their spiritual life.” See **Figure 14** on page 26. Respondents averaged 3.88. See **Figure 15** on page 28).
- **Leadership are equipped for the church, but less so for the community.** Seventy percent of respondents said it is “Definitely” or “Mostly true” that “Our congregation’s leaders have the skills to minister to members of our congregation,” but just 56 percent said their leaders had the skills to minister to people in the community. See **Figure 16** on page 29. Leadership questions overall scored an average of 3.81, the second-highest score behind Discipleship. See **Figure 17** on page 30.

- **Identity as part of the global church is stronger than identity as CRC or as justice-seekers.** Over three-quarters of respondents (77 percent) reported that it is “Definitely” or “Mostly true” that congregants feels like they are part of “Christ’s worldwide church” and that their congregation responds to the call to “do justice, love kindly, and walk humbly” with God. However, just 51 percent said people understand what it is to be CRC, and just 36 percent indicated that they are personally active in working for justice in their community. See **Figure 18** on page 31. This scale tied with Collaboration for the lowest score overall at 3.72. See **Figure 19** on page 32.
- **Collaboration is perceived to be stronger with the denomination than with other churches.** At least two-thirds of respondents said their congregation works effectively with ministries of the Christian Reformed Church (68 percent “Definitely” or “Mostly true”), that the congregation should financially support the CRCNA (67 percent), and that their congregation is closely connected to the denomination and its ministries (66 percent). Far fewer respondents said their congregation works with other CRC congregations from their region (53 percent) or elsewhere (43 percent). Fully 25 percent doubt the last statement. See **Figure 20** on page 33. The average respondent scored this scale identically to Identity at 3.72. See **Figure 21** on page 34.

Overall, CRC respondents affirm that many of the Desired Futures are alive and well in CRC churches, but leave substantial room for improvement when it comes to church planting, interpersonal discipleship, leadership of community outreach, Reformed identity, and intercongregational collaboration.

IV. FACTORS RELATED TO THE DESIRED FUTURES SCALES

To deepen our understanding of the Desired Futures, we conducted multivariate regression analyses of each of the five scales and of the overall combined scale. To set the stage, we relate the Desired Futures to our single-item question about the current health of the church, validating that congregants from healthier churches perceive more Desired Futures; see **Figure 24** on page 38. We show that each church contains substantial differences of opinion and that churches vary widely on the five scales; see **Figure 25** on page 39 and **Figure 26** on page 40. We also re-introduce readers to the Worship Variety scale that has been a part of the survey questionnaire since 2007; this scale documents the frequency respondents report experiencing storytelling, testimonies, drama, audiovisual presentations, and other varieties of engaging worship; see **Figure 27** on page 41.

The results of the regression models show how the Desired Futures relate to many attributes of churches, people, and people’s roles in church. Three main findings stand out:

1. The **worship variety scale** is the factor most consistently related to the five Desired Futures, even after controlling for many other attributes of churches and people. Congregations that report more variety in worship report all five of the Desired Futures are more likely to be true. We conjecture that the modes of worship in the scale facilitate development of each of the five areas; see the worship variety section starting on page 50.
2. The **spiritual disciplines scale** is highly related to Discipleship and yet unrelated to the Leadership scale. See page 51.
3. Finally, the Desired Futures scores are lower for respondents who report being discontented with being excluded from **decision-making opportunities** at their congregation. See page 52.

Each of these presents potential actions congregations and denominational agencies can take to increase the Desired Futures.

V. THEMES FROM RESPONDENTS’ COMMENTS

Survey respondents had two opportunities to express themselves at length, about the role of CRCNA agencies and ministries in the health of their congregations and about the survey and “our life together as the body of Christ.” We received and coded 2,384 comments from the two questions. See **Figure 38** on page 54 and **Figure 39** on page 60 for a breakdown of the themes we coded.

The comments provided the following insights:

- As in previous years, the dominant topic is expressions of gratitude for the ministry and/or for the survey. However, most of these words are polite pro-forma prologue for the primary content and so are excluded from the denominator of the percentages below.
- Congregational life is the most prevalent theme among closing comments, with 40.6 percent of the 1,586 total. Of these, over two-thirds had a negative direction.
- Denominational concerns followed close behind with 34.6 percent of the total and over 8-to-1 negative.
- Congregational and denominational leadership came third, with 29.6 percent of the total, not quite 3-to-1 negative.
- Political commentary came fourth with 22.1 percent of the comments, almost exclusively negative.
- Among 798 comments on CRCNA ministries and agencies, the top theme is interest in knowing more about available denominational resources (52 percent). Second was interest in greater support for congregational life from agencies (37.8 percent).

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our concluding section seeks to reconcile apparent tensions with practical recommendations. On one hand, large majorities of respondents confirm that their congregations urge them to apply the Bible to all of life and are otherwise living their mission. On the other hand, negative comments reflect anxiety about demographic trends and heightened worldly cultural influence on the church.

We address this tension by placing the demographics and anxieties in a wider context of declining trust in institutions of all kinds. Then we suggest that we should work together directly on the trust dynamic itself, independent of our disagreements about theology, worship, and ethics. We recommend a focus on trust building through interconnection. Too many CRC congregants report they don't talk with others about their spiritual life, and too few perceive collaboration among congregations and with the denomination.

To complement the strategies suggested in the analysis at the end of section IV beginning on page 50, and also to address the problem of full representation of all races, ethnicities, and linguistic groups addressed on page 9, we make the following recommendations. See page 64 for full details.

1. Invent, expand, improve, and sustain exchange and visitation practices.

These ideas include pulpit exchange, council visits, intercultural retreats, learning missions, and other institutional and liturgical ways to broaden experience of other congregations and cultures.

2. Define and practice new discipleship commitments.

The survey suggests the entire body would benefit from efforts to organize a monthly conversation for every congregant with a spiritual conversation partner, to create explicit discipleship and leadership pathways within and among congregations, and to pair up pastors with rotating conversation partners.

3. Justice and mercy work should be reinvigorated as a basic practice for all congregations.

This recommendation emphasizes the church's role in giving suspicious congregations direct experience and collaboration with social workers, public health professionals, community organizers, anti-racism leaders, to replace rumor with empathy and to foster real direct investment in such work.

In conclusion, we note that such efforts only seem unrealistic and time-consuming until *they are what we do*, at which point they can deliver profound benefits through connectivity and participation.

Resources and feedback

The final section of the report documents forthcoming resources and future plans; readers may visit <http://www.calvin.edu/go/crcsurvey> for much more information about the survey data.

The authors and the CRCNA leadership welcome your comments, critiques and suggestions. For the authors, write to csr@calvin.edu; for the CRCNA leadership, contact executive-director@crcna.org. Or include both addresses in a general message.

I. An introduction to the survey

SURVEY PURPOSE: TRENDS, VOICE AND HEALTH

At the request of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), and with kind cooperation of CRCNA leadership and the pastors, staff, and laypeople at dozens of local congregations, the Calvin University Center for Social Research (CSR) has fielded the CRCNA Congregant Survey (publicly named the “Our Journey 2020 Survey”) each year between January and April of 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020. This annual survey series continues a series of denominational congregant surveys conducted every five years from 1987 to 2012. Since 2007, the survey’s stated purpose has been “to help leaders at all levels of the CRC to understand trends and patterns in the composition of the church and the beliefs and practices of the people.”

Let us be clear: God is the only true Judge of whether a congregation is healthy or not. Survey data is a helpful source of information of what God’s people believe, or are willing to say they believe, about their congregations. The reader’s prayerful wisdom and judgment is indispensable. Churches should not shape their missions solely to improve their survey results, as if they were students studying only for the exam and not seeking to learn. But congregational leaders may find that these opinions offer insight into our real strengths and weaknesses in fulfilling our mission as a covenant community of the children of God.

QUESTIONNAIRE: A FRESH FOCUS ON “DESIRED FUTURES”

Originated by former CSR Director Dr. Rodger Rice, surveys of CRC members have been conducted every five years since 1987. The 2017 survey marked the seventh such five-year benchmark, along with a shift to five randomly assigned cohorts of congregations with annual survey administration to each cohort. As with any longitudinal study, a top priority was to repeat questions from previous waves of the survey so as to monitor trends. Some questions date back to 1987; others originated in 2007, 2012, or 2017.

In 2015, CRCNA leadership adopted a strategic plan called “Our Journey 2020”⁴, which identified a comprehensive list of “Desired Futures” in five areas:

1. **Church and community:** churches flowing into their communities
2. **Discipleship:** churches nurturing disciples
3. **Leadership:** churches cultivating leaders
4. **Identity:** churches telling our story
5. **Collaboration:** churches working in partnership

Led by Dr. Laura Luchies, the CSR and CRCNA teams developed 42 survey questions as proxy indicators for detailed goals and metrics established in the Our Journey 2020 plan. For consistency with past surveys, many of these questions were selected from the Healthy Church Comprehensive Survey developed in 2006. The 2017 to 2020 questionnaire leads with this Desired Futures content, then replicates much stable content from the 2007 and 2012 questionnaires. The survey had the following outline:

1. Welcome
2. Desired Futures
3. About Your Church (including congregational health, worship, and lifecycle)
4. About Your Participation at Your Church (including personal devotional life)
5. Church Decision-Making
6. Financial Contributions
7. Belonging and Membership (including baptism and profession of faith)
8. Relationships with the Christian Reformed Church
9. Christian Day Schools
10. About You (including a long list of demographics reflected in the Trends section of this report)
11. Closing Comments

⁴ “Our Journey 2020,” Christian Reformed Church, August 17, 2016, <https://www.crcna.org/OurJourney>.

Congregations were encouraged to distribute a hyperlink to recruit online responses.⁵ Beginning in 2018, congregations whose congregants had limited Internet access could also request and distribute paper self-mailing questionnaires in English, Spanish, and Korean.⁶ Logistics for the paper distribution method improved steadily between 2018 and 2020.

SAMPLING METHOD: RANDOMLY ASSIGNED ANNUAL COHORTS OF CONGREGATIONS

As part of a long-running legacy research project, the Our Journey 2020 surveys build on and diverge from a long evolutionary design.

2017 to 2020 sampling design

The 2017 to 2020 surveys were available to any congregation in any year. However, each year's response recruitment efforts focused on a randomly-assigned cohort of twenty percent of CRCNA congregations. The CRCNA Information Technology team has randomly assigned each congregation to one of five stable survey cohorts; over five years, every congregation is officially recruited to participate once. The result—apart from nonresponse bias—is a rolling five-year representative sample of the entire denomination.

CRCNA Yearbook office staff recruited participation from congregations. Congregations obtaining at least 20 completed responses were rewarded with a free custom report on their survey results at the end of each spring. Once a congregation consented to participate, a congregational representative or survey liaison became responsible for promoting the survey to congregants, encouraging online responses but offering a paper option. Survey liaisons at each sampled congregation were provided with promotional materials (handouts, announcement scripts, and slide graphics) to facilitate promotion of the survey within their congregations over the course of several weeks⁷; liaisons also had access to online reports on how many responses had been received to date.

The survey results are not a strictly statistically random sample of the CRCNA population. The results include a variety of biases, given variation in the willingness of congregations to participate, the extent of each congregation's response-recruitment efforts, and the relative availability and interest of survey participants in each congregation. However, the results for many questions are remarkably consistent over time and inspire confidence that the measurements are useful. Demographic responses closely reflect the denomination's self-portrait from other sources, including the Yearbook. Given that, for reasons of polity and philosophy, we lack a central denominational database of all congregational members and attenders, the church-based recruitment method is relatively inclusive and representative.⁸

Legacy survey sampling history

In 1987, 1992, 1997, and 2002, surveys were mailed to samples of households drawn from a master list supplied by central denominational records (primarily the mailing list for *The Banner* magazine). Such records are unavoidably biased toward people with relatively stronger connections to the denomination. To reduce this problem, we experimented successfully in 2007 with recruiting Internet responses through randomly-selected congregations, both to reduce costs and to increase the availability of the survey to

⁵ Rodger Rice, Neil Carlson, and Luchies, "2020 Survey of Christian Reformed Church Congregants: Online Questionnaire Preview," Qualtrics Research Suite, 2020, https://calvin.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/preview/SV_5uI9buf95zrNyXr?Q_CHL=preview&Q_SurveyVersionID=current.

⁶ Rodger Rice, Neil Carlson, and Laura Luchies, "Our Journey 2020 Printable Survey Questionnaires in English, Spanish, and Korean" (Calvin University Center for Social Research, 2020), <https://public.tableau.com/views/CSR603CRCNAOurJourney2020TableauPublic20180831/QuestionnairePDF>.

⁷ Kristen Vanderberg, "Denominational Survey - Church Promotion Resources," The Network, 2020, <https://network.crcna.org/crcna-and-synod/denominational-survey-church-promotion-resources>.

⁸ In 2007, we considered asking each congregation for a copy of its membership directory, but this would have been expensive to manage and could have been perceived as invasive. The method employed since 2007 is inexpensive, both for the denomination and for congregations, while remaining fully anonymous for individual respondents. However, it remains true in 2020 that it would greatly be preferable from a methodological perspective for the CRCNA to develop a robust denomination-wide master list of all churches' members and attenders, given suitable protections for individual and congregational control of privacy and communication access to congregants.

church members and attenders who might not be on denominational lists.⁹ The 2012 survey continued and expanded this practice. Full reports for the 2007 and 2012 waves are available online.¹⁰

RESPONSES AND RESPONSE RATES

At the conclusion of the data collection period in January 2013, at least one response had been received from 102 churches. At least 10 responses were received from 67 churches; at least 30 responses (the minimum for a church to receive a customized report from CSR) were received from 40 churches, up to a maximum of 122 responses from a single church. Overall, 2,609 responses were received; 78.5 percent of these (2,048 cases) came from the top 40 responding churches. This result compares to previous surveys as shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1 Survey history with response counts by year

| Survey Year | Method | Sample Units | Total Respondents | Respondents from target cohort | Response Rate |
|-------------|----------------|---------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|---------------|
| 1987 | Mail | Members | 555 | n/a | n/a |
| 1992 | Mail | Members | 617 | n/a | n/a |
| 1997 | Mail | Members | 488 | n/a | 44.4% |
| 2002 | Mail | Members | 553 | n/a | 34.5% |
| 2007-8 | Internet | Congregations | 1,434 | n/a | 6.1% (est.) |
| 2012 | Internet | Congregations | 2,609 | n/a | 7.3% (est.) |
| 2017 | Internet | Congregations | 1,596 | 1,544 | 5.3% (est.) |
| 2018 | Internet/paper | Congregations | 1,371 | 1,307 | 5.1% (est.) |
| 2019 | Internet/paper | Congregations | 1,357 | 1,187 | 4.5% (est.) |
| 2020 | Internet/paper | Congregations | 1,743 | 1,637 | 7.5% (est.) |

Response rates in **Table 1** are estimated by dividing the number of responses from each year's target cohort of congregations and dividing it into total CRC Yearbook active adult membership of the sampled congregations;¹¹ we can estimate response rates as percentages of congregational populations. **Table 2** elaborates, showing these estimates in the row labeled "Active adult membership response rate." The overall adult membership response rate for 2017 to 2020 from target congregations was 5.5 percent, ranging from a low of 4.5 percent in 2019 to a high of 7.5 percent in 2020. The denominator of the alternate response rate estimate shown in the table is active adult members only from the congregations

⁹ Some offsetting exclusivity results from the online-only design, since Internet access is lacking in certain areas and among lower-income populations. However, response recruitment was done both on paper and in person, and survey materials encouraged respondents to get help from friends, church personnel, libraries and so forth. Many respondents did so.

¹⁰ Rodger Rice, Neil Carlson, and Christina Vanden Bosch, "Spiritual and Social Trends and Patterns in the Christian Reformed Church in North America: A Report on the CRCNA 150th Anniversary Survey, 2007-2008" (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin College Center for Social Research, 2009), https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/2007_Congregant_Survey_final.pdf; Rodger Rice et al., "Spiritual and Social Trends and Patterns in the Christian Reformed Church in North America: SECOND EDITION, A Report on the 2012 Christian Reformed Church Survey, Sixth in a Quinquennial Series Beginning in 1987" (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin College Center for Social Research, 2013), <https://calvin.edu/directory/publications/spiritual-and-social-trends-and-patterns-in-the-christian-reformed-church-in-north-america>.

¹¹ Updated yearbook data files were provided by the denominational offices for each wave from 2007 through 2020.

that agreed to participate; that rate was 9.9 percent overall and ranged from 7.5 percent in 2019 to 10.3 percent in 2020.

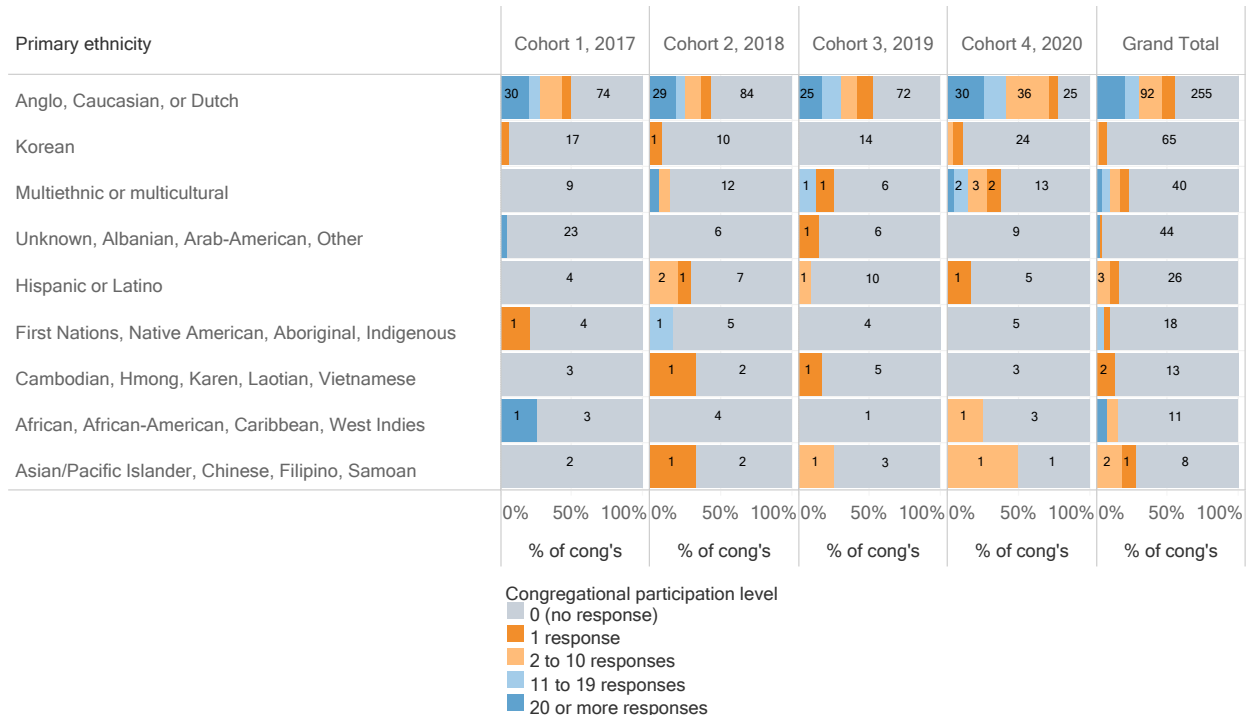
Table 2 Comprehensive response counts and response rate estimates for 2017 to 2020

| | Cohort 1, 2017 | Cohort 2, 2018 | Cohort 3, 2019 | Cohort 4, 2020 | Grand Total |
|--|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------|
| Congregations | 216 | 207 | 208 | 194 | 825 |
| Total members | 48,437 | 44,271 | 42,960 | 37,612 | 173,280 |
| Active adult professing members | 28,961 | 25,776 | 26,444 | 21,982 | 103,163 |
| Average Sunday Attendance | 34,656 | 31,992 | 34,339 | 27,738 | 128,725 |
| Participating congregations | 77 | 75 | 87 | 106 | 345 |
| Congregational participation rate | 35.6% | 36.2% | 41.8% | 54.6% | 41.8% |
| Fully participating congregations (N >= 20) | 32 | 30 | 25 | 31 | 118 |
| Congregational full participation rate (>=20) | 14.8% | 14.5% | 12.0% | 16.0% | 14.3% |
| Responses | 1,544 | 1,307 | 1,187 | 1,637 | 5,675 |
| Active adult membership response rate | 5.33% | 5.07% | 4.49% | 7.45% | 5.50% |
| Active adult members of participating churches | 16,701 | 13,814 | 15,939 | 15,926 | 62,380 |
| Active adult membership response rate for participating churches | 9.24% | 9.46% | 7.45% | 10.28% | 9.10% |
| Median weight by size and region | 0.994 | 0.826 | 0.849 | 0.841 | 0.849 |

INCLUSION CHALLENGES

As in past years, an important caveat for readers of this report is limited participation by congregations whose primary ethnicity is not Anglo/Caucasian or Dutch. As shown in **Figure 1**, Anglo/Caucasian and Dutch congregations are likely to participate at far higher rates than other congregations. Overall, of 114 fully participating congregations, 111 were classified as primarily Anglo/Caucasian or Dutch; the remaining three congregations were multiethnic (2) and African-American (1).

Figure 1 Congregational participation level by primary ethnicity of congregation



Meanwhile, the large contingent of congregations that are primarily Korean is missing almost entirely from the survey data—in spite of intensive recruitment efforts and the availability of a Korean-language translation of the survey. The remaining groups are also all greatly underrepresented.

Table 3 offers a different perspective, breaking down congregations' ethnic membership numbers from Yearbook data by congregational participation levels for cohort 4 in 2020. Just 20.1 percent of active adult Anglo or Caucasian members belonged to Cohort 4 congregations that did not participate in 2020, while 83 percent of active adult Korean members belong to churches that did not participate at all. The share attending non-participating congregations is similarly high for First Nations or Native American members (77.1 percent), Hispanic or Latino members (74.0 percent), and African-American or Caribbean members (58.5 percent). Anglo or Caucasian members are nearly three times as likely to attend a fully participating congregation (27.9 percent) as African-American or Caribbean members (10.3 percent) and four times as likely as Asian or Pacific Islander members (7.8 percent).

Table 3 Membership ethnicity by congregational participation level, 2020, cohort 4

| | Congregational participation level | | | Grand Total |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------|-------|-------------|
| | None | Partial | Full | |
| Active adult professing members | 6,056 | 9,791 | 6,135 | 21,982 |
| % of active adult professing members | 27.5% | 44.5% | 27.9% | 100.0% |
| Anglo or Caucasian | 2,108 | 5,525 | 2,848 | 10,481 |
| % of Anglo or Caucasian membership | 20.1% | 52.7% | 27.2% | 100.0% |
| Korean | 1,645 | 325 | 12 | 1,982 |
| % of Korean | 83.0% | 16.4% | 0.6% | 100.0% |
| Hispanic or Latino | 680 | 213 | 26 | 919 |
| % of Hispanic or Latino | 74.0% | 23.2% | 2.8% | 100.0% |
| African American/Caribbean | 394 | 210 | 69 | 673 |
| % of African American/Caribbean | 58.5% | 31.2% | 10.3% | 100.0% |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 67 | 229 | 25 | 321 |
| % of Asian/Pacific Islander | 20.9% | 71.3% | 7.8% | 100.0% |
| Chinese | 20 | 131 | 8 | 159 |
| % of Chinese | 12.6% | 82.4% | 5.0% | 100.0% |
| First Nations or Native American | 155 | 42 | 4 | 201 |
| % of First Nations or Native American | 77.1% | 20.9% | 2.0% | 100.0% |
| Other ethnicities | 116 | 25 | 8 | 149 |
| % of other ethnicities | 77.9% | 16.8% | 5.4% | 100.0% |

Survey research itself appears to be a cultural distinctive of the denomination's majority culture and intellectual elite that underrepresents the rest of the church community. Fuller participation is unlikely without some transformative change in relations or research design.

WEIGHTS

For the analyses in this report, the survey data have been weighted to approximate a representative sample of the CRCNA by region and church size. That is, responses from smaller churches and from under-represented regions count more in calculating averages than those from less-represented regions and larger churches. As shown in **Table 4**, the least represented churches (and therefore the most heavily weighted to compensate) are small churches in Eastern Canada (weight = 1.82 in 2007, 1.91 in 2012), while enthusiastic participation around Toronto in 2007 (weight = 0.50) and among small churches in West Canada in 2012 (weight = 0.52) led to small weights that reduce these respondents' leverage on overall averages.

Table 4 Weight matrix by region, membership size, and cohort

| Ministry region | Congregation members | Cohort & Year | | | | | | | |
|-----------------|----------------------|----------------|--------|----------------|--------|----------------|--------|----------------|--------|
| | | Cohort 1, 2017 | | Cohort 2, 2018 | | Cohort 3, 2019 | | Cohort 4, 2020 | |
| | | Count | Weight | Count | Weight | Count | Weight | Count | Weight |
| Canada Eastern | 0-300 | 9 | 0.49 | 11 | 0.42 | 11 | 0.80 | 11 | 0.89 |
| | 301+ | 12 | 0.62 | 7 | 0.99 | 13 | 0.58 | 8 | 1.02 |
| Canada Western | 0-300 | 4 | 0.84 | 4 | 1.26 | 4 | 1.05 | 13 | 0.35 |
| | 301+ | 2 | 1.31 | 6 | 0.67 | 3 | 1.32 | 4 | 0.84 |
| USA Central | 0-300 | 9 | 0.99 | 7 | 0.97 | 10 | 0.85 | 19 | 0.58 |
| | 301+ | 9 | 0.77 | 8 | 1.52 | 5 | 1.93 | 5 | 2.55 |
| USA Eastern | 0-300 | 2 | 1.79 | 3 | 1.30 | 7 | 0.57 | 2 | 3.56 |
| | 301+ | 1 | 3.18 | 1 | 0.67 | 2 | 7.88 | | |
| USA Great Lakes | 0-300 | 4 | 2.60 | 9 | 0.60 | 12 | 0.58 | 8 | 0.90 |
| | 301+ | 13 | 1.42 | 5 | 2.02 | 11 | 1.38 | 15 | 1.21 |
| USA Western | 0-300 | 9 | 1.10 | 11 | 0.83 | 8 | 1.24 | 19 | 0.73 |
| | 301+ | 3 | 1.32 | 3 | 1.26 | 1 | 1.46 | 2 | 2.83 |
| Grand Total | | 77 | 1.08 | 75 | 0.97 | 87 | 1.10 | 106 | 0.96 |

Congregations from Canada Eastern have generally tended to participate at high rates, both as congregations and congregants, so their respondents are weighted lower, as low as 0.42 for respondents from smaller congregations in 2018. Respondents from USA Eastern have been hard to come by, and so receive large weights, as high as 7.88 for larger congregations in 2019.

Despite the apparent disparity in these weights, the effect of their application is usually not substantive. For example, weighting may shift the estimated percentage strongly affirming a particular congregational health measure by a few percentage points, but it rarely alters the overall relative pattern of affirmation or disaffirmation. Meanwhile, larger numbers of respondents from regions with low weights still have tremendous value by increasing the precision of the survey's estimates.

In this report, unless otherwise stated, responses are unweighted for ease of interpretation.

II. CRC trends over 33 years, 1987 to 2020

This section summarizes trends experienced by the CRC over the past 33 years. The available measurement points in this report are the ten surveys of CRC congregants, taken every five years from 1987 to 2012 and every year from 2017 to 2020.

The trends reviewed here are divided into three parts:

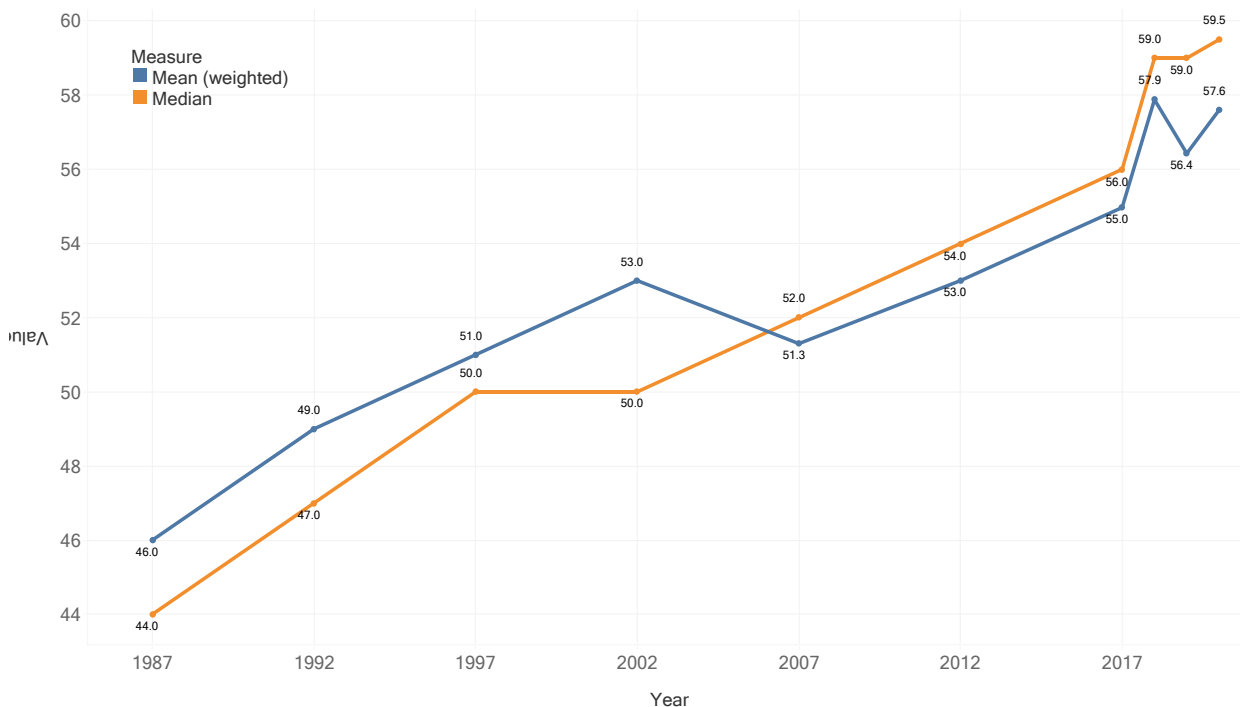
1. demographics;
2. church-related characteristics;
3. other trend items of interest available for 2007, 2012, and 2017 to 2020 only.

DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

Continued aging of the constituency

As shown in **Figure 2**, the average survey respondents are now in their late 50s, topping out at an average age of 59.5 in 2020, up from 46 in 1987 and up from 56 in 2017.¹² When measured as a median—that is, the age at which half of all respondents are older and half younger—average age also increased to 57.6 in 2020, up from 44 in 1987 and 55 in 2017.

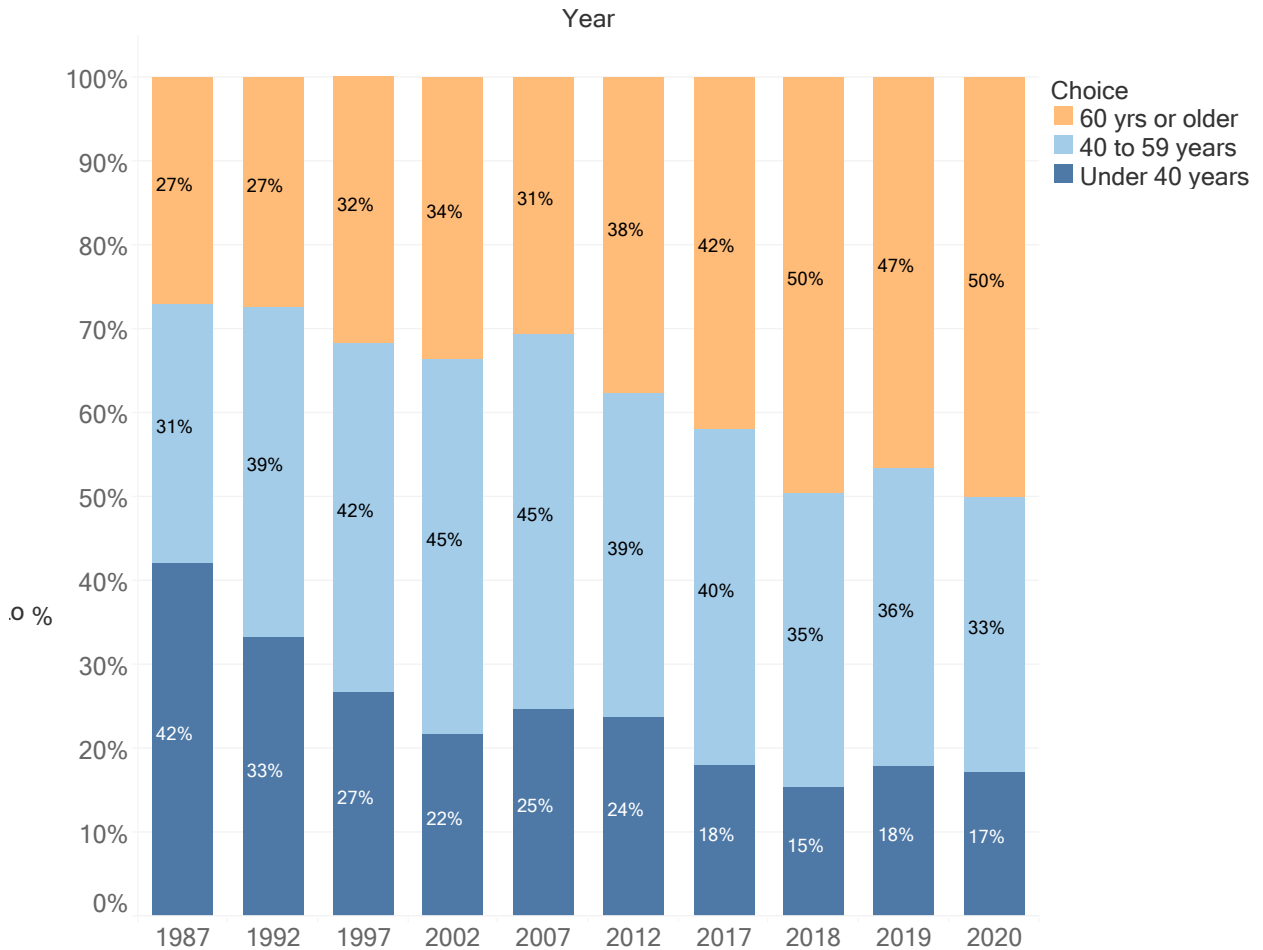
Figure 2 Average age of respondents (weighted) is nearing 60



¹² These averages do not reflect the entire CRC population, only those 18 or older eligible to participate in the survey.

Figure 3 shows, for each survey year, a breakdown of respondents into three broad age categories: under 40, 40-59, and 60 or older. In 1987, Baby Boomers, the extraordinarily large cohort of babies born approximately between 1946 and 1965, would have been between the ages of 22 and 40. In 1987, 42 percent of respondents were under 40, and Boomers constituted a majority of them. As Baby Boomers have aged, they contributed first to the expansion of the age group 40 to 59, then to the group 60 and over. In 2020, 50 percent of respondents are over 60. The youngest Boomers are now 55, and the majority of them are 60 or older.

Figure 3 Age categories by survey year



The four years of the current survey period, 2017 to 2020, suggest some stabilization in the percent under 40, ranging between 18 percent in 2017 and 15 percent in 2018, and ending at 17 percent in 2020.

The apparent aging of the survey respondent community is amplified by its Whiteness and the low participation rate (nearly 0 percent) of congregations with primary ethnicities other than Anglo/Caucasian and Dutch. The Millennial generation is now larger than the Boomer generation, but it is also considerably more diverse ethnically.¹³ See **Figure 1** on page 9 and **Table 3** on page 10 for evidence of underrepresentation in the survey of congregations primarily of ethnicities other than Anglo/Caucasian and Dutch.

¹³ William H. Frey, "The Millennial Generation: A Demographic Bridge to America's Diverse Future," *Brookings* (blog), January 24, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/millennials/>.

Declining households with children and with children in Christian schools

Figure 4 shows a sustained decline in the number of children under 18 per household, declining from a high of 1.1 in 1992 to a low of 0.61 in 2018 and ending at 0.68 in the 2020 sample. However, at least among our survey respondents, the number of children per household *in households with children* has recovered from its low of 2.0 in 2007 to an all-time high of 2.45 in 2020.

Figure 4 Average children per household for all households and households with children under 18

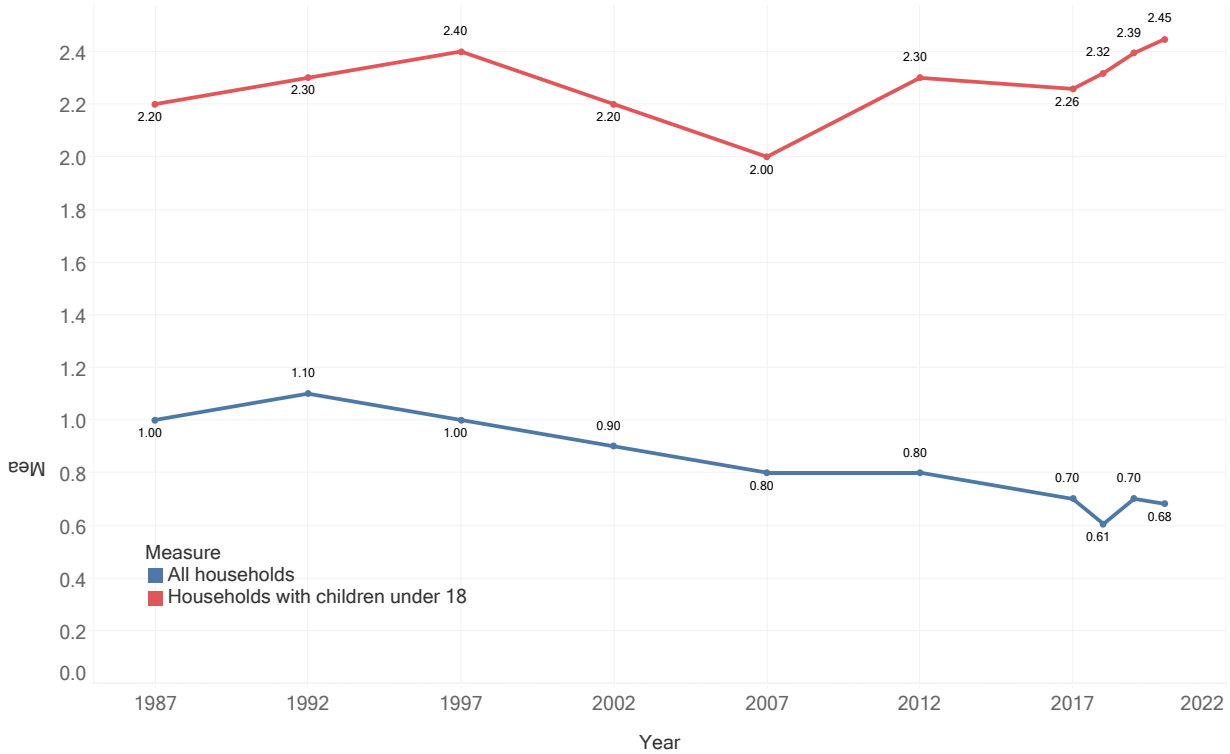


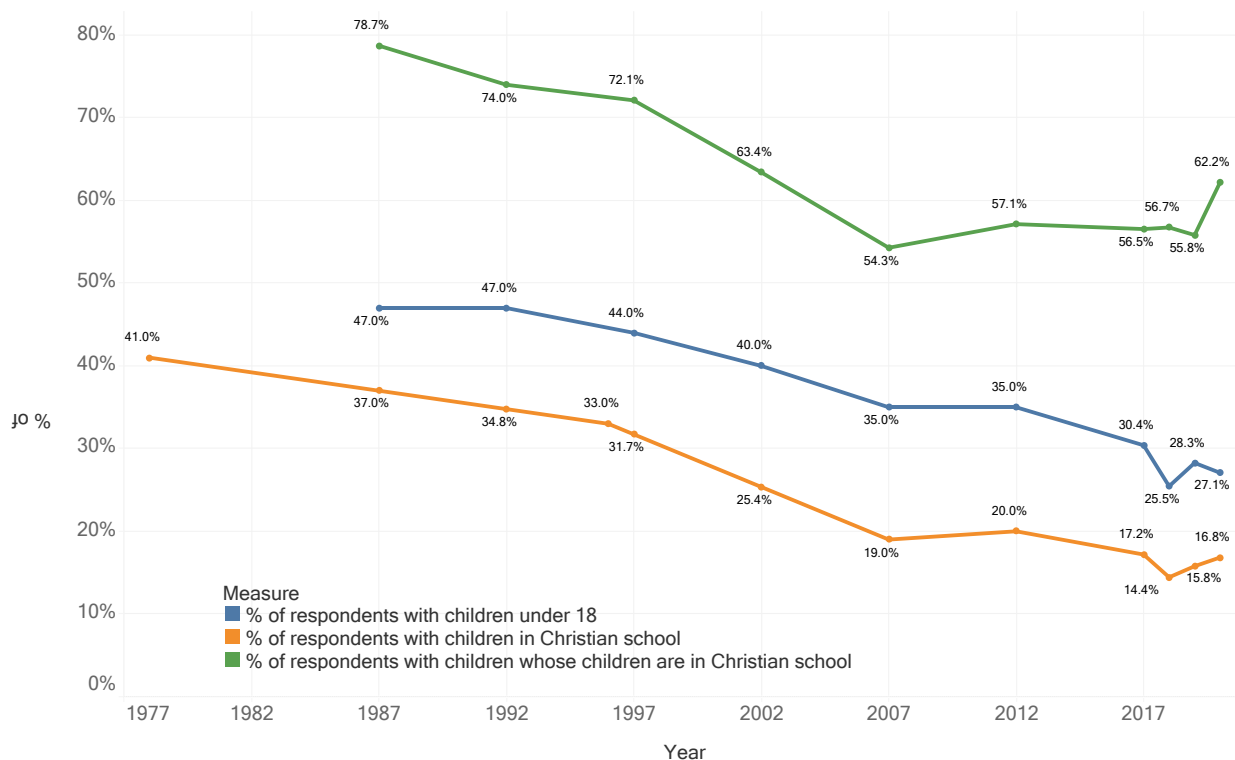
Figure 5 shows trend lines for the percentage of households with children under 18 (A, blue), the percentage of households with children under 18 attending Christian school (B, orange), and the percentage of households with children under 18 that have children attending Christian school (B as a percentage of A, or simply B/A).¹⁴

The percentage of households with children under 18 fell from 47.0 percent in 1987 to a low of 25.5 percent in the 2018 sample, ending at 27.1 percent in 2020.

Using these three measurement points, we observe that the percentage of CRC households with children in Christian school fell from 41 percent in 1978 to a low of 14.4 percent in 2018 but ticked up a bit to 16.8 percent in the 2020 sample. Only one in six CRCNA households has children under 18 who are attending Christian school, where once that figure was more than two in five.

However, as the green line in **Figure 5** shows, our 2020 sample stands out, with 62.2 percent of respondents with children reporting that those children attend Christian school, close to the 63.4 percent value last observed in 2002.

Figure 5 Percent of households with children and with children in Christian school



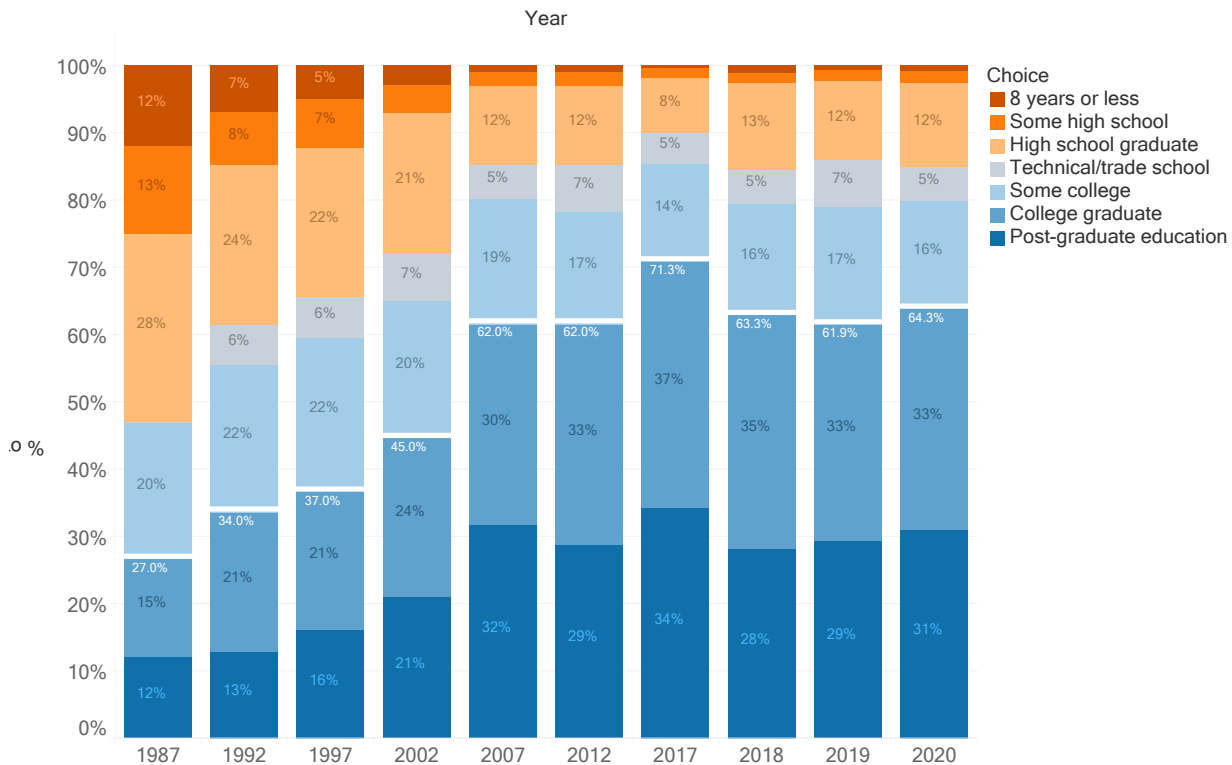
¹⁴ To estimate the trend of households with children in Christian school (B, orange), we borrowed measurement points from two other denomination-wide surveys: a 1978 survey sponsored by the CRWRC and a 1996 survey sponsored by Barnabas Foundation. Values for 1987, 1992, 1997, and 2002 are interpolated from the trend line.

Increasing proportion of CRC constituency with college education

Figure 6 shows the breakdown of education levels among CRC adult survey respondents. In 1987, nearly as many respondents had no high school diploma (25 percent) as had college degrees (27 percent); in 2017—an unusually well-educated sample—respondents with college degrees or post-graduate education (71.3 percent) outnumbered respondents with a high school diploma or less (9 percent) by a ratio of about 8 to 1. Christian Reformed Church survey respondents are unusually well-educated; in 2018, 35 percent of Americans over 25 had a Bachelor’s degree¹⁵ and 34 percent of Canadians 25 to 64 had a post-secondary education.¹⁶

People of color who responded to the Our Journey 2020 survey reported somewhat greater average educational attainment than White respondents. 35 percent reported postgraduate degrees, a rate 5 percent higher than the average for White respondents.

Figure 6 College-educated proportion is rising



¹⁵ “Educational Attainment in the United States,” in *Wikipedia*, September 18, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Educational_attainment_in_the_United_States&oldid=979124015.

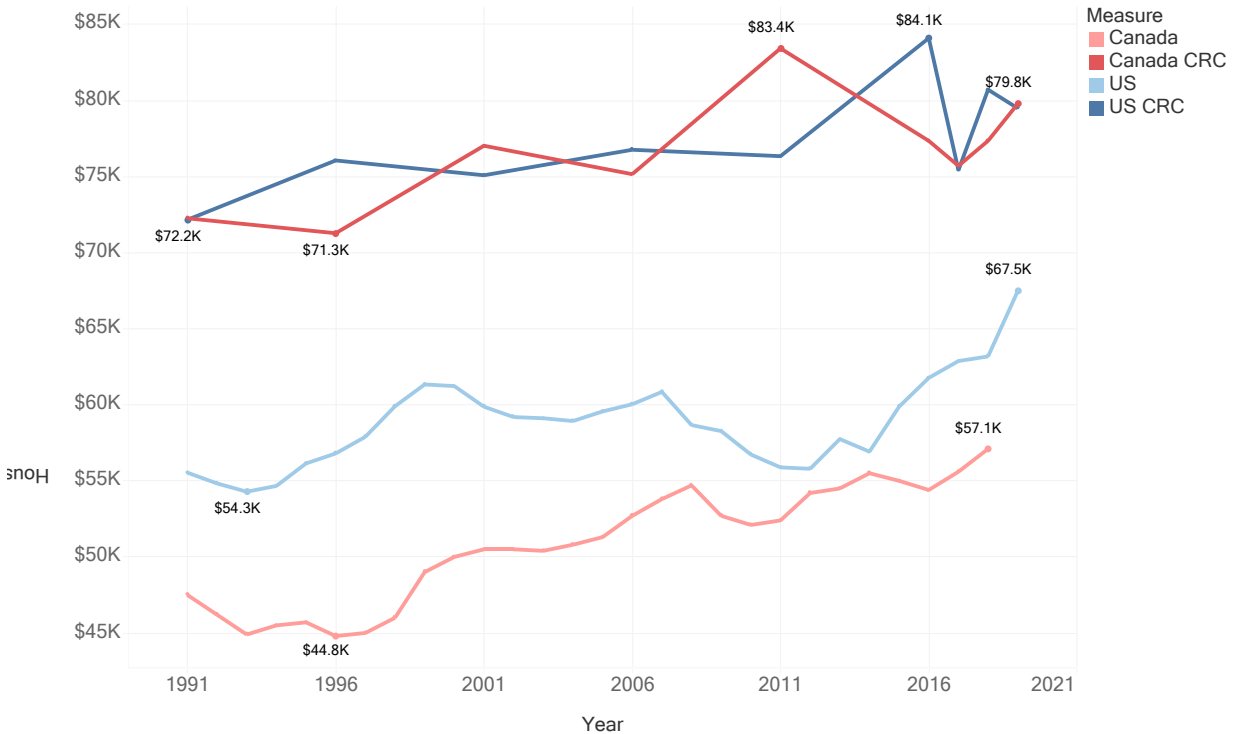
¹⁶ Statistics Canada Government of Canada, “Educational Attainment of the Population Aged 25 to 64, by Age Group and Sex, Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), Canada, Provinces and Territories,” December 27, 2017, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3710013001>.

Household income is higher than but growing slower than national averages

In **Figure 7**, median annual household income (pre-taxes) has adjusted to reflect inflation in each country by expressing the figures in constant 2018 dollars.¹⁷ For CRC households in both the United States and Canada, from 1991 through 2019, average incomes significantly and consistently exceed the national averages. Median income has a mixed pattern for CRC US and CRC Canada, as adjusted median income has increased and decreased over the years. These changes are likely due more to variation in the participating respondents and churches than to overall economic conditions.

CRC households are wealthy, but the estimated rate of growth in median income has fallen behind overall growth rates. For the CRC in the both countries, the 28-year increase in real income from 1991 to 2019 was 10.5 percent, compared to 20.5 percent in the US and 19 percent in Canada (through 2018). The compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of CRC median household income in both countries was about 0.36 percent, nearly half the rate for all households in the US (0.67 percent) and Canada (0.65 percent).

Figure 7 Real (inflation-adjusted in 2018 dollars) median household income continues to exceed US and Canadian¹⁸



¹⁷ Survey responses are for income brackets, so there is some imprecision in calculating means and medians. Brackets are assigned the dollar value of their midpoint; from 1987 to 2012, medians were adjusted by a proprietary algorithm in SPSS software. For 2017 to 2020, CSR staff created a regression model to adjust and refine the bracket midpoints based on demographics such as age, gender, education, marital status, race, occupation, and employment status.

¹⁸ US Census Bureau, "Historical Income Tables: Households; Table H-9," The United States Census Bureau, accessed September 23, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-income-households.html>; Statistics Canada Government of Canada, "Market Income, Government Transfers, Total Income, Income Tax and after-Tax Income by Economic Family Type," February 26, 2019, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1110019001>; Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, "Consumer Price Index, 1913-," Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, 2020, <https://www.minneapolisfed.org:443/about-us/monetary-policy/inflation-calculator/consumer-price-index-1913->; Statistics Canada Government of Canada, "Consumer Price Index, Annual Average, Not Seasonally Adjusted," January 18, 2019, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1810000501>.

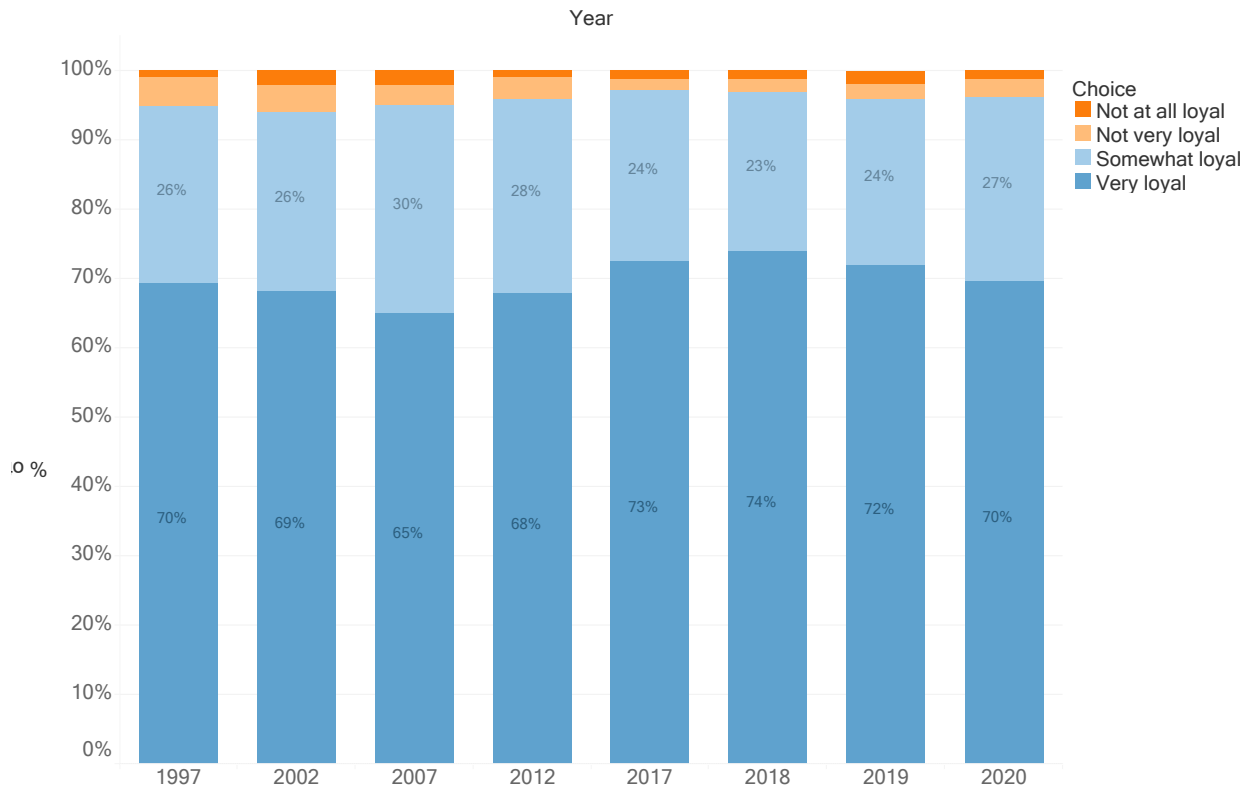
FAITH-RELATED CHARACTERISTICS

Largely stable loyalty to local church and denomination

Since the 1997 survey, we have asked respondents to describe their level of loyalty to their local church. Four levels of loyalty are provided: very, somewhat, not very, and none. As shown in **Figure 8**, those saying they are “very loyal” to their local church is remarkably stable, ranging from a low of 65 percent in 2007 to a high of 74 percent in 2018.

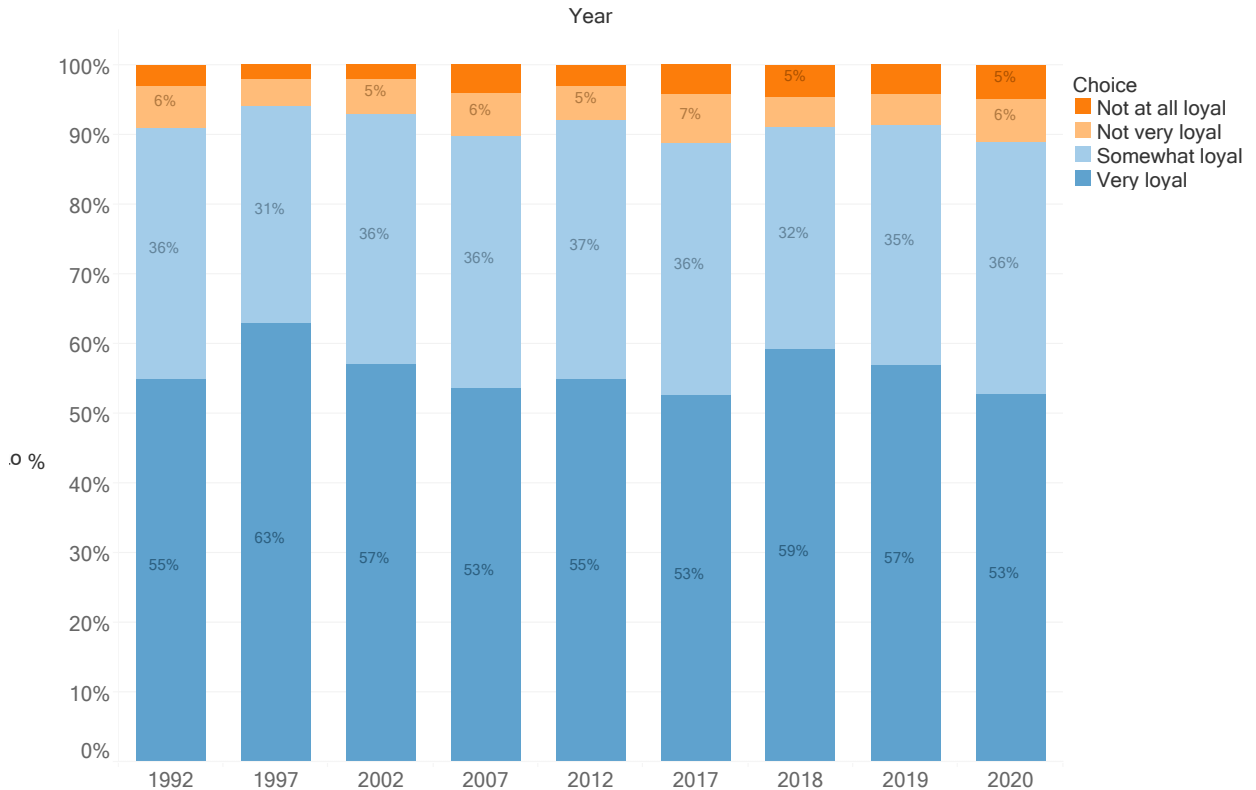
Factors associated with greater loyalty to one’s home congregation include trust in church leadership, perceptions of church health, retirement age, participation in volunteer or ministry roles, household income, and sex (women express greater loyalty).

Figure 8 Loyalty to congregation fluctuated but high and fairly stable since 1997



In **Figure 9**, loyalty to the Christian Reformed Church appears lower than loyalty to congregation, but similarly stable over the years. Respondents who reported being “very loyal” to the CRC have never made up less than 53 percent of a survey wave (2007, 2017, and 2020) and never more than 63 percent (1997). Factors associated with denominational loyalty are very similar to those for congregational loyalty (see comments on **Figure 8** on page 18). However, only pastors report greater denominational loyalty than others, while elders, deacons, Sunday School teachers, and small group leaders do not report the same relatively greater loyalty to the denomination that they do to their local congregation. Women do not report greater loyalty, but people of color do. However, those who report “none of the above” in forms of volunteering and leadership do report significantly lesser loyalty both to their congregation and to the CRC.

Figure 9 Loyalty to the Christian Reformed Church

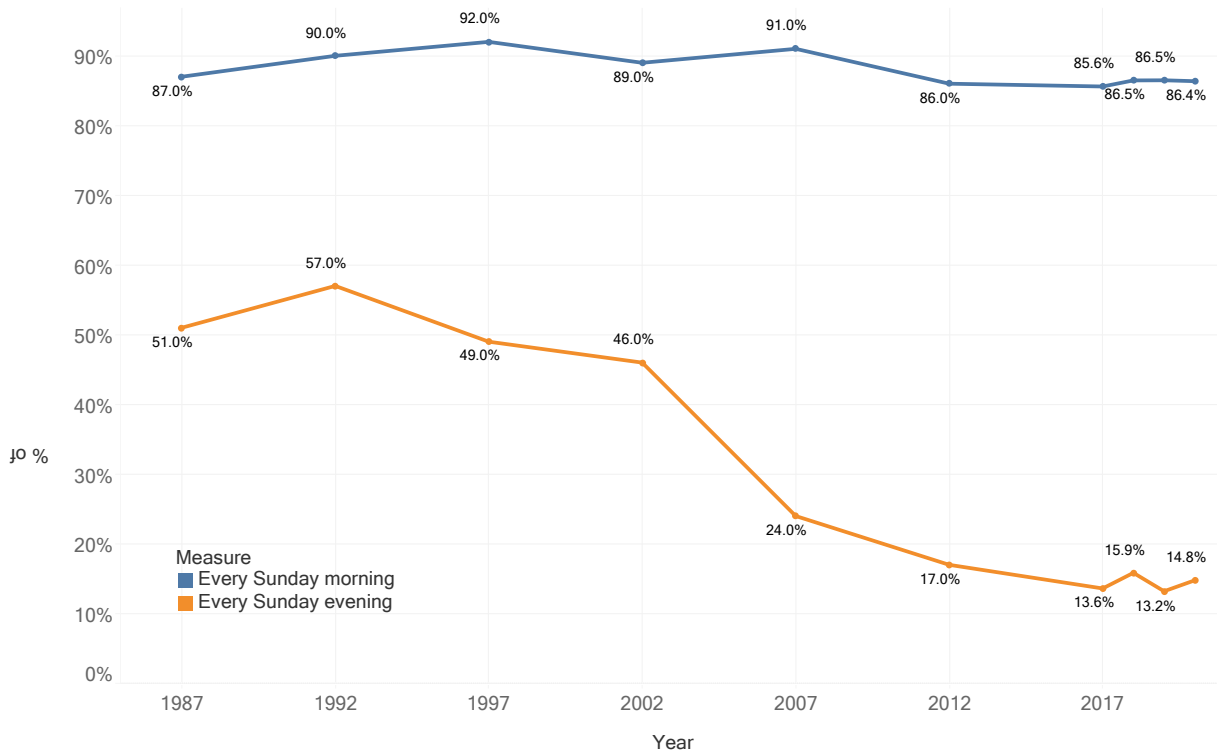


High and stable morning attendance, while morning attendance reaches a floor

In **Figure 10**, respondents who say they attend morning worship services every Sunday has remained fairly steady over the past 33 years, hovering around 86 percent since 2012. The long decline in Sunday evening worship service attendance may be nearing its low point, averaging 14.2 percent over the 2017 to 2020 period.

Regular Sunday evening attendance is most likely to be reported by older, less educated, and less wealthy respondents from small towns and farms in the US Central and US Great Lakes regions. Conversely, it is least likely among younger, well-educated, and wealthier urban dwellers in Canada and the US Eastern and US Western regions.

Figure 10 Weekly Sunday morning attendance stable around 86 percent; evening attendance stabilizing around 15 percent



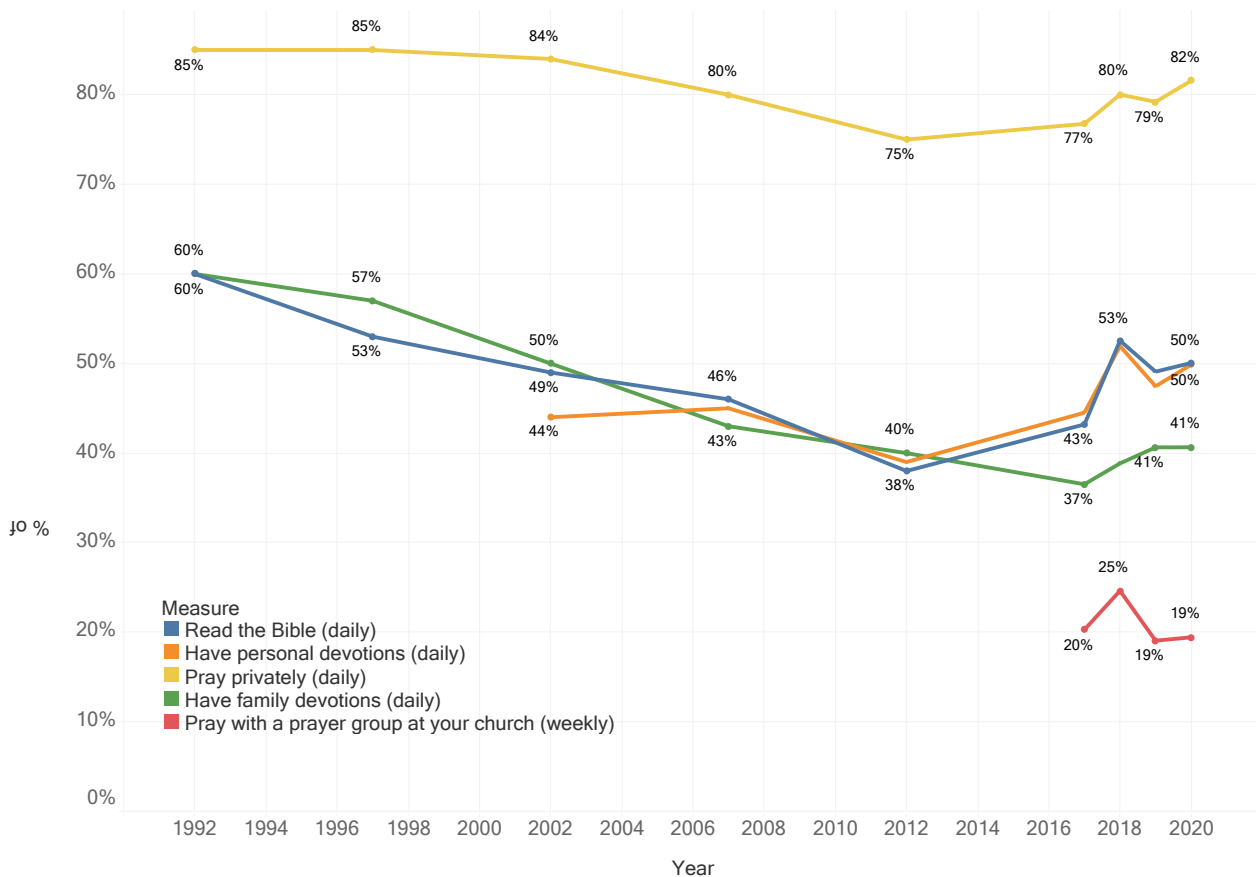
Spiritual disciplines seem to be recovering

Figure 11 displays how often CRC people say they engage in certain spiritual disciplines or devotional practices. There are five: praying privately, reading the Bible, having personal devotions, having family devotions, and praying with a group at church (new in 2017). The chart shows the percentage of those who engage in these practices daily or more often (weekly for praying with a group).

Praying privately (yellow) is the most common practice, with 82 percent reporting they do so daily, up from a low of 75 percent in 2012 and nearing levels reported in the late 80s and 90s. Similarly, reading the Bible daily (blue) and having personal devotions daily (orange) are all but indistinguishable practices that have recovered from lows around 38 percent in 2012 to 50 percent in 2020, a rate last reported in 2002. Daily family devotions may also be recovering a bit, up from a low of 37 percent in 2017 to 41 percent in 2020. Finally, praying weekly with a group at church was reported by 19 to 25 percent of respondents.

The four disciplines measured since 2002 or earlier appear to recover since a low point in 2012; however, statistical investigation suggests this recovery is largely an artifact of an aging population of survey respondents, since retirement is associated with more spare time. Factors associated with high levels of devotional activity include age (the older the respondent, the more devotional activity), income (the more money, the less discipline), congregational health (respondents who perceive a healthier home congregation exercise more discipline), and ministry engagement—especially for pastors, not surprisingly.

Figure 11 Devotional practices continue to decline



TRENDS SUMMARY

Our review of selected CRC demographic trends shows a denomination with an aging constituency (still driven primarily by the aging Baby Boomers), fewer households with dependent children and with children attending Christian school, a stable and high proportion of college graduates, and household incomes increasing at a rate slower than the general population.

Trends of church-related characteristics include stable levels of loyalty to congregation and denomination, signs of stabilization in the rate of Sunday evening worship attendance, and aging-driven recovery in the proportion of respondents reporting regular devotional activities.

III. Introducing the Desired Futures scales

In 2015, the CRCNA implemented a strategic plan called “Our Journey 2020,” which identified a comprehensive list of “Desired Futures” in five areas:

6. **Church and community:** churches flowing into their communities
7. **Discipleship:** churches nurturing disciples
8. **Leadership:** churches cultivating leaders
9. **Identity:** churches telling our story
10. **Collaboration:** churches working in partnership

The “Desired Futures” portion of the questionnaire includes questions related to each of the five areas above. These questions were designed to assist congregations in developing strategies and accessing resources appropriate to their unique ministry contexts and opportunities. The following section presents results of each survey question, as well as the overall scales for each of the five “Desired Futures” areas.¹⁹ For each scale, we look for evidence of systematic differences by year of survey, age, gender, race, education, and income. This allows us to bring a more critical eye to the next section, which considers how the Desired Futures vary across churches.

¹⁹ Statistical analysis with Cronbach’s alpha shows that each scale is statistically reliable, with alpha values of at least 0.76 (for Identity) and ranging as high as 0.88 (for Discipleship). Reliability means the scale does not depend too much on any one item, producing stable results even when individual questions are excluded.

CHURCH AND COMMUNITY

As shown in **Figure 12**, most respondents say that their church strongly encourages them to build relationships with one another (84 percent say “Definitely” or “Mostly true”), that their church is generous in offering resources (79 percent), that they intentionally build relationships with other Christians (77 percent), that their church is discerning God’s work among them (73 percent), and that they are growing in their sense of belonging (70 percent). Intentionally building relationships with other Christians was much more likely (77 percent) than building relationships with non-Christians (46 percent). A large minority indicated that their congregations are not involved birthing new churches and discipling communities (43 percent “Definitely UNTRUE” or “Hardly true”).

Figure 12 Church and community statements

Please indicate how true each statement is concerning your church and yourself:

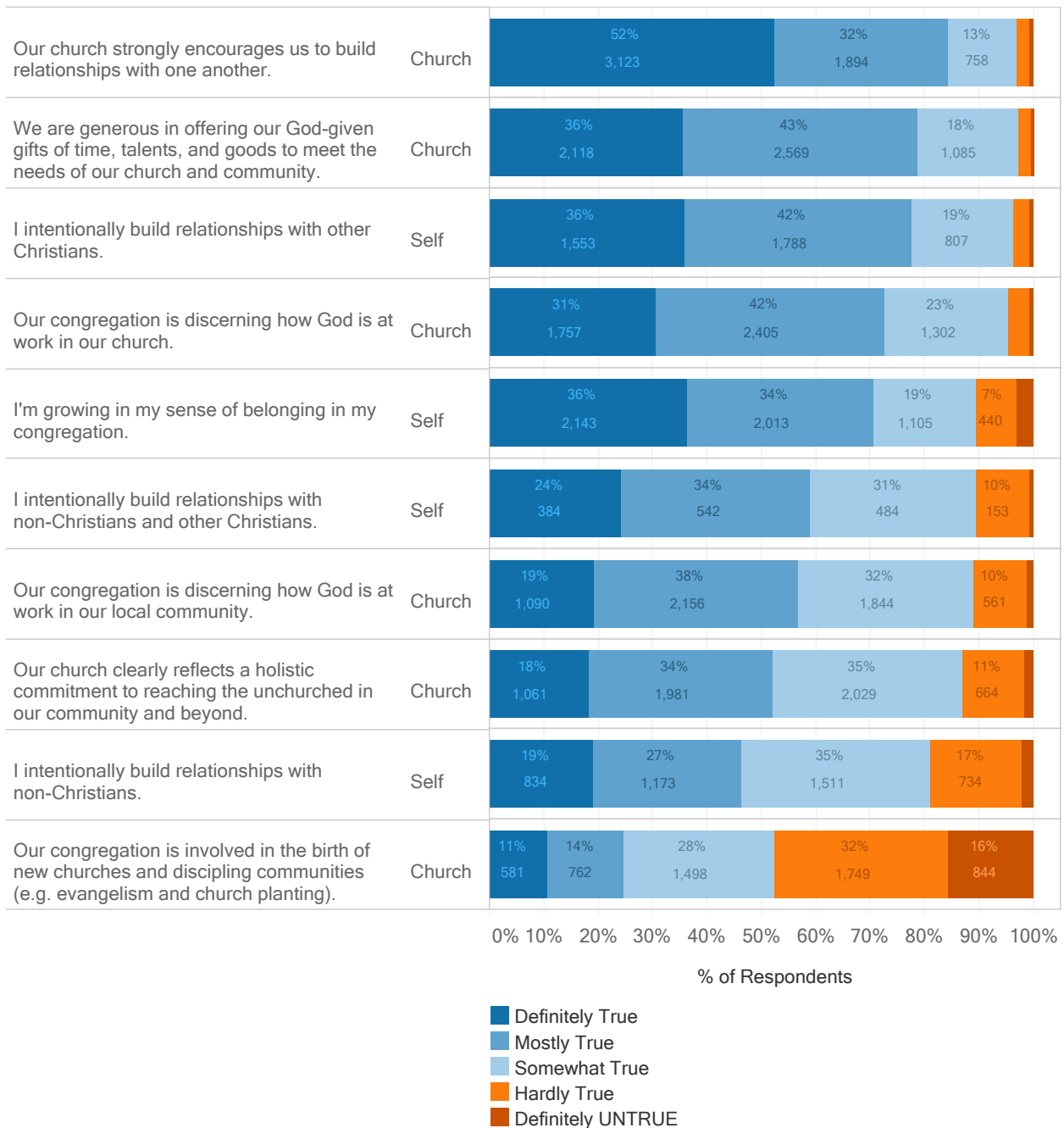
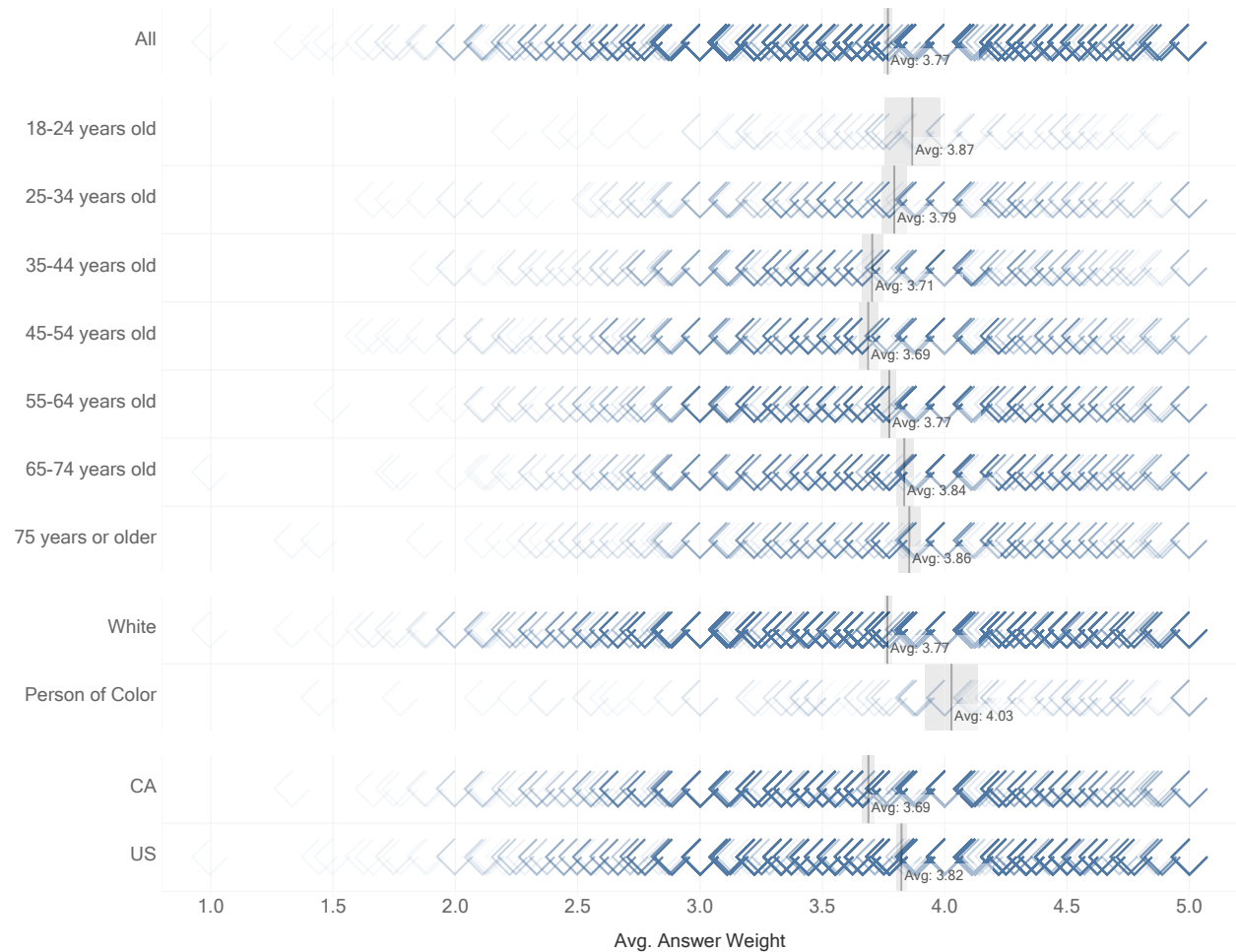


Figure 13 displays average responses to Church and Community measures. Each response was assigned a value from 1 (“Definitely UNTRUE”) to 5 (“Definitely True”). Each diamond represents one respondent’s average across all ten statements. For example, if a respondent selected “Definitely UNTRUE” for all ten statements, their average response is represented by a diamond positioned at 1.0, while a respondent who selected “Definitely True” for all ten statements has a diamond at 5.0. Diamonds are slightly transparent, so lighter colors represent fewer respondents, while darker diamonds represent dense areas of overlap. Overall, respondents averaged a response of 3.77. In other words, respondents perceive these Church and Community Desired Futures are, on average, very nearly “Mostly true.”

Figure 13 Church and community scale



The second pane of **Figure 13** separates the average scale scores by age.²⁰ Younger respondents (34 and under) and older respondents (55 years or older) rated these statements slightly more true (around 0.1-0.2 points). In the third pane, people of color said these statements were slightly more true for their congregations and themselves than did white respondents. Canadian respondents reported feeling that these statements were less true for their church and for themselves than American respondents.²¹

The Church and Community scale did not vary significantly by other factors we examined: year of the survey, gender, education, or income.

²⁰ Gray bands around the black lines for scale averages represent 95% confidence intervals; when two bands do not overlap, the averages are statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level.

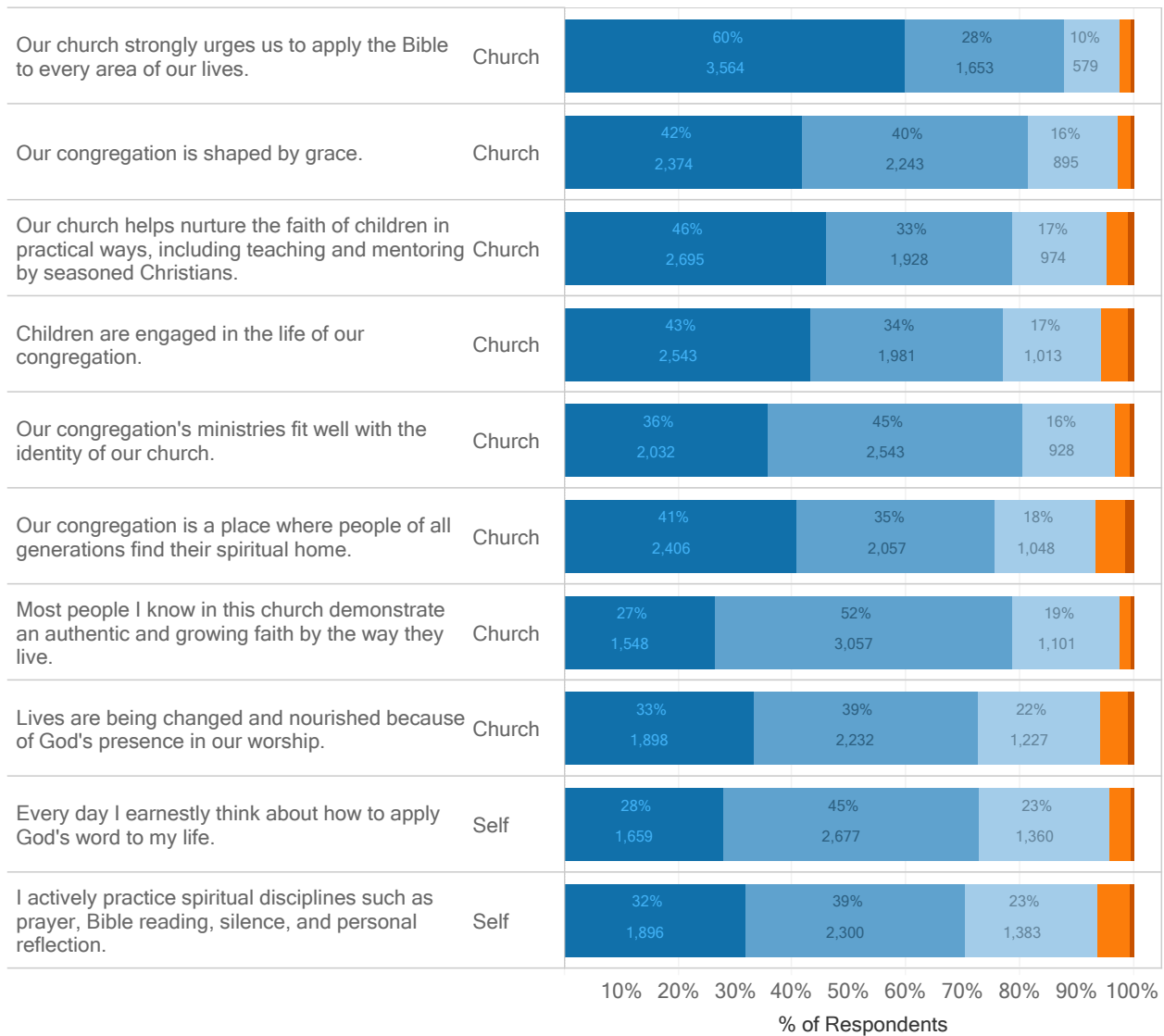
²¹ Note that differences between countries may reflect national differences in cultural styles of survey response rather than substantive differences in real conditions.

DISCIPLESHIP

Figure 14 documents the second group of “Desired Futures” statements. A large majority of respondents (60 percent) indicated that it is “Definitely true” that their church strongly urges congregants to apply the Bible to every area of their lives. But 25 percent of respondents said it wasn’t true that they discuss their growth as a disciple with someone they trust or that they speak regularly with others about their spiritual life.

Figure 14 Discipleship matrix

Please indicate how true each statement is concerning your church and yourself:

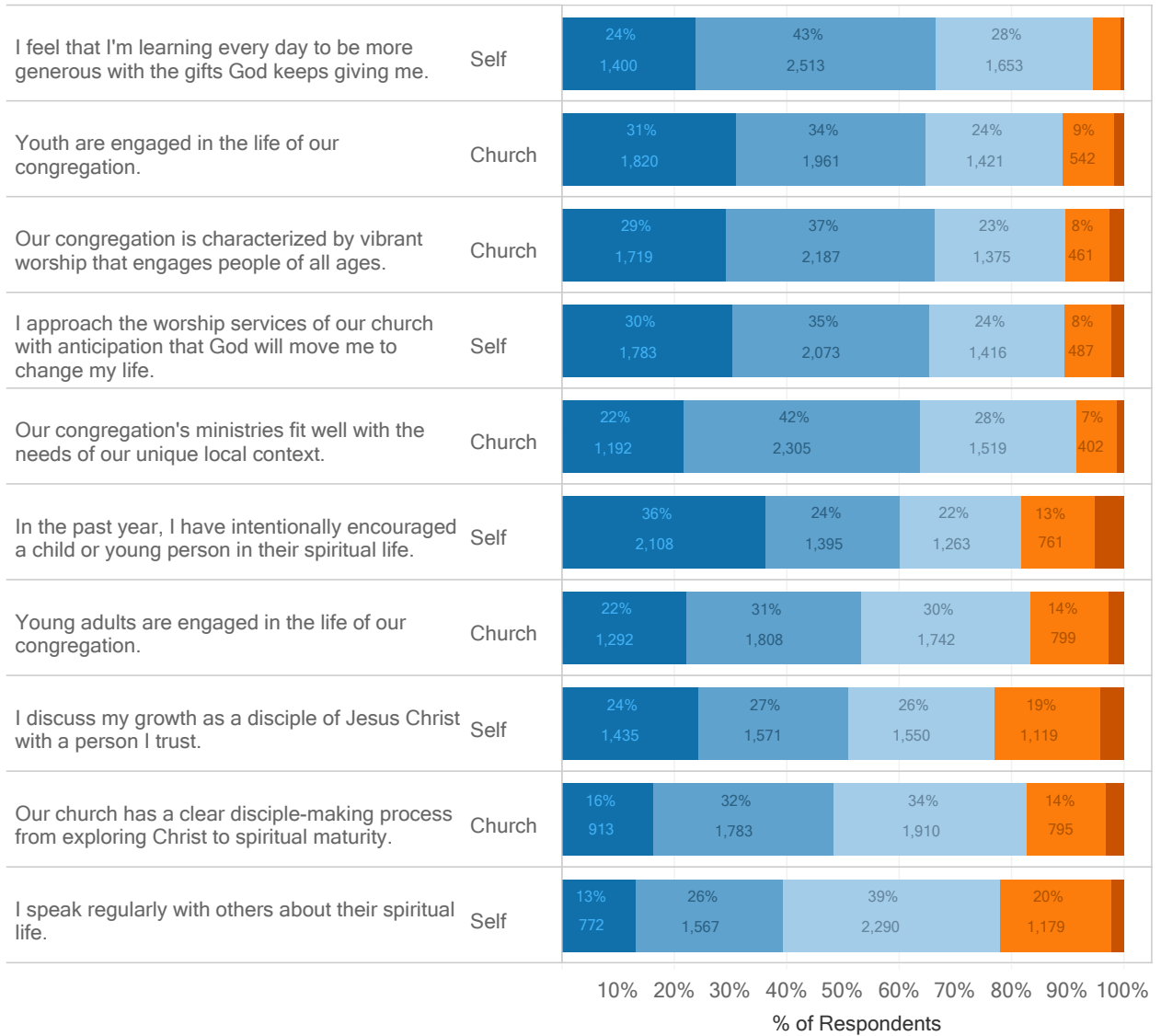


- Definitely True
- Mostly True
- Somewhat True
- Hardly True
- Definitely UNTRUE

(Figure continues on following page.)

Figure 14 continued:

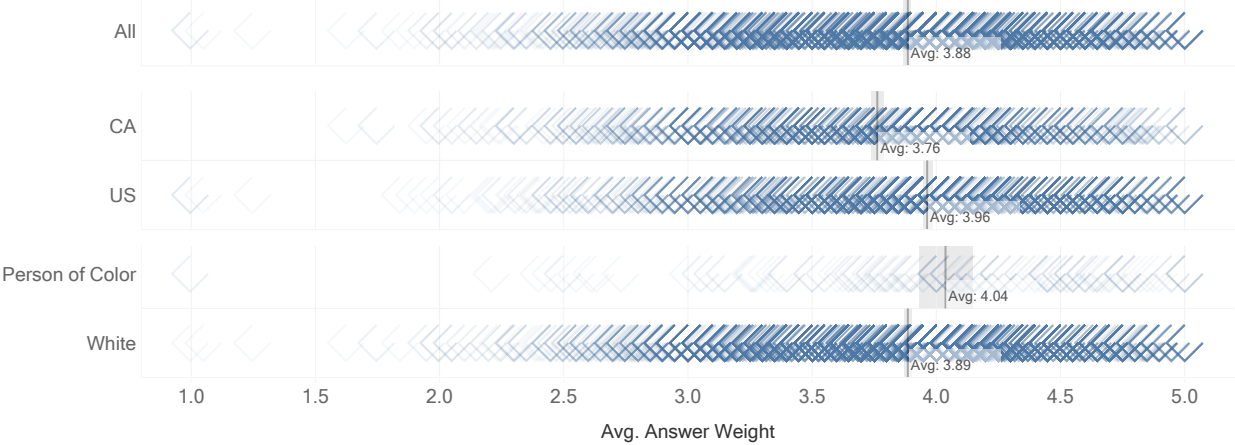
Please indicate how true each statement is concerning your church and yourself:



- Definitely True
- Mostly True
- Somewhat True
- Hardly True
- Definitely UNTRUE

Overall, respondents indicated that these 20 Discipleship statements were “Mostly true” for their church and for themselves. As shown in **Figure 15**, respondents reported an average of 3.88 across all twelve statements.

Figure 15 Discipleship scale



Differences between respondents from different countries again appear when comparing average Discipleship scores. On average, Canadian respondents scored a bit lower (3.76) than American respondents (3.96), as shown the second pane.

Respondents of color reported an average of 4.04 on each of the twelve Discipleship statements, while white respondents reported an average of 3.89.

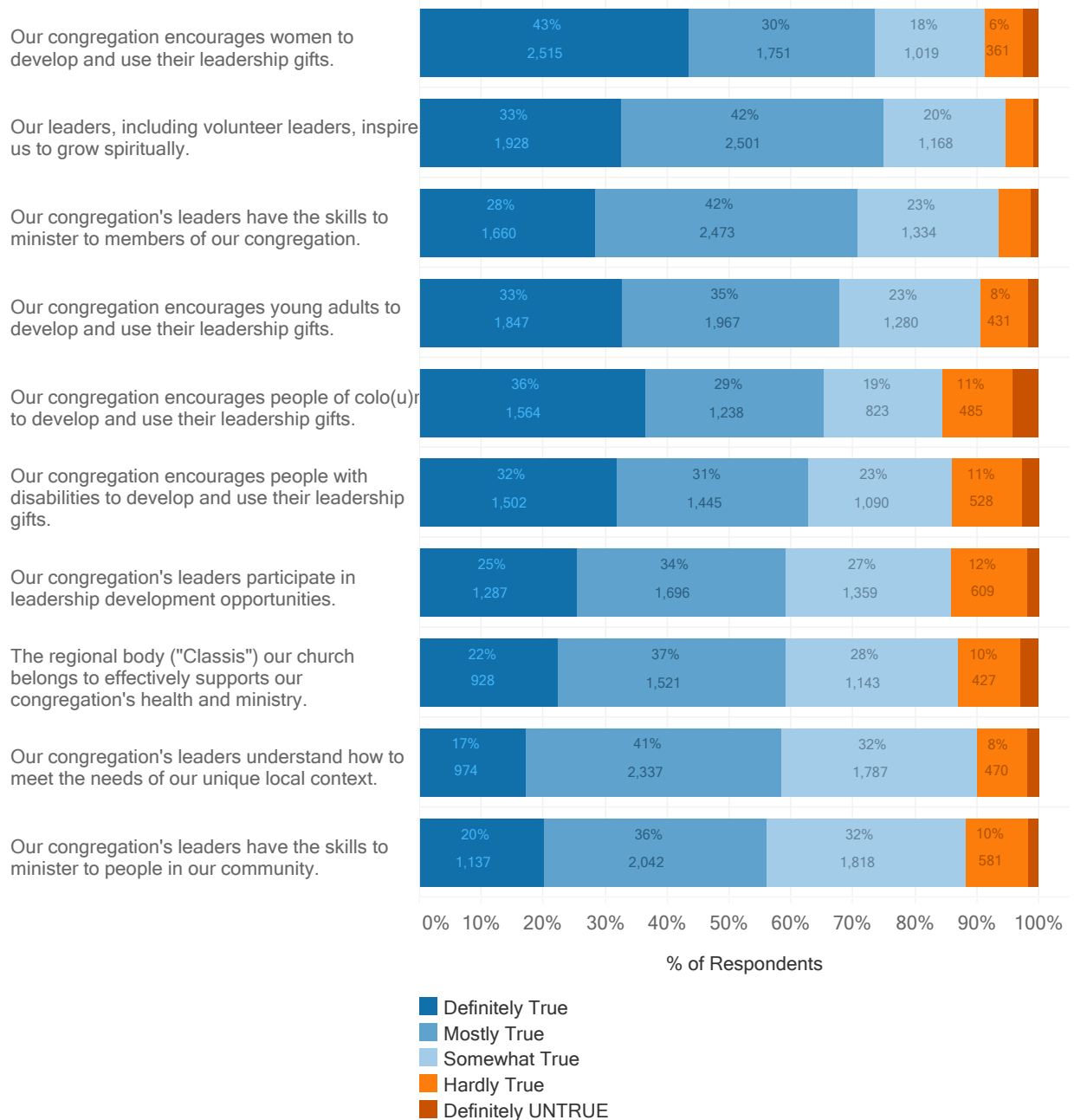
The Discipleship scale averages did not vary by year of survey, gender, income, or education.

LEADERSHIP

The third section of “Desired Futures” questions asked respondents about six statements related to leadership. The results of this question are shown below in **Figure 16**. Nearly three quarters of respondents (73 percent “Definitely” or “Mostly true”) reported that their congregation encourages women to develop and use their gifts; a full 75 percent say leaders inspire the congregation to grow spiritually. About 70 percent of respondents felt that their congregation’s leaders have the skills to minister to members of the congregation. At the lower end, 13 percent of respondents who rendered judgment perceived that their leaders had not participated in development opportunities,²² and 11 percent expressed doubt that their leaders had the skills to minister to people in the community.

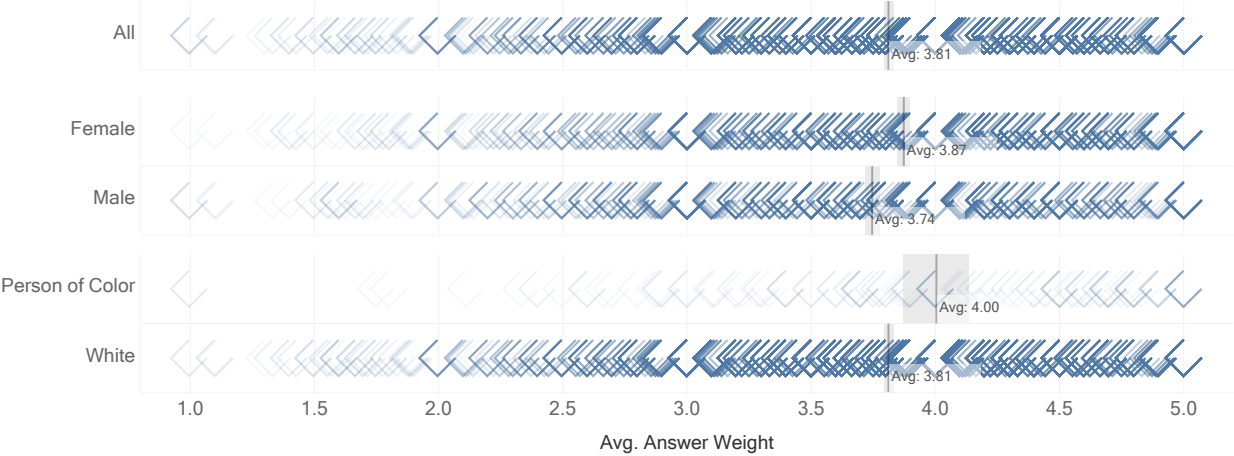
Figure 16 Leadership statements

Please indicate how true each statement is concerning your church:



Across the six Leadership statements, respondents reported an average of 3.81, meaning that overall, they felt the leadership statements were mostly true of their congregation (see **Figure 17**).

Figure 17 Leadership scale



Differences between male and female respondents emerged in this scale, with female respondents reporting a higher average (3.87) than male respondents (3.74).

As for the other scales, respondents of color reported that these statements were more true for their congregation than white respondents reported.

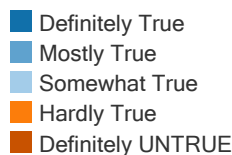
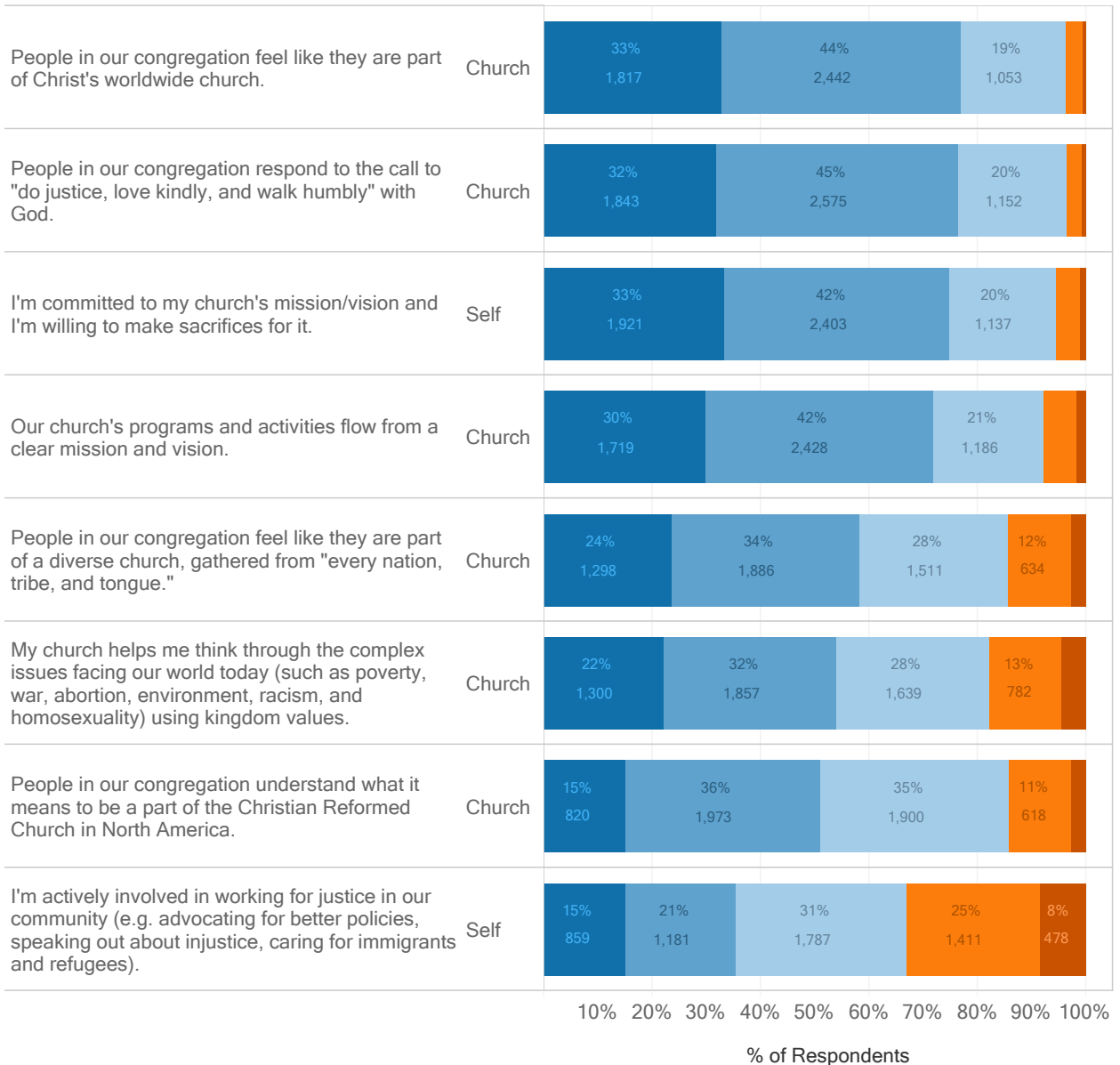
Averages for the Leadership scale did not vary significantly by year of survey, country, income, or age.

IDENTITY

The fourth group of “Desired Futures” asked respondents to respond to a set of statements regarding Identity, as shown in **Figure 18**. Over three-quarters of respondents (77 percent) reported that it is “Definitely” or “Mostly true” that congregants feels like they are part of the larger church and that their congregation responds to the call to “do justice, love kindly, and walk humbly” with God. However, a third (33 percent) of respondents indicated that they are not actively involved in working for justice in their community.

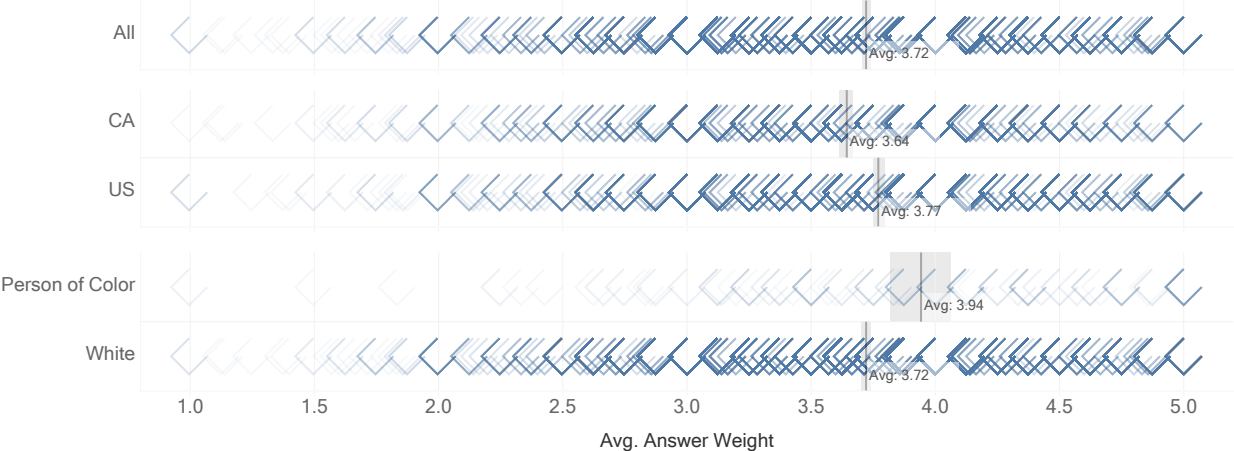
Figure 18 Identity statements

Please indicate how true each statement is concerning your church and yourself:



Across all eight statements regarding Identity, respondents reported that these statements rang mostly true for their congregation and themselves. As **Figure 19** shows, respondents reported an average of 3.72 for all statements.

Figure 19 Identity scale



Canadian respondents reported an average score of 3.64 versus 3.77 for American respondents.

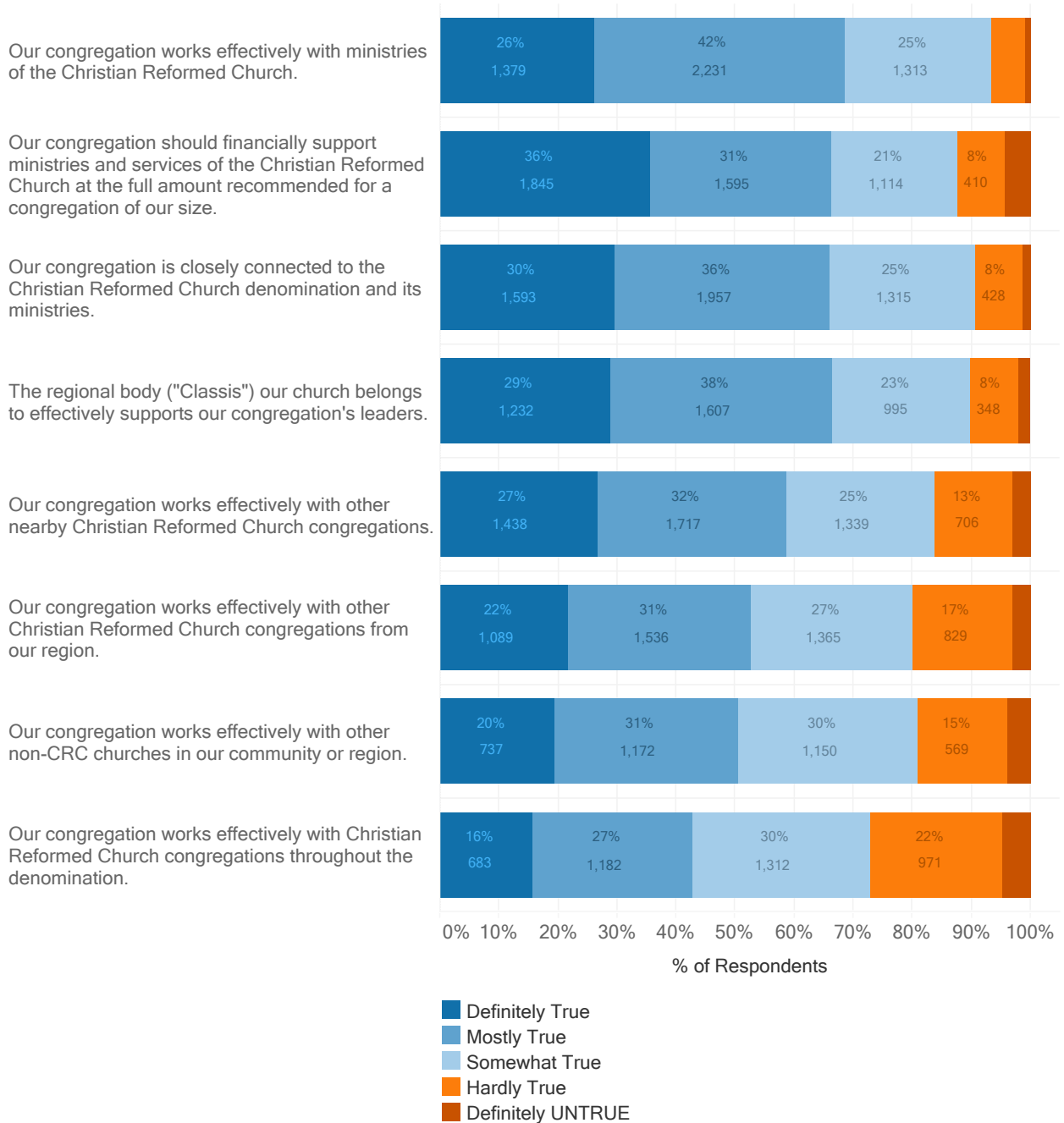
Respondents of color again reported that the Identity statements were more true on average (3.94) for their congregation than white respondents reported (3.72).

COLLABORATION

Finally, respondents were asked about collaboration by their church. As shown in **Figure 20**, at least two-thirds of respondents said their congregation works effectively with ministries of the Christian Reformed Church (68 percent “Definitely” or “Mostly true”), that the congregation should financially support the CRCNA (67 percent), and that their congregation is closely connected to the denomination and its ministries (66 percent). Far fewer respondents said their congregation works with other CRC congregations from their region (53 percent) or elsewhere (43 percent). Fully 25 percent doubt the last statement.

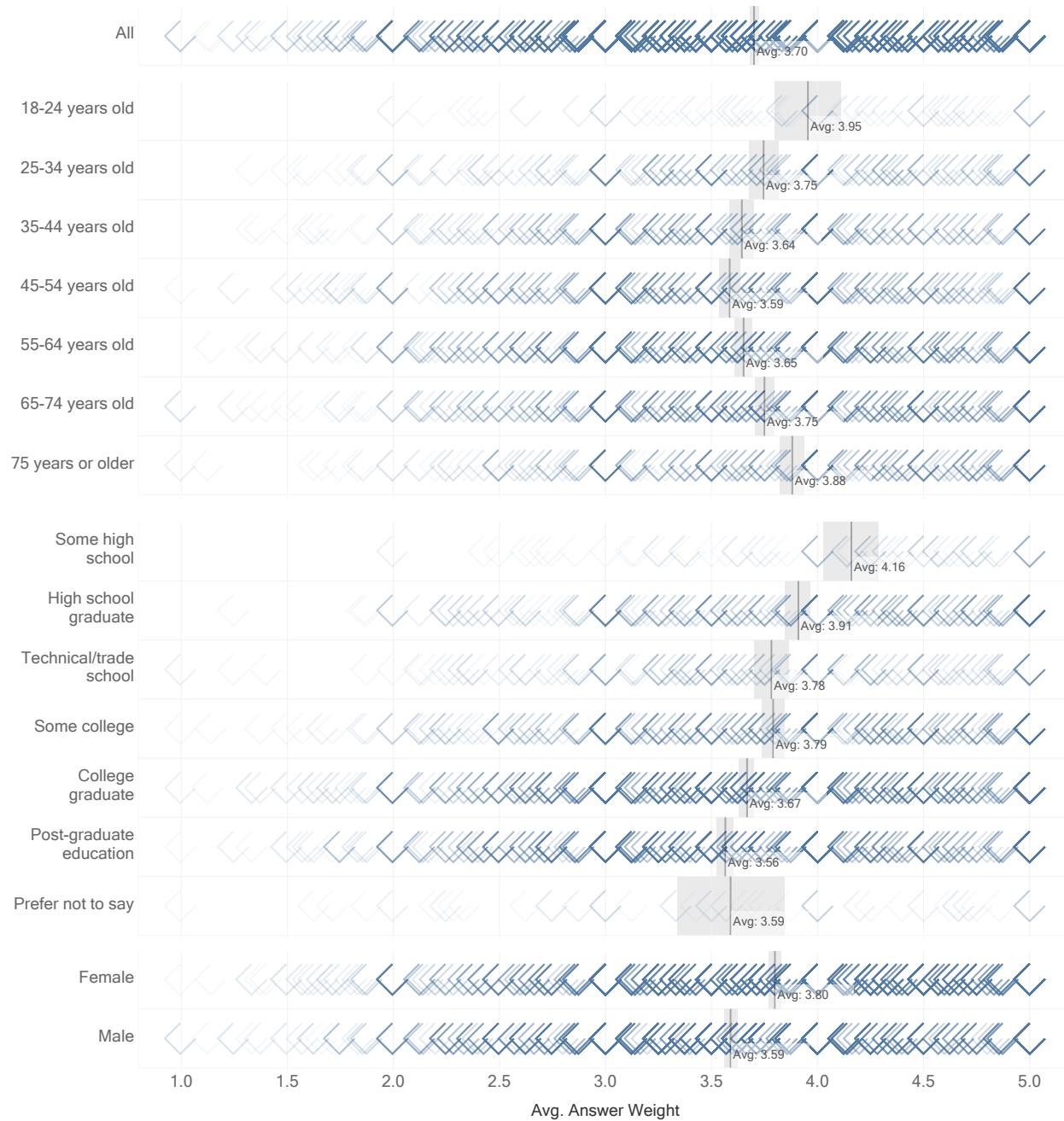
Figure 20 Collaboration statements

Please indicate how true each statement is concerning your church:



Similar to the overall Church and Community responses, respondents' answers to the Collaboration statements indicate that on average, respondents feel these statements are somewhere between somewhat true and mostly true for their congregation (see **Figure 21**).

Figure 21 Collaboration scale



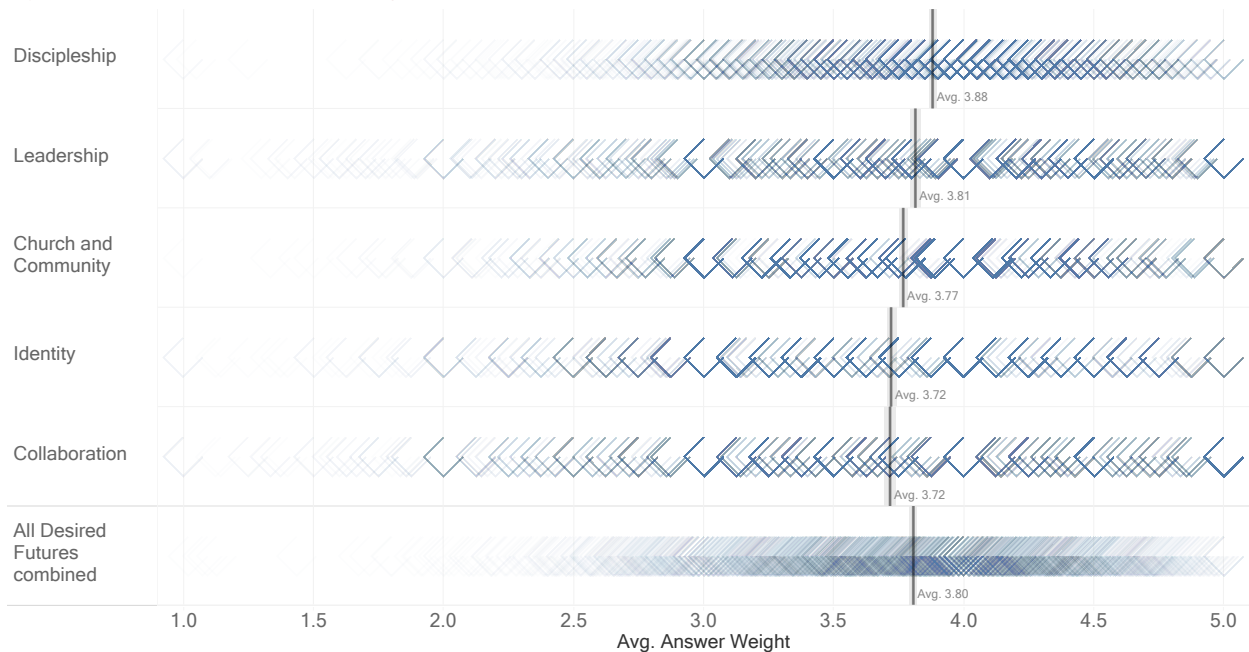
In the second pane, 35- to 54-year-olds responded that Collaboration statements were slightly less true than respondents who were younger or older. Respondents with undergraduate and post-graduate degrees tended to report lower levels of agreement that these statements were true for their congregation than those who did not. Female respondents tended to assess the Collaboration statements to be truer than did male respondents, with female respondents reporting an average of 3.8 on all statements and male respondents reporting an average of 3.59.

Average Collaboration scores did not vary by year of survey, country, income, or race.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The Desired Futures scales are remarkably stable and largely positive across demographics and years of the survey. Across all five scales, respondents rated the Discipleship and Leadership statements most true on average for their congregation and themselves, while Collaboration and Identity statements were rated slightly less true for respondents. A comparison of all five averages is presented in **Figure 22**. Discipleship scored highest (average score 3.88, just shy of “Mostly true”), followed by Leadership (3.81), Church and Community (3.77), Identity and Collaboration (tied at 3.72). Overall, the average respondent scored 3.80 across all five Desired Futures scales combined.

Figure 22 Desired Futures five scale comparison



As the CRCNA launches its “Our Journey 2025” strategic plan, there may be some merit in focusing effort items from each of the five areas that respondents rated as being less true for their congregations and for themselves. Some of these areas of growth are also highlighted in the discussion of respondent comments included later in this report (see **Themes from closing general comments** on page 54).

Church and Community: bolster church planting and evangelism

Respondents indicated that their congregations were doing well encouraging personal and interpersonal growth within the congregation. However, one-third of respondents felt their congregation was not very involved in the birth of new churches and discipling communities. An item of focus for this area may be to provide congregations with the resources and support to bolster their evangelism efforts in the broader community.

Discipleship: foster frank person-to-person discipling relationships

Personal spiritual growth appears to be strong among respondents: over 70 percent of respondents reported actively practicing spiritual disciplines and thinking about how to apply the Bible to their everyday life. But interpersonal spiritual connections are more difficult for respondents. Nearly a quarter of respondents reported that they do not discuss their growth as a disciple or about their spiritual life with someone they trust. Congregations may need to double down on their efforts to foster accountability for individual spiritual growth with trusted people.

Leadership: Most respondents indicated that their congregation's leadership was well-equipped to serve the members of the congregation. However, respondents indicated that one area for leadership growth could be encouraging leadership to engage in more leadership development opportunities. Such opportunities may also better equip leadership to minister to the broader community, another area of growth indicated by respondents in this section.

Identity: reinforce link between Reformed identity and complex justice issues

Nearly three quarters of respondents reported that their congregation responds to the call to do justice, love kindly, and walk humbly with God and that they are committed to their church's mission and vision. However, sizeable minorities of respondents reported that their congregations could do more to support justice in their community and wrestle with the complex issues facing the world today. About 15 percent of respondents also think they or their congregation struggle to understand what it means to be part of the CRCNA. Given these areas of opportunity, it could be valuable to provide congregants and congregations with actionable resources to engage justice and address complex issues.

Collaboration: enhance connections to other congregations

Many respondents felt their congregation is well-connected to the Christian Reformed Church and its ministries. However, connection to other congregations in the denomination and regionally seemed to be lacking for nearly a quarter of respondents. In the same way that the denomination may offer support and resources for congregations to connect to their broader communities, congregations need similar encouragement to connect with other CRC congregations in their region.

IV. What factors affect the Desired Futures?

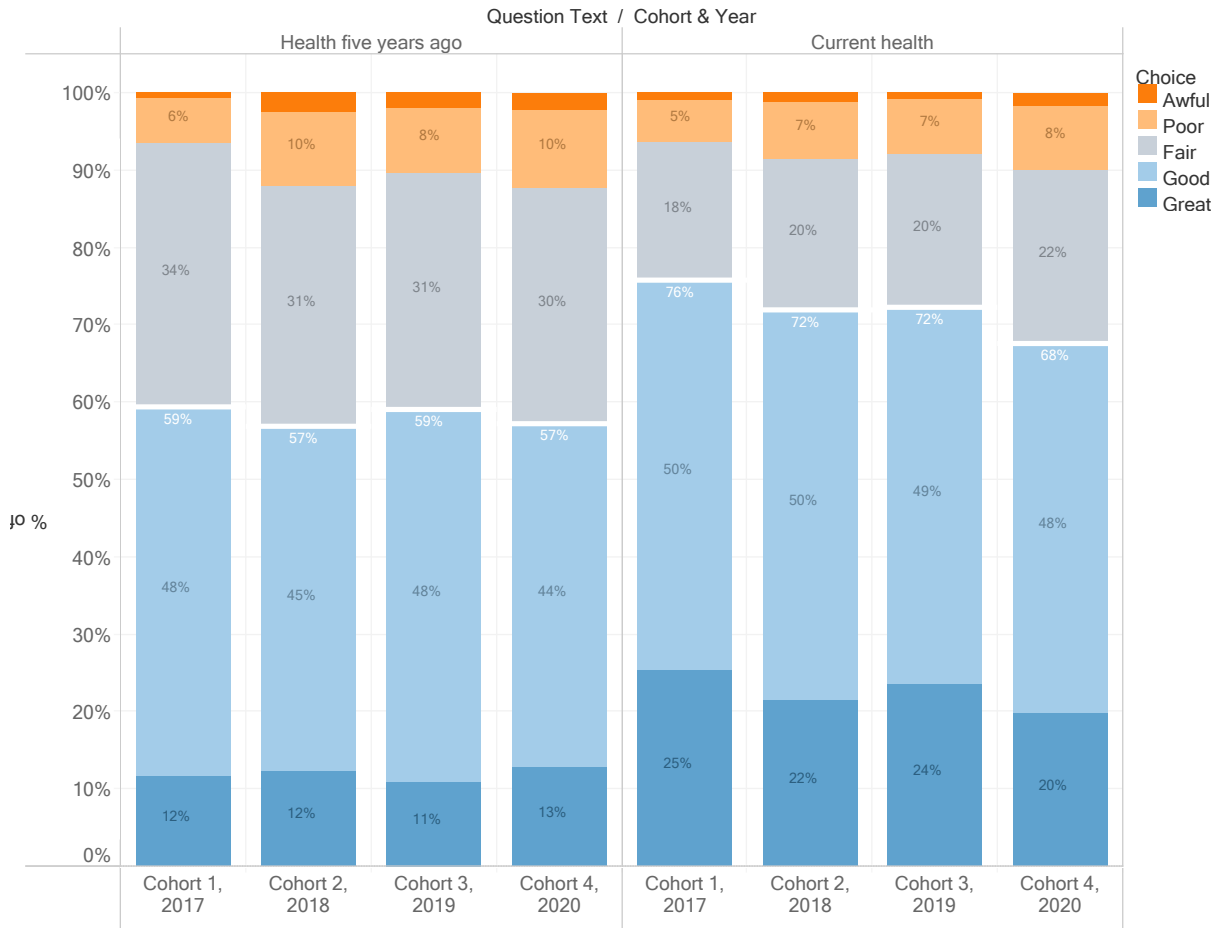
So far, we have demonstrated that responses to the Desired Futures scales vary widely among individuals but display limited systematic variation between years or by demographic factors. In this section, we will focus on how the Desired Futures vary across churches and what factors are associated with that variation. At the end, we will analyze the results and seek to harvest some actionable insights from the data.

CHURCH HEALTH RATINGS

Since 2007, respondents have been asked, “Please describe [your congregation’s] general health currently, compared to five years ago.” **Figure 23** displays the results for scheduled cohorts of congregations from 2017 to 2020. The four assessments of health five years ago in the left pane (excluding around 10 percent unsure in each year) show a fairly steady proportion of 57 to 59 percent of respondents saying their congregation was in “Good” or “Great” health five years earlier.

In the right pane, a majority of 2017 respondents perceived their congregations were currently healthy, with 76 percent reporting “Good” or “Great” health, and just 6 percent “Poor” or “Awful.” Those numbers are very similar to 2007 and 2012, when the “Good + Great” totals were 75 and 77 percent, respectively. But the 2020 cohort perceived less health, with just 68 percent “Good + Great,” and a low of just 20 percent “Great.”²³

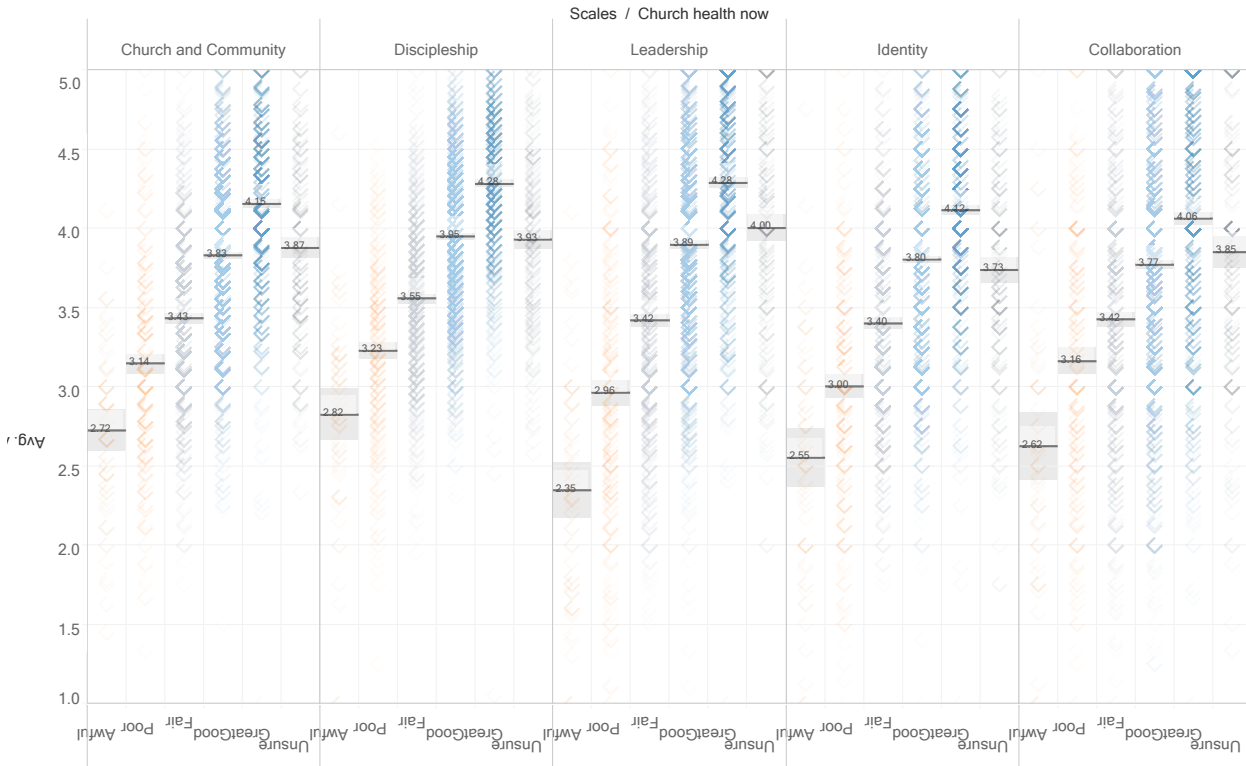
Figure 23 Congregational health assessments, now and five years ago, by cohort and year



²³ Over 90 percent of 2020 survey responses were collected before February 28, before the extensive onset of public awareness of the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-March. However, it’s still possible 2020 data was affected by pandemic news.

Figure 24 demonstrates that Desired Futures scales are strongly correlated with respondents' assessments of current congregational health. Respondents who assessed their congregation's health as "Awful" (labels at the bottom left of each scale pane) averaged Desired Futures answers of 2.35 to 2.82, between "Somewhat true" (3) and "Hardly true" (2) on the continuum. Respondents who perceived "Great" congregational health averaged between 4.06 and 4.28 on the Desired Futures scales, between "Mostly true" (4) and "Definitely true" (5).

Figure 24 Desired Futures scales by congregational health assessments

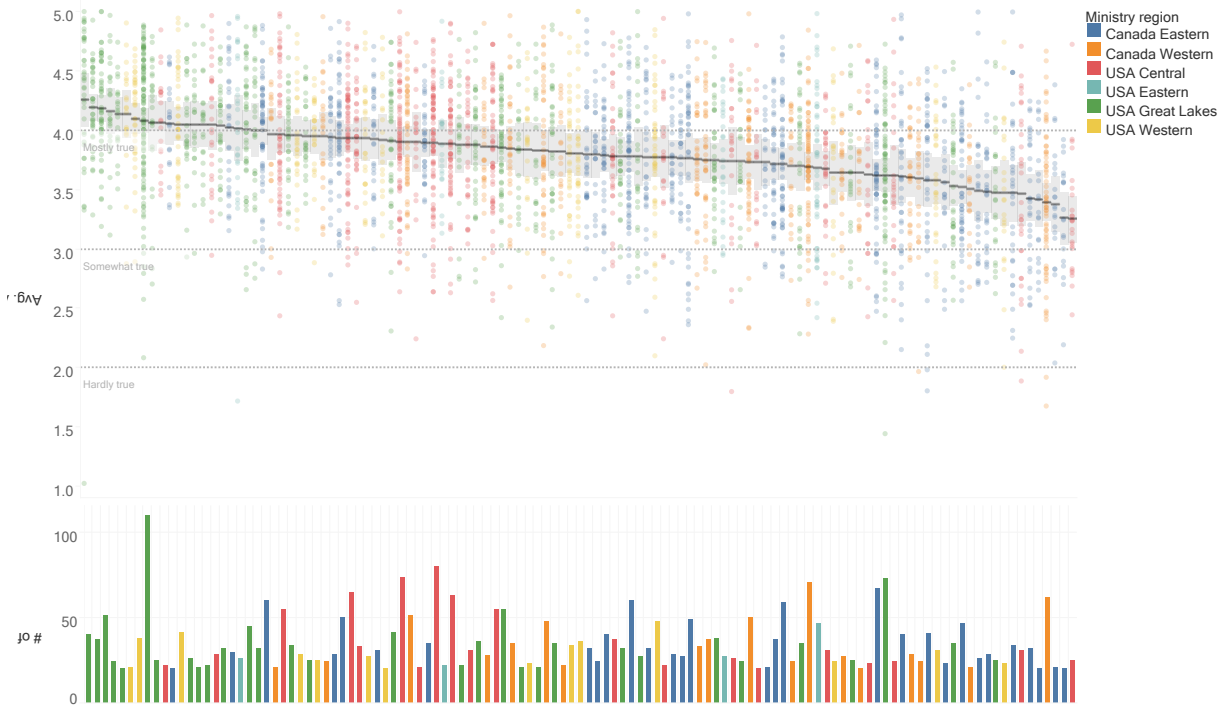


The figure clarifies that the Desired Futures do indeed reflect factors that correlate with perceptions of congregational health; for example, the health assessment alone explains 25 percent of variation in the overall combined Desired Futures score. But the figure also clarifies that there is substantial variation in opinion about Desired Futures within each health category. In the following sections, we'll seek to explain some of this variation and diagnose actions that can be taken to achieve more in the Desired Futures, even when congregational health is constant.

DESIRED FUTURES WITHIN AND BETWEEN CONGREGATIONS

Every responding congregation contains substantial difference of opinion about Desired Futures, and there is substantial variation between churches. **Figure 25** illustrates this variation for 118 congregations with at least 20 responses who participated in the Our Journey 2020 survey between 2017 and 2020. At far left of the chart, the highest-scoring churches average above the 4.0 “Mostly true” threshold, while at far right, the lowest-scoring churches near the “Somewhat true” line. The gap in average scores is a full scale point between the highest-scoring church (4.25) and the lowest-scoring church (3.25).

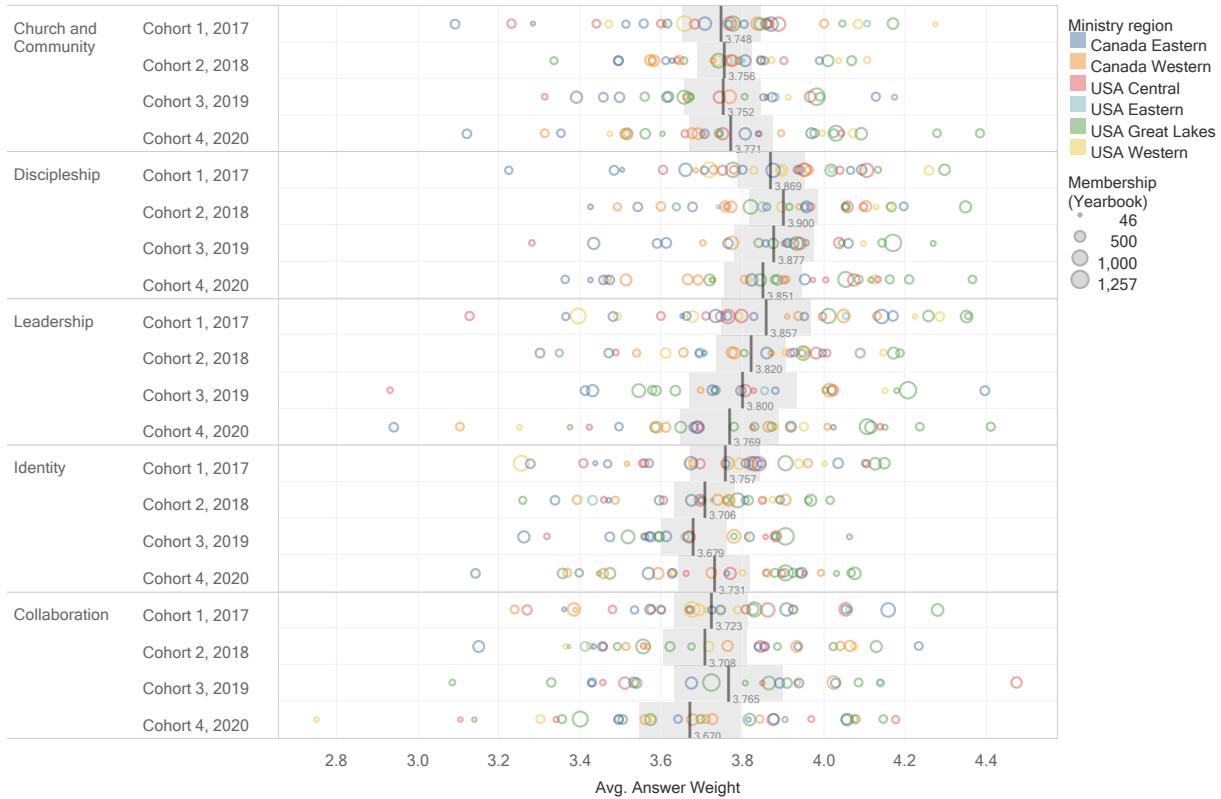
Figure 25 Desired Futures overall scale by congregation with ministry region



Meanwhile, even the top-scoring churches have congregants who think things are mediocre at best, while the lowest-scoring churches have at least one congregant who perceived things to be pretty good. These internal variations may come with internal conflicts, making healthy conflict management a central task of any Christian congregation.

Figure 26 takes the 118 congregations from the previous figure and shows congregation-level scores for each scale by cohort. As we saw in **Figure 22** on page 35, scores are highest for Discipleship and lowest for Identity and Collaboration. Leadership scores appear to have fallen slightly (by about 0.1) from 3.86 in 2017 to 3.77, but none of the year-over-year differences show statistically significant changes at the congregation level.²⁴

Figure 26 Congregation-level Desired Futures scores by scale and cohort with region



²⁴ The gray bands show 95 percent confidence intervals at the congregation level. When the bands do not overlap, the averages differ with statistical significance at the $p < 0.05$ level. The 2019 score for Identity is just low enough to differ statistically from the two highest scores for Discipleship in 2017 and 2018.

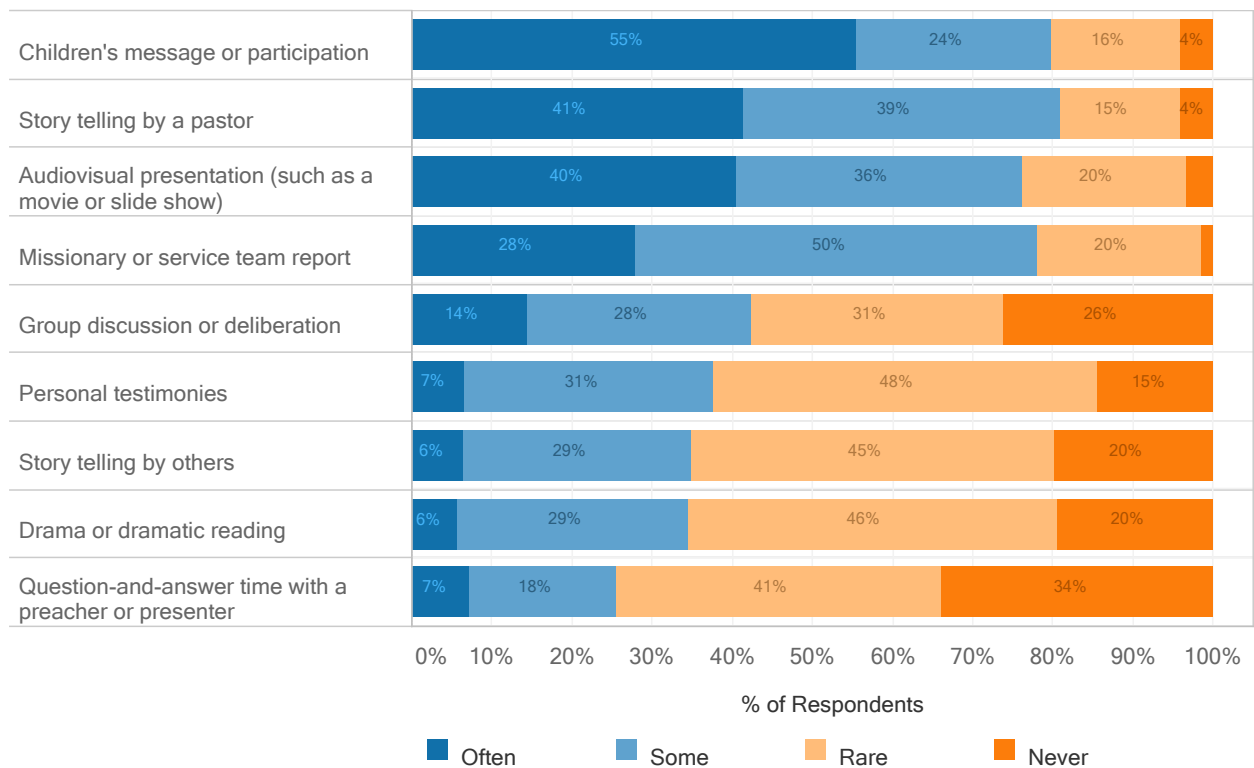
WORSHIP VARIETY SCALES

Since 2007, survey respondents have been asked how often their congregation experiences each of nine types of worship modes and how much value for worship they perceive in each one. In 2007 and again in 2012, we found that these experiences were strong, actionable predictors of congregational health measures drawn from the CRCNA's Healthy Church Comprehensive Survey (HCCS). In the next section, we will examine whether they are still correlates of the Desired Futures.

Figure 27 shows the frequency reports from all four cohorts for 2017 to 2020. Children's messages are the most frequently reported, with 55 percent of respondents saying the congregation "Often" engages in this kind of activity. In contrast, 7 percent or fewer report they "Often" engage in personal testimonies, storytelling by others (not the pastor), drama or dramatic reading, or question-and-answer time with a preacher or presenter.

Figure 27 Frequency of various worship activities

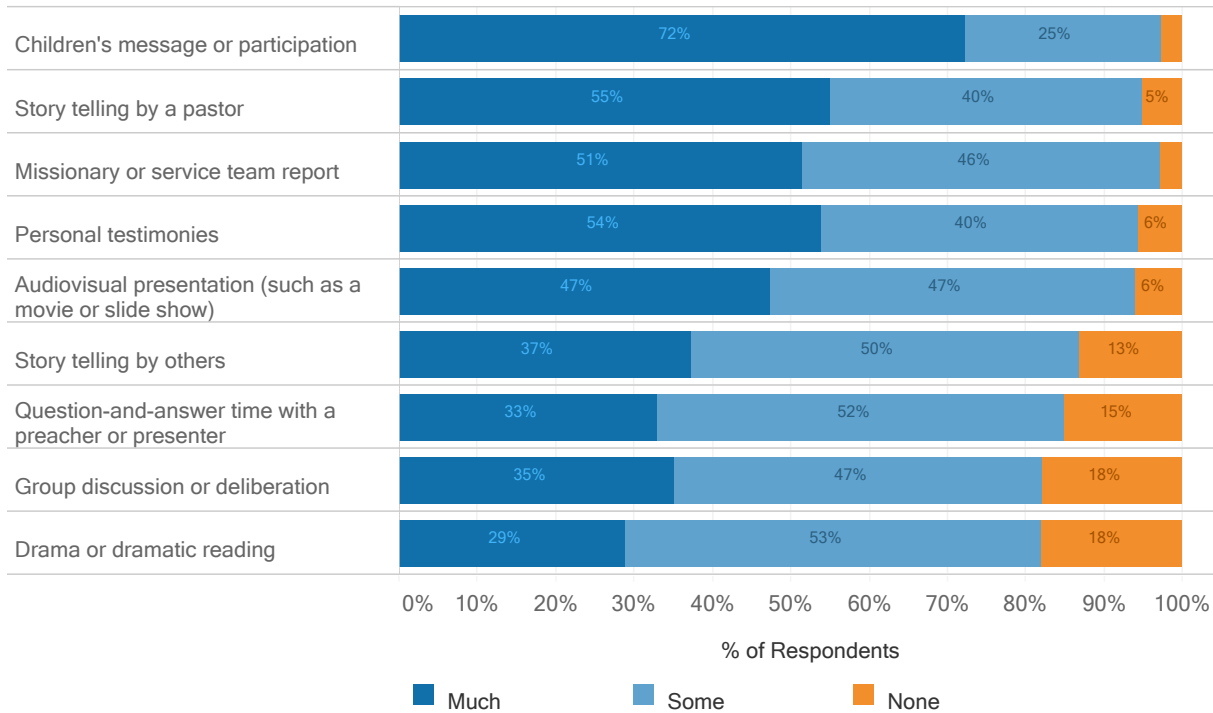
How frequently does your congregation engage in this kind of activity during worship?



Meanwhile, **Figure 28** shows how respondents perceived the value of these activities for worship. Majorities of respondents assigned “Much” value to children’s messages (72 percent), storytelling by a pastor (55 percent), missionary or service team report (51 percent), and personal testimonies (54 percent), with 6 percent or fewer saying “None.” Large majorities of respondents see at least “Some” value in the rest of the activities, ranging from 94 percent for audiovisual presentations to 82 percent for drama or dramatic reading, but just 29 percent see “Much” value in the last option.

Figure 28 Value of activities for worship

How much value does each activity have for worship, in your opinion?



Both sets of responses form reliable scales for “Worship variety frequency” and “Worship variety value”;²⁵ both scales are basically stable over the 2017 to 2020 period, though there is a small decline in the frequency scale driven mainly by small declines in reports of audiovisual use and missionary reports.

EXPLAINING DESIRED FUTURES WITH A STATISTICAL MODEL

To provide a comprehensive view of factors contributing to Desired Futures scores, we created a multivariate regression model of each scale and of all five scales combined. Each model includes an array of potential covariates, including personal characteristics of survey respondents, their form of participation in their congregation, and attributes of the congregations, including the reported experience of varieties of worship.²⁶

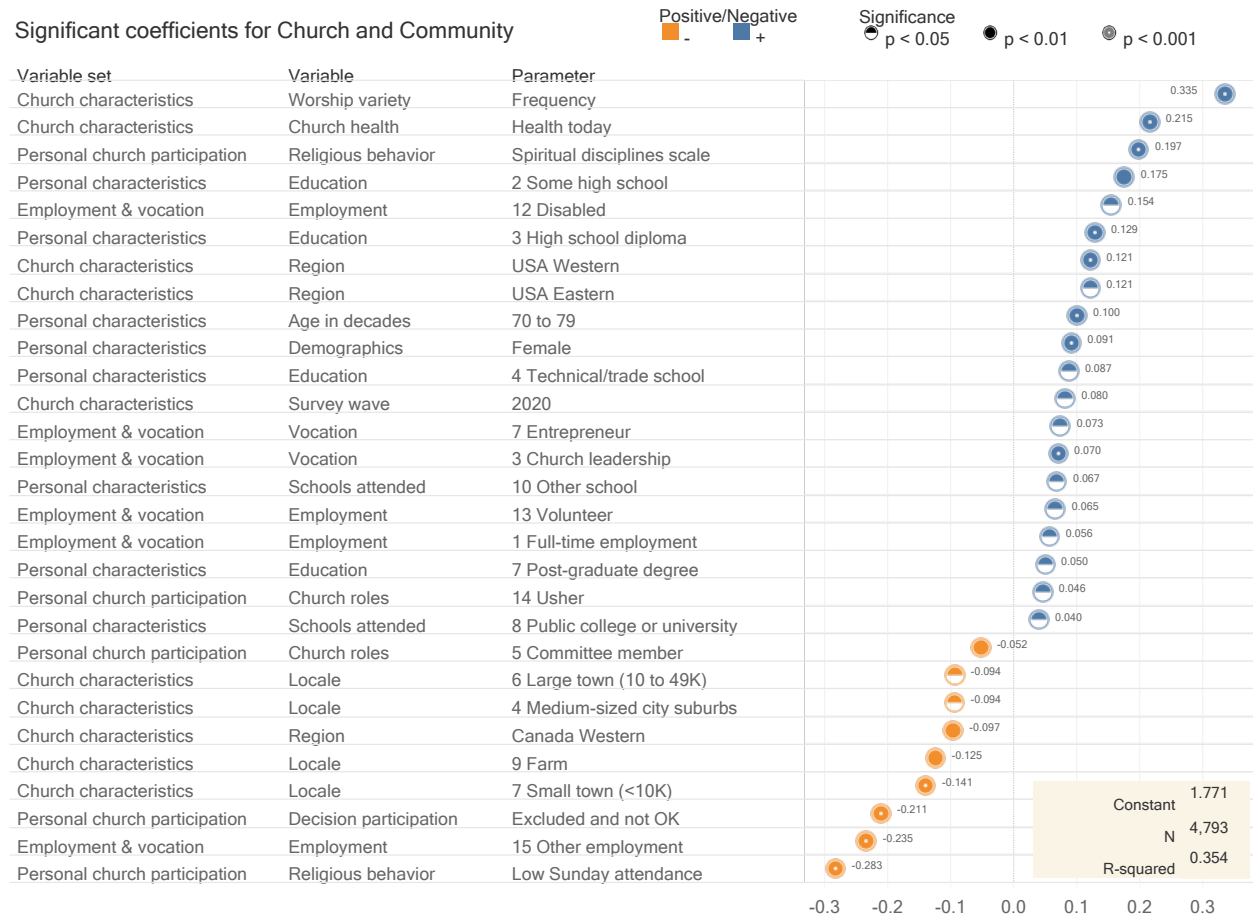
²⁵ Cronbach’s alpha for the two scales is 0.73 for frequency and 0.75 for value.

²⁶ Models use a design stratified by congregation (since those were the original sampling units) and weighted with the probability weights presented in the Weights section on page 13.

Church and Community results

Figure 29 presents the results of a regression of respondents' Church and Community scores on their attributes. Each numeric coefficient is standardized and indicates how much average change in the Church and Community scale is associated with a one-standard-unit change in the variable, holding all the other variables constant. The model is based on 4,793 responses and explains 35.4 percent of the variation in the scale.

Figure 29 Significant regression model results for Church and Community



From the figure, we can make the following observations:

1. At 0.335, frequency of engagement in a variety of worship activities is the largest single coefficient in the model. A one-point increase in the frequency scale is related to a third of a point increase in Church and Community scores. This finding holds, even though we are already controlling for a wide range of other variables, including perceptions of congregational health. On average, any congregation whose congregants perceive higher rates of these various worship activities has higher Church and Community scores than another congregation.
2. Increasing respondents' perceptions of congregational health (see **Figure 23** on page 37) by one unit—say, from “Fair” to “Good”—is associated with an increase in the Church and Community score of 0.215 points.
3. A one-point increase in the Spiritual Disciplines scale (say, from engaging in devotional activities “Several times a week” to “Daily”; see **Figure 11** on page 21) is associated with an increase of 0.197 in the Church and Community scale.
4. Another actionable variable is opportunities to participate in decision-making. Respondents who perceived a lack of opportunity and didn't appreciate it scored lower by -0.211.

5. Low Sunday church attendance (less than two or three times a month) is associated with lower scores (-0.283). Note that increased attendance might not be an option for some who are homebound or otherwise separated from church, and their responses may reflect a sense of isolation.
6. Church and Community responds to a variety of controls, unactionable attributes that congregations cannot much change:
 - a. lower education levels (relative to a college degree, the baseline);
 - b. regional differences (all else equal, the USA Eastern and Western divisions score higher relative to the baseline region of Canada Eastern, while Canada Western scores lower);
 - c. large towns, medium-city suburbs, small towns, and farms score lower relative to the baseline category of big cities;
 - d. various employment statuses and vocations, including Disability, Entrepreneurship, and Custodial work (the latter having a negative effect).

Finally, having ruled out a wide variety of demographic influences, we find a net increase in the Church and Community scale for 2020 of 0.080, suggesting that the participating churches from the randomly-selected 2020 cohort are slightly more engaged in their communities, on average, than previous cohorts.

Discipleship results

Figure 30 presents the results of a regression of Discipleship scores. The model is based on 4,801 responses and explains 44.5 percent of the variation in the scale.

Figure 30 Regression results for Discipleship scale



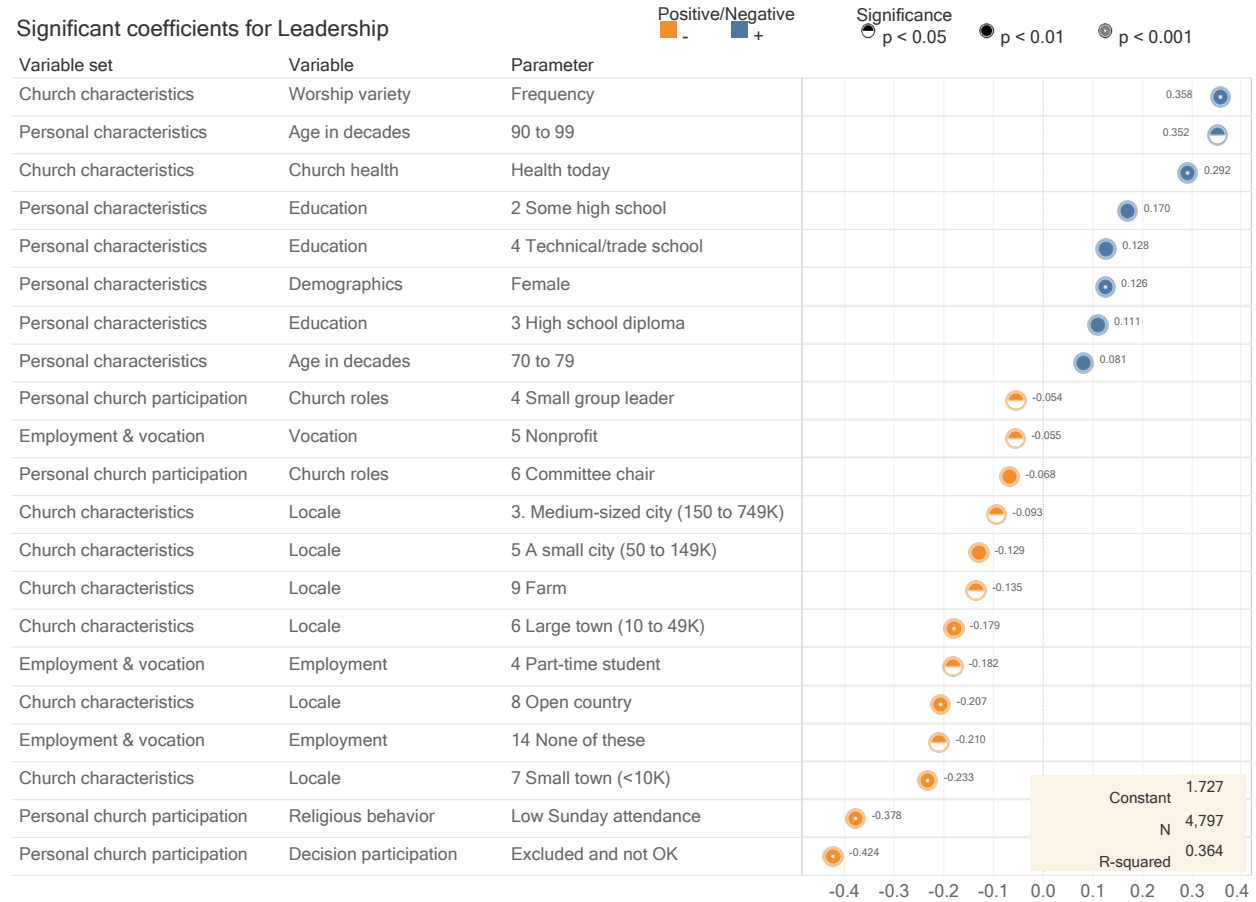
From the figure, we can make the following observations:

1. A one-point increase in the Spiritual Disciplines scale is associated with a huge increase of 0.889 in the Discipleship scale. In effect, there is a nearly one-to-one correspondence: even small increases in *reports of* more frequent devotional practice should be reflected in similar increases in the Discipleship scale. This strong relationship appears in the regression, even though the direct correlation between the two scales is 0.28, smaller than the 0.37 correlation between Discipleship and the worship variety frequency scale. The regression reveals that it is important to compare apples to apples on age and region.
2. Frequency of engagement in a variety of worship activities is again a large coefficient at 0.260.
3. Increasing respondents' perceptions of congregational health by one unit is associated with an increase in the Church and Community score of 0.227 points.
4. Opportunities to participate in decision making are again correlated. Respondents who perceived a lack of opportunity and did not appreciate it scored lower by -0.166.
5. Low Sunday church attendance (less than two or three times a month) is associated with lower scores (-0.189).
6. Discipleship also responds to a variety of controls. Three US regions all report higher levels than the Canada Eastern baseline region, and almost every other educational level gave statistically higher scores than the baseline college degree category.

Leadership results

Figure 31 presents the results of a regression of Leadership scores. The model is based on 4,797 responses and explains 36.4 percent of the variation in the scale.

Figure 31 Regression results for Leadership scale

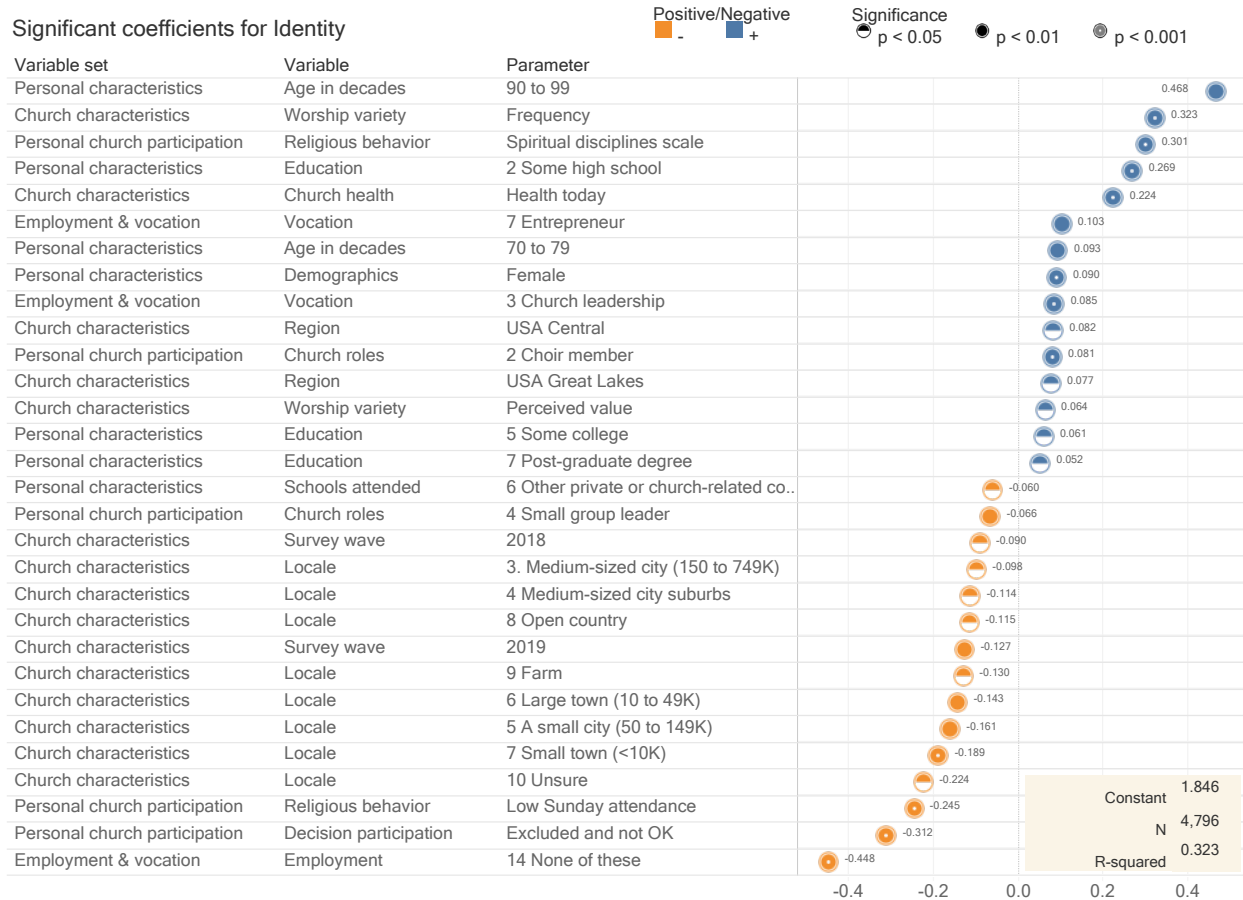


1. The spiritual disciplines scale is not a significant correlate of the Leadership scale.
2. Frequency of engagement in a variety of worship activities is again the largest positive coefficient at 0.358.
3. Increasing respondents' perceptions of congregational health by one unit is associated with an increase in the Leadership score of 0.292 points.
4. Opportunities to participate in decision making are again correlated. Respondents who perceived a lack of opportunity—and did not appreciate being excluded—scored lower by -0.424, the largest coefficient in the model.
5. Low Sunday church attendance (less than two or three times a month) is associated with lower scores (-0.378).
6. Leadership also responds to a variety of controls, including gender, education, and church locale.

Identity results

Figure 32 presents the results of a regression of Identity scores. The model is based on 4,796 responses and explains 32.3 percent of the variation in the scale.

Figure 32 Regression results for Identity scale



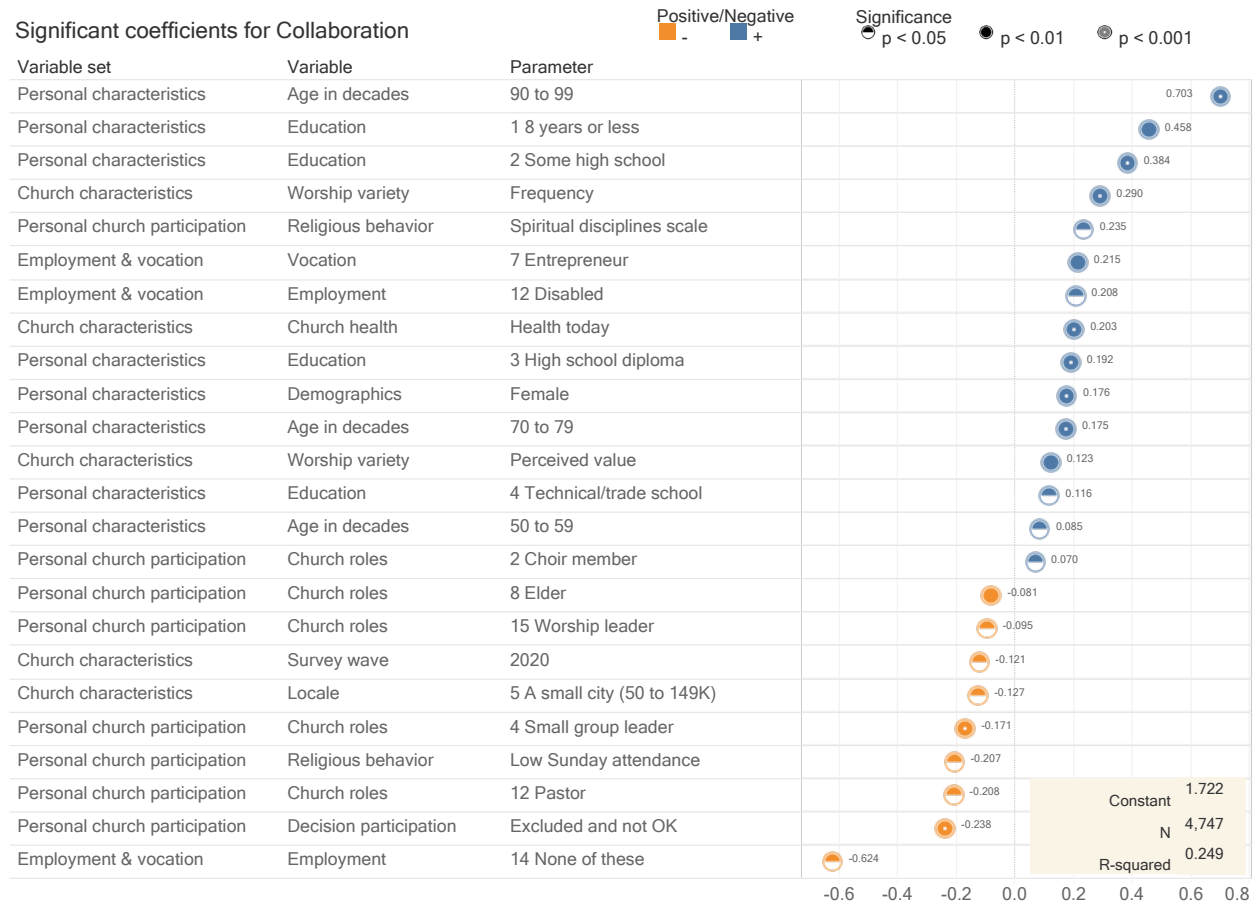
Observations from the figure:

1. Frequency of engagement in a variety of worship activities is again the largest positive coefficient at 0.323 standard units.
2. The spiritual disciplines scale also relates to Identity with a coefficient of 0.301.
3. Increasing respondents' perceptions of congregational health by one unit is associated with an increase in the Identity score of 0.224 points.
4. Respondents who perceived a lack of opportunity—and did not appreciate it—scored lower by -0.312.
5. Low Sunday church attendance (less than two or three times a month) is associated with lower scores (-0.245).
6. Identity also responds to controls, including gender, education, and church locale. The regional scores are of particular interest. Compared to the baseline Canada Eastern region, the USA Central and USA Great Lakes regions score significantly higher on Identity. These regions are home to the longstanding Dutch immigrant communities in Northwest Iowa and West Michigan that have anchored CRC identity for more than 150 years.

Collaboration results

Figure 33 presents the results of a regression of Collaboration scores. The Collaboration scale is most unique in focus and thus the least correlated with the other four Desired Futures. The model is based on 4,747 responses and explains 24.9 percent of the variation in the scale.

Figure 33 Regression results for Collaboration scale



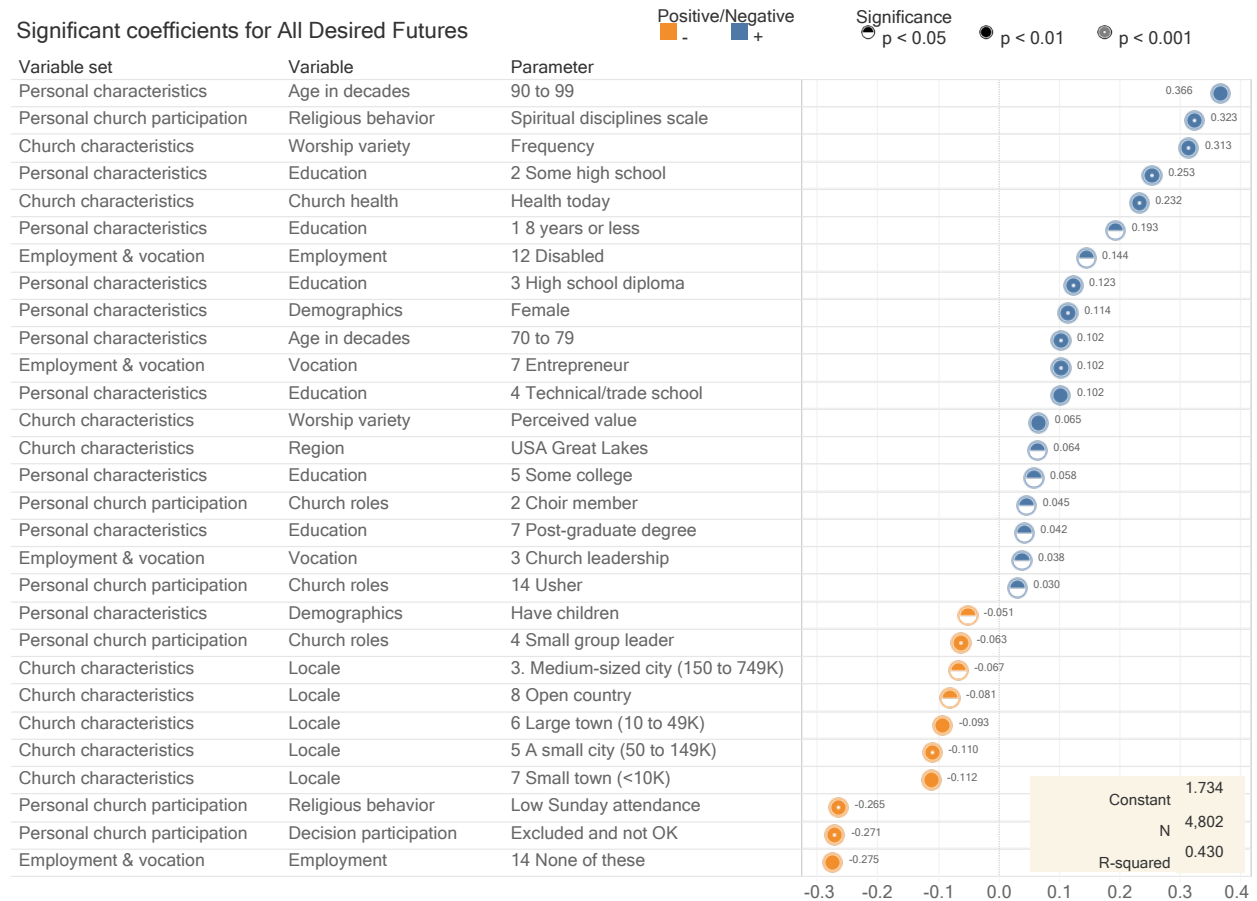
We can make the following observations:

1. Unlike other scales, Collaboration seems to be particularly influenced by controls. Older and less educated respondents perceive greater collaboration than younger, more educated respondents.
2. There is also a marked relationship with roles; highly informed roles like Pastors (-0.208), small group leaders (-0.171), worship leaders (-0.095), and Elders (-0.081) perceive less collaboration than do other congregants. This may occur because holders of these roles are involved in planning congregational ministry and know how much (or how little) teamwork with denominational agencies and other congregations actually takes place.
3. As in each model, the frequency of variety in worship modes is a predictor of perceived Collaboration, with a coefficient of 0.290.
4. Spiritual disciplines also contribute to perceptions of greater Collaboration, with a coefficient of 0.235.
5. Individuals who felt unhappy about being excluded from decisions scored lower (-0.238).
6. A one-standard-unit increase in perceived congregational health contributes 0.203 units to Collaboration.
7. Low Sunday attendance is associated with a decrease of -0.207.
8. 2020 scored lower than the 2017 baseline by a significant margin (-0.121).

Results for all Desired Futures combined

Figure 34 presents a model of all the Desired Futures combined into a single scale, which results in a sort of averaging out of the coefficients from the previous five models. It is based on responses from 4,802 respondents and explains 43.0 percent of the variation in desired futures.

Figure 34 Regression results for all Desired Futures combined as a single scale



The patterns are reflective of the five previous models, of course:

1. Spiritual disciplines and worship variety top the coefficients at 0.323 and 0.313, respectively.
2. Members who were unhappy with no opportunity to participate in decision-making differed by -0.271.
3. Church health has a coefficient of 0.232 for each point of increase on the scale.
4. College degrees are the baseline. Other education levels have higher scores on the Desired Futures overall scale: those with some high school (0.253), 8 years or less (0.193), high school diplomas (0.123), technical/trade school (0.102), some college (0.058), and post-graduate degrees (0.042).
5. Disabled respondents score 0.144 higher than those who are not disabled.
6. Female respondents score 0.114 higher than male respondents.
7. Entrepreneurs score 0.102 higher than those who are not entrepreneurs.
8. Those who perceive worship varieties as having more value for worship score 0.065 higher.
9. Respondents from the USA Great Lakes region score 0.064 higher than the Canada Eastern baseline.
10. Choir members (0.045), church leadership (0.038), and ushers (0.030) score more; small group leaders (-0.063) score less.
11. Respondents from less densely populated locales score lower than the baseline group from large cities: medium-sized cities (-0.067), large town (-0.093), small cities (-0.110), and small towns (-0.112).
12. Respondents who rarely attend on Sunday mornings score much lower (-0.265)

ANALYSIS: WORSHIP VARIETY, SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES, AND DECISION PARTICIPATION STAND OUT AS ACTIONABLE FACTORS

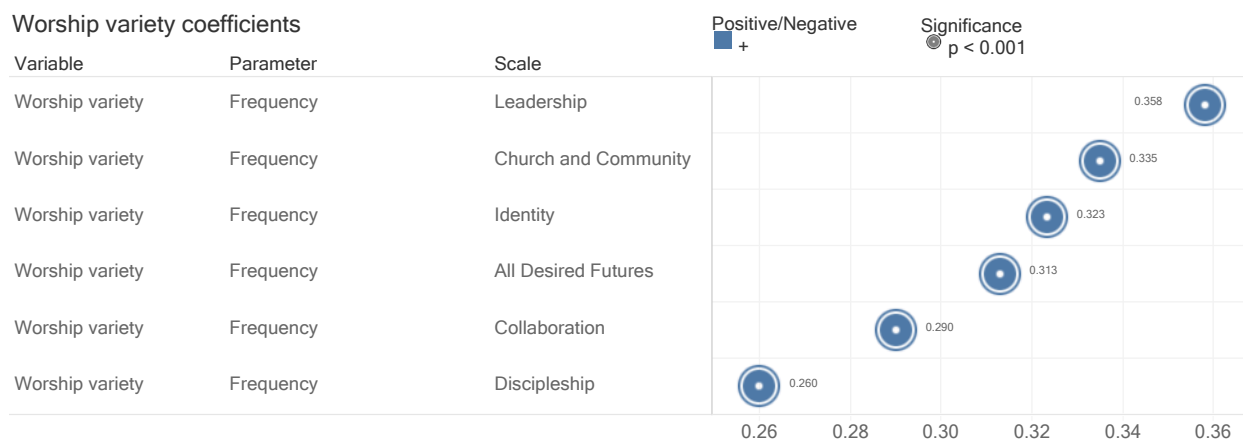
Our Reformed tradition has been memorably described as having pietistic, doctrinal, and cultural (or “transformationalist”) aspects.²⁷ In the statistical models above, we find opportunities to improve achievement of our denominational Desired Futures through applied versions of each of these traditions:

1. We can flood our pietist stream by seeking increased spiritual discipline, which is associated with stronger perception of our Desired Futures.
2. We can strengthen our doctrinal knowledge and practice by diversifying the worship activities in which we deliver doctrine through more participatory storytelling, testimonies, Q & A, audiovisual, drama, and children’s messages.
3. We can accomplish our transformational mission in culture by ensuring more congregants who aspire to participate in decisions are included. We need to live into our inclusive, participatory church polity by better identifying ambition to lead and by retaining and re-launching those who have it.

Worship variety

Worship variety is the most diverse of these strategies in terms of potential causal effects on all five Desired Futures. **Figure 35** summarizes the worship variety frequency coefficients from the previous six figures, all of which are large and statistically significant:

Figure 35 Worship variety frequency coefficient summary



This data is not evidence of causality, but there are reasons to think that causality could be at play:

1. **Leadership:** the worship variety scale has its largest effect on leadership (0.358). The scale includes a variety of activities that offer congregants opportunities to develop leadership skills in planning activities, creating art and drama, public speaking, and being persuasive. Churches are engines for leadership development, and worship participation is an important means.²⁸
2. **Church and Community:** this coefficient (0.335) may indicate that a wider variety of forms of content offers a wider range of opportunities for community connections: “Minute for Ministry” visits from local nonprofit leaders, testimonials from members about their work in the community, and storytelling or dramatic reading of community history and happenings can serve as sermon illustrations and social connection all at once.

²⁷ Mr. James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans-Lightning Source, 1984).

²⁸ Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, Abridged Edition (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995).

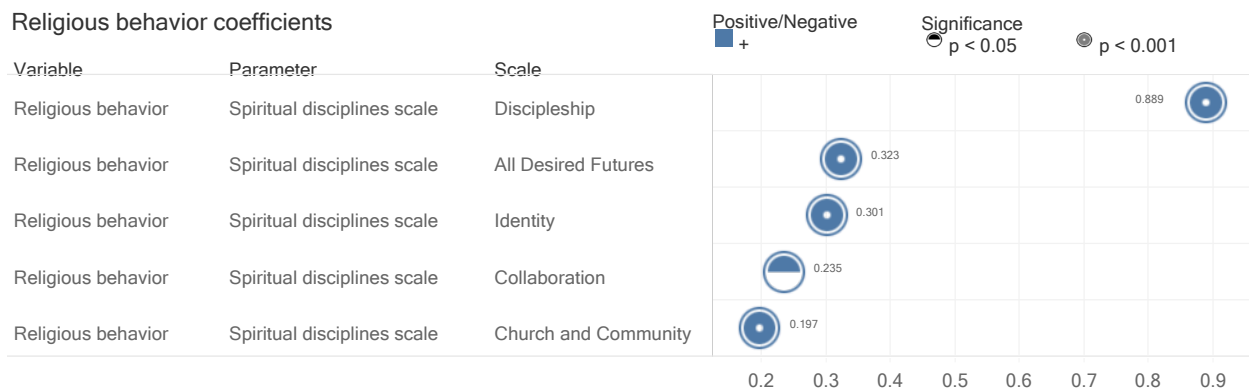
3. The **Identity** scale (0.323) is all about a sense of belonging and self-knowledge. It's hard for passive listeners to a few voices—even the wise, skilled voices of seminary-trained pastors—to have a sense that they are heard and known and know others; a diversity of voices and styles of presentation provides more opportunities for worshippers to identify and appreciate their secure place in the congregation.
4. **Collaboration**: few congregations—even large ones—have the internal range of resources to provide a diversity of worship activities on a weekly basis. Those that do so may engage in a wider range of collaborations with denominational visitors and other CRC churches. Options that make this coefficient work (0.290) may include pulpit exchange, joint traveling drama groups, audiovisual production cooperation, and so forth.
5. **Discipleship**: Even the least of these coefficients is objectively large (0.260). Jesus inspired his disciples to the practice of prayer and Scripture study through the constant use of parables and object lessons. Sermons anchor the worship service, but a supporting variety of activities can provoke devotion and create hunger for insight and growth.

Intentional action to expand worship variety is an experiment in waiting. Large majorities of responding congregants perceived these activities as valuable for worship (see **Figure 28** on page 42), but in every survey since 2007, significant shares of respondents have perceived the actual occurrence of several of them to be occasional or rare (see **Figure 27** on page 41). We should not limit our imagination to the items in the survey list, which are merely representative indicators of a large phenomenon of creativity and variety in worship. The overall effect on Desired Futures is likely to be positive (0.313).

Spiritual disciplines

It has been a major theme of this series of reports that the church receives significant benefits when we are a discipling home for people who report obedience to our Lord's commands to pray and study Scripture daily. **Figure 36** summarizes the significant coefficients from the six Desired Futures models.

Figure 36 Spiritual disciplines coefficient summary



1. Unsurprisingly, spiritual disciplines have the strongest relationship with the **Discipleship** scale (0.889). It is easier to say discipleship is truly happening when one's own life is characterized by discipling practice.
2. With respect to **Identity**, the visible public and private practice of prayer and Scripture study and family devotions may contribute significantly (0.301) to a congregant's sense of membership in the Body of the local congregation and the broader denomination.
3. In terms of **Collaboration** and **Church and Community**, the disciplines are fed and motivated by knowledge of the broader mission of the church and its people.

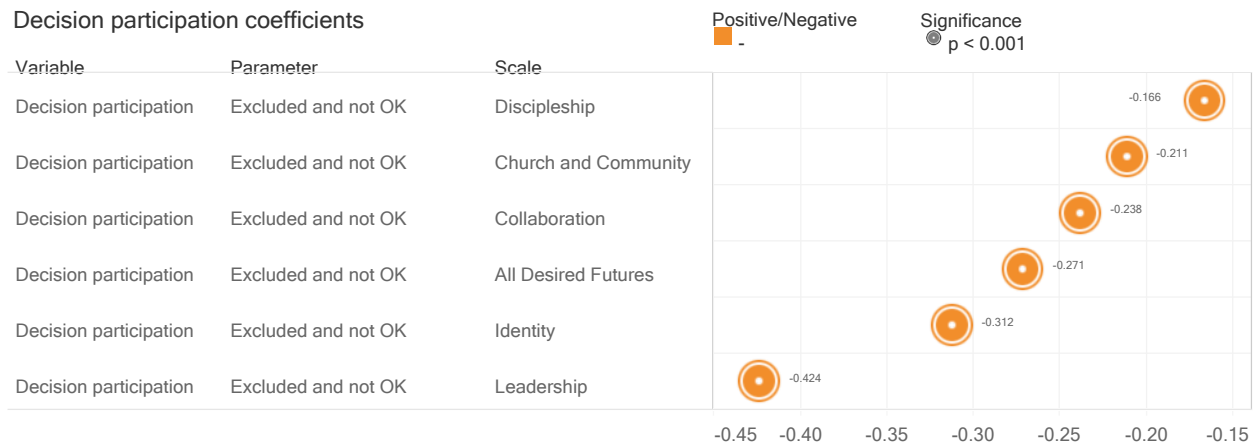
Overall, any congregation's effort to inspire greater spiritual discipline may be rewarded by measurable improvement in the entire bundle of Desired Futures (0.323).

Decision participation

Our Reformed tradition was born in political conflict, both with the world and within the church. Our forebears built a new kind of church polity to harness and control that conflict.

Over 500 congregants—5.9 percent of the four-year sample—said they had not been given opportunity to participate in decision making, and that they were “not OK” with that lack of opportunity. These 500 people stand out in our models major source of doubt that the Desired Futures are true. **Figure 37** summarizes the coefficients from the six Desired Futures models for these respondents.

Figure 37 Decision participation coefficient summary



No doubt some share of these respondents are just difficult people, and no amount of effort would satisfy them. But Jesus brought together a Zealot and a tax collector, and Saul of Tarsus was clearly not a nice person—Ananias of Damascus was loath to meet Saul even when he was blind and weak. We are called to disciple difficult people.

Decision exclusion has its largest effect on **Leadership** (-0.424). When we discourage those ambitious to participate in church decisions, actively or passively, we may sacrifice God-given gifts on the altar of our own petty idols. Recent research by Colorado sociologists found that the church is hemorrhaging talent and ambition because we do not do enough to listen to and retain people with ideas. We too often wrap potential leaders in restraints that drive them to leave.²⁹ That schismatic tendency is the traditional path of the personality cults and petty tyrannies associated with “apostolic” traditions that license individuals to strike out on their own. It is not the proper path of the Reformed covenant community and egalitarian polity that recognizes that all are called yet none are infallible. But the protectors of polity must beware, lest proper procedure become an excuse not to hear and act on valuable proposals.

The rest of the scales all suffer some loss when congregants recognize they have not been offered an opportunity to participate in decisions. **Identity** suffers (-0.312) when a congregant knows they are “out.” **Collaboration** is weakened (-0.238) and **Church and Community** does not develop (-0.211) when new ideas are not heard and new energies are not tapped. Even **Discipleship** pays a price (-0.166) when congregants perceive that decisionmakers do not practice what they preach, that piety is not accompanied by a participatory polity.

We may have the opportunity to reinforce our identity as a Christian tradition that does church politics well, and to reap benefits in **Desired Futures** by reducing our overall losses (-0.271).

In the following section, we’ll sample from the thousands of comments left by congregants, most of them negative. Where better to start showing Christian love and political inclusion than with the discontented in our midst?

²⁹ Josh Packard PhD, Ashleigh Hope, and Group Publishing, *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are DONE with Church but Not Their Faith* (Loveland, Colorado: Group Publishing, 2015).

V. Themes in respondents' comments

Respondents had two opportunities to provide comments.

- First, respondents could provide an open-ended response to the question, “Do you have any specific suggestions about how ministries and agencies could better serve your church?”
- Second, respondents could provide additional comments at the end of the survey about the survey and their life as part of Christ's body.

These comments provide a robust exploration of attitudes and insights of congregants, as many respondents offered thoughts or topics not found in other sections of the survey. CSR staff reviewed the comments, identified common themes, and coded which themes, if any, were found in each comment. This section provides an overview of different themes found in many comments, as well as key comments that highlight these themes.

Respondents' comments offer insight into themes and ideas that may not be captured well in multiple-choice questions. Because of the freedom these open-ended responses allow, many respondents' comments express intense opinions and address controversial issues. We beg our readers to keep in mind that CSR staff strove not to bring any conscious agenda to the coding or selection of comments represented in this chapter, and we did our best to suppress any unconscious agenda.

Given the nature of optional open-ended comments, the number of comments and themes highlighted in this section are not intended to quantify which perspectives are more common, more intensely held, or more accurate. However, examining key themes that emerge from these comments helps describe and address the range and depth of opinion of CRCNA congregants. Comments quoted below are unedited except for minor punctuation or bracketed edits to increase clarity.

The comments have a wide range in tone and may tend somewhat toward extremes, whether positive or negative. In the context of an anonymous survey, respondents with intense viewpoints may also be the most vocal. Some respondents were very unhappy with the direction the CRCNA or their local churches were headed, while others were very pleased with the efforts of their church and their community.

Themes coded from the final comment are shown in **Figure 38** on page 54, while the themes from the optional comment regarding specific agencies and ministries are shown in **Figure 39** on page 60. Themes are not mutually exclusive; a single comment may have been coded for multiple themes. Comments take additional time in an already long survey, so fewer than 30 percent of 8,389 survey respondents (including 2012 respondents) offered comments. Of the total responses to either open-ended question, 841 comments solely expressed gratitude, feedback on the survey structure, or no substantive theme (e.g., “N/A” or “My faith is my rock.”). These comments do not appear in the figures below.

THEMES FROM CLOSING GENERAL COMMENTS

At the end of the survey, respondents were given the following prompt: “Your comments on the survey and on our life together as part of Christ’s body are welcome. If you wish to remain anonymous, please do not use any names or other information that might reveal your identity. And please show kindness to those who read these comments as you choose your words. Speak strongly but speak kindly.”

The themes found in these comments are shown in **Figure 38**. The rightmost Grand Total column displays the overall share of comment; 40.6 percent were about Congregational Life, 34.6 percent were about Denominational Concerns, 29.6 percent about Leadership, and 22.1 percent about Politics. We found that over 80 percent of comments took a negative or critical approach to each respective theme. Comments about Congregational Life and Congregational or Denominational Leadership were the only areas with at least 100 positive comments, but even in these areas, we found at least twice as many negative comments on each theme.

Figure 38 Themes from Final Comments (N = 1,586)

| Theme | Negative | | Positive | | Grand Total | |
|---|--------------|--------------|------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| | # | % | # | % | # | % |
| Congregational Life | 436 | 27.5% | 208 | 13.1% | 644 | 40.6% |
| Denominational Concerns | 488 | 30.8% | 61 | 3.8% | 549 | 34.6% |
| Congregation or Denomination Leadership | 349 | 22.0% | 120 | 7.6% | 469 | 29.6% |
| Politics | 339 | 21.4% | 11 | 0.7% | 350 | 22.1% |
| CRC Doctrine and Theology | 301 | 19.0% | 27 | 1.7% | 328 | 20.7% |
| Worship Style | 185 | 11.7% | 33 | 2.1% | 218 | 13.7% |
| Congregation or Denomination Decline | 212 | 13.4% | | | 212 | 13.4% |
| Intergenerational Concerns | 165 | 10.4% | 25 | 1.6% | 190 | 12.0% |
| Politics: LGBTQ | 158 | 10.0% | 3 | 0.2% | 161 | 10.2% |
| Denominational and Congregational Resources and Programming | 101 | 6.4% | 22 | 1.4% | 123 | 7.8% |
| Politics: Women in Leadership | 109 | 6.9% | 7 | 0.4% | 116 | 7.3% |
| Politics: Race | 78 | 4.9% | 14 | 0.9% | 92 | 5.8% |
| External Engagement (Community) | 58 | 3.7% | 16 | 1.0% | 74 | 4.7% |
| Internal Engagement (Evangelism and Teaching) | 62 | 3.9% | 9 | 0.6% | 71 | 4.5% |
| Christian Schools | 60 | 3.8% | 4 | 0.3% | 64 | 4.0% |
| Politics: Becoming Too Liberal | 51 | 3.2% | 2 | 0.1% | 53 | 3.3% |
| Current Events | 33 | 2.1% | 4 | 0.3% | 37 | 2.3% |
| Politics: Climate Change | 26 | 1.6% | 1 | 0.1% | 27 | 1.7% |
| Ministry Shares | 19 | 1.2% | | | 19 | 1.2% |
| Differences in US and Canada | 8 | 0.5% | | | 8 | 0.5% |
| Grand Total | 1,270 | 80.1% | 316 | 19.9% | 1,586 | 100.0% |



Gratitude

Many respondents (N = 183) expressed gratitude for the opportunity to complete the survey and for their experience in their congregation or the denomination. These comments often recognize the importance of gathering feedback as a means to improve the health of the denomination and individual congregations, as this respondent wrote:

*Thank you for the opportunity to give feedback, as this can be a **very valuable tool to the denomination and individual churches**. I pray many will take advantage of this.*

Another comment shows gratitude for efforts dedicated to improving the denomination, especially in what many perceive as difficult times:

*Thank you to the denominational leadership for all you do. **It is a challenging time for all followers of Christ, especially so for those involved in a leadership role.** We have challenging times ahead that may again shake us to the core. I pray for openness and love to all those created in the image of God!*

*Blessings to you all and **keep up the excellent work** on the justice issues!*

Many respondents expressed the kind of caring disposition found in the comments above and mentioned praying regularly for direction for the denomination and their individual congregations.

Congregational Life and Leadership

Of all 1,586 substantive comments on the final open-ended question, 40.6 percent referenced some aspect of the respondent's congregational life, making this the most frequently referenced theme. Comments about congregational life also heavily intersected with two other themes: congregational or denominational leadership (260 comments coded to both themes) and congregational or denominational decline (212 comments coded to both themes).

Many comments (208) regarding congregational life expressed positive sentiments, such as praise and gratitude, for the respondents' individual churches. As illustrated in the comment below, respondents often highlighted the many strengths present in their congregations:

*I feel that our church is **moving in the right direction.** We are an established congregation but have a good sense of direction. We do worship well, have an awesome pastor and committed leadership. We have a broad spectrum of ages in regular attendance and actively support the development of children and young people. We have a good presence in our community through things like an ice rink open to all, a strong sports camp program, participation in PADS, and other service-oriented activities. We have good small group involvement.*

*I feel that we need to **get more involved in social justice issues but see signs of improvement** in that area as well.*

*In short, [our church] is a **great place and I am proud to be a member** there.*

Other respondents commented on the sense of belonging and community fostered within their congregations:

*In my time at [this church], I have **felt exceptionally well at home** and that my faith has been consistently growing. [Our pastor's] sermons are always great and insightful. The elders also show great care for the wellbeing of the congregation.*

Conversely, 436 comments about congregational life indicated some negative sentiment, with many of these comments indicating concern about the decline of a congregation or problems encountered with congregational leadership. The following respondent shared some of the factors they believe are contributing to shrinking congregations:

*Our church is **declining in numbers with many older long-time members dying and others leaving for various reasons.** We are having trouble getting elders to serve now. **There is definitely a cultural change now in the church.** Many retirees now are out of town regularly in the winter and or summer months and unwilling to serve. This never was the case years ago. I fear our church is declining and will eventually have to merge with another local church.*

Very concerned about the **declining number of young families in our church** and what that means for youth ministry. This concern is heightened by the recent departure of a well-loved youth pastor who had strong relationships with youth and former youth members, as well as the departure of a worship ministry leader who was great at involving youth and all generations and ethnicities in worship. Feel this may cause strain in our family as we want to be loyal to [our church] and its programs, but it will be tempting to seek more dynamic youth ministries in other area churches.

I feel that **many needs in our church are not being met...** The lack of a women's pastor, a leadership team that strongly needs restructuring, and the fact that we do not look outside our "bubble." No continued support after children leave High School and very little support for children who attend public as opposed to Christian School. **Church is good at drawing people in but lacks the ability to keep them.**

These concerns are not unique to these respondents. Many other comments echoed the above, with respondents expressing concerns about older members dying, many members leaving over internal conflict or personal reasons, and lack of engagement with younger generations.

Congregational leadership also seemed to play a role in some of the negative sentiment expressed in these comments. Many respondents feel their leadership has neither the time nor the resources available to fully serve the congregation. As one respondent describes:

The leaders of our congregation are **doing their best to provide spiritual guidance**, but they are all working full time and have mostly young families, so we need a pastor. Right now one pastor from our classis has agreed to do that on a part-time basis, which will help in that we won't need to depend on classical assignments as much, and he'll be available on some weekends for those who need counseling, but the burden of managing the church both financially and spiritually still depends on Council, and as I've stated previously, they're working full time, so we haven't had a weekly Bible study for adults in ages.

Some respondents point to the relationship between leadership concerns and congregational decline, such as the following:

I am saddened by the council's handling of recent issues. Because of the council's decision, highly gifted and valued members of our congregation left. **There is a void in our church family that I fear will never be fully healed.**

Our church has **experienced turnover of staff, and a lot of members** have left over the past 5 years. I don't appreciate how church leadership hasn't been transparent about what caused the conflicts and generally has tried to ignore that it has happened and pretended everything is fine. The vacuum has left some remaining members to assume that unresolvable conflict between staff was to blame and those that left lost "political battles" and gave up despite the amazing Christian impact and growth our church had with past staff leadership. **Between the staff turnover, members leaving, and not really knowing what has transpired, some feel a cloud over our church going forward.**

Despite their concerns, respondents often indicated they remain committed to their congregations and to the denomination. These critical comments should not be taken as an indication of hopelessness; rather, respondents are invested in their congregational life and wellbeing and hope to take part in regenerative processes to renew their congregation.

Denominational Concerns

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the second most common theme (N = 549) that emerged from these comments was concern for the denomination's future. Respondents' concern for declining membership and relevance is not limited to their individual congregations; many comments point toward these same anxieties for the denomination more broadly. In particular, many respondents perceive the denomination struggling with the tension between adhering to traditional CRC beliefs and adapting to new traditions and cultural trends.

Several respondents articulated concerns about the denomination straying from its Reformed identity, as shown in the comments below:

*In many ways **the CRC is struggling and has lost its identity as a Reformed Church**. There seems to be a difference between staff and heads of agencies and needs and wants of the churches themselves, especially when it comes to the mission of the church. I see a **loss of our Reformed identity and commitment to Scripture**, and honestly worry if the church will be staying together in the next few years due to the pushing of social and political issues by the denomination.*

*I love the CRC, but I am very **concerned that our denomination will go the same direction as the Lutheran and the Presbyterian denominations**. I feel that the **culture has had more impact** on the church than the church has had on culture. I desperately want the CRC to uphold the truths of scripture without watering them down to make them more acceptable to the world.*

Other respondents expressed a different perspective on this tension, indicating their desire to see the denomination provide more leadership and engagement with social and political issues:

*The CRC is **dying because it is rigid in tradition and cannot or will not change quickly enough to be relevant** to our neighbors. There has never been a culture of concern for the lost and least. We are mostly concerned about how we can survive and keep things the way they have always been.*

***My congregation seeks to be relevant and inclusive. I wish the CRC sought to be the same**. In my experience, the CRC waits for the rest of the world to become convinced of whom to include, and then it agrees. The church should lead on including in love, unconditionally. I believe the CRC also needs to become involved in the crises of our time, such as the environmental crisis. I believe these are the issues/contexts that Jesus involved Himself in. Therein lies relevance.*

Political and social tensions are not the only reason respondents believe the CRC is struggling to retain membership. Some comments also point toward a tension between congregations in the United States and congregations in Canada. Respondents expressed frustration with the bi-national nature of the denomination:

*The CRC in Canada is simply a branch plant of the CRC in the US. Despite the designation CRCNA, **the CRC is really just an American church**. It should never have been established in Canada. It would have been better for Dutch immigrants to have joined the Anglican or Presbyterian churches in Canada.*

*Being Canadian in a **bi-national church does not always work well**. There is a sense that we are beholden to our larger, more powerful neighbour to the south. I think that there should be separate boards for Canada and USA as **our needs are different**, and in some cases, our perspectives on issues. For me there is a disconnect between my local church and the denomination.*

Additionally, denominational exclusivity may be another point of tension for many congregants. Some comments, such as the one below, highlight the denomination's **ethno-cultural exclusivity**:

***[The CRCNA] will only survive if we can move beyond our cultural heritage towards being a church of the community**. We struggle, generally, to leave an immigrant mentality that handicaps our congregations. The CRC originated as a culturally homogenous group of people seeking safety in numbers, common language, and cultural values. This was fine, except that still today the same desires for 'safety' and homogeneity remain, though perhaps sub-consciously. **Our future depends on changing/replacing this culture and hinges less on theological challenges** which we can all see coming and seems to be the bogeyman most are worried about.*

Another respondent points to **doctrinal exclusivity** as a barrier to fellowship between congregations:

The CRC isn't as well-known as a denomination, but though we are small we are a mighty force in the world. As much as I love and respect the doctrines of the CRC, I believe we need to

interact more with other denominations. The universal church should be more emphasized more than individual denominations and/or individual churches. Churches are too often pitted against each other for members and known for differences instead of consolidating and sharing commonality. We need to combine resources if we are to last as a denomination.

Other respondents identify the **denomination's commitment to Christian schooling** as one that can be exclusive, such as the commenter below:

*I think the question of Christian education being a requirement to be in covenant community is absurd. **That is an exclusive and oppositional position to all those who do not fit the "mold" of the CRC.** It breaks my heart when strong believers feel excluded and avoided by the church simply because they chose to send their children to public school. It is a message from the CRC that Jesus does not love them. The church should be a reflection of Christ's love and grace and not exclude people because of what school they go to.*

Political and Theological Tensions

As the fourth and fifth most common themes that emerged from these comments, respectively, it is worth expanding on the political (N = 350) and theological (N = 328) tensions mentioned in the section above. Many respondents argued strong positions about several current political issues as they relate to the traditions of the denomination and their local congregations. Specifically, respondents most often pointed to concerns about inclusion of the LGBTQ community (N = 161) and women in leadership positions (N = 116). On one hand, respondents see the inclusion of LGBTQ people and women in leadership as compromising traditional CRC theology and doctrine, such as the respondents below:

*I love the CRC, but **I am very concerned about the direction the church is taking regarding women in office and LGBT relations.** The church is getting far too liberal. In trying to connect to the community, it is starting to lose its boldness to proclaim what the Bible clearly states is wrong. Again, I love the CRC and am very loyal, but I fear that in the next several years I will be forced to leave this denomination for one that is far more conservative and more biblically based. The CRC should be able to reach out to the community in love and show the love of the Lord to those around us without having to compromise our moral/biblical beliefs.*

*I believe strongly in theology and mission of the CRC; but **I am discouraged that the leadership of CRC has "punted" on several issues such as homosexuality, children at the table, and women in office.** These and other issues have been left up to individual congregations and/or Classis to decide for themselves. While I understand why it was done this way, the results of "punting" have left several congregations trying figure out identity and what God's word says about these issues apart from denominational help. I fear this may have fractured congregations and what was intended to promote unity may end up causing division due to lack of leadership.*

On the other hand, several respondents expressed their frustration with the perceived lack of engagement and commitment to LGBTQ people and women in leadership on the denomination's part. The comments below embody this perspective:

*The CRC has been **slow to support women in ministry and glacially slow in engaging in conversation about how much God loves [the LGBTQ community]** and embracing them as part of God's family. We would do well to examine the scriptures with an open mind and increase the pace of these conversations so we stop alienating people for whom Christ died.*

*I wonder about the **intent and purpose of our faith when there is perceived condemnation and judgement for not fitting the CRC "mold."** There is a lack of resources and support for professional women who work outside of the church (i.e., all women's programs occur during the workday). Questions I have asked re consideration of LGBTQ are answered by statements that are watering down scripture. I wonder if the church is a psychologically safe place for people to be their authentic selves, and if not, how can we truly be a community of Christ? Difficult questions,*

but so relevant to maintain a community of faith as I see people reaching out to healthcare providers more and church communities less in my professional practice.

While affirmation of the LGBTQ community and support for women in leadership were the two most common tensions addressed in the comments, respondents also shared differing perspectives on more general tensions, such as the denomination's shift toward more liberal teaching or the denomination's focus on social justice. For example, the following commenters believe that the denomination should return focus to evangelism and teaching that is free from value-laden political judgements:

*I am concerned that the **priority of the CRC is becoming social justice and addressing secular issues and diaconal outreach rather than "bringing the good news to the church members and the unsaved."** I am concerned that the CRC is less focused on Bible knowledge and full devotion to God, including faith strengthening, devotional and prayer life, and being separate from the world but yet in the world....I am concerned that the CRC is slowly declining because we are not doing what Scripture teaches us as a church to be. Encouraging one another, living together with a strong sense of community which includes commitment, sacrifice, strong biblical teaching (especially our youth), accountability, feeling of belonging, and excitement to be a Christ follower.*

*I don't see much future in the denomination of the CRC. **Too political, too liberal, too much involved in stuff that is a distraction from telling others about Jesus.***

Some respondents, however, see this as a false dichotomy and express hope that political polarization will not divide congregants. As the respondent below explains, the denomination could both engage with social justice and live into its teachings:

*I am concerned that the polarization we see in the country will divide the CRC. **I don't think the church can stay silent about politics, the truth of human-caused climate change, the greed of our current government;** indeed, the prophetic voices of Jeremiah, Amos, Isaiah, Obediah, and the rest of the major and minor prophets, need to be studied and brought to the top of all our Bible studies and conversations. But maybe more important is to teach both conservative and liberals to argue as one in Christ and value one another AND their opinions, especially when they are different. That compromise is not a slippery slope to hell, but the narrow road of God's people in community with each other as he intends.*

THEMES FROM MINISTRY AND AGENCY SUPPORT COMMENTS

Respondents were also given an opportunity to comment on ministries and agencies of the CRCNA. A list of CRCNA ministries and agencies were displayed to the respondent (e.g. Back to God, Calvin University, Home Missions, Partners Worldwide). The following prompt was displayed after the list of agencies for respondents, “Do you have any specific suggestions about how ministries and agencies could better serve your church?”

Figure 39 Themes from Ministry and Agency Feedback Comments (N = 798)

| Theme | No Sentiment All | | Negative All | | Positive All | | Grand Total | |
|--|---------------------|-------|-----------------|-------|-----------------|-------|-------------|--------|
| | # | % | # | % | # | % | # | % |
| Denominational Resources | 140 | 17.5% | 235 | 29.4% | 40 | 5.0% | 415 | 52.0% |
| Supporting Congregational Life | 95 | 11.9% | 179 | 22.4% | 28 | 3.5% | 302 | 37.8% |
| Communication about Ministries and Resources | 83 | 10.4% | 143 | 17.9% | 35 | 4.4% | 261 | 32.7% |
| Denominational and Congregational Leadership | 60 | 7.5% | 112 | 14.0% | 12 | 1.5% | 184 | 23.1% |
| CRC Doctrine and Theology | 27 | 3.4% | 81 | 10.2% | 9 | 1.1% | 117 | 14.7% |
| Politics | 9 | 1.1% | 70 | 8.8% | 6 | 0.8% | 85 | 10.7% |
| Worship Style | 28 | 3.5% | 43 | 5.4% | 5 | 0.6% | 76 | 9.5% |
| Grand Total | 263 | 33.0% | 442 | 55.4% | 93 | 11.7% | 798 | 100.0% |



Awareness of available resources

Many respondents used this comment section to highlight the disconnect between their congregations and the listed ministries. Just over 40 percent of comments included some indication that the respondents would like to see more communication about how their congregations could partner with and take advantage of the resources available to them. For example, the following commenters mention their hope of better connection between local congregations and denominational ministries:

Maybe better communication. *We are a long way from the various agencies' headquarters, and this tends to seem impersonal and disconnected.*

Lack of awareness of what these ministries actually involve is an issue. *It's a hard question to answer when you don't have a good understanding of what each of the ministries/agencies does.*

*The ministries come up with some really good ideas and well-thought-out plans, but **the implementation of these in the daily life of the congregation is problematic.** Any way more of this information could be disseminated at a congregational level? Maybe regular emails to which members can subscribe or some such thing? Even the Banner does not have that much info; it is mostly news about other churches.*

Some respondents feel that this disconnect is due to geographic exclusiveness, such as a focus on Grand Rapids or the eastern United States:

I feel as if a lot of this ministries are very "Grand Rapids" focused and really have no influence on my life in Western Washington. *Though I know that [denominational ministries] are making a difference, I would like to be able to see them firsthand in my church.*

Take more interest in what happens in the West. *Too much eastern concentration & influence.*

*Take some interest in churches west of the Rocky Mountains. True, the population base is larger in the east, but almost all programming and direction to the churches out west is being driven from Grand Rapids. [There is a **d]isconnect from west coast culture and [Grand Rapids is] often out of sync with what we experience out here.** Synodical ministry shares seem like a waste*

because of little or no tangible impact realized as a tangible help to our church's ministry in our local community.

Whatever the source of this disconnect, many respondents mentioned the ways in which these resources and ministries would immensely help support and bring life to their congregations if the gaps in communication and awareness could be bridged.

*[Our church] is losing the young adults when they go away to school. **Agencies that assist in keeping up with young adult relations would be very helpful!** Also, ministries aimed at working people and their relationships within the church would not go amiss.*

*Our church holds a hymn sing monthly in a personal care home (run by the local health region) and we have a percentage of our congregation in care homes or homebound. I am involved in ministry to the elderly in the community. **It would be very helpful to have resources that were aimed on serving/leading elderly seniors from inside personal care homes.** It should include resources for church and unchurched seniors, and ways to encourage their caregivers, both family and staff.*

***Agencies have been helpful to our congregation when we sought their input.** We do not avail ourselves enough of resources available to us. This reluctance is not restricted to church matters only but applies to many other aspects of our complicated lives as well. Generally, we strive to "figure it out for ourselves" which is sometimes detrimental to our successes.*

CRC governance

Many respondents also used this opportunity to describe the relationship between their local congregation and the denomination. Some respondents expressed satisfaction with how their congregation interacts with and is supported by the denomination:

*In this area the denomination does **a nice job, is efficient, and supports a good network of local congregations.***

*I believe that all of the ministries and agencies in the CRC that I am aware of are making a **positive, significant contribution to the CRC's health.** As part of that body, that strengthens us at Immanuel.*

However, the respondents below, like many others, expressed frustration with the denomination's relationship to their congregation and describe a similar feeling of disconnect as previous respondents highlighted in this report:

*I feel that the agencies and denominational level ministries should remember that **they exist to be of service to the local congregations and/or to fulfill and expand upon the ministry focus of the local congregation.** This is instead of the other way around -- as I see it, the local congregation [provides direction] up to the denomination, **NOT** the denomination down onto the local congregation. If the congregations are not being served by the denomination, then what is the purpose of the denomination?*

*I have noticed over the years that **many local congregations of the CRCNA consider that what goes on at 1700 28th St. is growing less connected to what happens in the churches.** Are they consulting local churches, such as in this survey, or are they only taking input from some (a few regional classes) or attendees at Synod who constitute an extremely select and maybe unrepresentative surface layer of the members of the denomination?*

***I think the church should be more localized.** There are way too many CRC agencies.*

Despite these negative comments, some respondents acknowledged that even if their congregations may be aware of resources, they do not always access them:

*I think the CRCNA agencies do a good job of letting churches know what is happening, both through the Banner and mailings. **Individual churches may not take advantage of the information***

that is available. I know in our church a lot of attendees aren't familiar with many of the CRCNA agencies and what they are doing. (Our church is made up of people from many different religious backgrounds) It is a challenge to foster interest in agencies that don't impact us directly.

*As a church **we don't always take full advantage of what the CRC has to offer.** Balancing effective communication with avoiding information overload is difficult.*

Local and global ministry

Finally, respondents also commented on the focus of CRCNA ministries and agencies. Views on CRCNA involvement in local and global ministry vary widely. For example, some respondents feel that many of these ministries' global focus pulled resources and attention away from local ministry—a sentiment that echoes earlier comments about the disconnect between the denomination and individual congregations:

*It seems that we are **incredibly globally minded, to the detriment of the local home community.** While we understand the mandate to go forth and spread the Word, it seems that more involvement in our local communities would be a better expression.*

*I hope there is more value than what I see. What I see is a **denomination that requires time and resources** from staff and congregants **to oversee and fund national and/or global programs** but adds little in terms of real and immediate value to [local congregations].*

However, other respondents recognize the value of globally reaching ministries, seeing it as part of the larger church's mission to support evangelism and outreach efforts:

***Some ministries are not meant to serve my church.** They represent me as they go out to serve the world and preach the gospel. They do a good job doing that and I need to support that. Your question has a very inward focus*

DISCUSSION

While many respondents have expressed their gratitude and praise for their local congregations and the denomination over the years, there is a sizeable portion of comments from respondents who are dismayed by their perceptions of a changing denominational identity, a heightened external, worldly cultural influence on the church, and an increased focus on social justice initiatives they find suspect. Another selection of these comments indicates concern about perceptions of denominational exclusiveness, insufficient outreach, and rigid traditions.

This apparent divide among respondents likely comes as no surprise, particularly given previous findings of this survey and the current political environment in the broader North American context. While it is easy to take these tensions as an indication that the denomination is rife with conflict, it is also worth noting that these groups may have more in common than a cursory glance might suggest. Perhaps it is not so much that each group's concerns and desires conflict with one another, but rather that there is no shared single assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the denomination. This anxiety about lack of direction in the face of rapid change is apparent throughout the comments, with many respondents expressing frustration that congregations have been left to decide for themselves how to respond to current issues apart from denominational guidance, like the comment quoted above in **Political and Theological Tensions**.

This is not to say that the distinct tensions that arise in the comments, such as the inclusion of the LGBTQ community or the appointment of women in leadership positions, do not need to be grappled with at both congregational and denominational levels. Given the direct relationship many respondents draw between declining membership and lack of direction or engagement with controversial topics, it may be beneficial for leadership to develop resources for shared education, conflict resolution, and consensus-building around these topics. Generating a mutual understanding and appreciation for the complexity of the Christian Reformed Church body may aid in strengthening relationships among members, congregations, and the denomination.

VI. Conclusions and recommendations

As in previous years, the survey results can appear to contain a bit of a paradox. On the one hand, survey respondents strongly affirm majority of the multiple-choice survey items—designed with denominational plans in mind and reflecting the broad, holistic theological, devotional, and ethical commitments of the Reformed tradition.

On one hand, congregants confirm, year after year, that their local church is full of desirable futures. Large majorities affirm that their congregations are “shaped by grace,” urges them to apply the Bible to all of life, helps them build relationships, nurtures the faith of children, and offers a spiritual home to people of all generations.

On the other hand, the substantive comments are predominantly negative and critical, reflecting anxiety about the aging demographic trends coupled with dismay over changing denominational identity, heightened worldly cultural influence on the church, and an increased focus on social justice initiatives that they distrust as politically motivated.

How do we address and reconcile these tensions?

First, we have few challenges that are not very common among North American social groups whose socioeconomic status resembles our own. The participating, predominantly Anglo/Caucasian and Dutch English-speaking congregations have an unusually well-educated and wealthy population of congregants. Education and wealth are everywhere associated with fewer marriages, delayed timing of marriage and childbirth, fewer children, and a growing share of retirees and elderly people.

Second, it’s not unusual that a substantial share of CRCNA congregants are increasingly distrustful of remote institutions; that trend is decades old and applies to a great many institutions, public and private.³⁰ The position of some fiercely critical commenters—that their local congregation is Biblically faithful, but the wider denomination is not—is broadly similar to the way many citizens profess to admire their local district’s political representative but despise the legislature that representative serves in.³¹

Our challenge is not to dismiss the reality that a significant and vocal share of our congregants may mistrust our denominational leadership and agencies for legitimate reasons, yet to recognize that those reasons may not be entirely addressable independent of broader changes in the wider church and society.

This is not to say that the denomination and all its congregations and congregants can do nothing. On the contrary, we can do what our governance-rich tradition disposes us to do: to talk and act together, systematically and directly, to work on the trust dynamic itself, addressing rebuilding trust as a problem independent of disagreements about theology, worship, and ethics.

Social science offers extensive evidence that interpersonal trust—social capital—is a product of social interaction. But CRC congregants report in the survey that some such interactions are infrequent. Many congregants say they don’t talk with others about their spiritual life. Most congregants do not perceive much direct collaboration among congregations on the Christian mission. Comments indicate that awareness of denominational activities is lower than they would like, especially in geography far from the denominational center of gravity in Grand Rapids.

Our tradition is well equipped to have such conversations. We take Scripture seriously when it says not to give up meeting together, we have orderly governance practices, and we have long believed that political process and enfranchisement are part of our response to God’s call to love our neighbor as ourselves.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We have already pointed to some actions with respect to worship variety, spiritual disciplines, and decision-making participation in our analysis of Desired Futures beginning on page 50. We have also

³⁰ Andrew I. Yeo and Matthew N. Green, *Living in an Age of Mistrust: An Interdisciplinary Study of Declining Trust and How to Get It Back* (Routledge, 2017).

³¹ Richard F. Fenno, *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts* (Longman, 2003).

pointed to the basic problem of representation for racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity that is reflected in survey participation.

Rather than repeat those points here, we'll suggest some further practical actions that would reinforce strategies for greater variety in worship, spiritual disciplines, inclusion in decision-making, and participation by all congregations. The survey data and broader social science findings suggest these practical recommendations:

1. Invent, expand, improve, and sustain exchange and visitation practices.

Meeting together in obedience to Scripture should not focus on meetings internal to the local congregation to the exclusion of meeting with the wider church body. We are a participatory tradition, so the scope of broad participation by congregants should extend well beyond the official roles of delegates to classis and Synod. To achieve more in the Desired Futures of leadership, identity, and collaboration, we need to improve and extend the traditional practice of “visiting” beyond home visits by elders and church visits by classis visitors. We could implement exchange programs on a grand scale as an essential part of our identity and practice, to improve communication and to build empathy and respect. For example:

- a. **Pulpit exchange:** Pastors should preach for another CRC at least once a quarter and for a congregation in another denomination at least once a year.
- b. **Council member and worship team visitation:** Council members and worship leaders should visit another congregation for worship at least once a quarter; worship-team exchanges and cross-trainings would be an advanced feature, leading to greater breadth in modes of worship as suggested on page 50.
- c. Church leadership should take a long weekend retreat together with leaders of a Christian church from another race, ethnicity, or culture at least once a year.
- d. College and seminary degrees should teach the value of the exchange and visitation practices as a basic commitment of being Christian Reformed.
- e. If and when travel is possible, condescending “short-term missions” should be replaced with learning pilgrimages. CRC teams should go forth to humble ourselves and learn from believers in other lands and cultures and to bring a teaching report back to our home congregations. If we go in weakness and ignorance, we can return in power and knowledge; if we go in power and knowledge, we will return weak and ignorant, because we will speak too much and hear nothing. If we go in disciplined humility, we will be welcome everywhere, and the Gospel will go with us.

2. Define and practice new discipleship commitments.

- a. Every congregant denomination-wide should be encouraged and equipped to have an intentional monthly conversation with a spiritual conversation partner—a peer, a mentor, a mentee, a counselor, or a church leader.
- b. Every congregation should have a clear step-by-step process for promoting spiritual growth and identifying leadership in disciplines like prayer, Bible study, service, and hospitality.
- c. Every pastor should be required to have a peer pastor to meet with monthly on a six or twelve-month rotation, for fellowship, professional development, and relationship-building.

3. Reinvigorate justice and mercy work as a central practice for all congregations.

Congregations and congregants are often suspicious of “social justice” work. Though they may have direct knowledge of the lives of the poor and oppressed, they rarely have much understanding of the systems and policies that have emerged from decades or even centuries of practice that very often originated in the work of churches—often Reformed churches. There is no substitute for direct experience and collaboration with social workers, public health professionals, community organizers, anti-racism leaders, and so forth.

- a. Congregational worship should be marked by regular testimony about the condition of the wider community from deacons and helping professionals in the congregation: teachers, nurses, social workers, counselors, etc.

- b. Liturgy and curriculum should remind congregants of the historic roots of modern welfare institutions in the example and advocacy of the church and should help congregants understand and address the root causes of poverty, addiction, and illness.
- c. As a matter of standard practice, every CRC congregation should pursue and sustain a supportive informal relationship with a public welfare or educational agency serving the poor in their geography, assigning congregants as liaisons and receiving reports from them on the agency's work. Such relationships need not imply endorsement of the public policy conducted by that agency, and occasion may arise to hold the agency accountable for misdeeds. But the relationship should be based in genuine care and concern for front-line workers serving the poor through channels other than the faith-based nonprofits that dominate church-supported outreach.

Like all kinds of voluntarism, such practices may seem an unrealistic demand on time and energy *until we actually do them regularly*. In practice, such efforts produce new energy, attracting fresh talent and reinvigorating ministries through the exchange of ideas and resources and inspiration. They also reveal inward-looking things that we can stop doing inwardly or stop doing altogether in favor of a more connected, collaborative whole. We are a covenant community—that has to mean doing more *together*.

AVAILABLE RESOURCES AND FUTURE PLANS

The Center for Social Research (CSR) team will continue to engage with denominational leaders and interested parties to find value in the survey data beyond the limited insights offered by this report.

The CSR web site provides tools for understanding the survey, supporting documents, including interactive online access to the survey data through Tableau Public.

If you are interested in learning more, please visit this web address:

<http://www.calvin.edu/go/crcsurvey>

Inquiries about the survey and this report may be addressed to csr@calvin.edu.

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