PREPARED BY FLOURISHING CONGREGATIONS INSTITUTE

Springbank United Church

flourishing
CONGREGATIONS
INSTITUTE

SURVEY RESULTS

FLOURISHINGCONGREGATIONS.ORG

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Introduction

Flourishing Congregations Institute

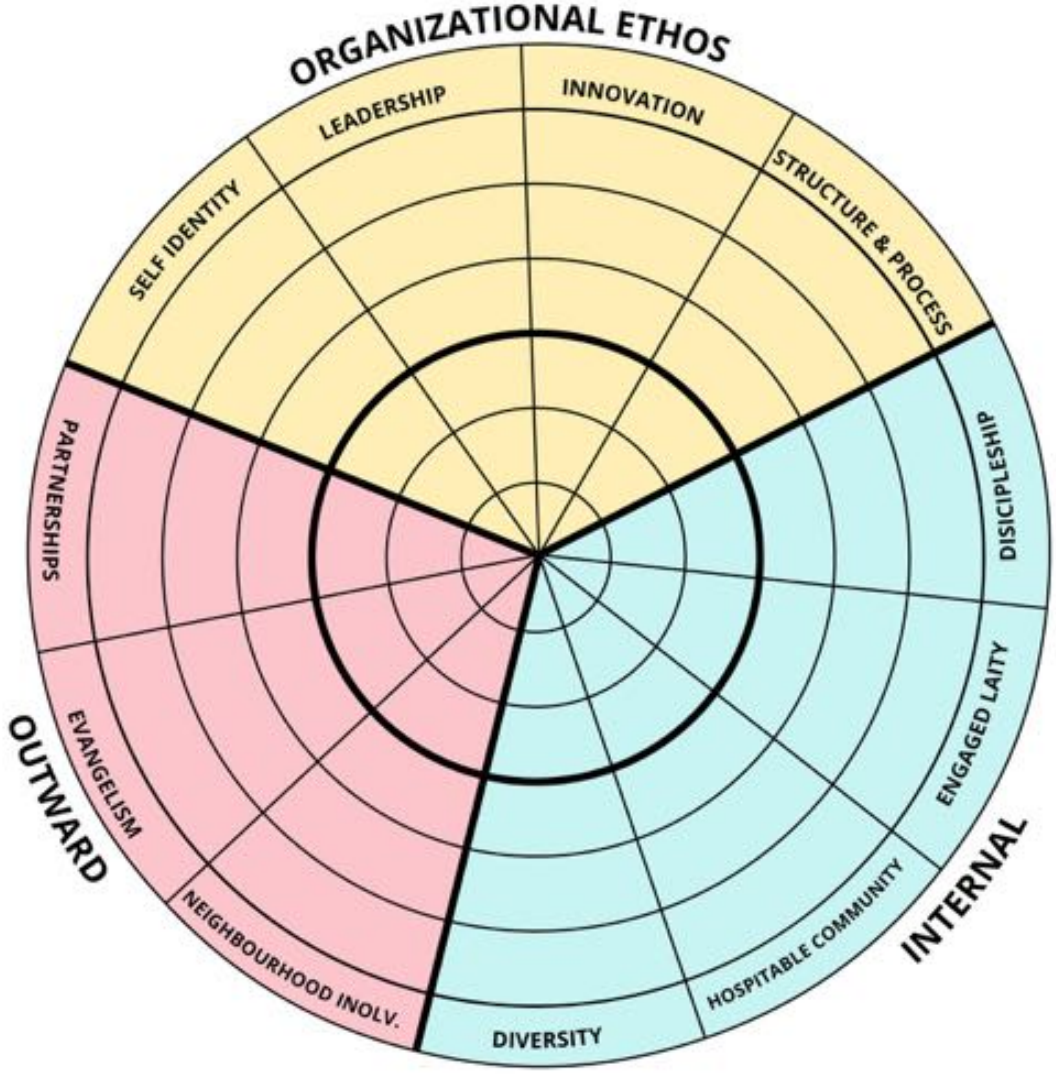
The Flourishing Congregations Institute started in 2015 at Ambrose University, in Calgary, Alberta. Our mission is to bring together academics and practitioners to research the factors surrounding flourishing congregations in Canada, develop tools and resources to help congregations flourish, and share our research findings with congregations that wish to flourish. Several funding partners have come alongside the Institute to share in this endeavor. These partners include: Ambrose University, Cardus, Christian and Missionary Alliance (Midwest and Western Canadian Districts), Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Stronger Philanthropy, Turning Point Consulting, University of Saskatchewan, Willow Creek Canada, and World Vision.

Our research team includes Dr. Joel Thiessen (Director, Ambrose University), Dr. Arch Wong (Associate Director, Ambrose University), Dr. Bill McAlpine (Leader Networker, Ambrose University), and Dr. Keith Walker (Member at Large, University of Saskatchewan). We also have a Partnership Council, comprised of church, denominational, and parachurch leaders from across theological traditions and Canadian regions. More on this group can be found in the "about us" section of our website.

Context for the National Survey

On behalf of the Institute, we want to thank you for being involved in this national survey. This survey is part of a larger multi-phase research project that started with interviews and focus groups with over 100 church and denominational leaders across Catholic, mainline, and conservative Protestant settings in five Canadian regions (Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg, Southwestern Ontario, and Halifax). During those interviews we asked leaders to describe for us what comes to mind when they think of a flourishing congregation. Among other things, those conversations contributed to what we are calling a "flourishing congregations construct."[1]

[1] One simple definition of a "construct" is that it is an idea or theory containing various conceptual elements, typically one considered to somewhat subjective and based on hunches or educated guesses without definitive empirical evidence.



Of course this construct is not at all perfect, but it serves as a common framework to study more deeply the perceptions and experiences of congregational life in Canada, across theological contexts and Canadian regions, mindful that some elements of the construct resonate more strongly in some traditions than others. Our interest – and we hope yours as well – is not only in the individual dimensions, but in the whole contruct. This survey – piloted before the survey was launched by researchers, church leaders, and congregants – is an attempt to parse out several elements to the overarching construct, from both leaders' and congregants' vantage points. We do not intend for this construct or these results to infer a hierarchy (i.e., variable 'x' is more important than variable 'y'); nor do we wish to suggest that flourishing equals numerical growth, though interestingly, this was one of the strongest points of contention during our phase one interviews.

How to Read this Report

In an effort to balance our research ethic obligations and our desire to provide all that we can to your congregation, we have included together your congregant and paid congregational/parish leader data. Further, we have only included select pieces of demographic data. We made these exclusion decisions to ensure confidentiality and anonymity for congregation/parish respondents (those in smaller congregations/parishes will be more appreciative of this). A few cautionary words at the outset as you read this report:

- A report like this one is only as strong as the sample size represented. If 30 people out of 500 in a congregation completed the survey, the results should be taken as much less indicative of overall perspectives in the parish. Conversely, where 75 out of 100 responded to the survey, far higher confidence in the findings would be warranted. Nevertheless, as you review this report, we encourage you to know that you are hearing/reading your own voices/perceptions back to yourself.
- The charts throughout this report display the proportion of those in your congregation/parish who completed the survey and responded to the options available to them. For example, if 75% of people say they “agree” on a given item, this percentage captures 75% of those who filled out the survey (see first point above on how indicative this may or may not be of your entire congregation/parish).
- This report is a descriptive account of how those in your congregation perceived and experienced of different aspects to congregational/parish life when the survey was done. Perceptions and experiences are important because they shape people’s reality and thus behaviour. These perceptions and experiences do change over time. Regardless of your personal perceptions, experiences, or aspirations, we encourage those who read this report to pay particular attention to the overarching narratives or themes that arise in these data.
- This report is a descriptive rather than prescriptive document, though we offer some suggestions at the end on possible ways for you to make sense of what you have read.
- When you read a chart, you might find it helpful to combine the strongly agree and agree, neutral and unsure, and disagree and strongly disagree percentages. Doing so can give you a snapshot of your congregation across three general perspectives.
- Every parish/congregations has strengths and weaknesses. It is reasonable to assume that respondents will express uneven or varied experiences (positive or negative) across a parish/congregation and that sub-cultures exist within one congregation/parish. This report will likely affirm some areas where you believe you are already flourishing, validate some hunches you had on different aspects of congregational life, and possibly alert you to some unexpected findings. We cannot stress the following any stronger: the aim of this report is not to present a negative image of any person or ministry area or to stir controversy. The data provided in this report can be powerfully used (but there is also possibility of misuse). We strongly discourage individuals or groups from taking these findings and rushing to quick judgments or hasty decisions. Rather, we encourage you to take your time to read, dialogue, pray and process; use these findings as a possible starting point to help name different realities in your context; create opportunities for healthy conversations

and process around these findings; and take strategic next steps that make sense in the context of *your* congregation.

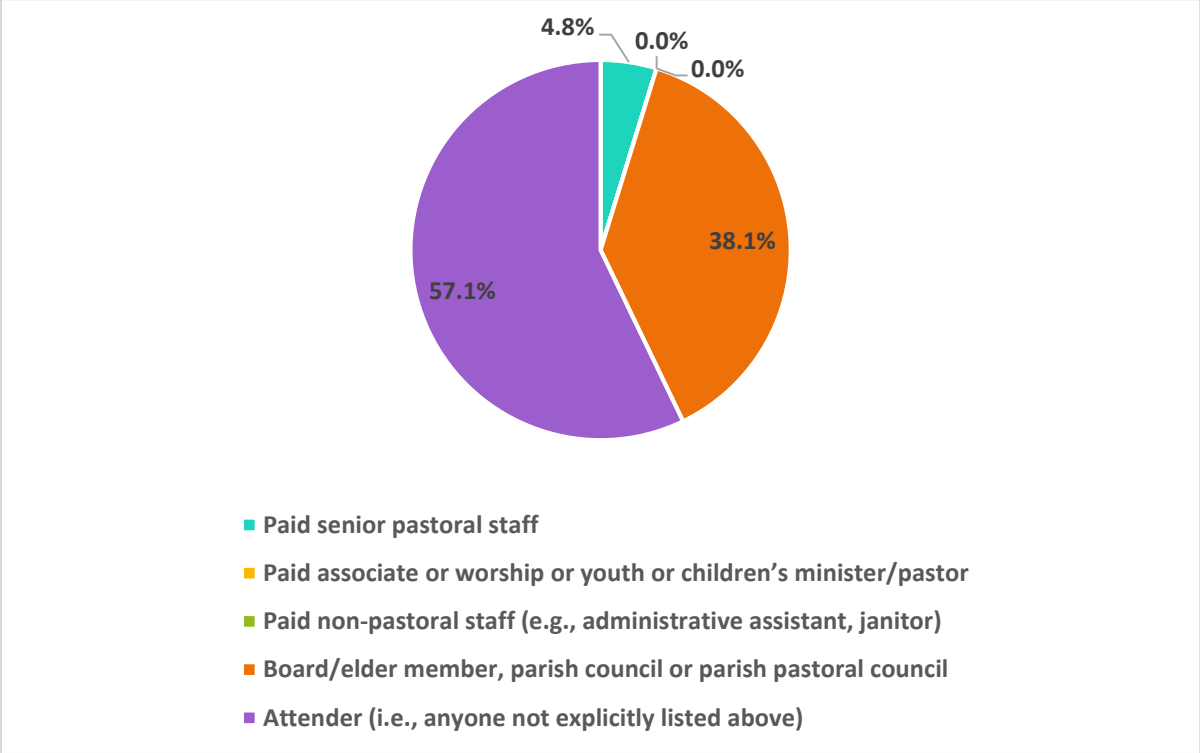
We have structured this report into broad sections: General Demographics, and Construct Themes (including, Clear Self-Identity, Leadership, Innovation, Discipleship, Engaged Laity, Hospitable Community, Neighborhood Involvement, and Evangelism). At the outset of each we have provided a short overview of our thinking and aims. We then provide select questions from these sections of the survey, with the data specific to your congregation. Because our data collection is ongoing, we are not able to provide any overarching comparisons – but we do hope to provide sector and other comparisons in the future. Following your congregation's results, we provide some recommendations for sharing this information with your congregation, next steps, and additional resources.

If, after reviewing this report, you have queries about specific questions contact our research team.

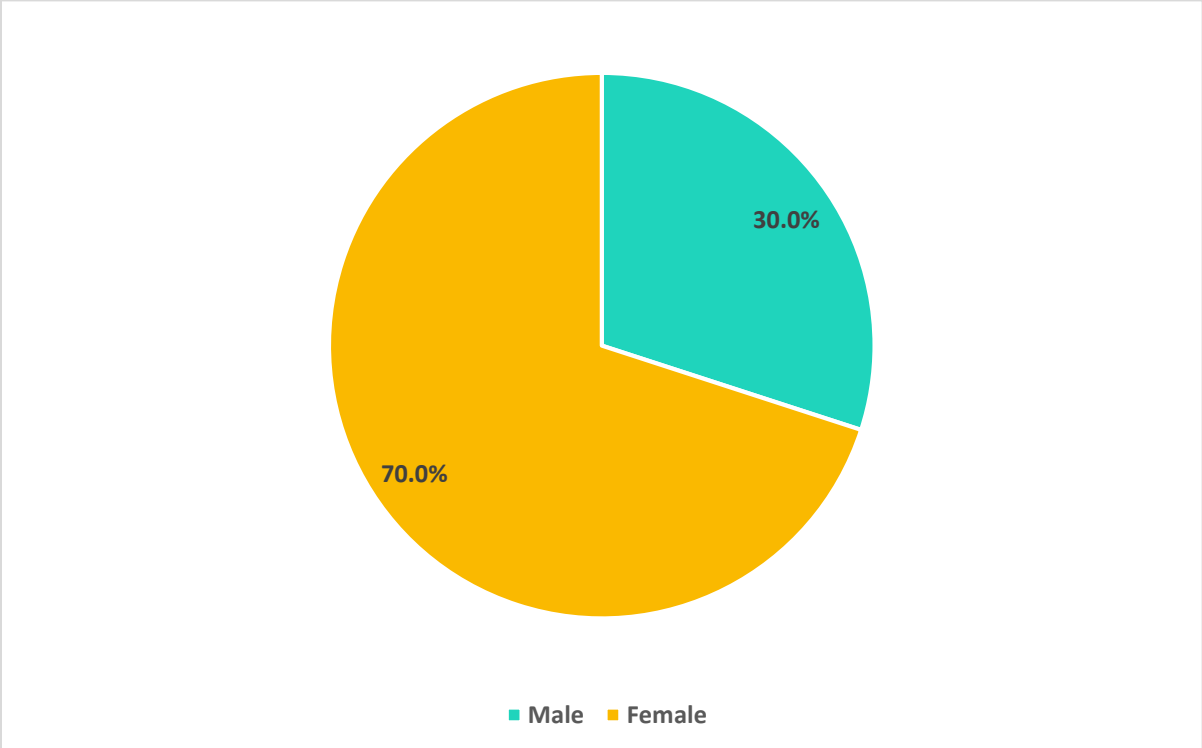
General Demographic Information

21 people from your congregation/parish completed this survey. The following questions capture a handful of demographic questions about those in your congregation, as well as some general perceptions that people have about your congregation.

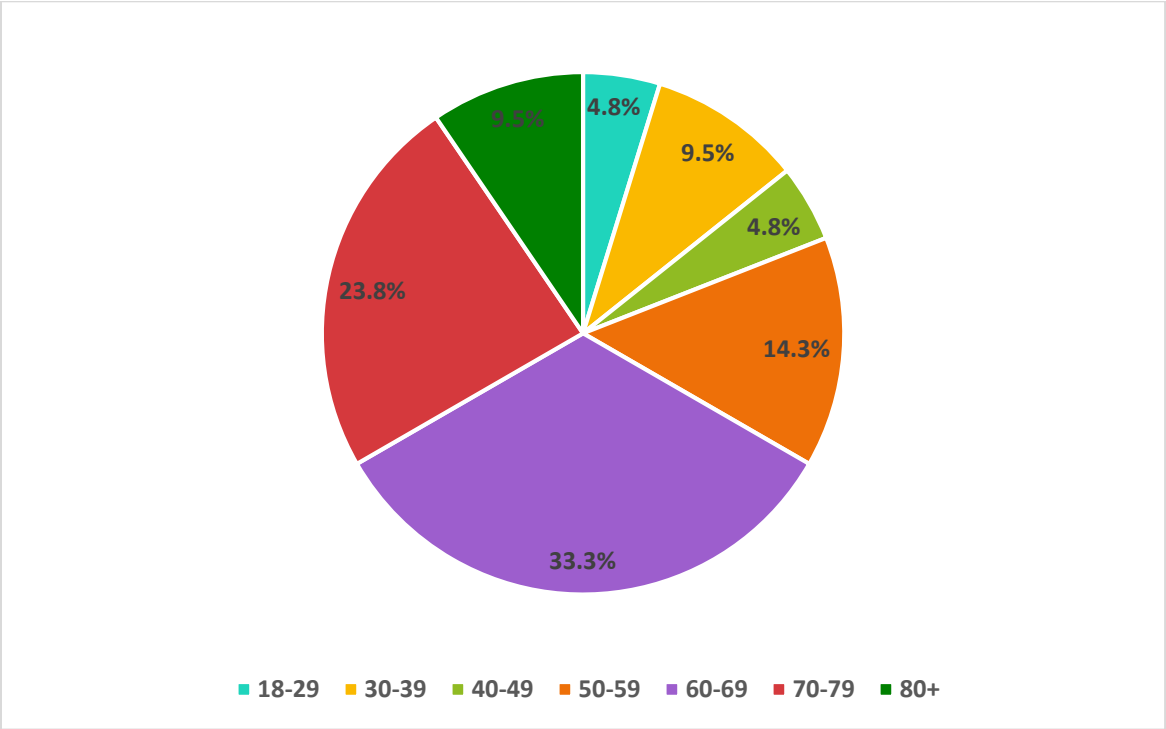
Who from our congregation filled this survey out?



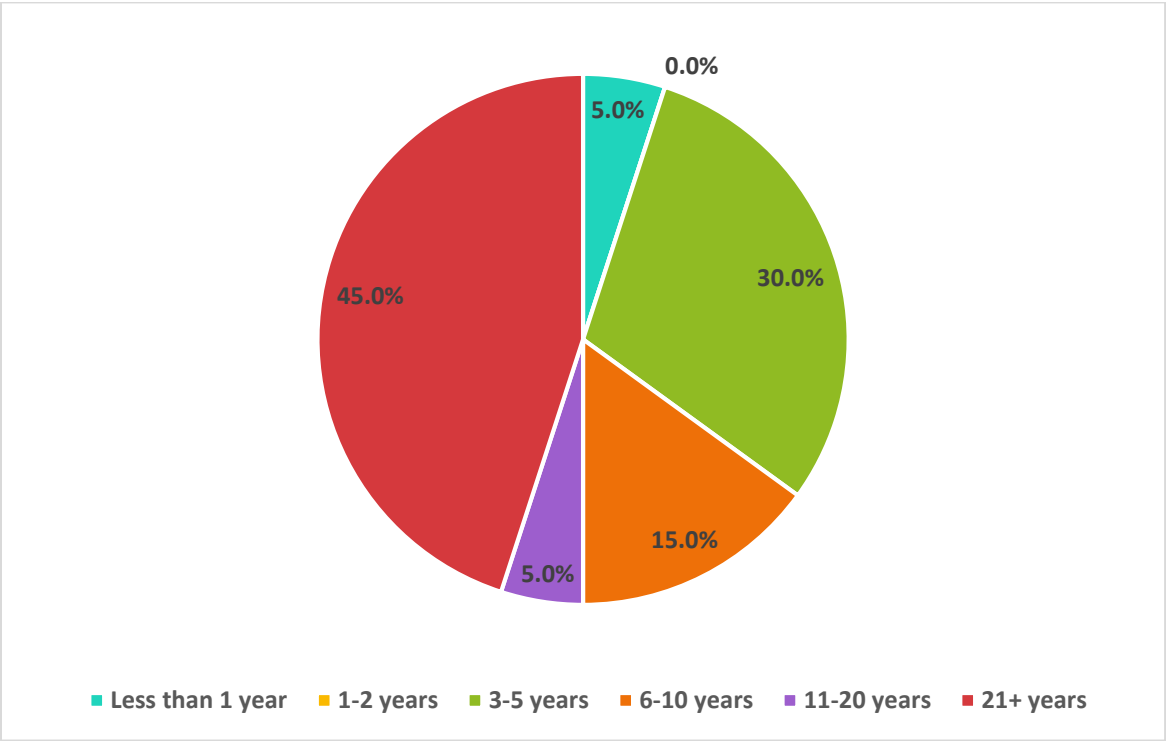
Gender



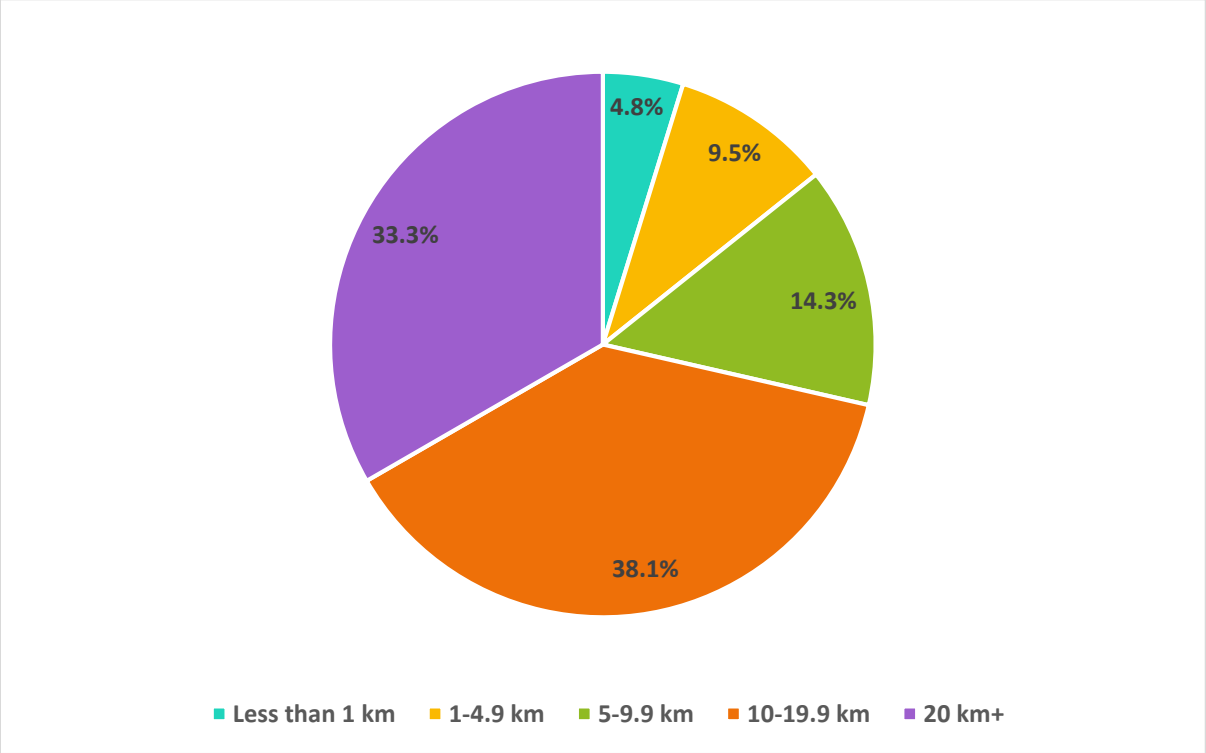
Age categories of respondents in our congregation



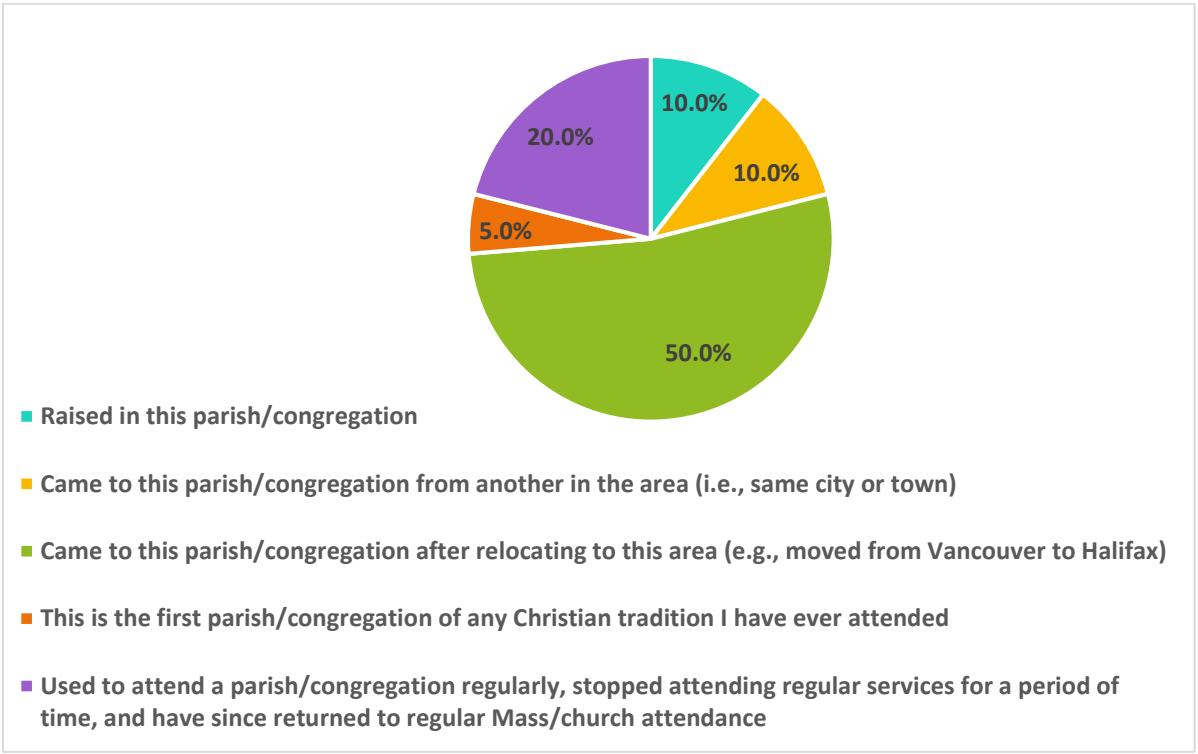
We asked: “How long have you attended Mass/worship services at this particular congregation/parish?”



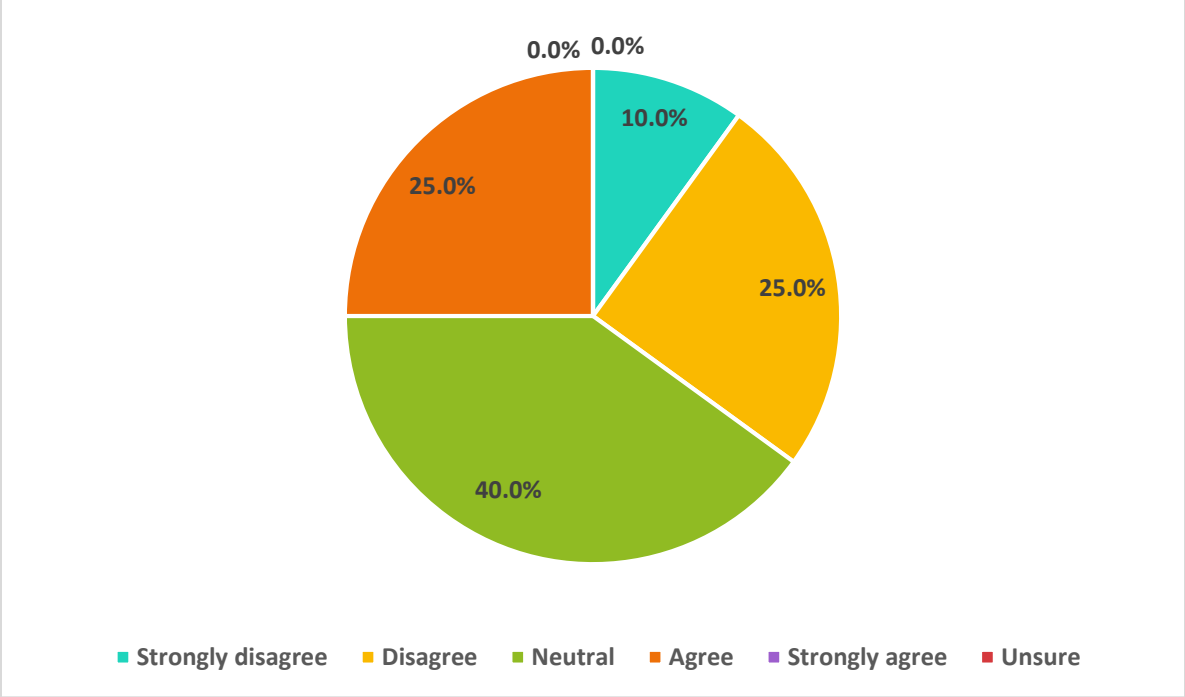
We asked: "Approximately how close do you live to your congregation/parish?"



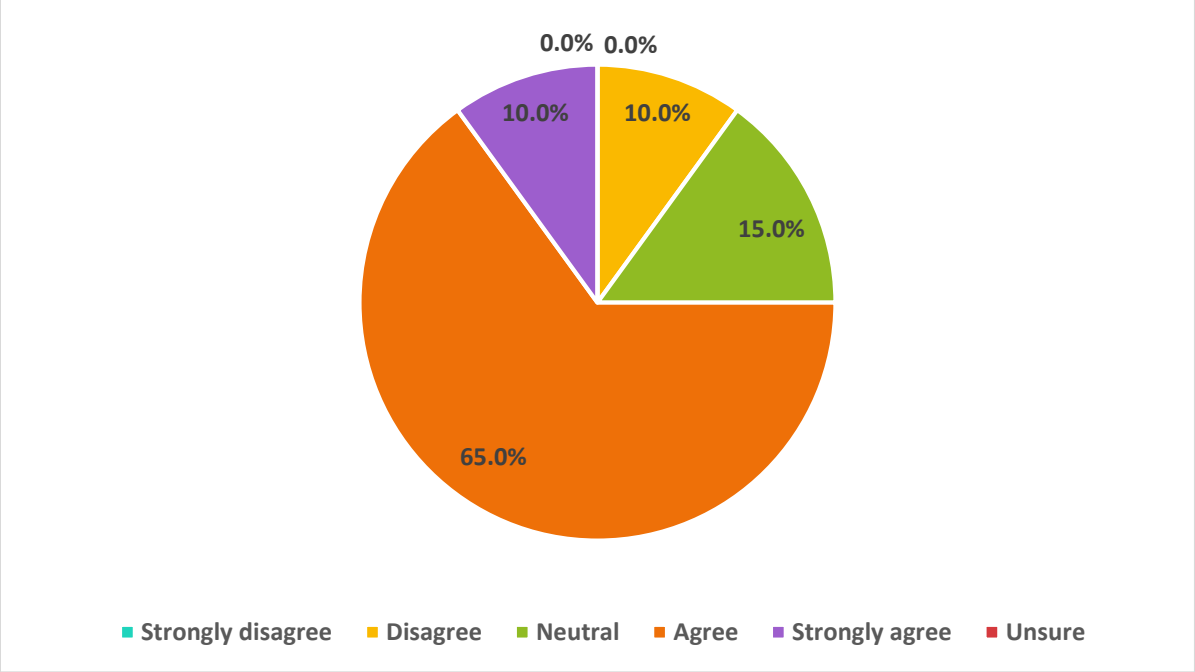
Respondent Background within the Congregation



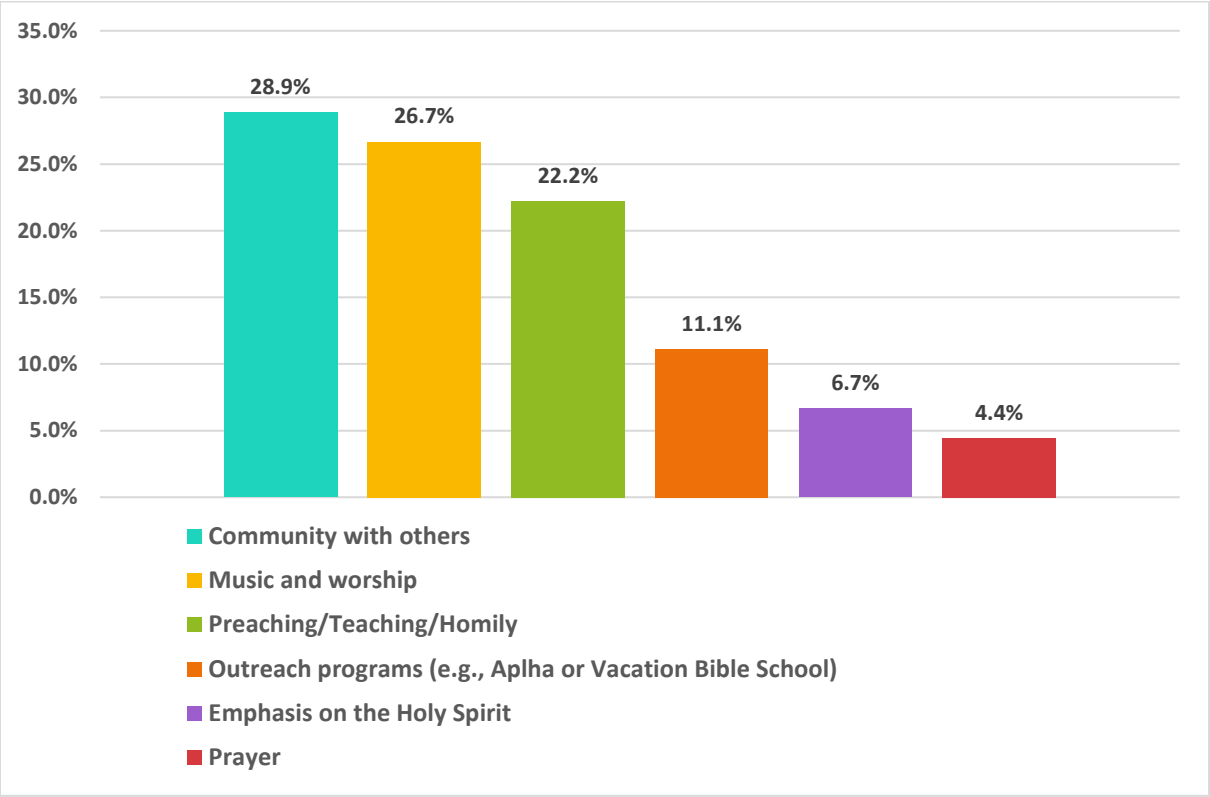
As researchers, our assumption is that most congregations have some areas of flourishing, or are flourishing in some areas more than others. We asked if: "Generally, your congregation/parish is flourishing?"



We asked if: "There are particular areas of ministry in your parish/congregation that are flourishing?"



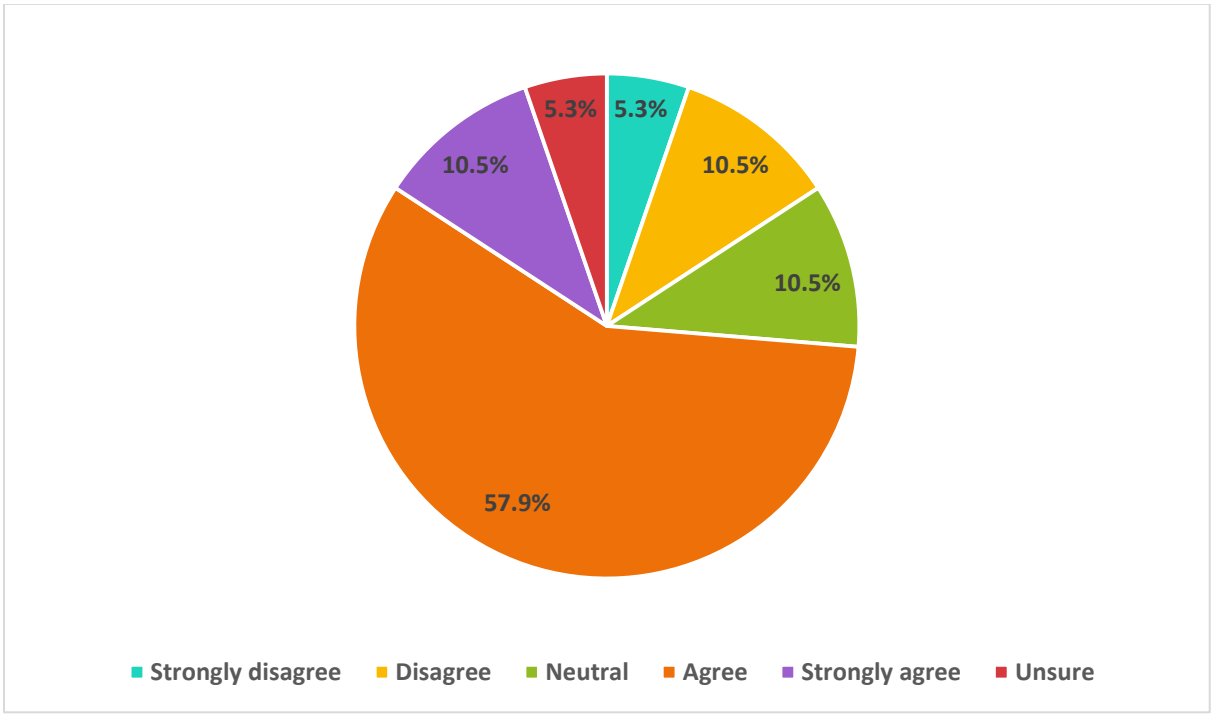
We asked respondents to *identify which three areas they most valued in their current parish/congregation*. We have provided the six most cited responses. The following percentages capture people who included those responses within their "top three."



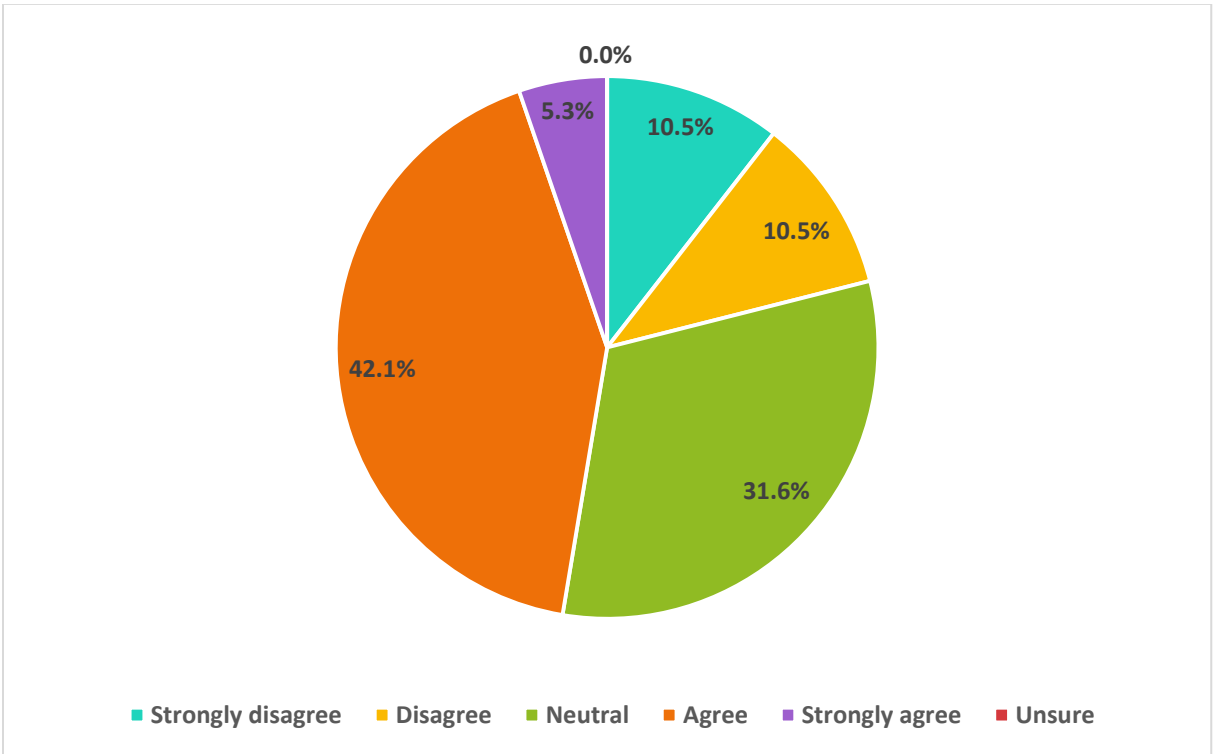
Organizational Ethos: Self-Identity

From our earlier interviews and focus groups, as well as our review of the literature, we discovered an emphasis on congregations who are clear on who they are – on where they have come from, where they are today, and where they are going. This dimension taps into people's perceptions and experiences about the clarity, communication, practice, and direction of your congregation's values.

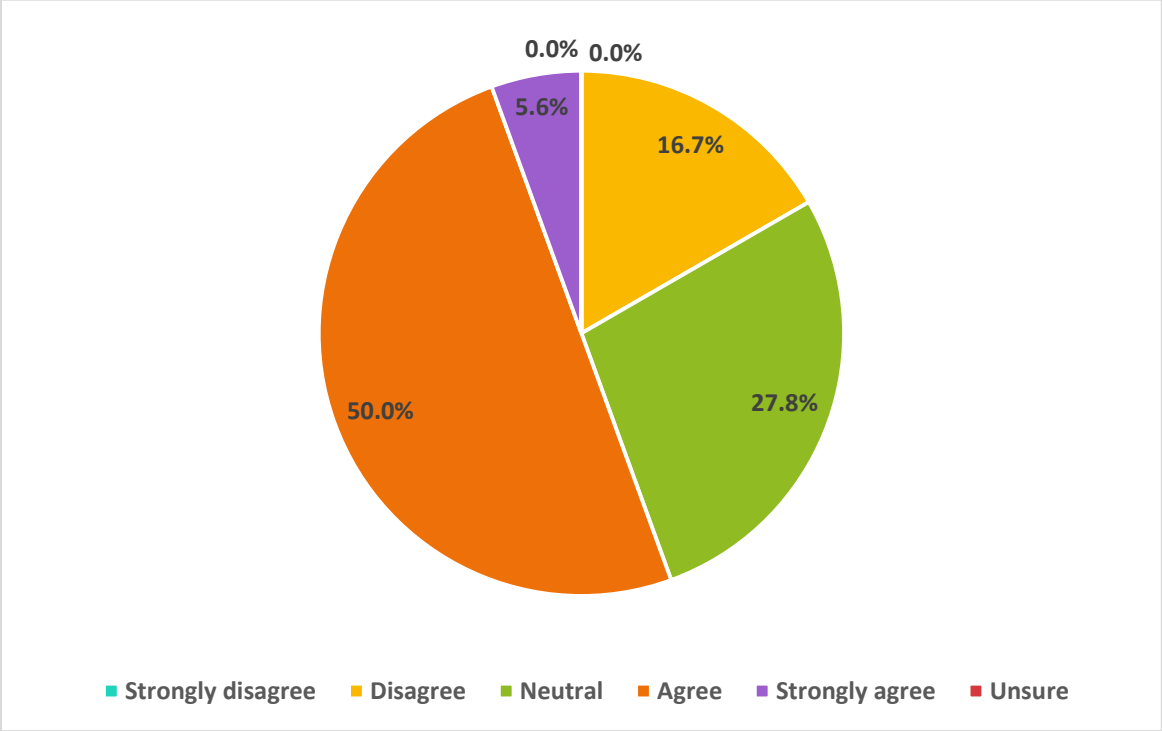
Our parish/congregation is clear on its core values and priorities (level of agreement)



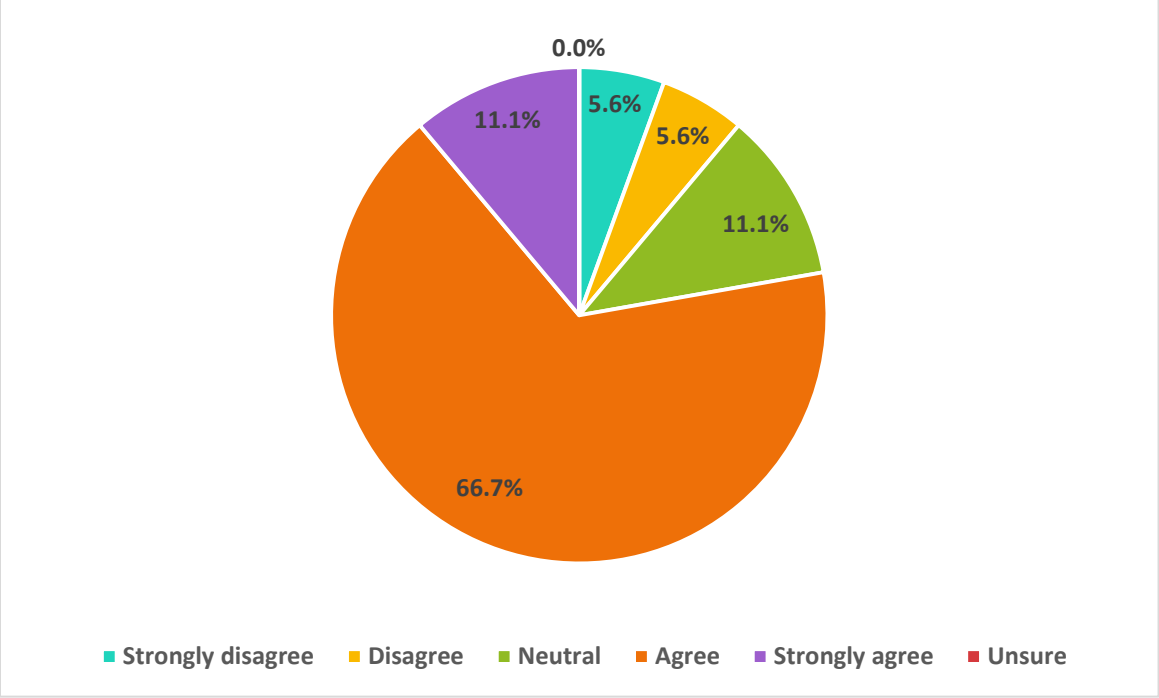
Our parish/congregation clearly communicates its core values to its members and attenders (level of agreement)



Our parish's/congregation's core values and religious teachings clearly shape our culture and ethos (level of agreement)



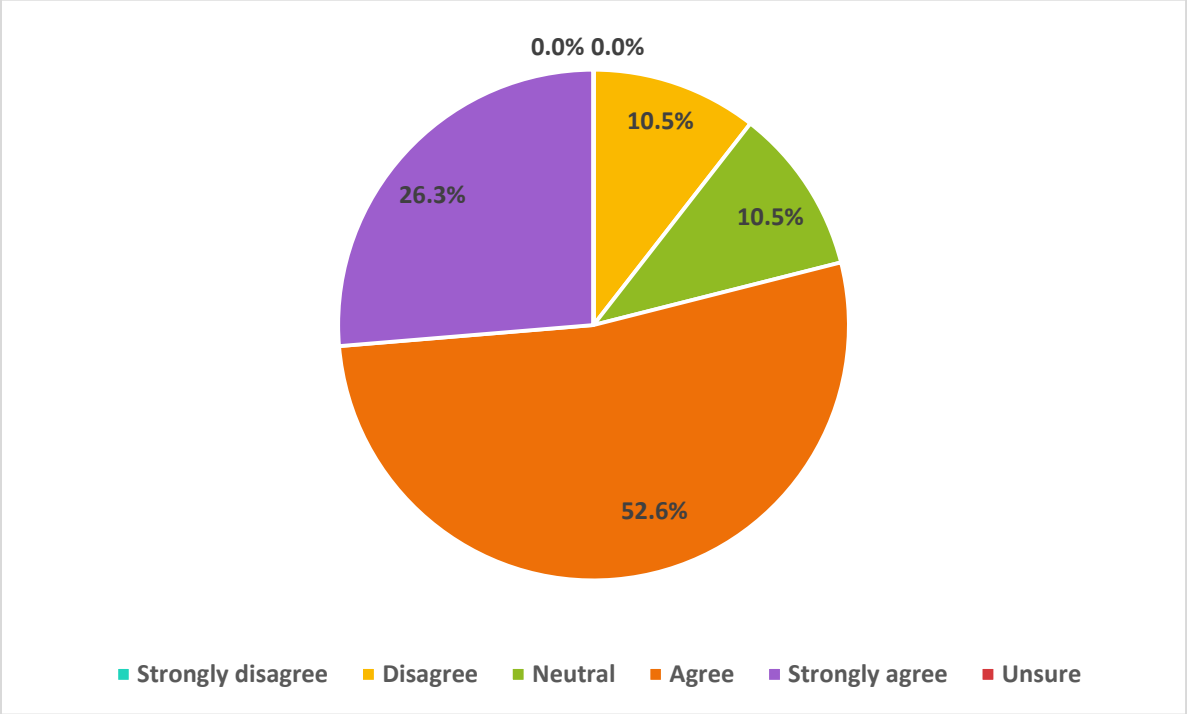
Our parish/congregation is generally moving in the right direction in aligning activities with our core values and religious teachings (level of agreement)



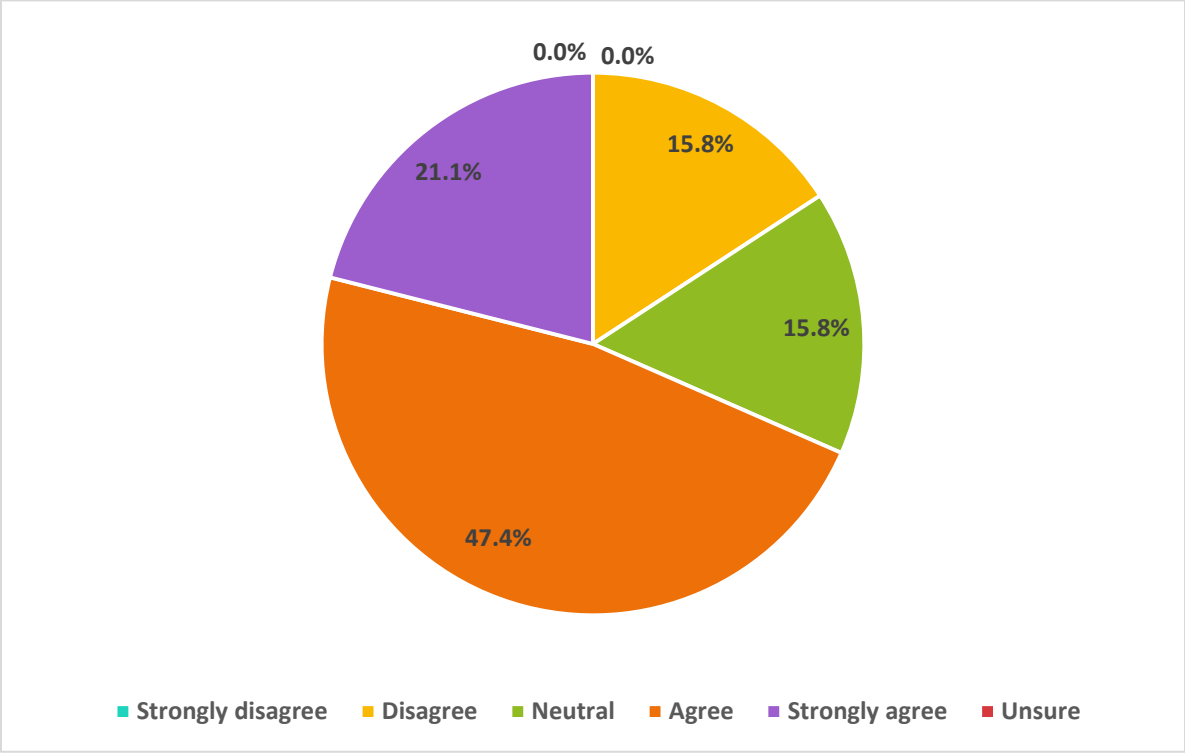
Organizational Ethos: Leadership

Of course there are numerous ways to measure people's perceptions and experiences of leadership in their parishes/congregations. This dimension centres on leader-follower dynamics, equipping and empowering leaders within the parish/congregation, traits associated with the current leadership, and touches on conflict-resolution capacities.

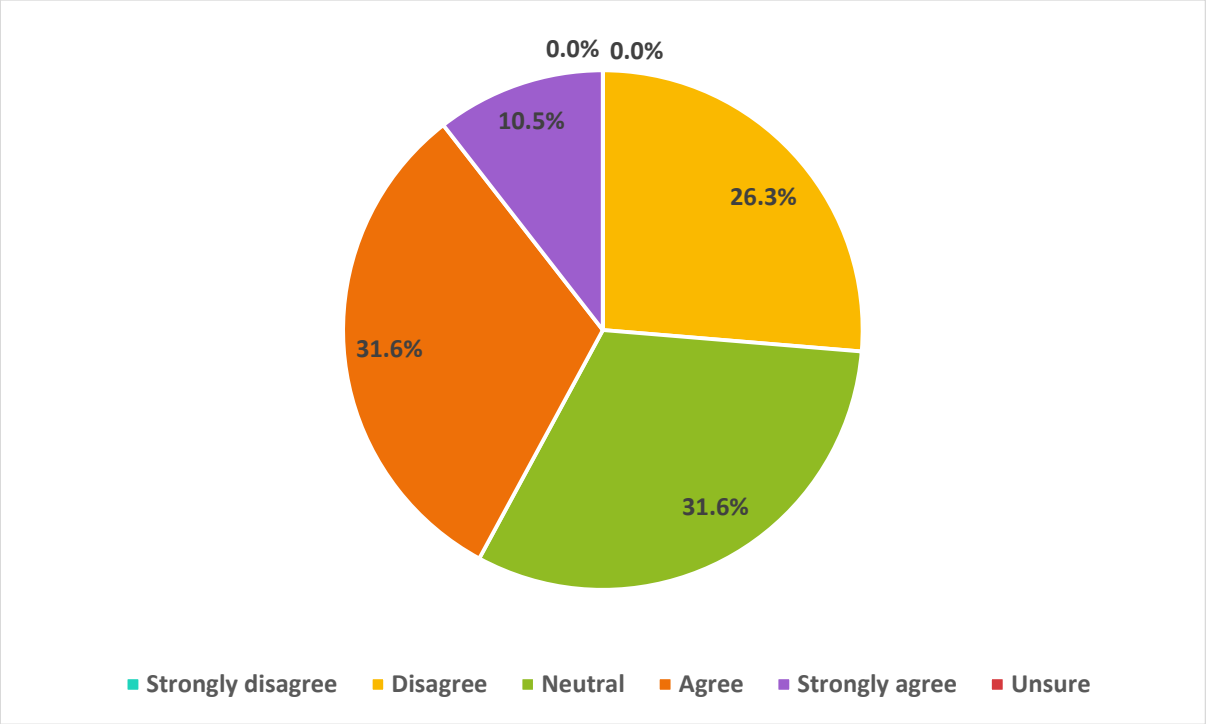
Our pastoral/church leaders take seriously the advice and ideas offered by our attendees (level of agreement)



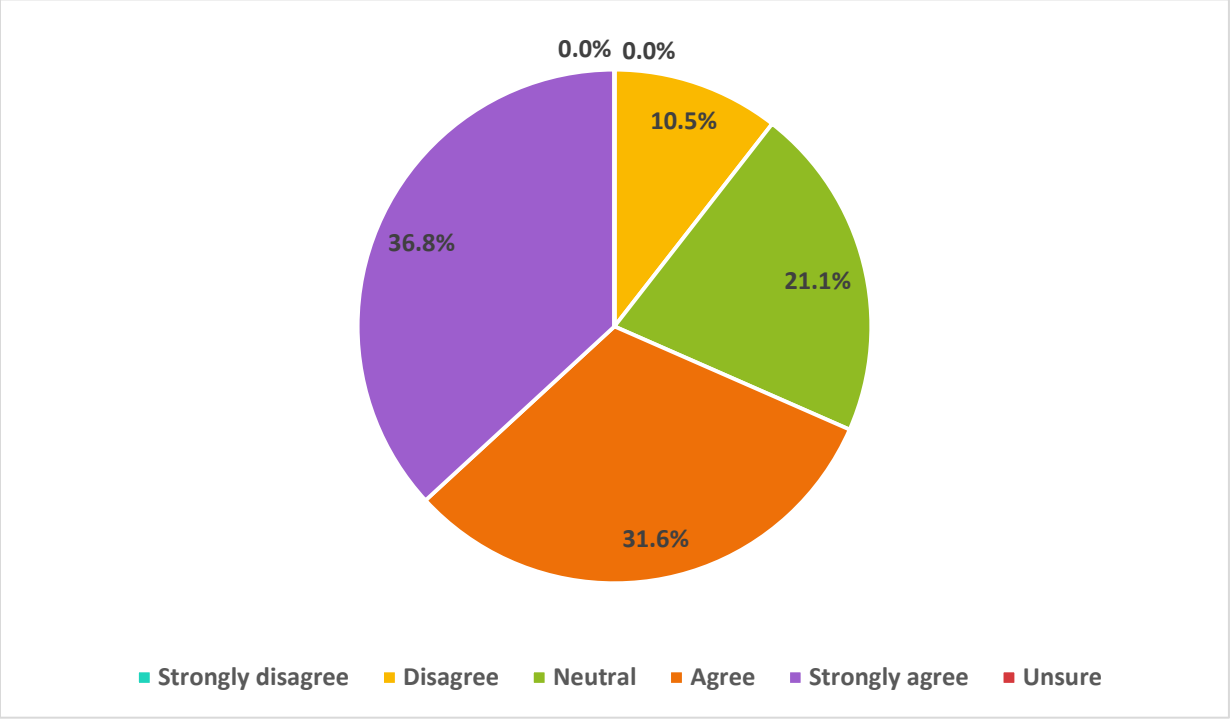
Our leaders appear to delegate/share tasks with others (level of agreement)



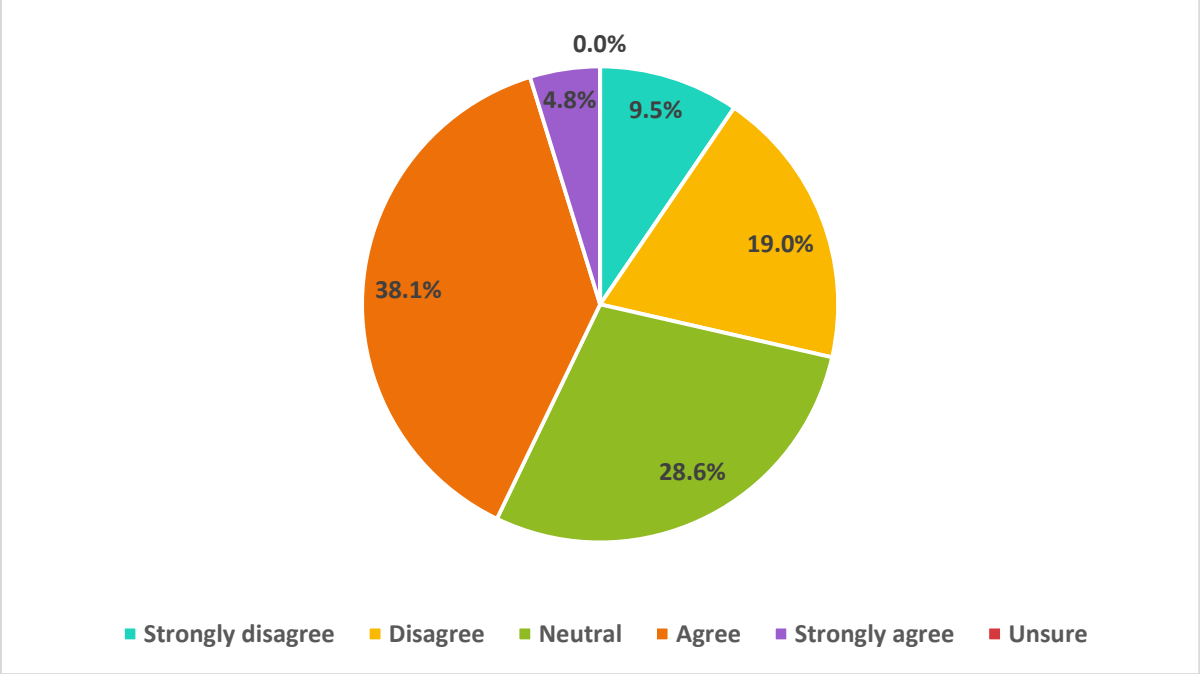
New (non-pastoral) leaders are being developed in on an ongoing way (level of agreement)



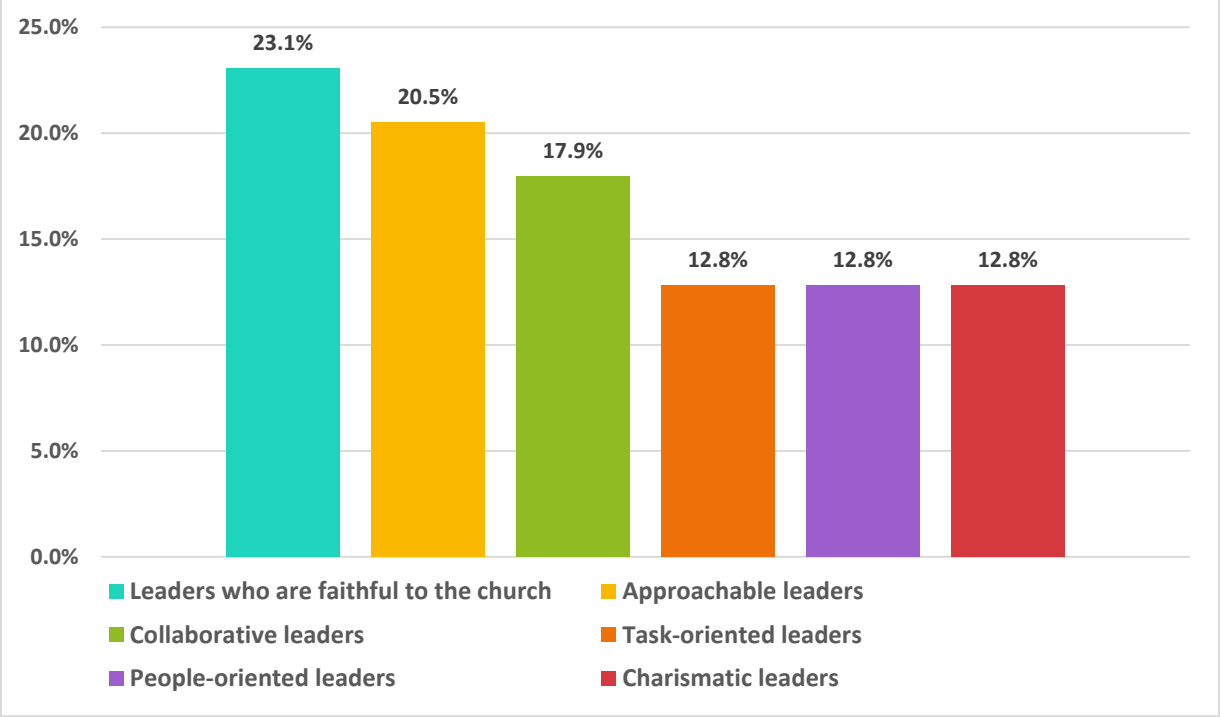
Level of confidence in those who currently lead our parish/congregation



Our leaders appear to handle conflict well (level of agreement)



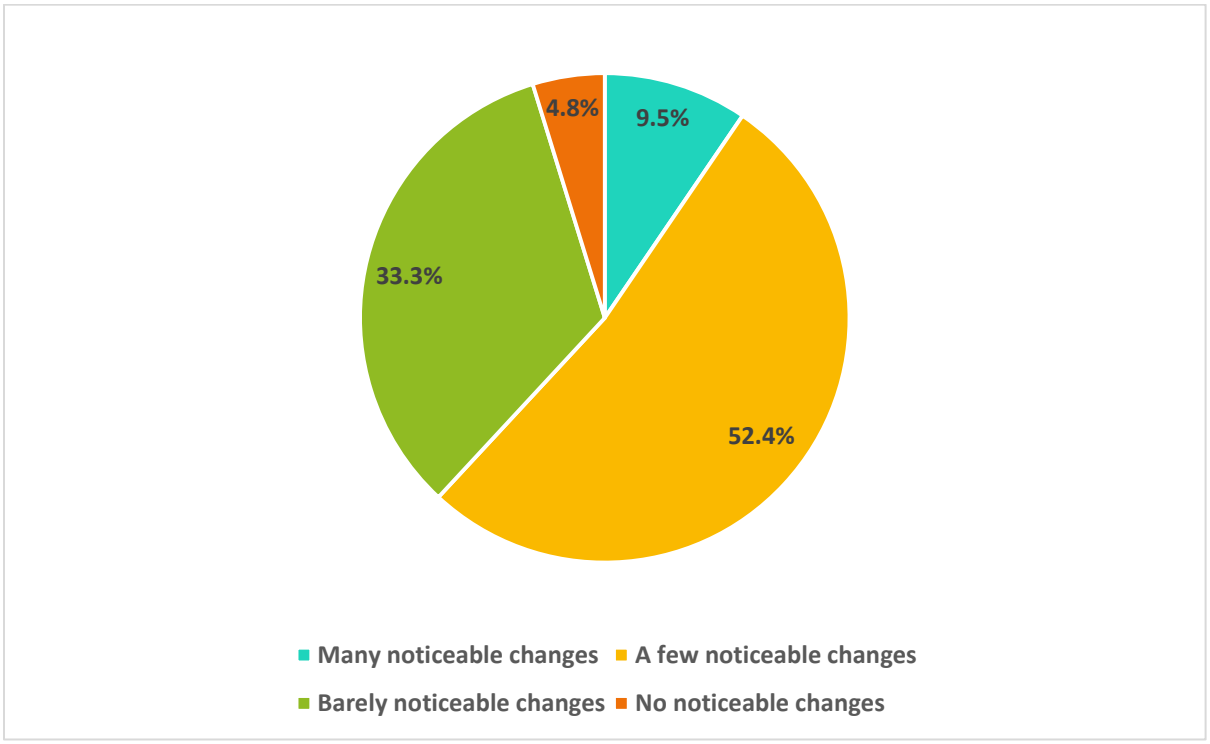
We asked respondents to *identify up to three prominent traits that best describe those who lead (e.g., paid leaders and voluntary ministry leaders) in their parish/congregation*. We have provided the six most cited responses. The following percentages capture people who included those responses within their "top three."



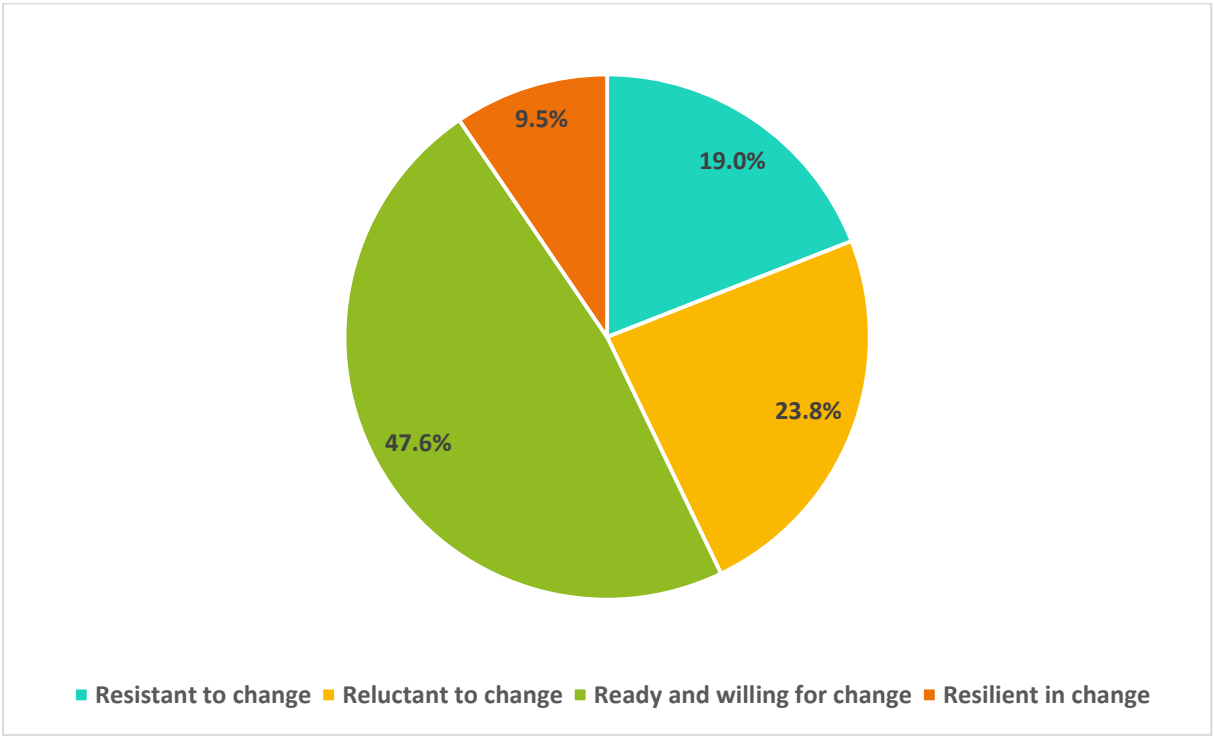
Organizational Ethos: Innovation

A refrain that we have heard in parishes/congregations is that flourishing involves innovation – flourishing parishes are open to new ideas, they experiment with new ideas, and they are not afraid to fail. These survey items detail people's perceptions of and openness to change and innovation in your parish/congregation.

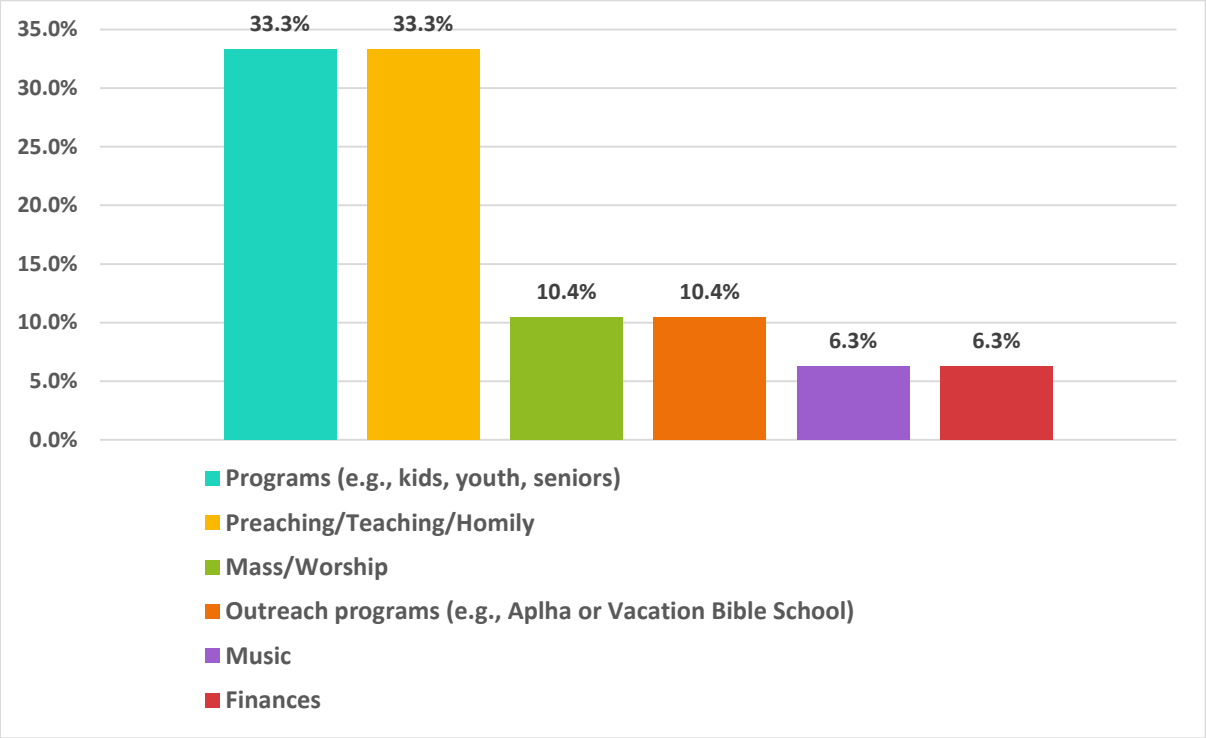
We asked: "If a person was away from your parish/congregation for three years and then came back – to what extent might they notice changes in how things are done?"



We asked: "Which of the following best describes your congregation?"

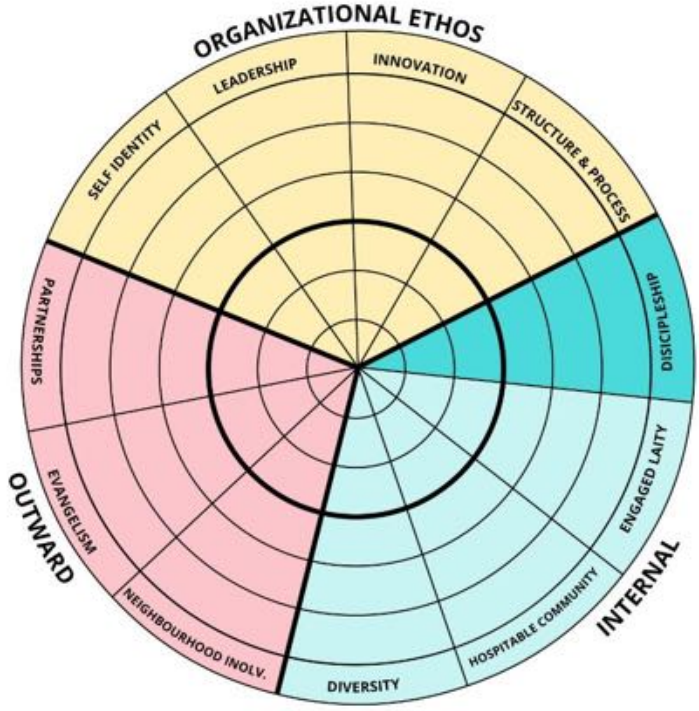


We asked respondents to *indicate up to three areas where innovations are most evident in their parish/congregation*. We have provided the six most cited responses. The following percentages capture people who included those responses within their "top three."

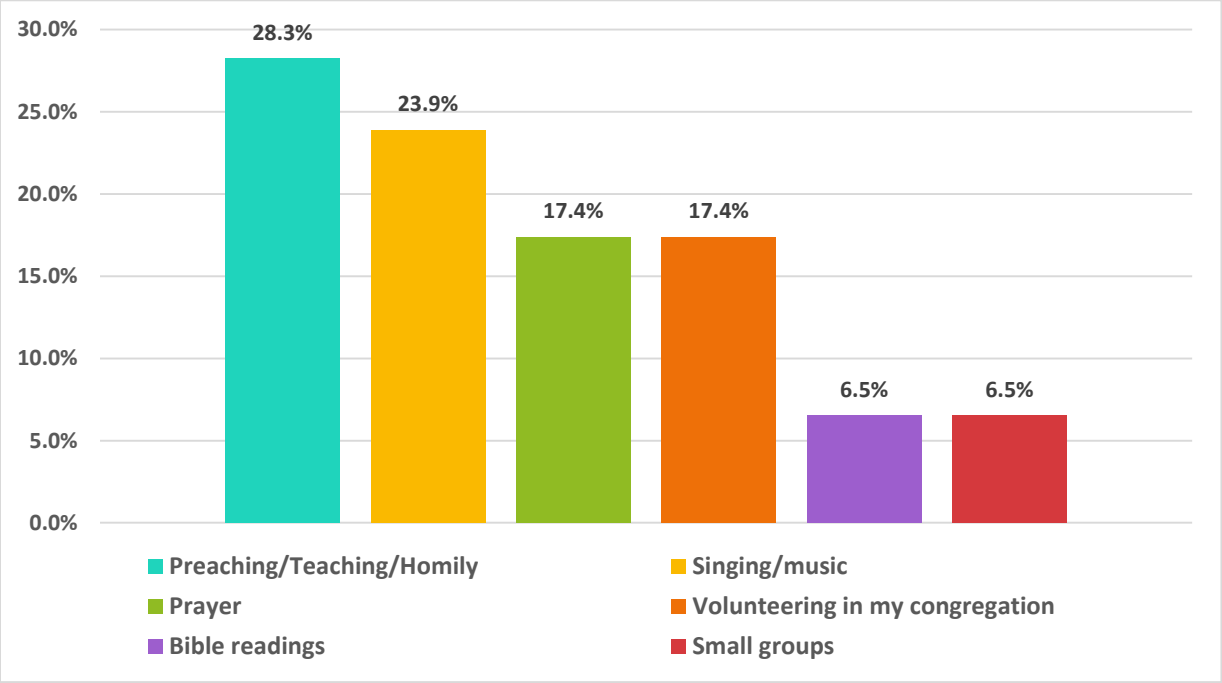


Internal: Discipleship

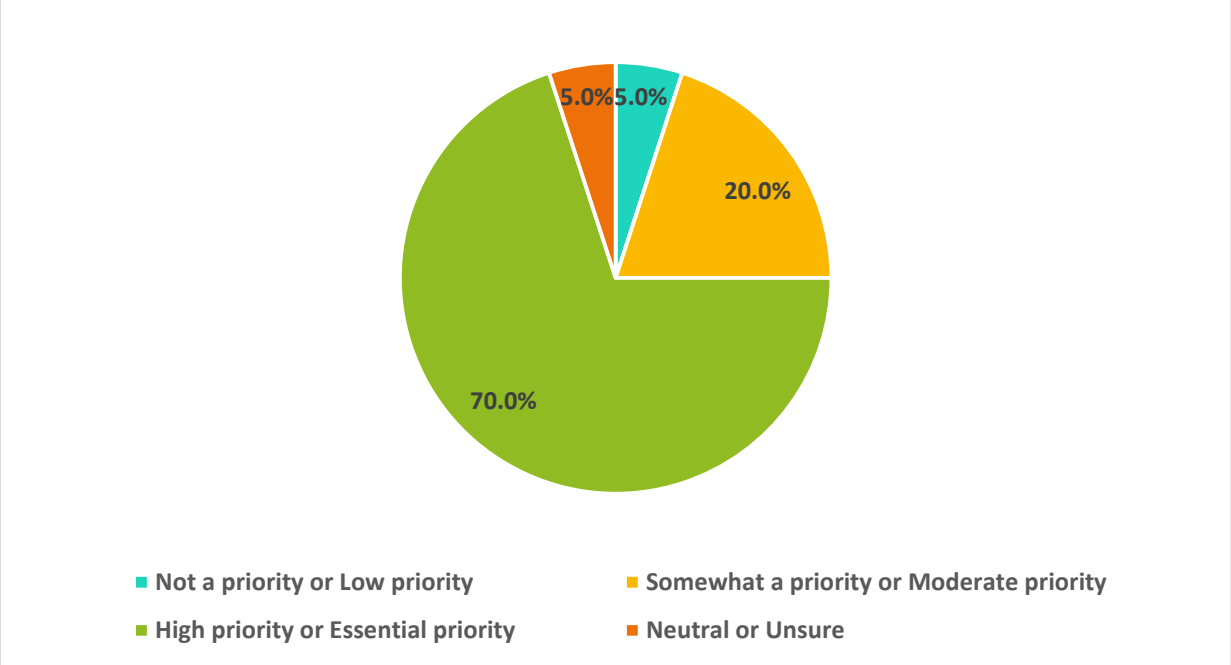
As one might imagine, discipleship is a difficult term to fully capture and measure across various Canadian theological traditions. This dimension focuses on various areas of spiritual formation and growth at both the individual and congregational/parish-level.



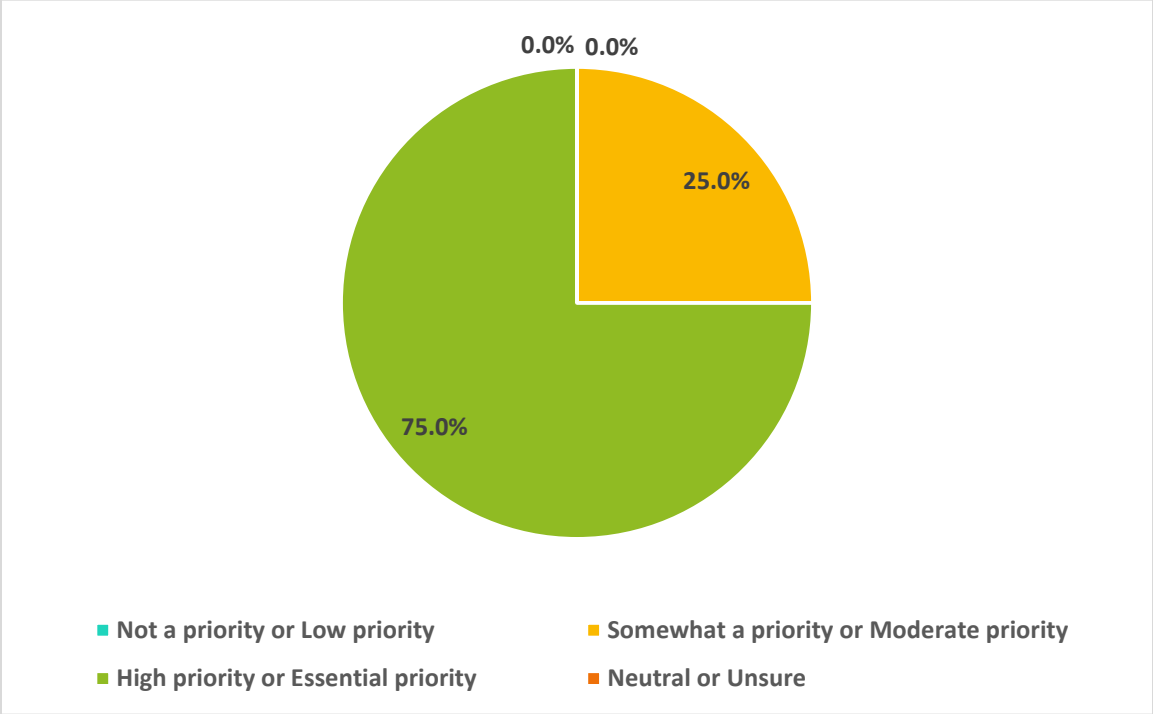
We asked respondents to *identify the three most important elements of parish/congregation life that impact their spiritual growth*. We have provided the six most cited responses. The following percentages capture people who included those responses within their "top three."



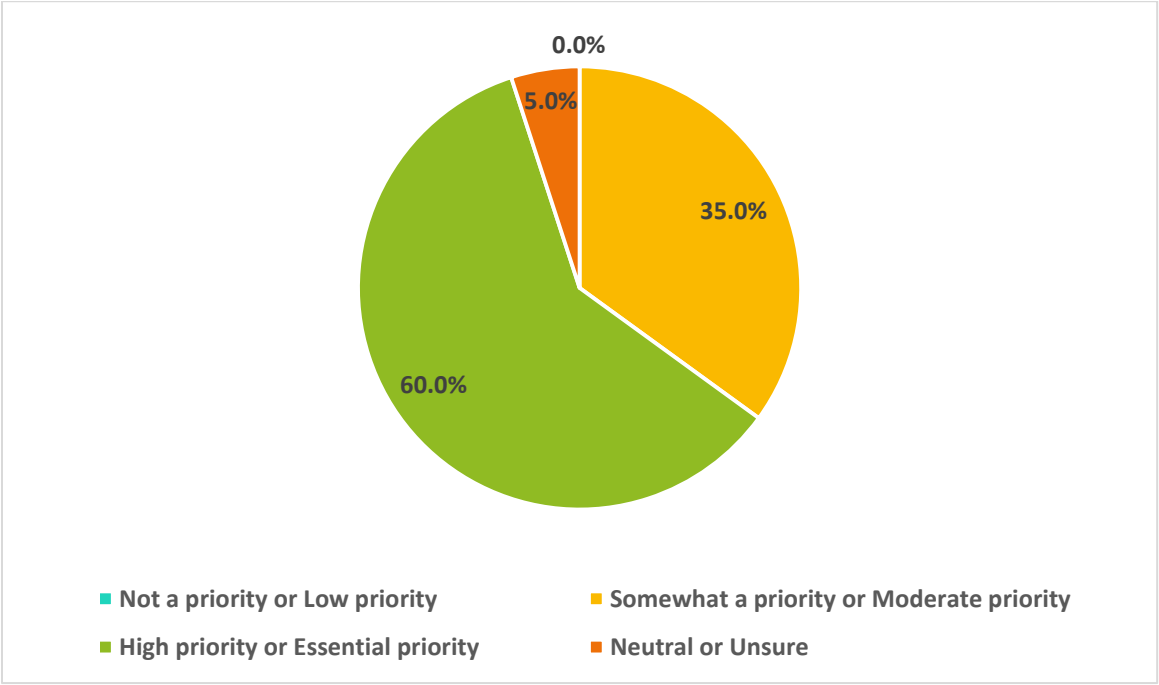
We asked: "To what extent would you say your parish/congregation gives priority (or not) to *just trying to survive as a parish/congregation (i.e., not close the doors)*?"



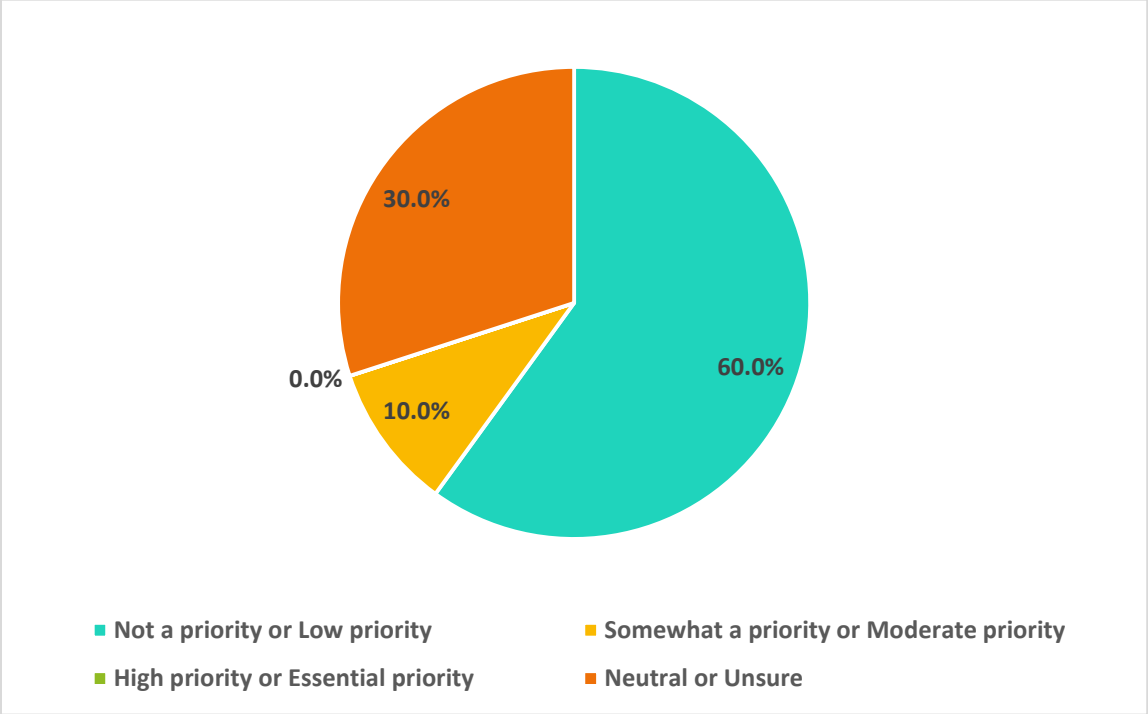
We asked: "To what extent would you say your parish/congregation gives priority (or not) to *children's programs*?"



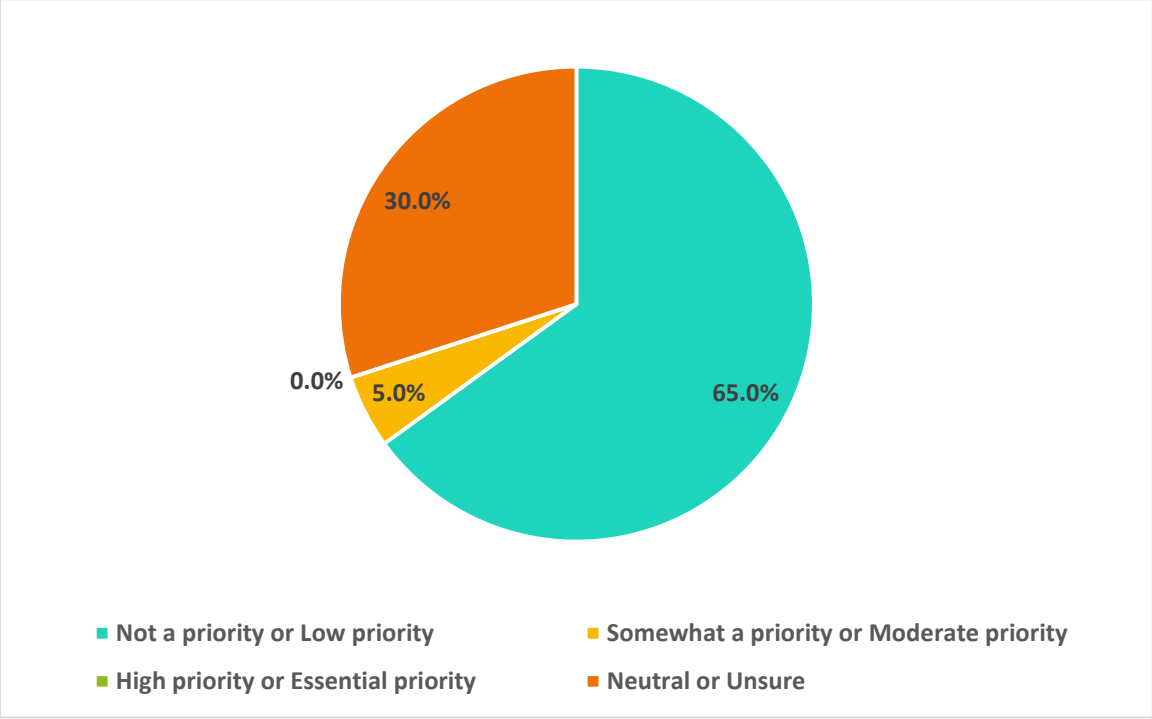
We asked: "To what extent would you say your parish/congregation gives priority (or not) to *having meaningful Mass/worship service(s)*?"



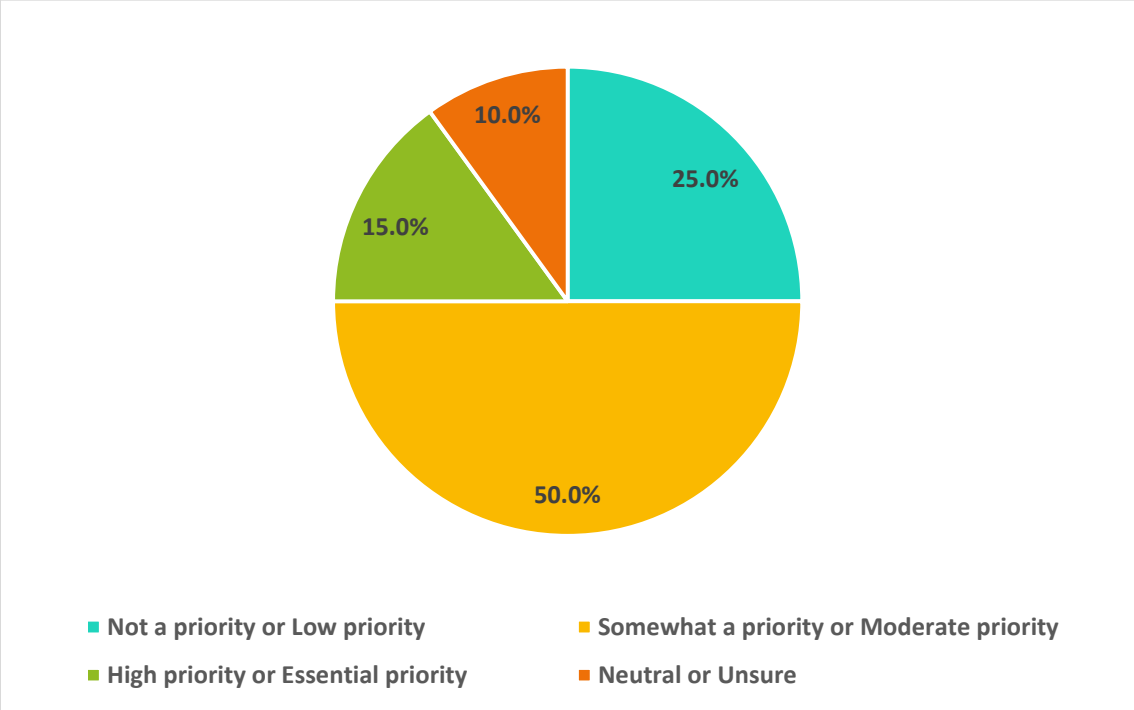
We asked: "To what extent would you say your parish/congregation gives priority (or not) to *women's programs*?"



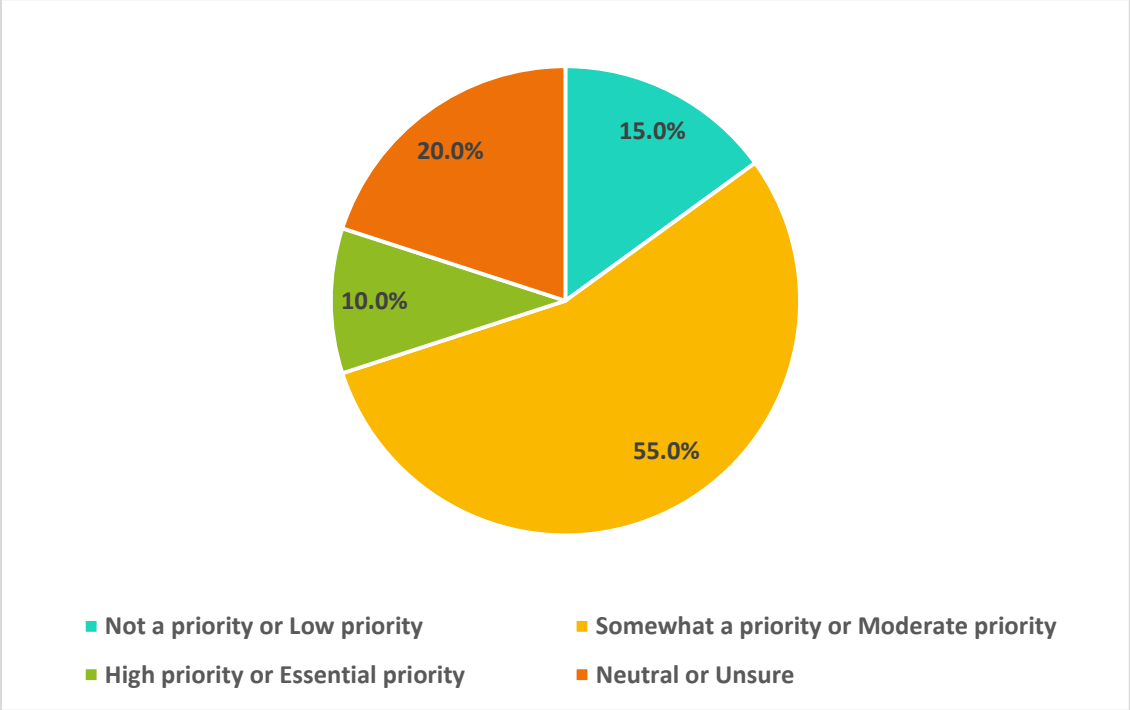
We asked: "To what extent would you say your parish/congregation gives priority (or not) to *men's programs*?"



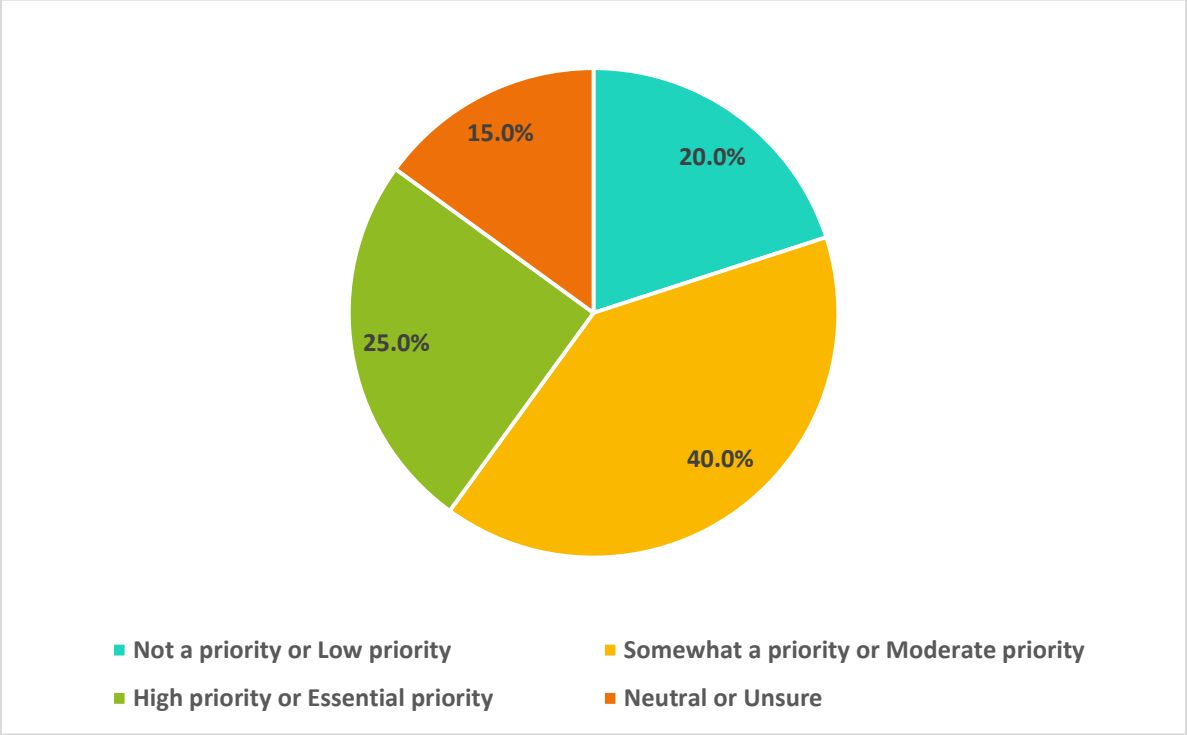
We asked: "To what extent would you say your parish/congregation gives priority (or not) to *providing Christian education for adults*?"



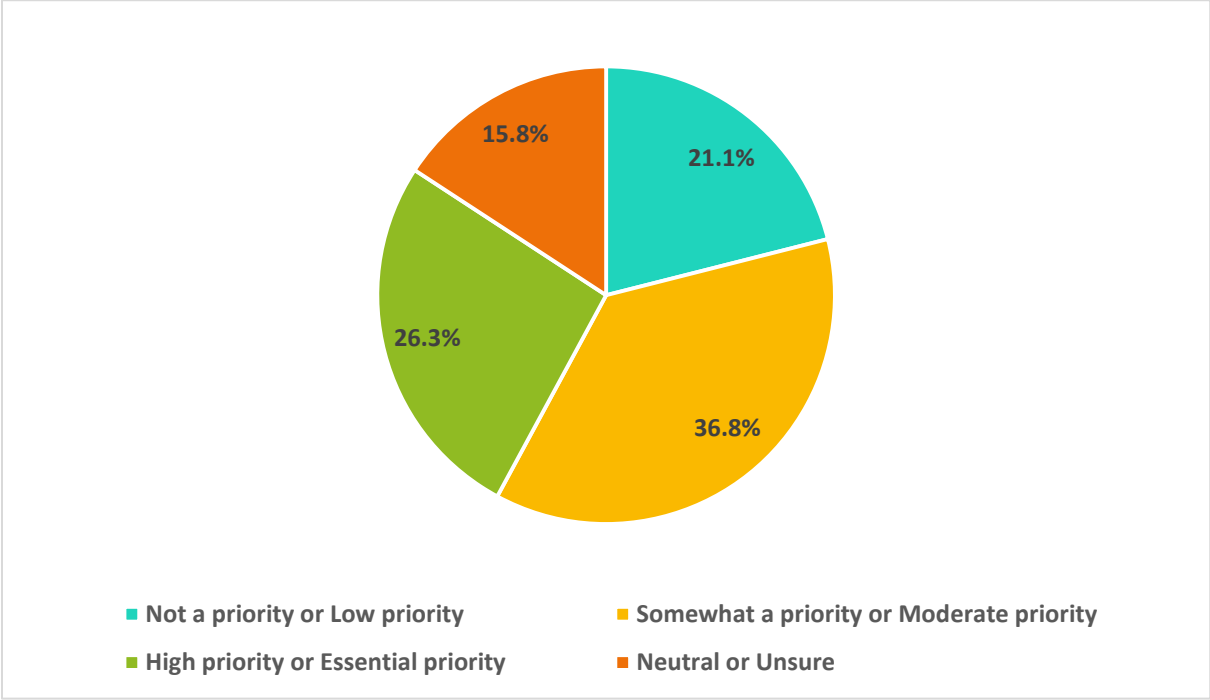
We asked: "To what extent would you say your parish/congregation gives priority (or not) to *attempting to address social issues*?"



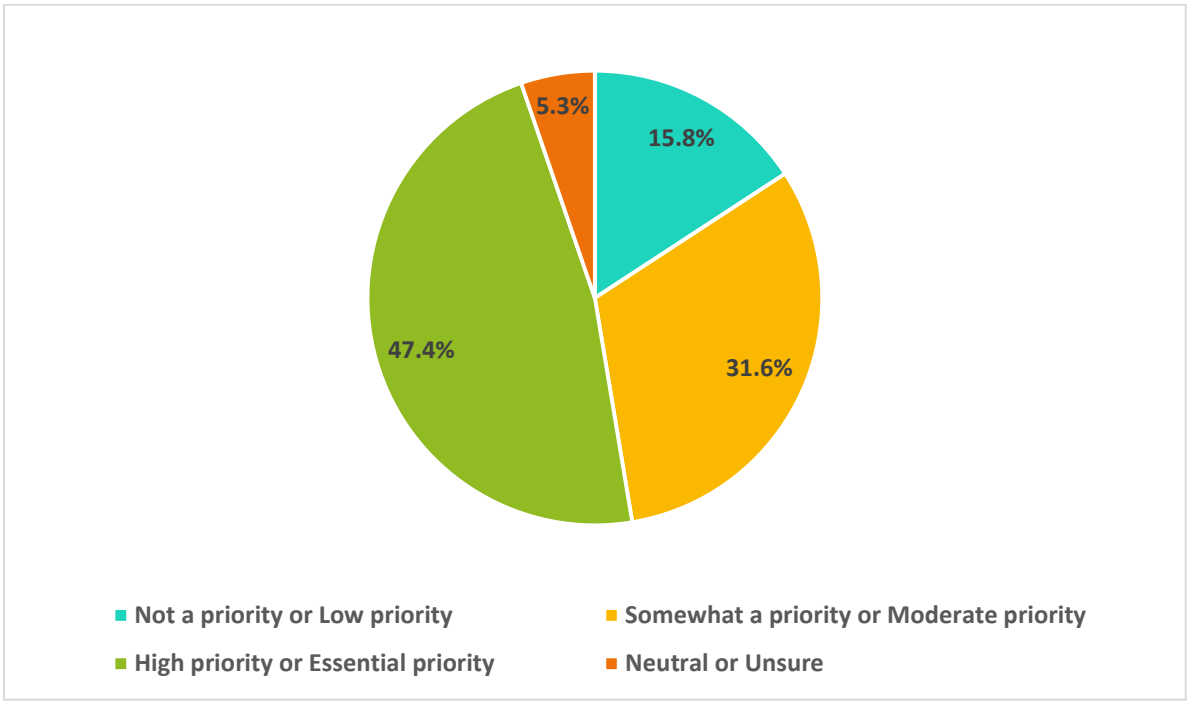
We asked: "To what extent would you say your parish/congregation gives priority (or not) to *strengthening family life*?"



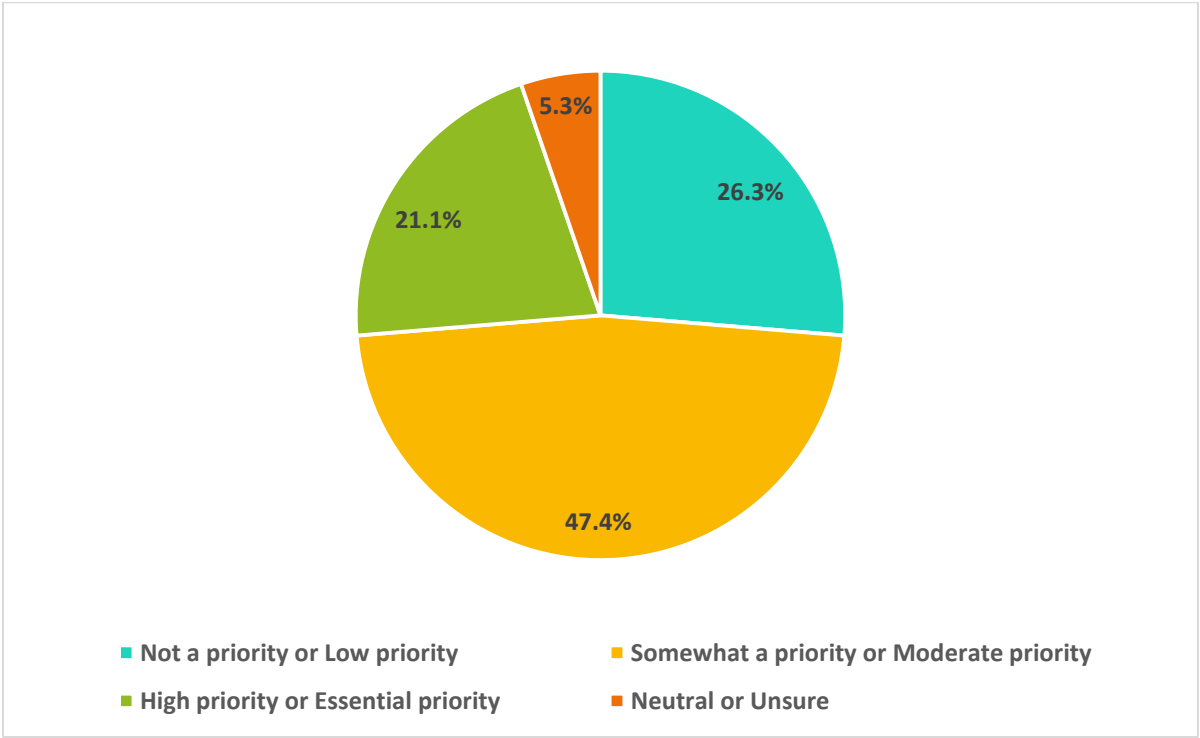
We asked: "To what extent would you say your parish/congregation gives priority (or not) to *healing and recovery*?"



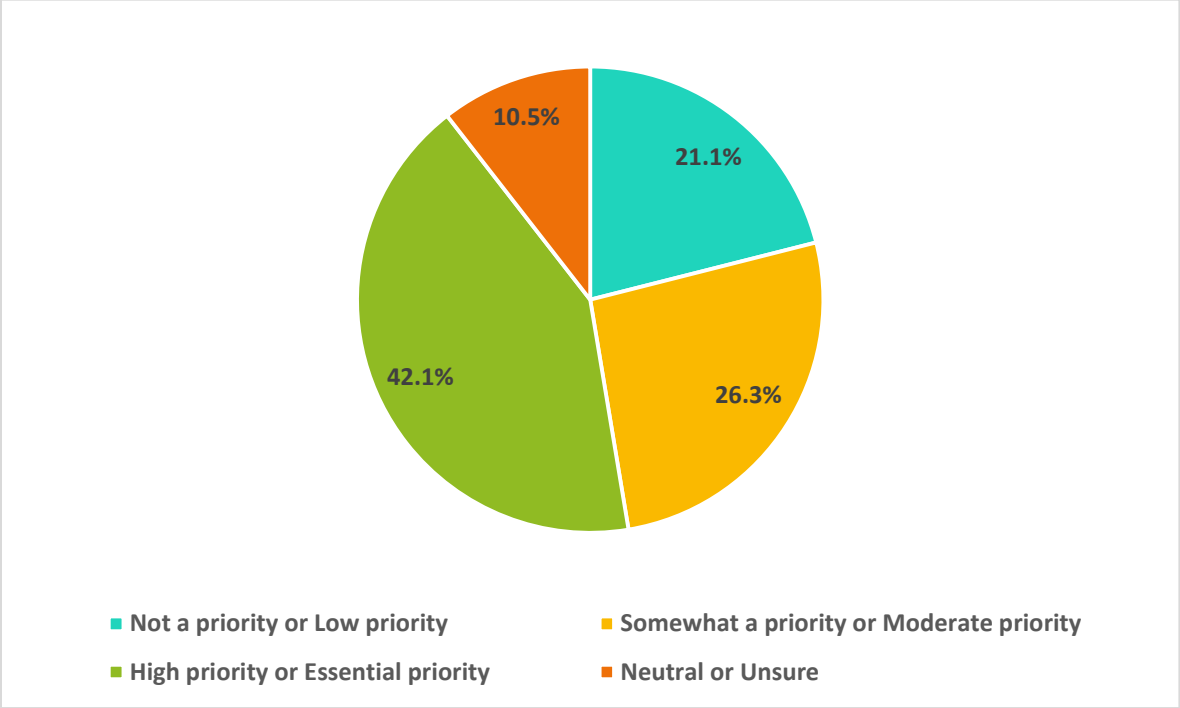
We asked: "To what extent would you say your parish/congregation gives priority (or not) to *good music*?"



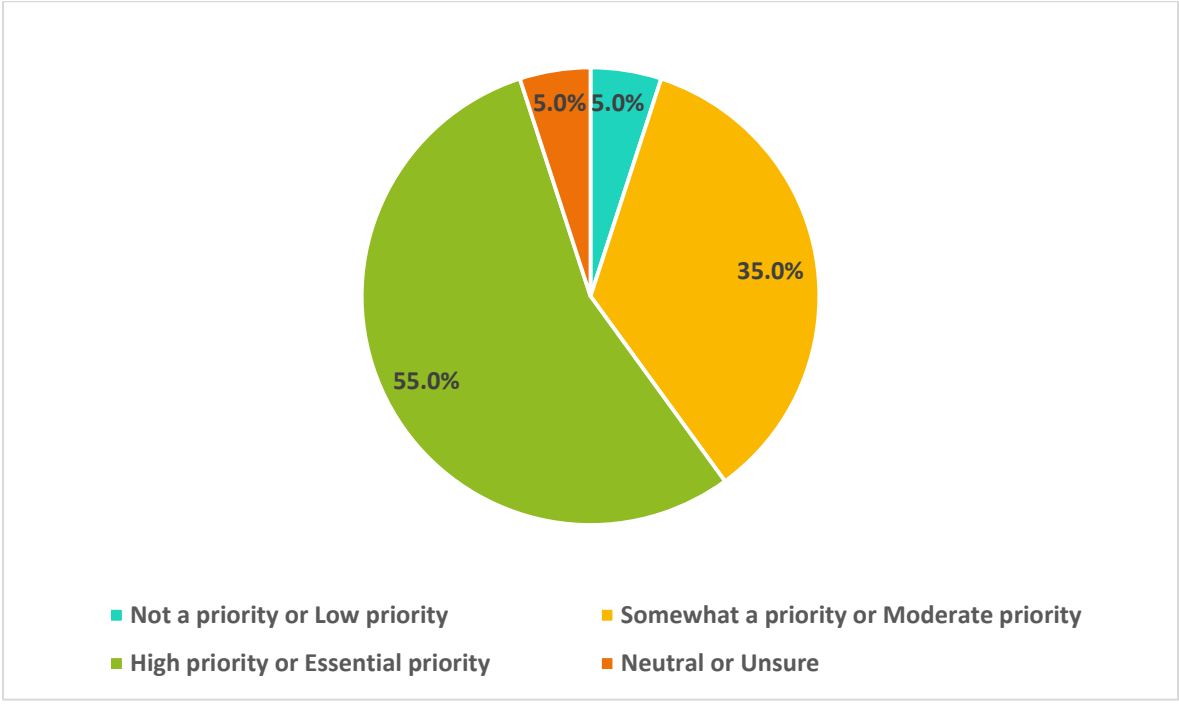
We asked: "To what extent would you say your parish/congregation gives priority (or not) to *having activities for young people*?"



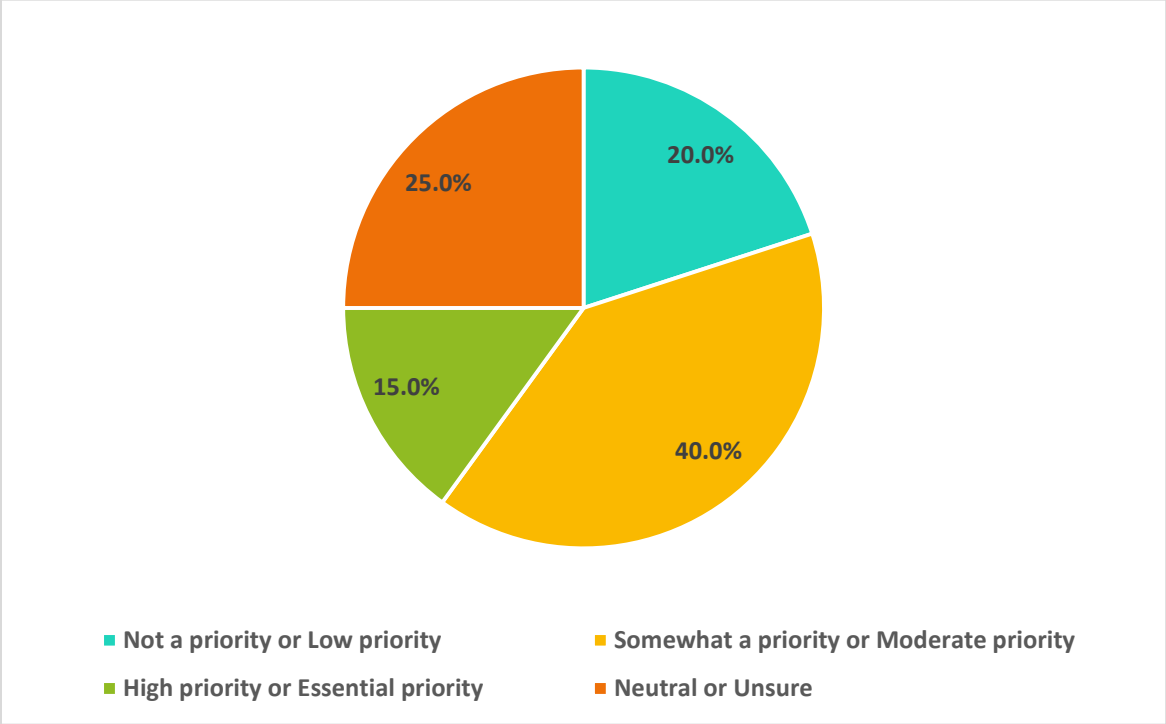
We asked: "To what extent would you say your parish/congregation gives priority (or not) to *providing Christian education for young people*?"



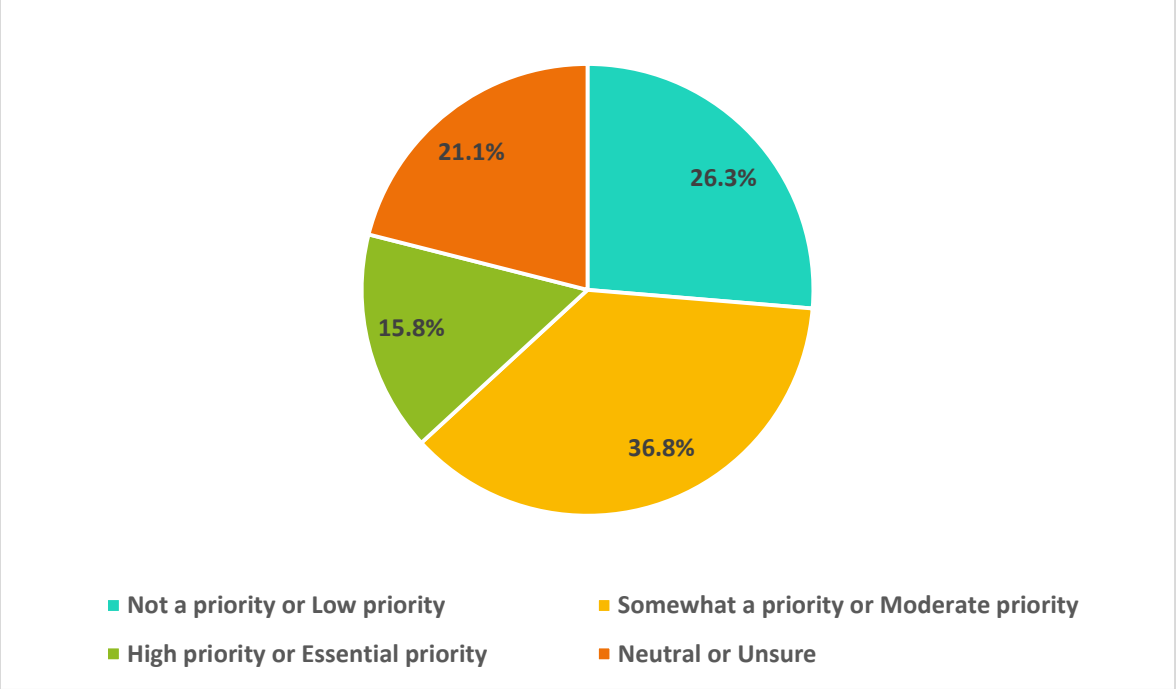
We asked: "To what extent would you say your parish/congregation gives priority (or not) to *providing a sense of community for members*?"



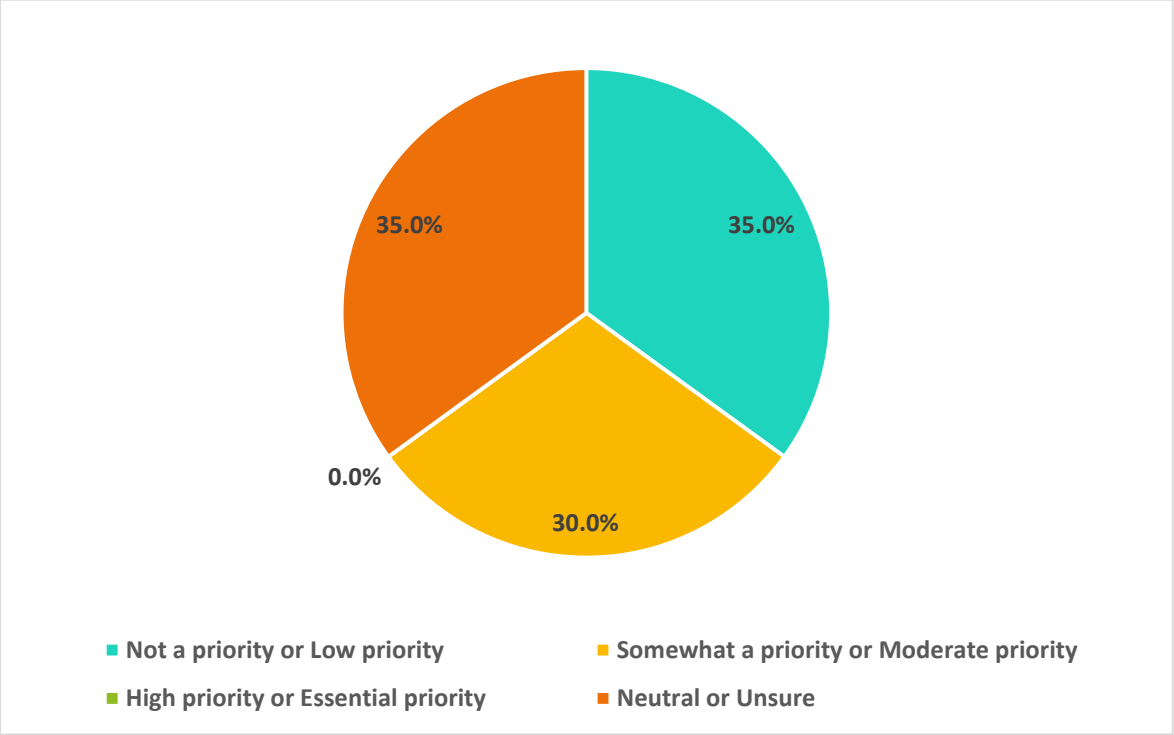
We asked: "To what extent would you say your parish/congregation gives priority (or not) to *supporting world missions*?"



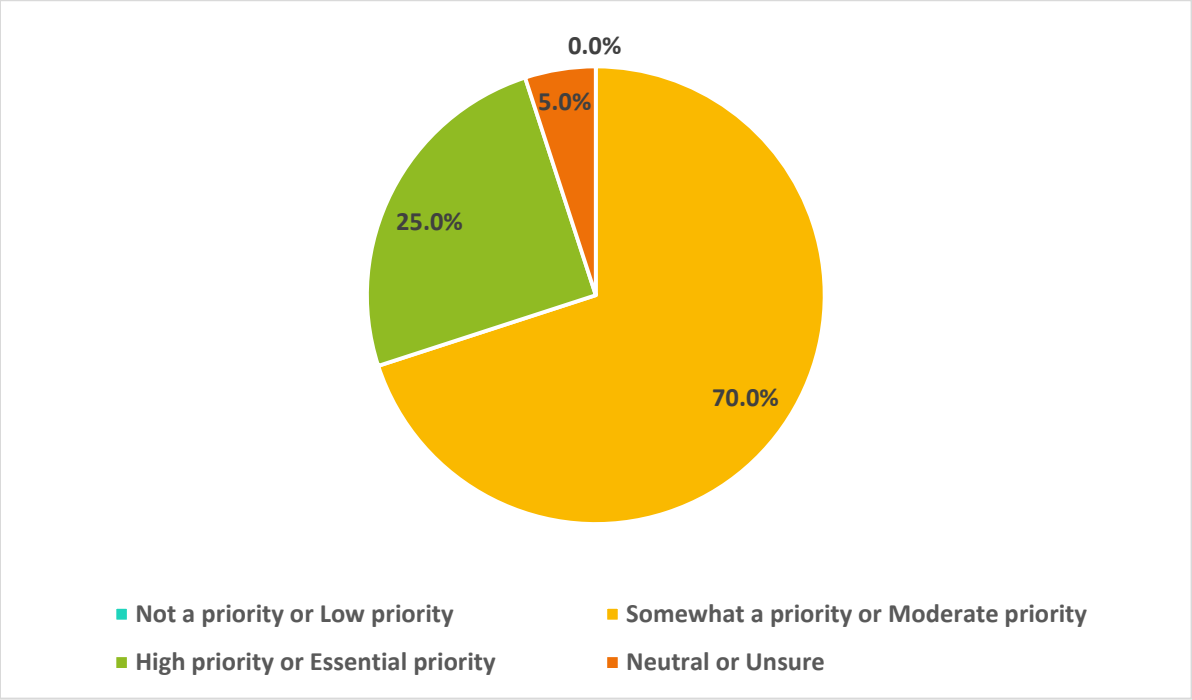
We asked: "To what extent would you say your parish/congregation gives priority (or not) to *ministering to people with disabilities or special needs*?"



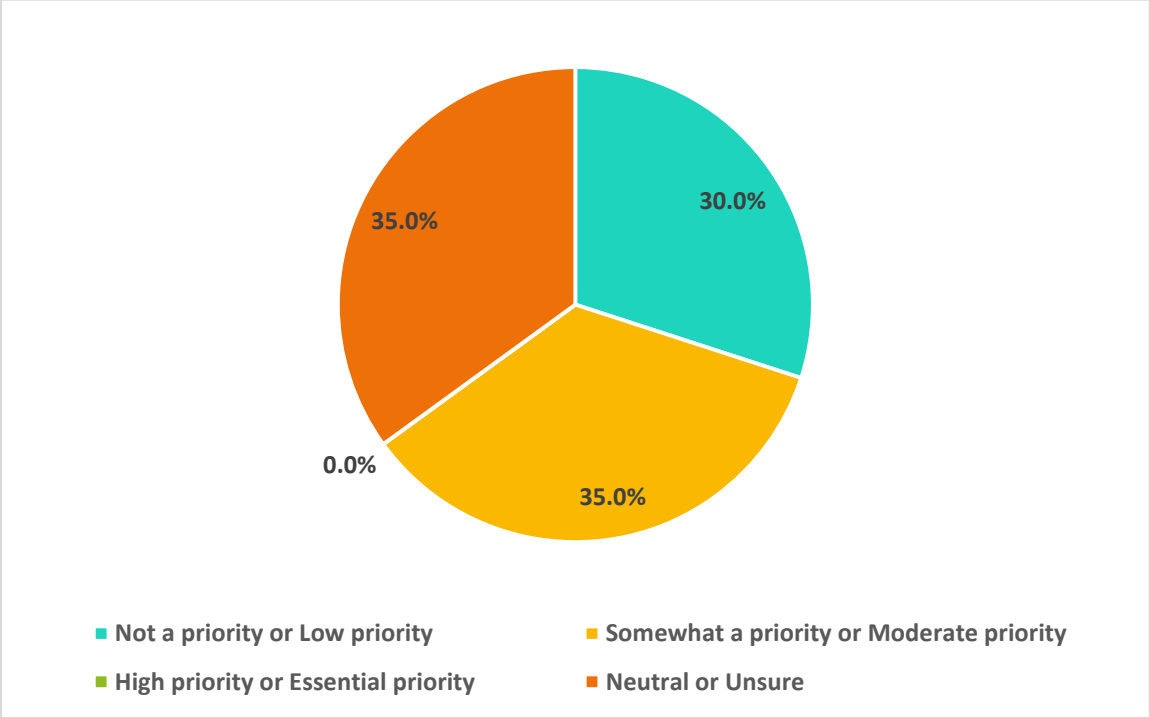
We asked: "To what extent would you say your parish/congregation gives priority (or not) to *engaging in evangelism*?"



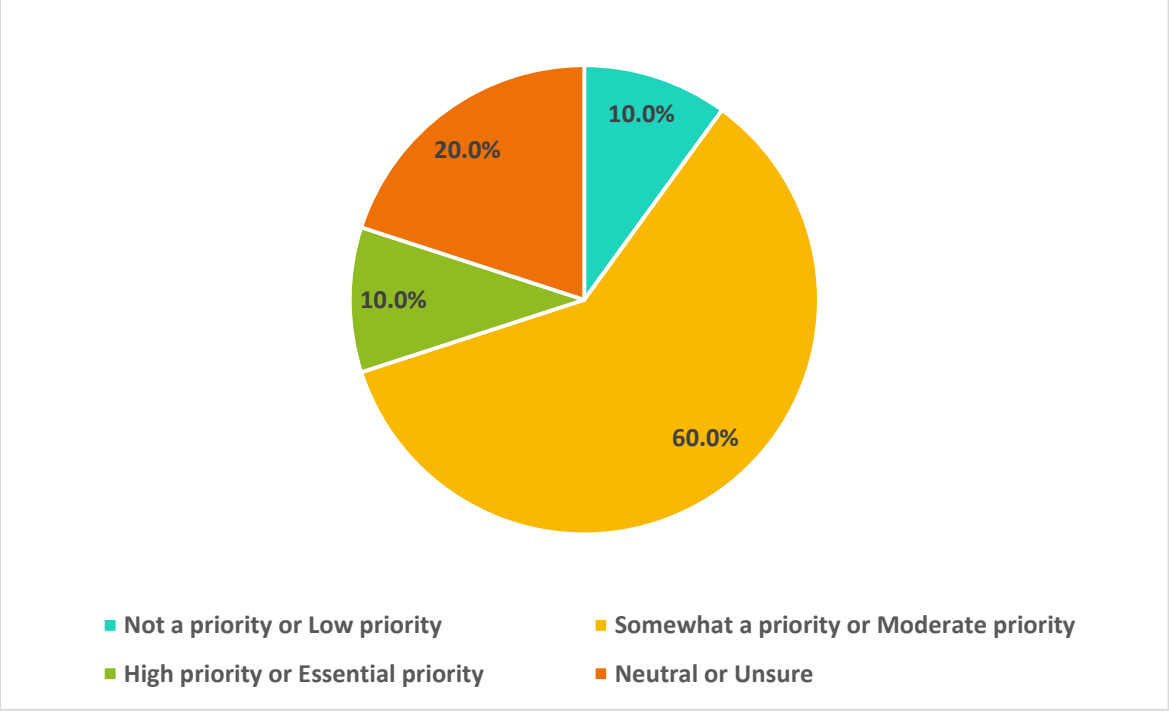
We asked: "To what extent would you say your parish/congregation gives priority (or not) to *serving the needy*?"



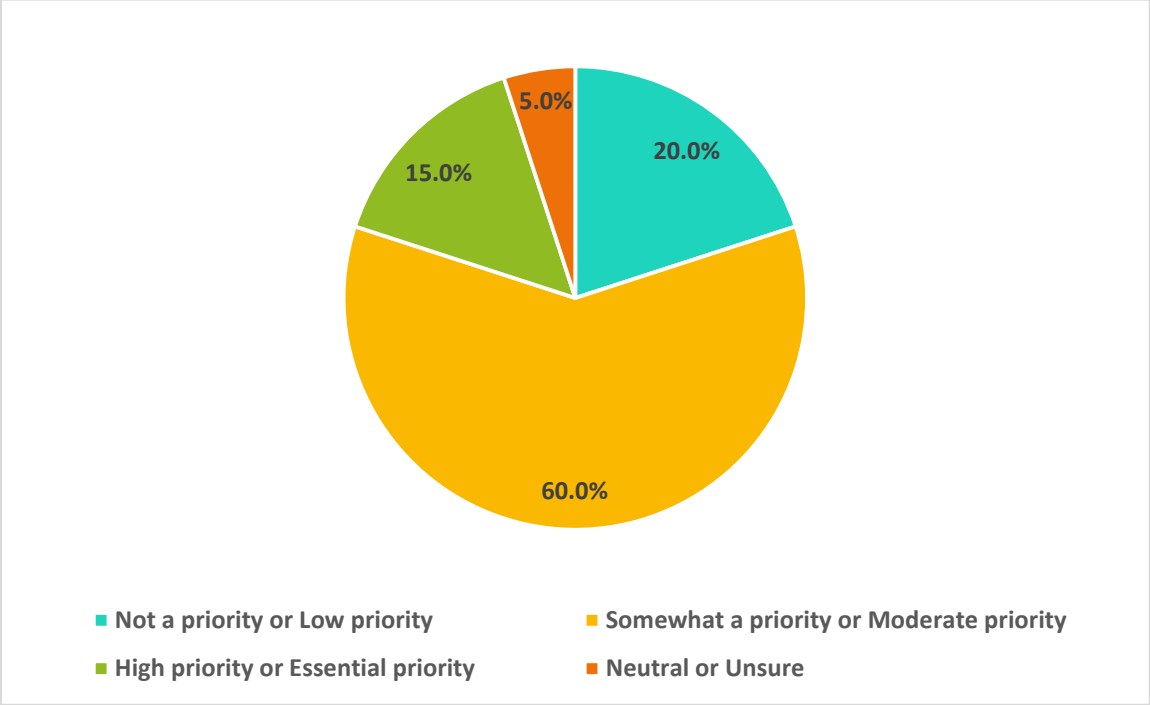
We asked: "To what extent would you say your parish/congregation gives priority (or not) to *ministering well to immigrants*?"



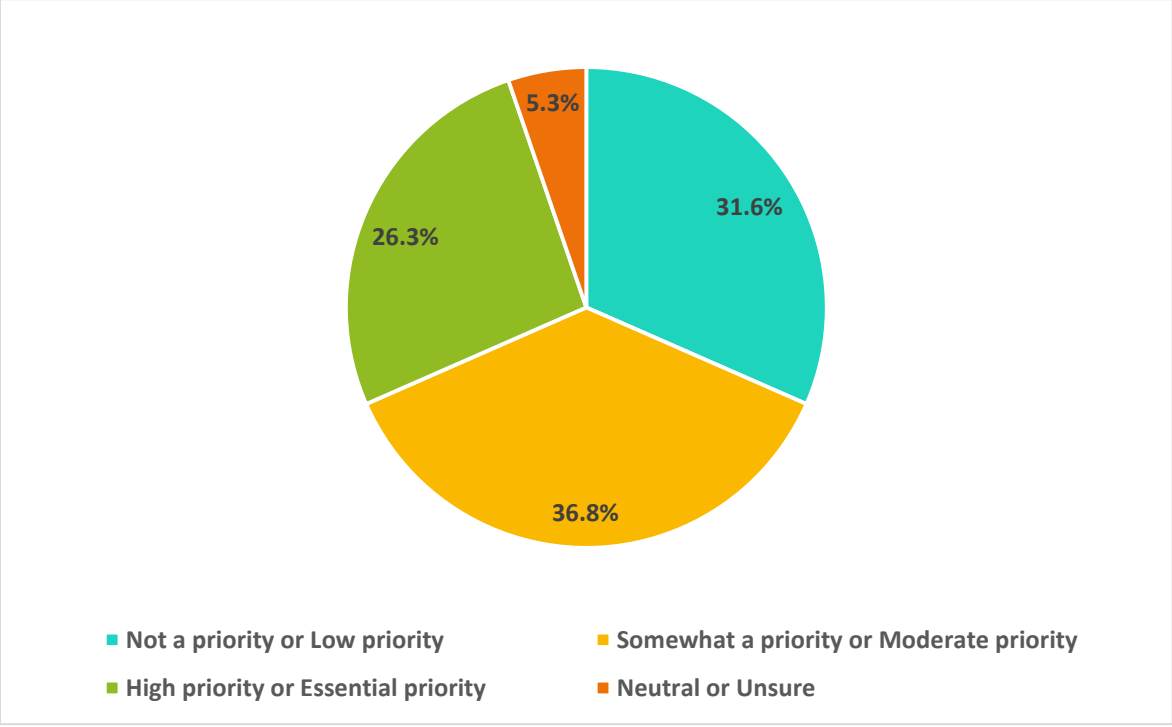
We asked: "To what extent would you say your parish/congregation gives priority (or not) to *having good physical facilities*?"



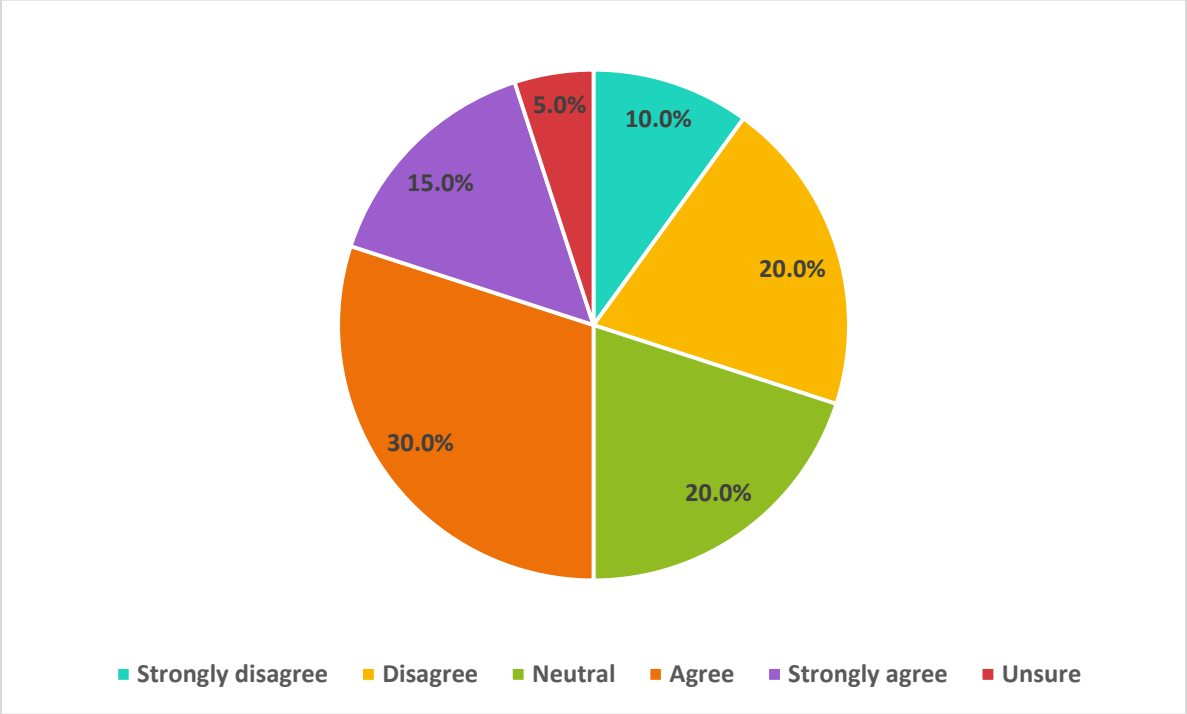
We asked: "To what extent would you say your parish/congregation gives priority (or not) to *Bible study*?"



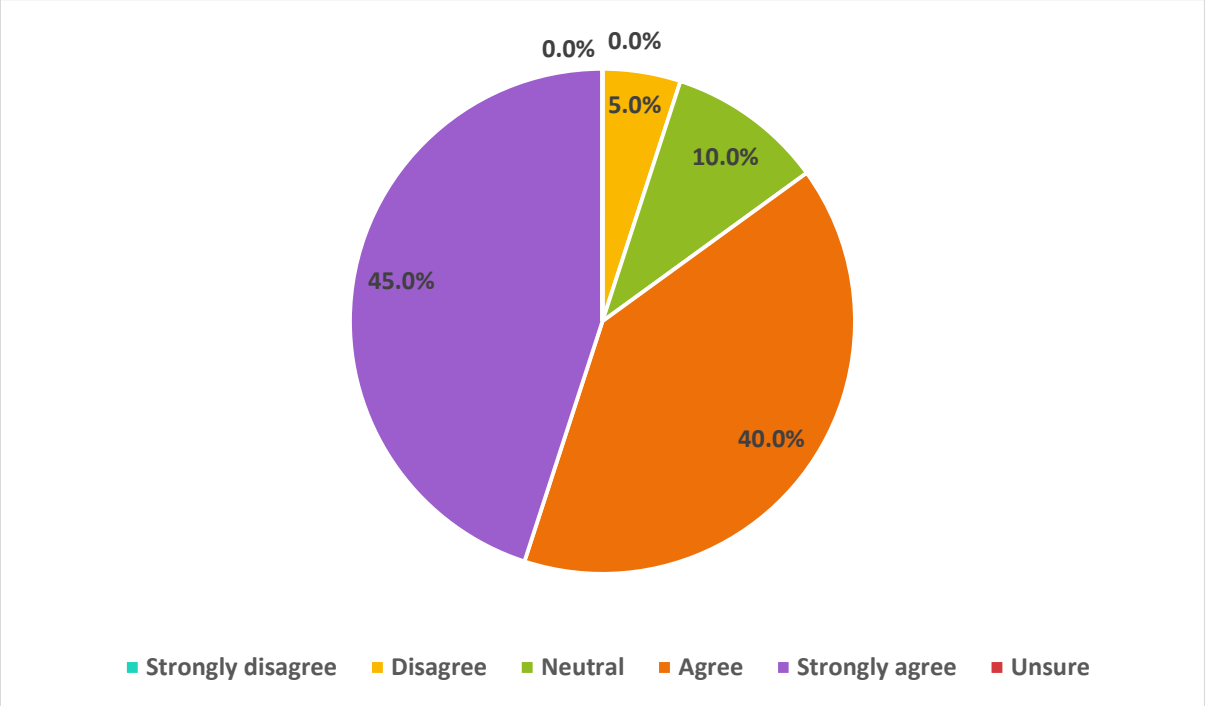
We asked: "To what extent would you say your parish/congregation gives priority (or not) to *serving the needs of the community*?"



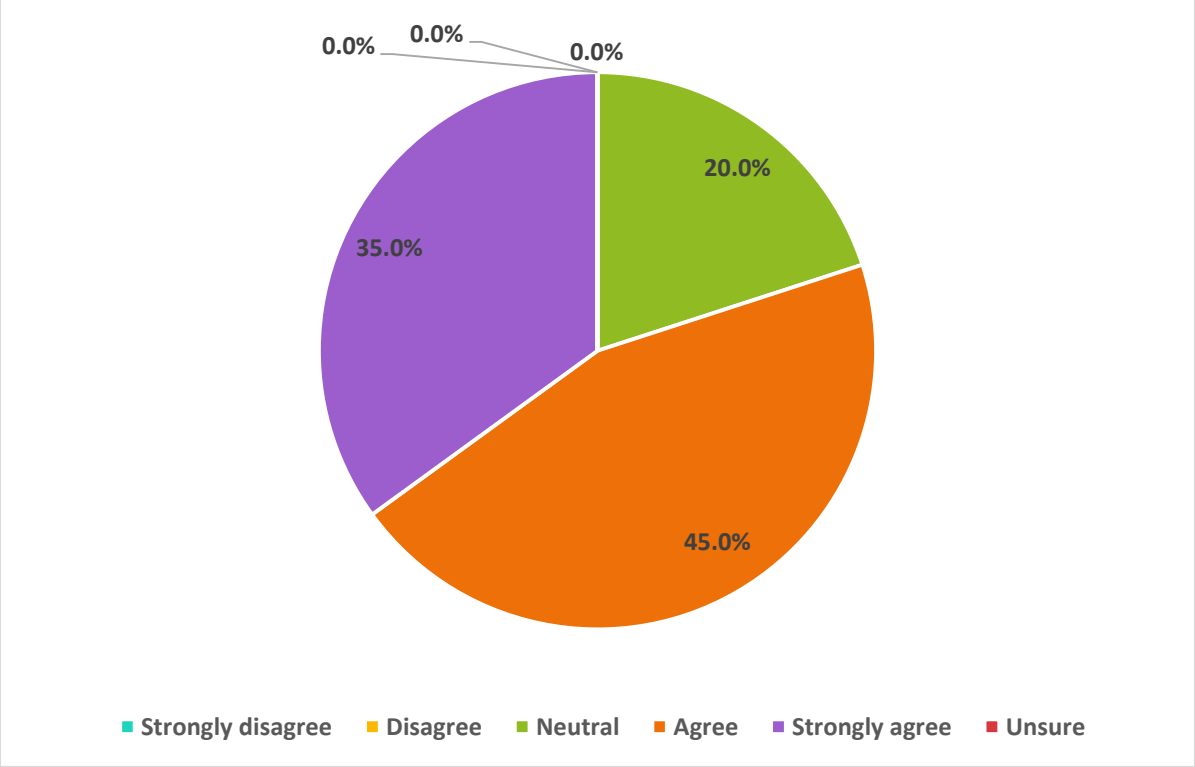
We have an explicit discipleship process for people who wish to grow in their faith (level of agreement)



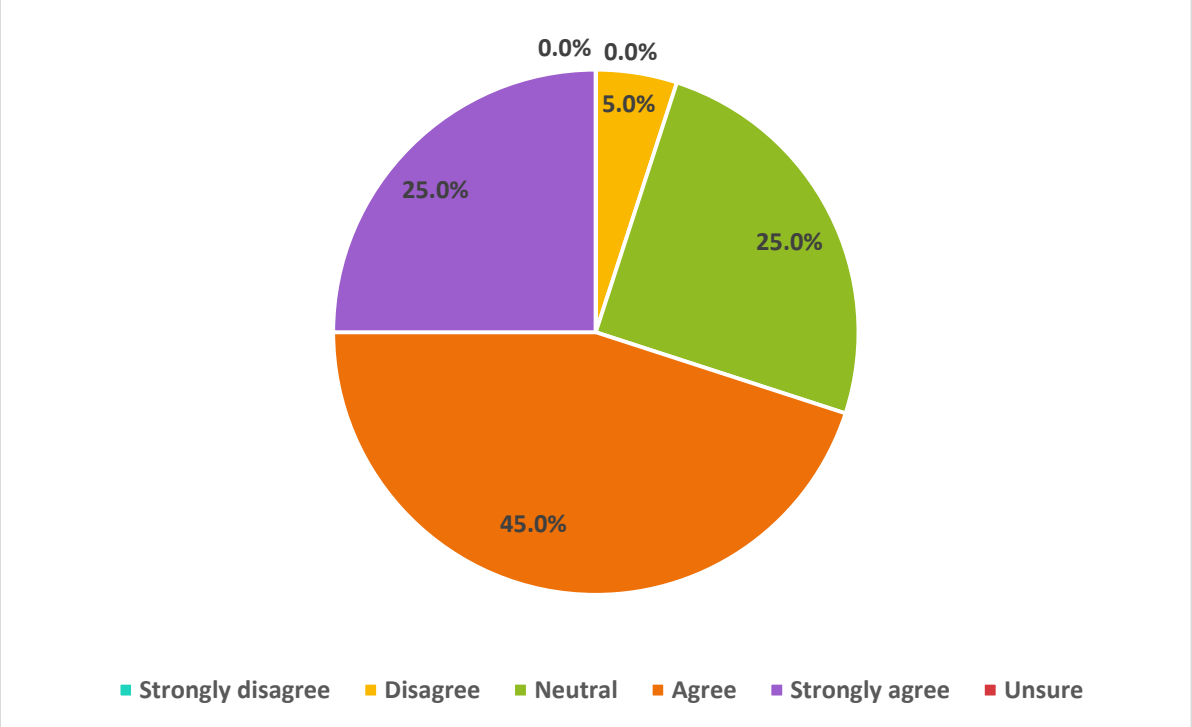
Our parish/congregation is a safe place to explore the Christian faith (level of agreement)



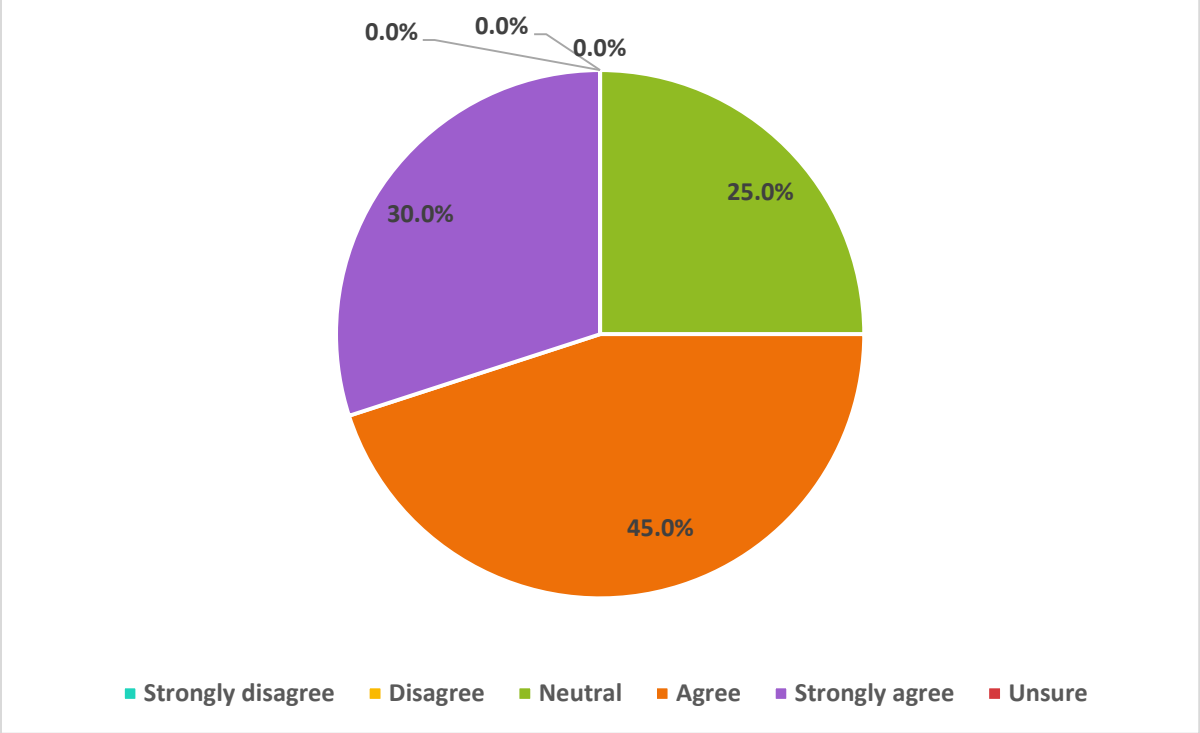
We asked: "Has your parish/congregation helped you to grow spiritually?"



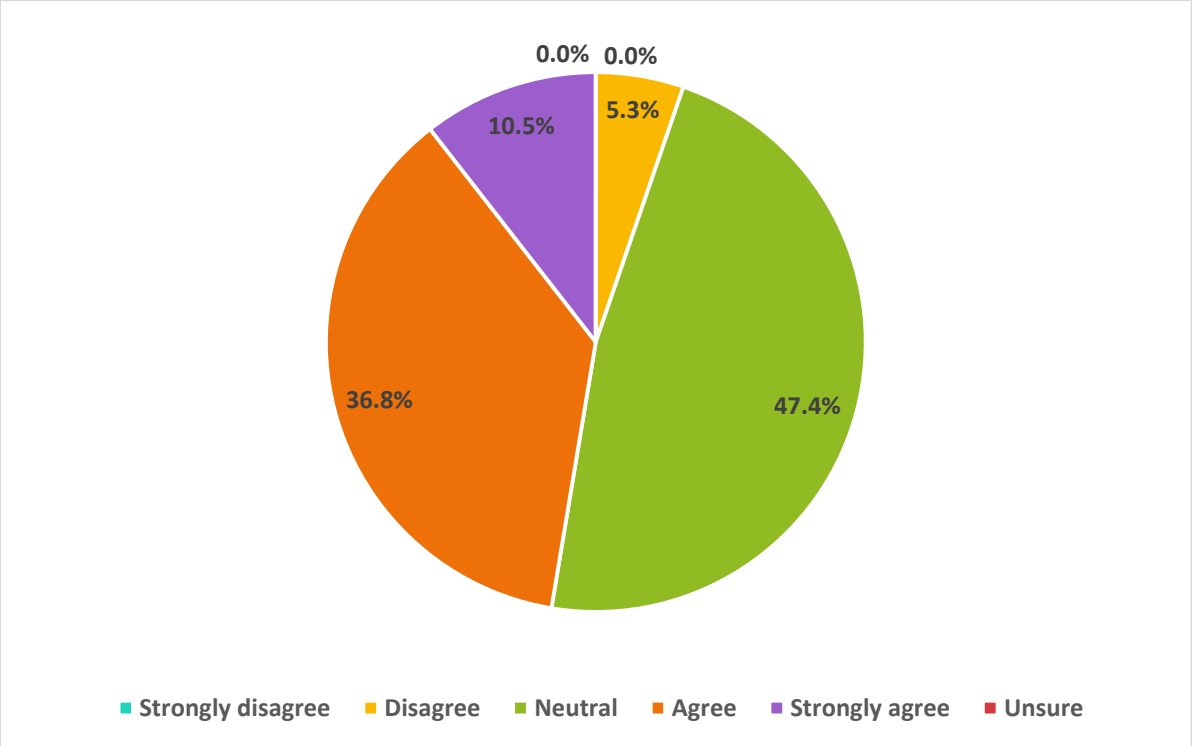
Our Masses/worship services are intellectually stimulating (level of agreement)



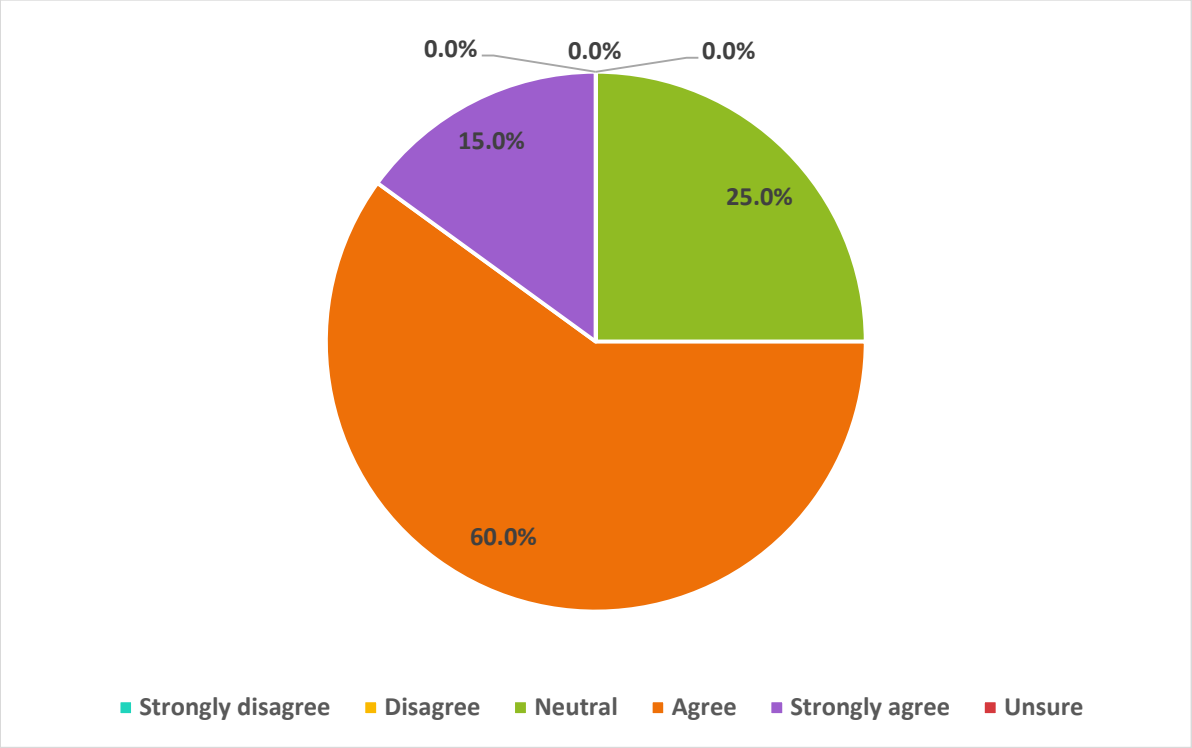
Our Masses/worship services are emotionally stimulating (level of agreement)



We asked: "Do you sense the Holy Spirit in your Masses/worship services?"

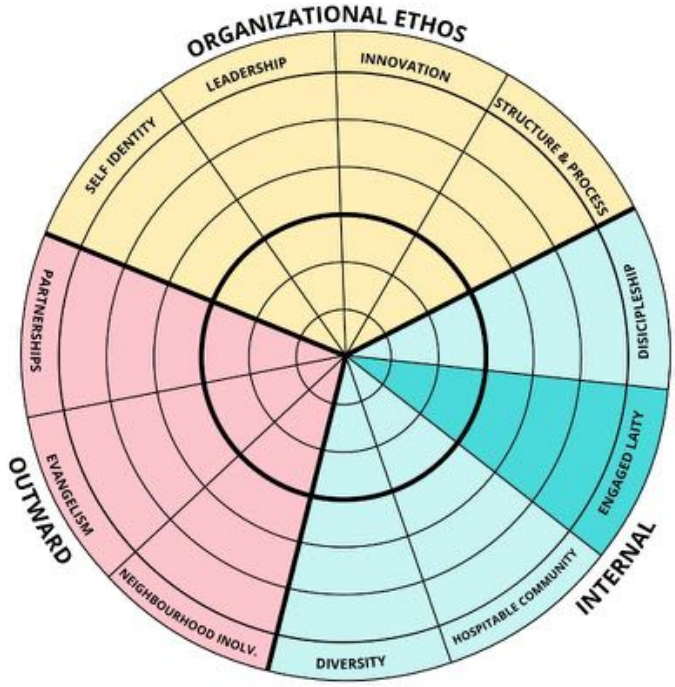


We asked: "Do your Masses/worship services challenge you to take action in your life (e.g., profession, family, spare time)?"

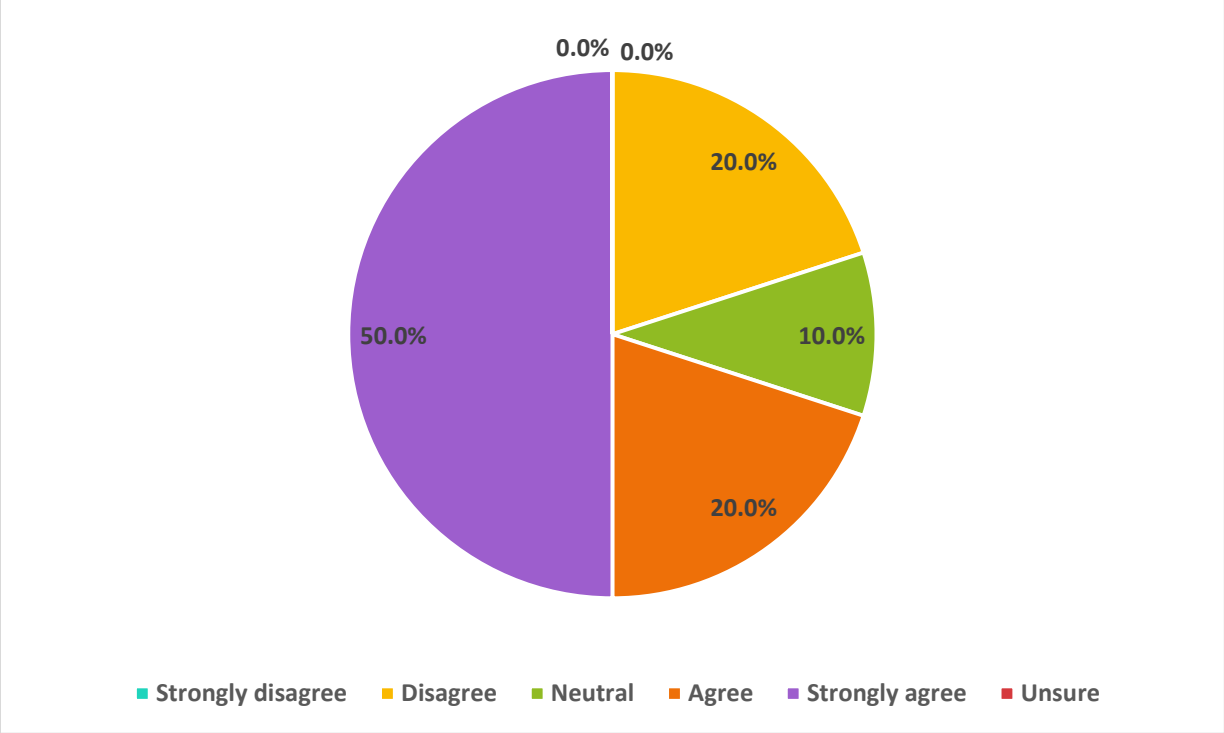


Internal: Engaged Laity

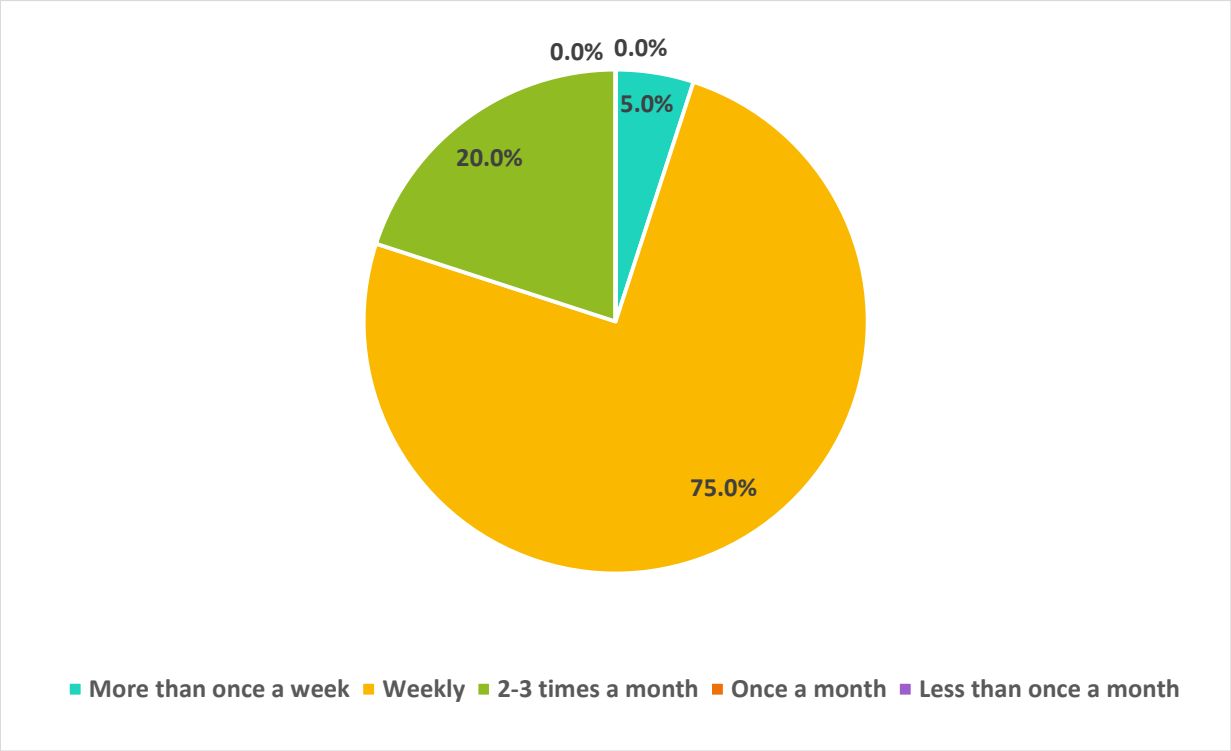
It is our understanding that parishes/congregations thrive when attenders have a vested interest and active involvement in the life of the parish/congregation community. The following survey items provide a sense of the places and spaces where people are connected to congregational/parish life (and how often).



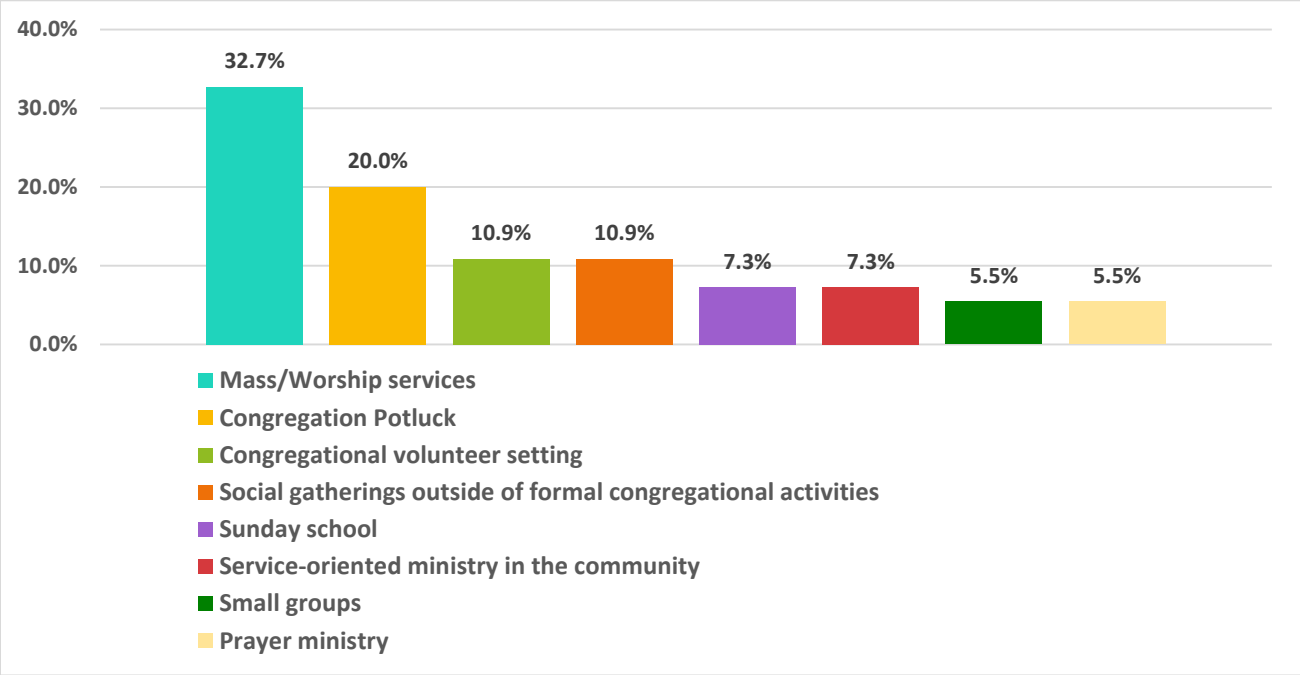
We asked: "Do you have a strong sense of belonging in your parish/congregation?"



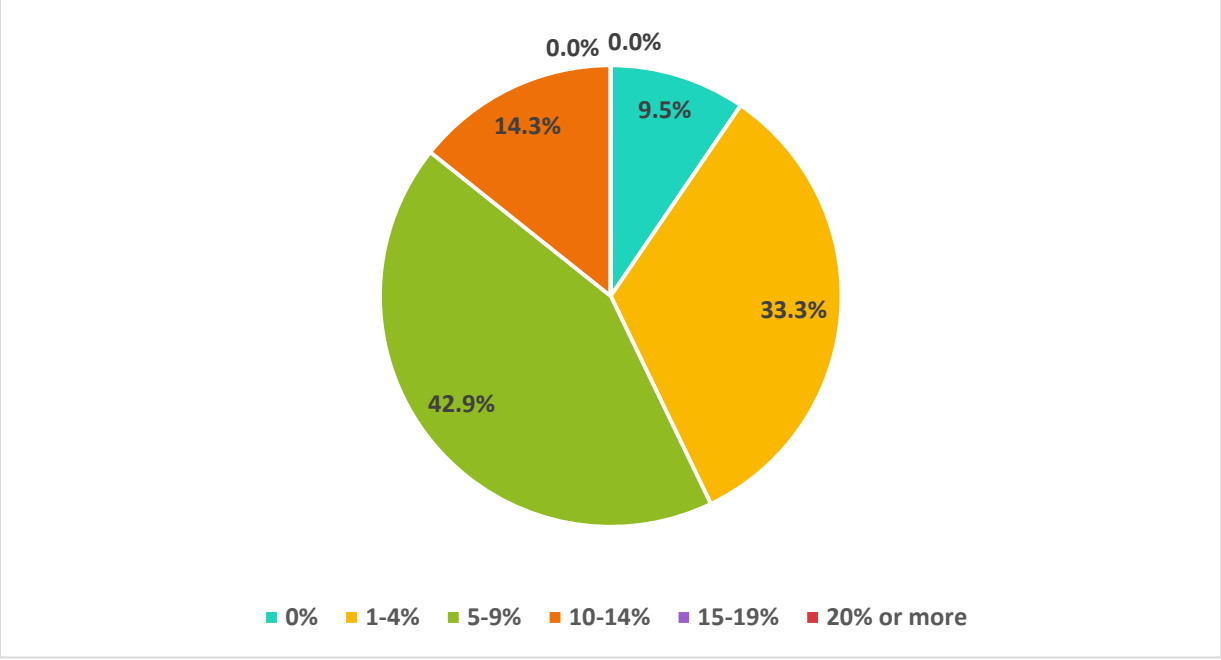
We asked: "On average, how often do you attend Mass/worship services?"



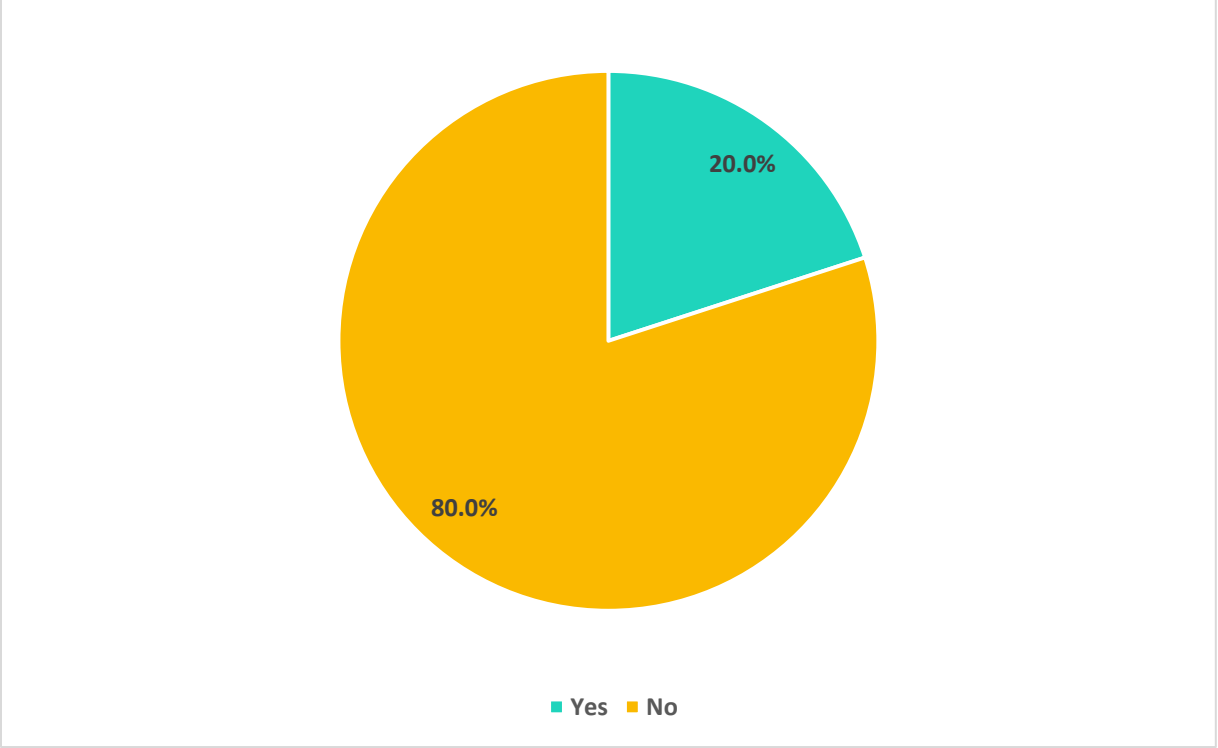
We asked respondents to *identify which of the following contexts they meet with others in their parish/congregation*. We have provided the eight most cited responses. The following percentages capture people who included those responses within their "top three."



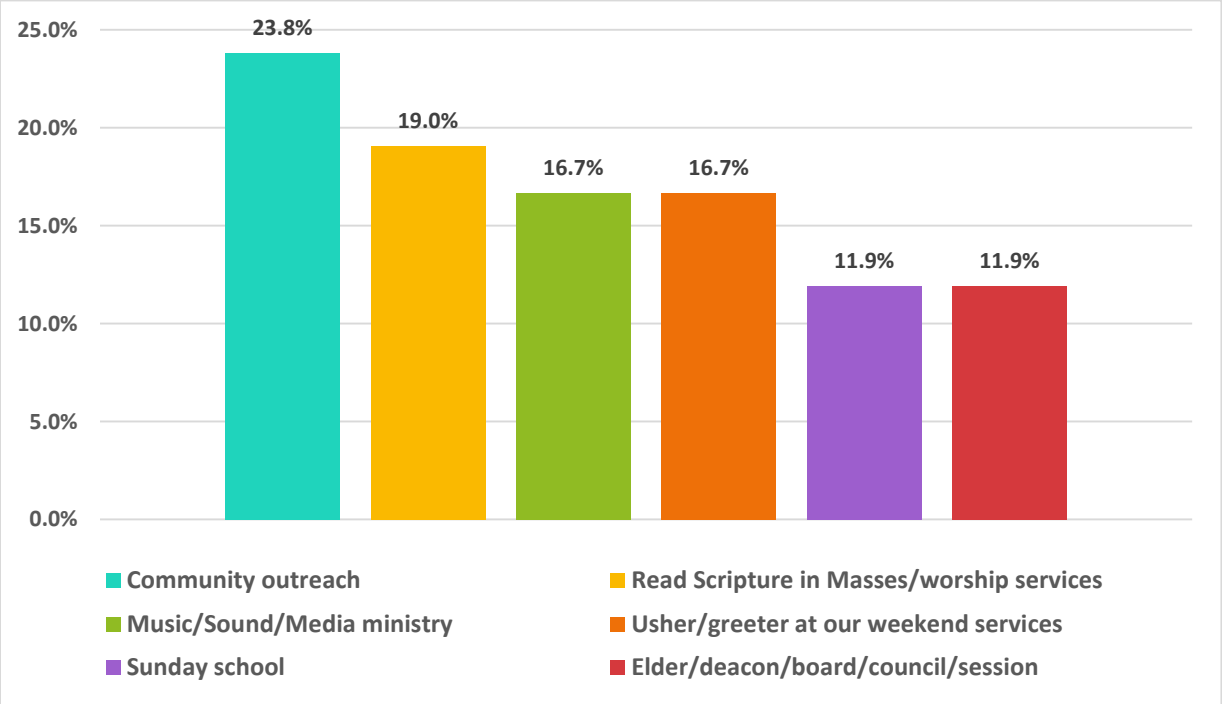
We asked: "Approximately what percentage of your household income do you give to your parish/congregation?"



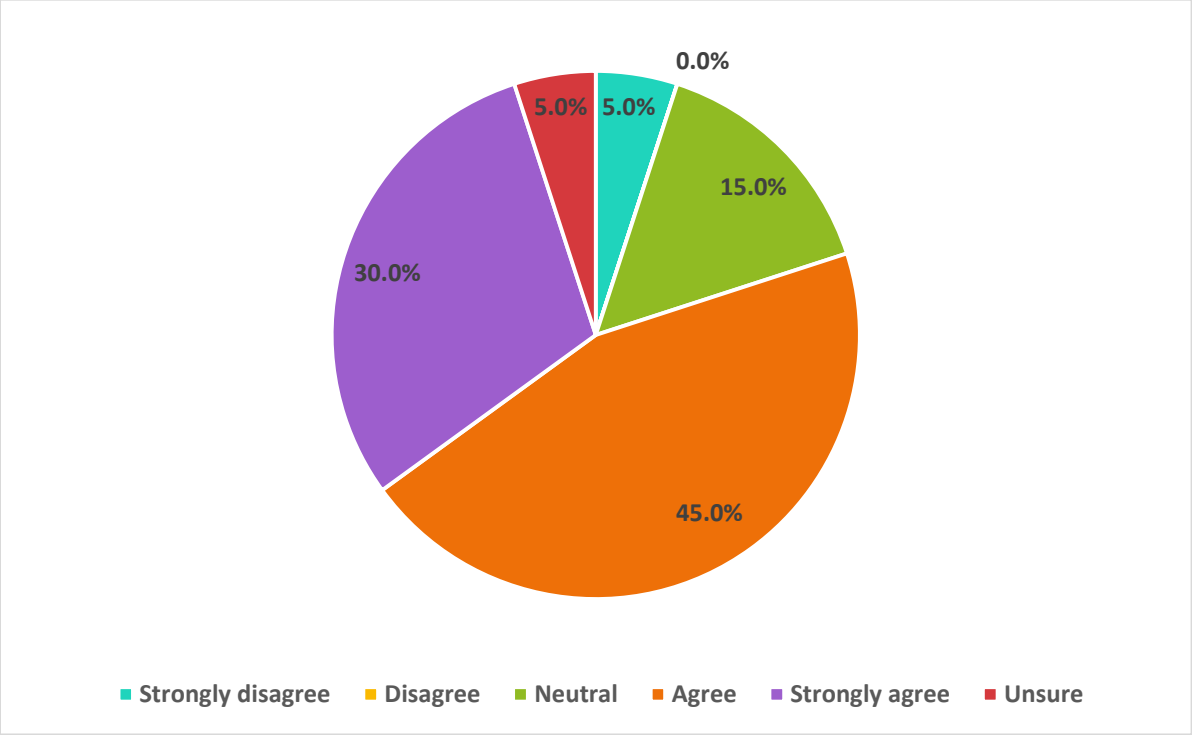
We asked: "Do you volunteer in your congregation/parish?"



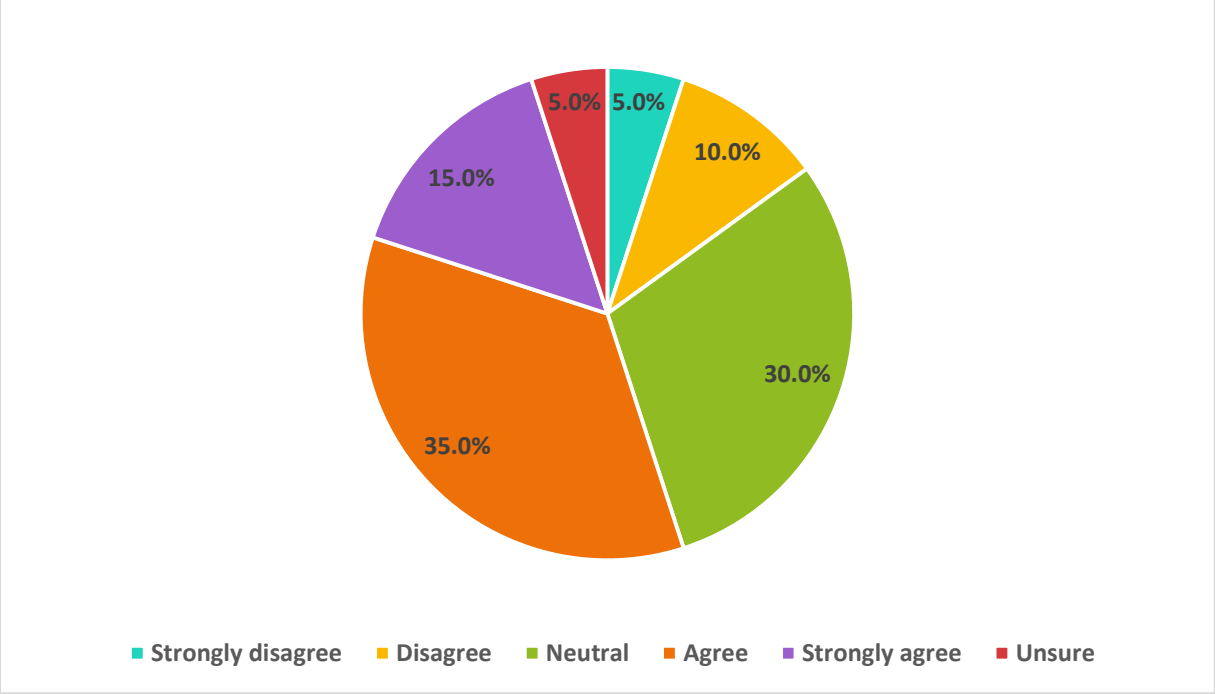
We asked respondents to *identify the type of volunteering they do in or/and through their parish/congregation*. We have provided the six most cited responses.



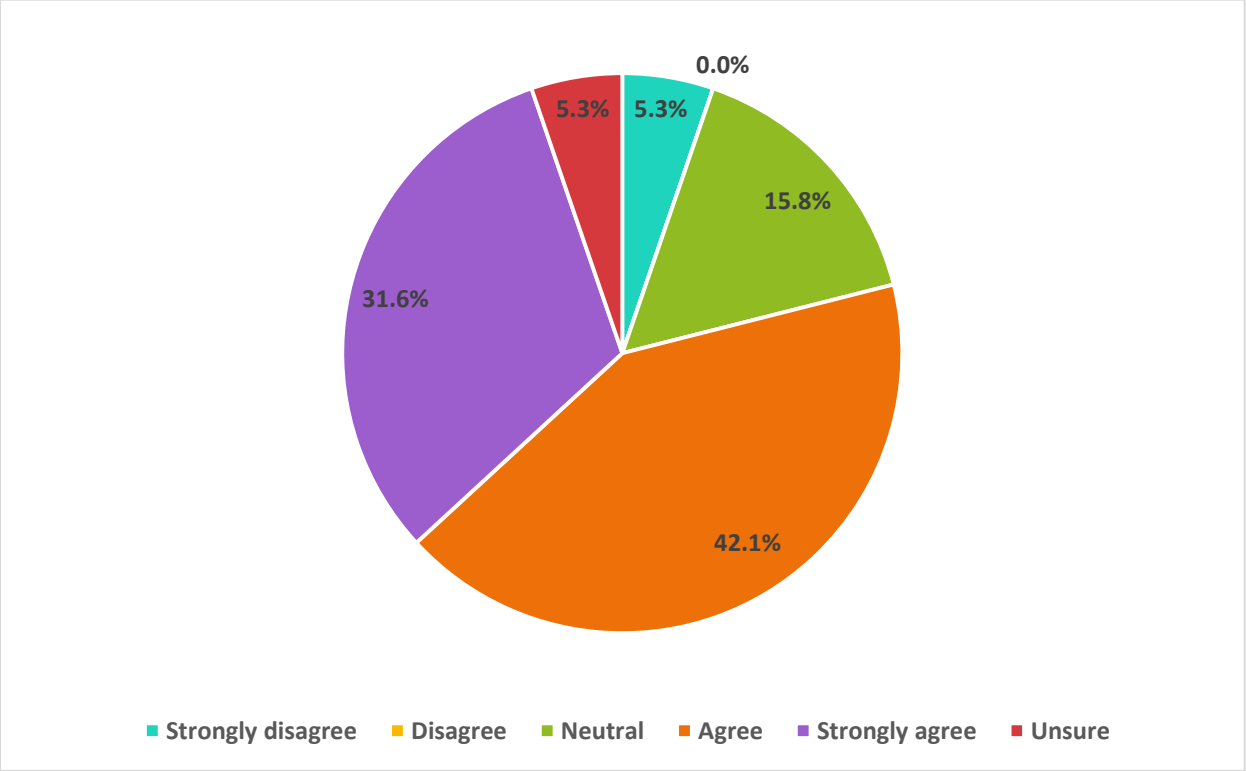
We asked: "Are you serving your parish/congregation according to your particular gifts?"



We asked: "Does your parish/congregation provide enough training for you to serve in your area(s) of ministry?"

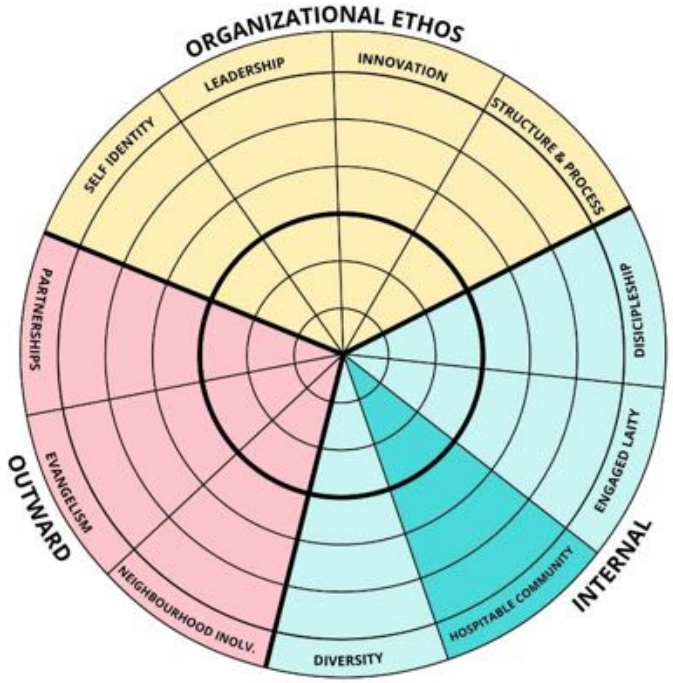


We asked: "Does your parish/congregation encourage and recognize good work among its volunteers?"

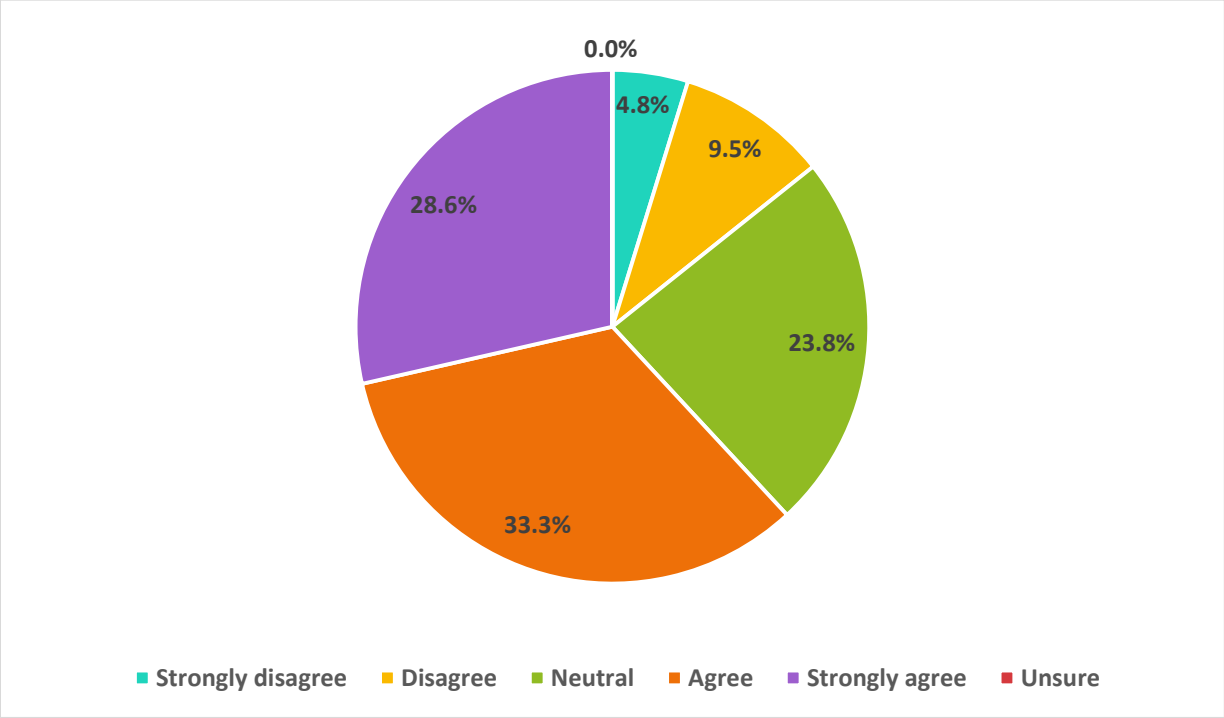


Internal: Hospitable Community

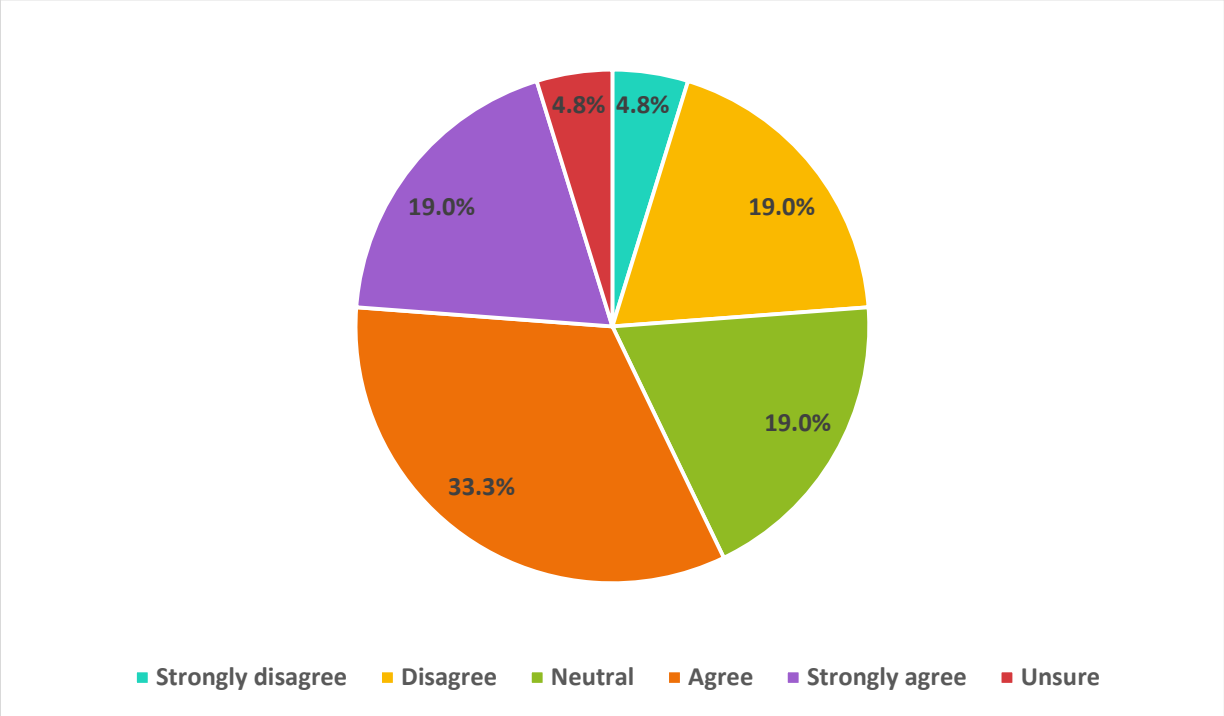
As someone said to us, “If your congregation is not hospitable, people don't want to join, people don't want to be a part of it, people don't want to contribute.” In this dimension we invite you to explore survey items that touched on the integration of newcomers as well as the range of care, concern, and friendships among those within your congregation/parish.



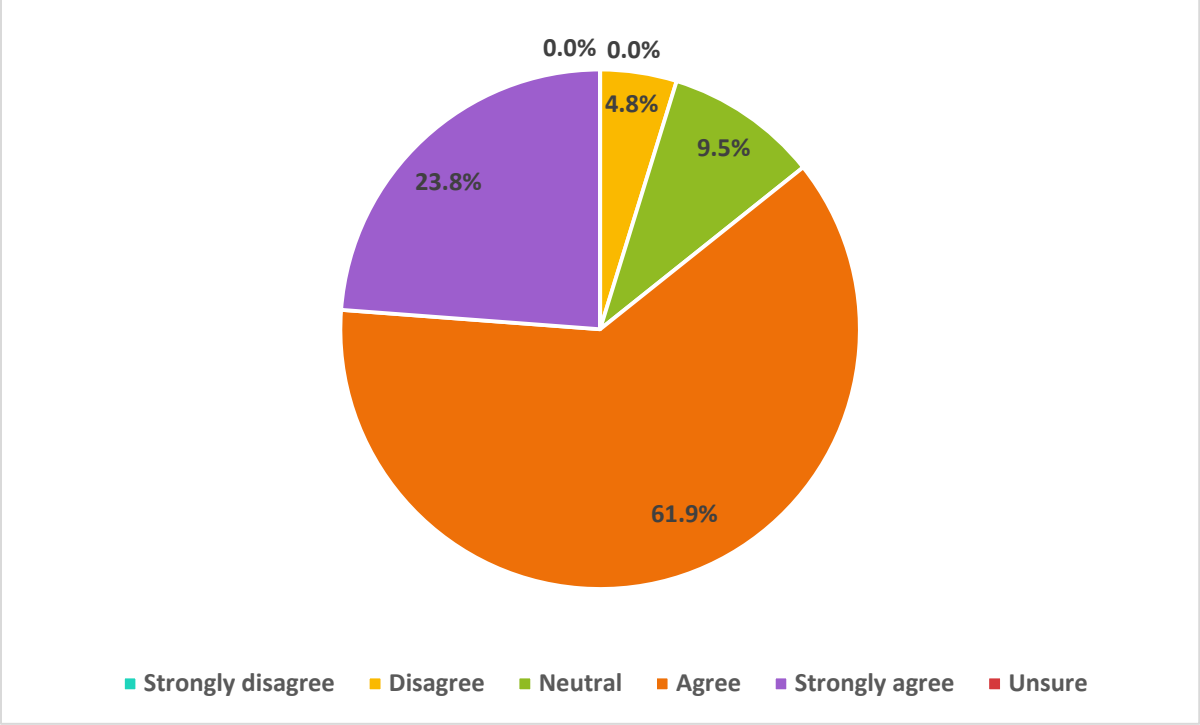
Our parish/congregation does a great job of integrating newcomers (level of agreement)



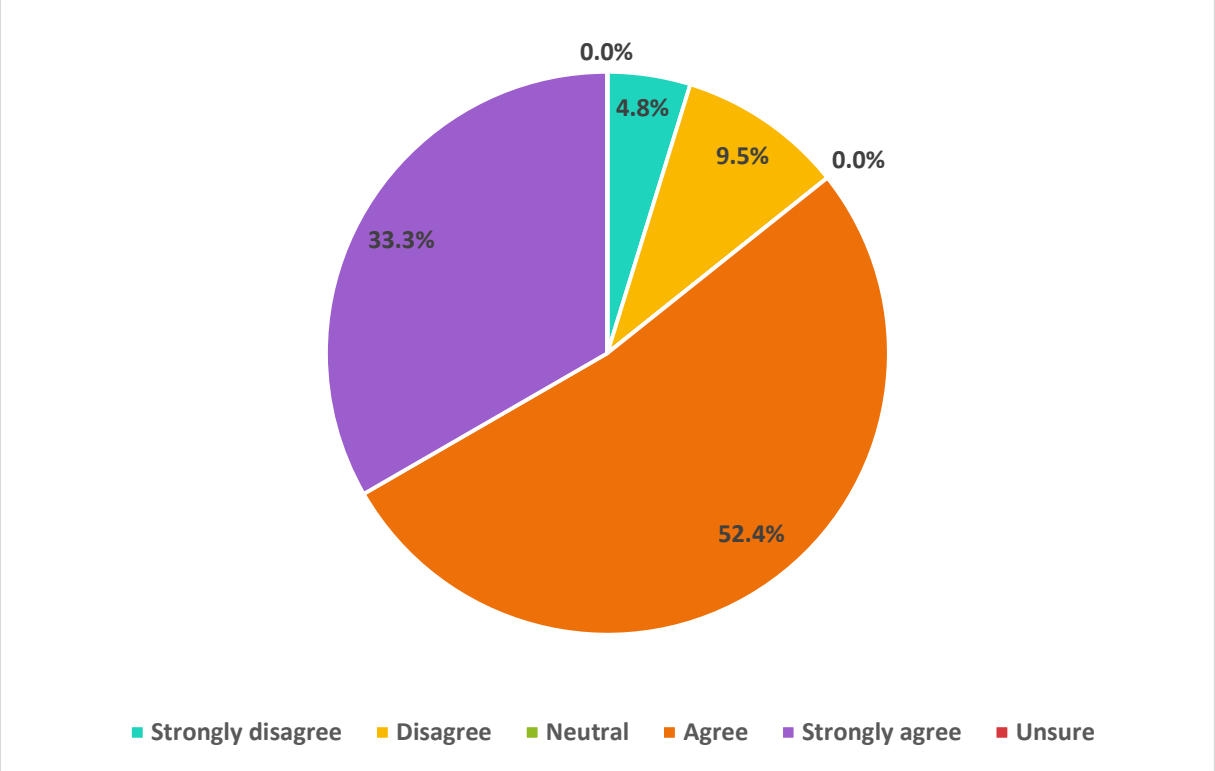
Our parish/congregation is a forgiving community (level of agreement)



We take great care of one another in our parish/congregation (level of agreement)

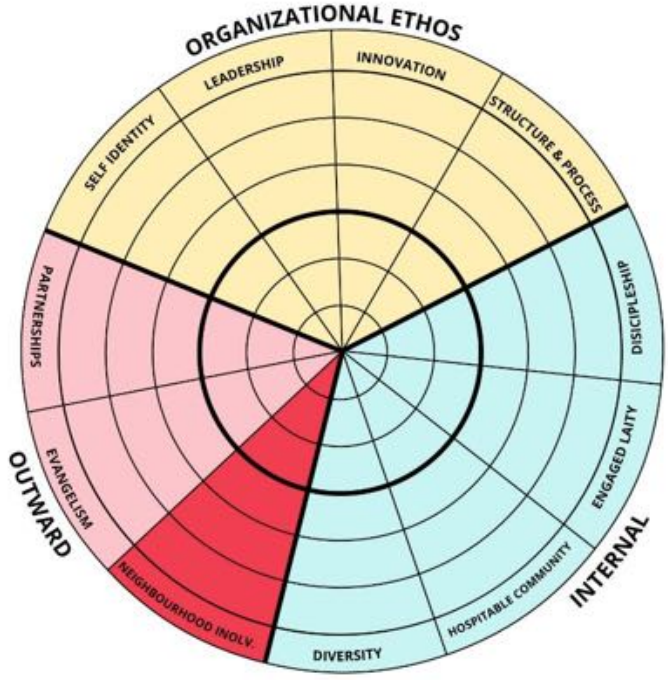


We asked: "Have you found it easy to make friends within your parish/congregation?"

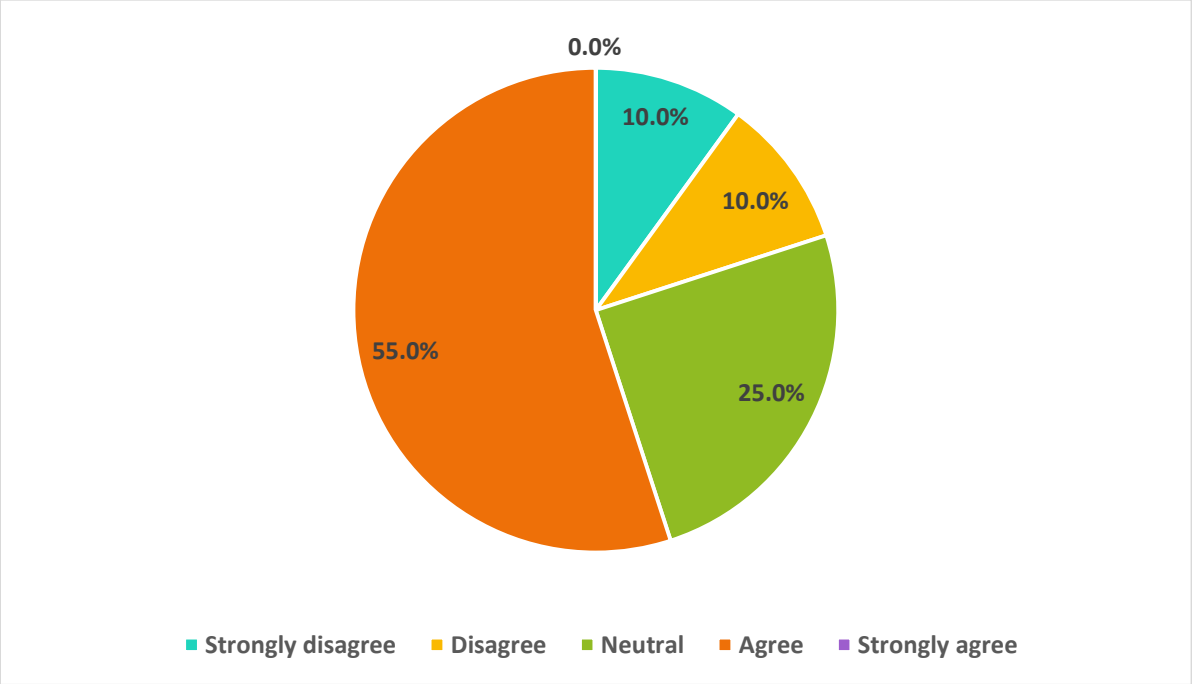


Outward: Neighborhood Involvement

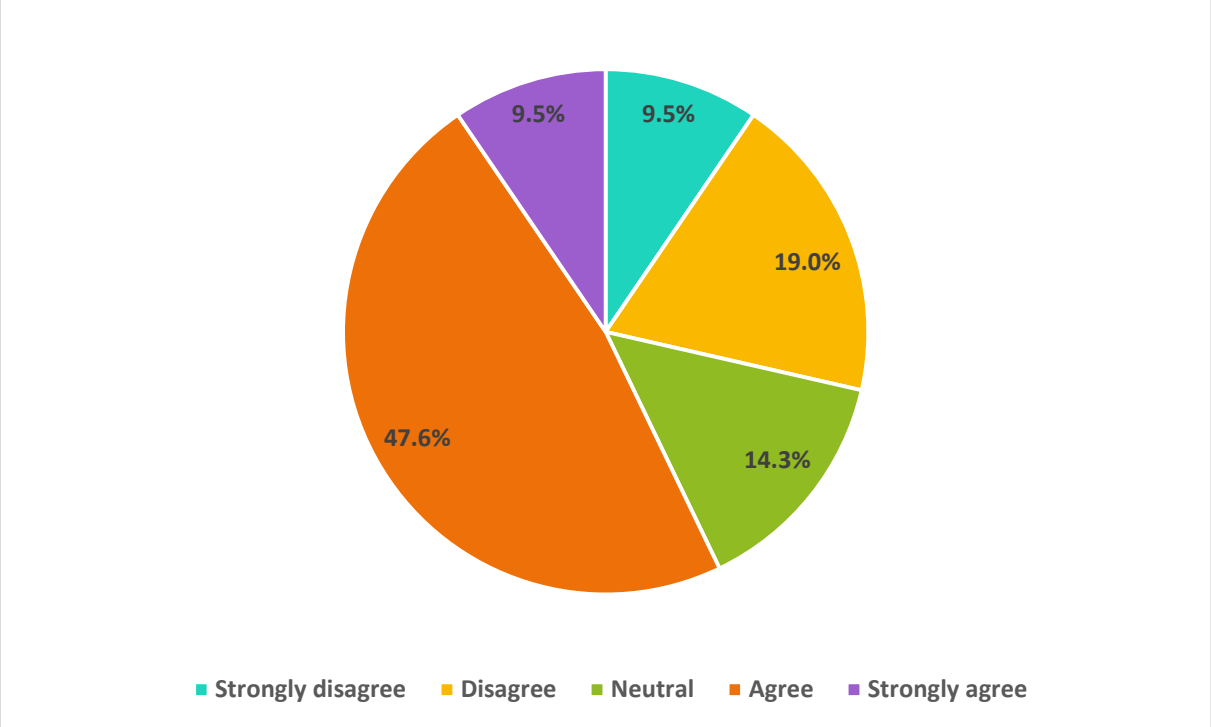
Would your neighborhood notice if your congregation was no longer there? This dimension of the report explores the various ways that your congregation/parish respondents indicated perceptions of involvement in initiatives beyond the walls of your congregation/parish, including levels of support and involvement for different activities among those in your congregation.



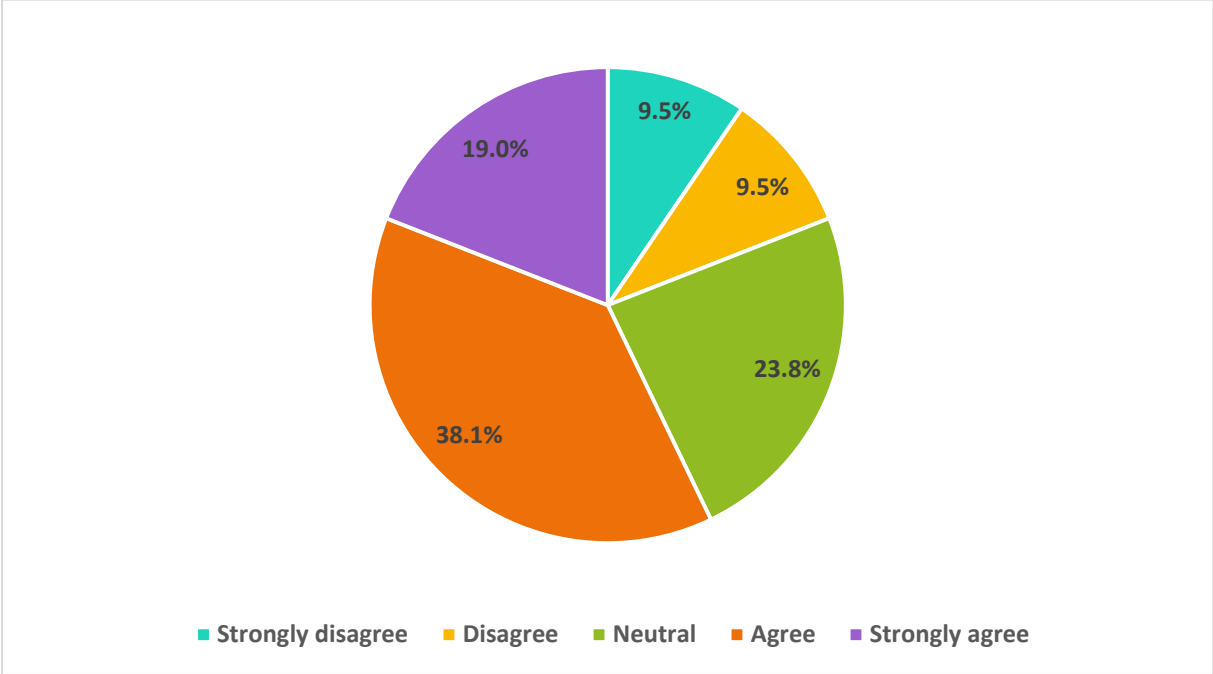
Our parish/congregation has an active presence in the wider community (level of agreement)



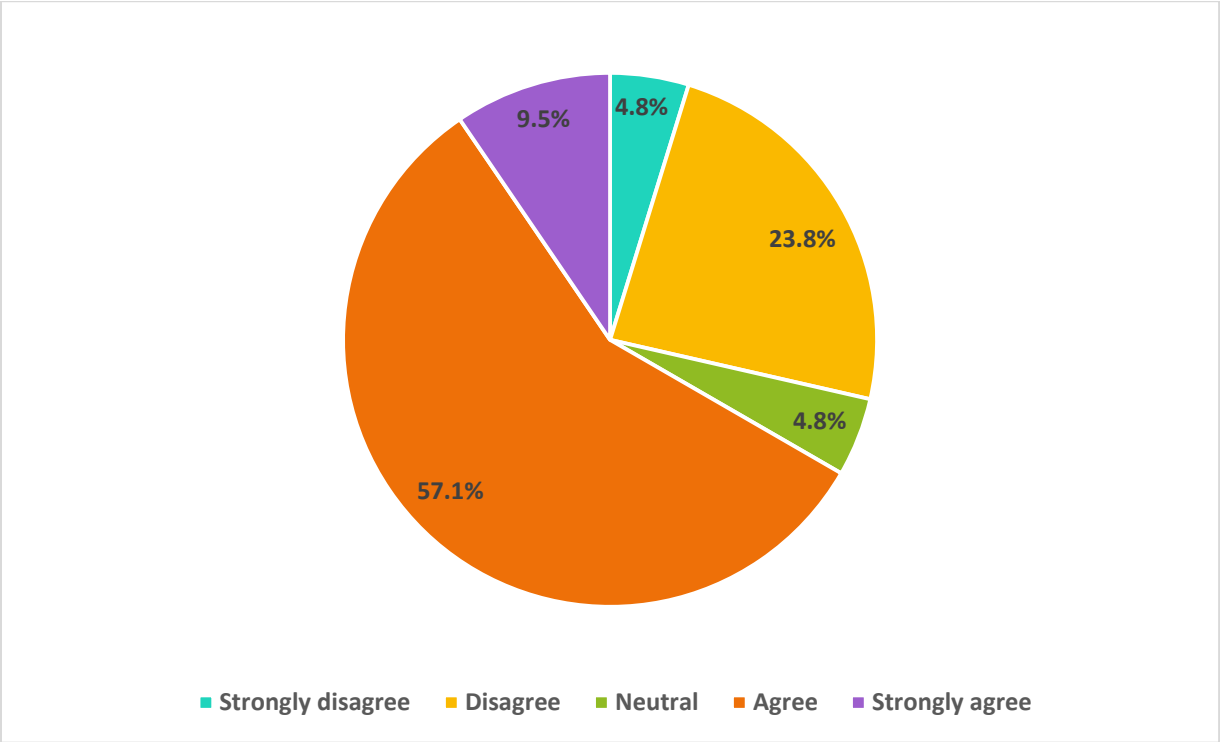
We asked: "Do you regularly take part in parish/congregational activities that reach out to the wider community?"



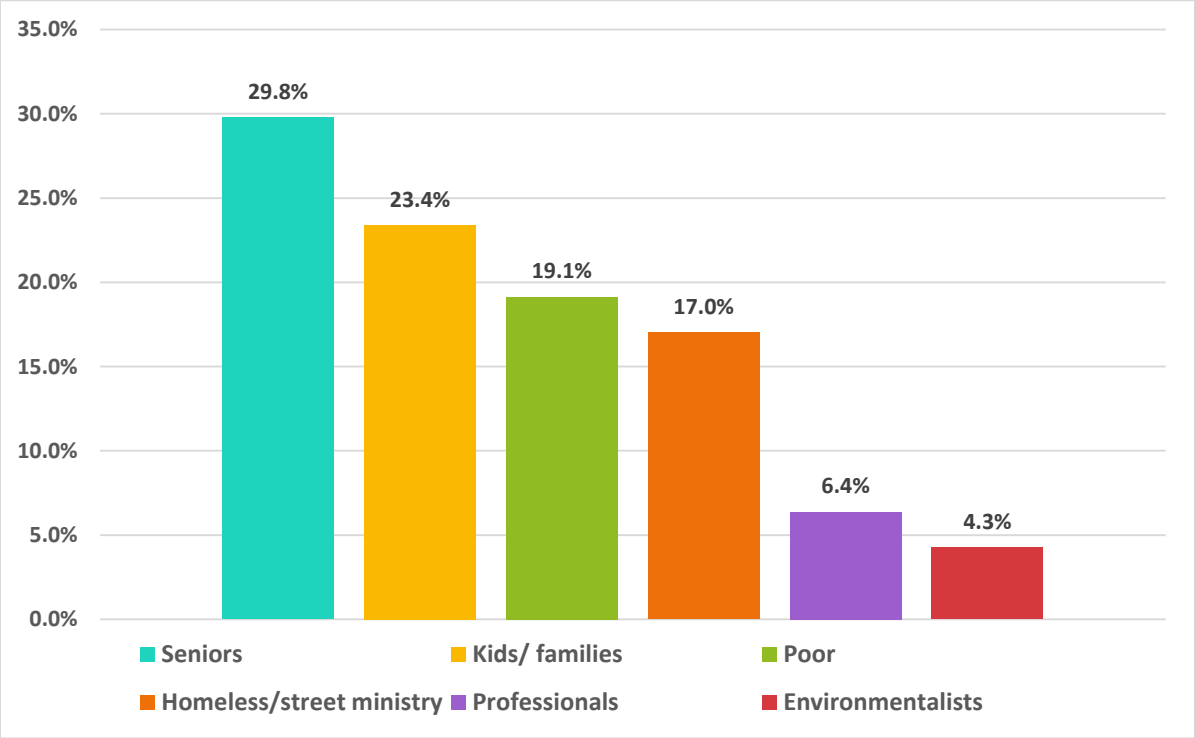
The neighbourhood around our parish/congregation building would notice if we were no longer here (level of agreement)



Our parish/congregation is actively involved in supporting missionaries or international workers (level of agreement)

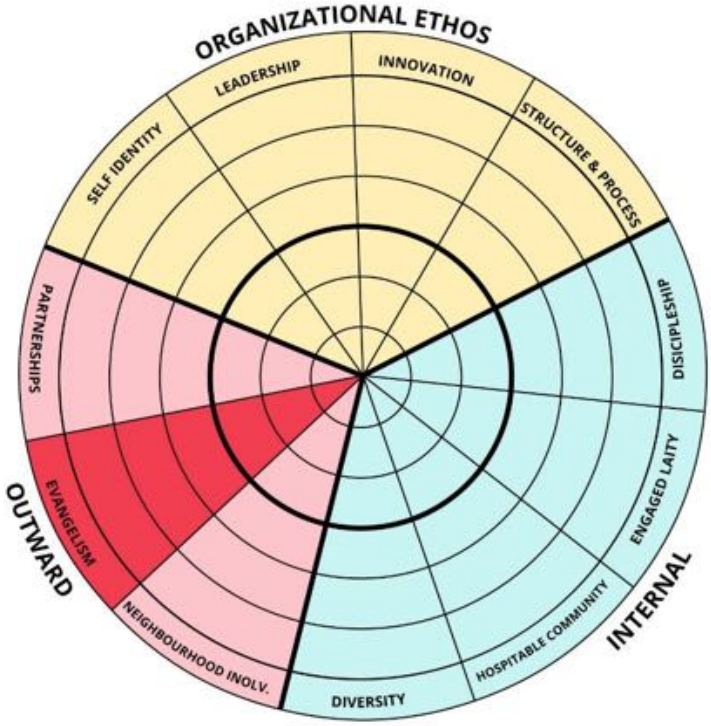


We asked respondents to *identify the three most prominent groups with whom our parish/congregation actively engages*. We have provided the six most cited responses. The following percentages capture people who included those responses within their "top three."

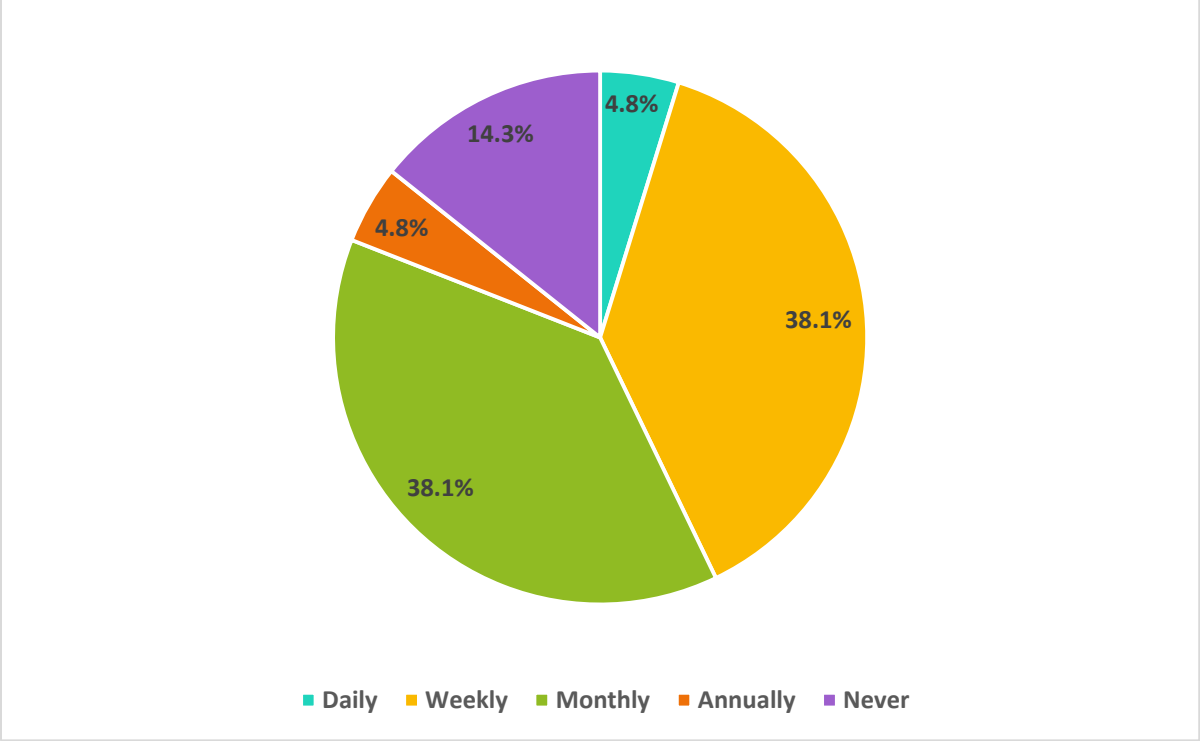


Outward: Evangelism

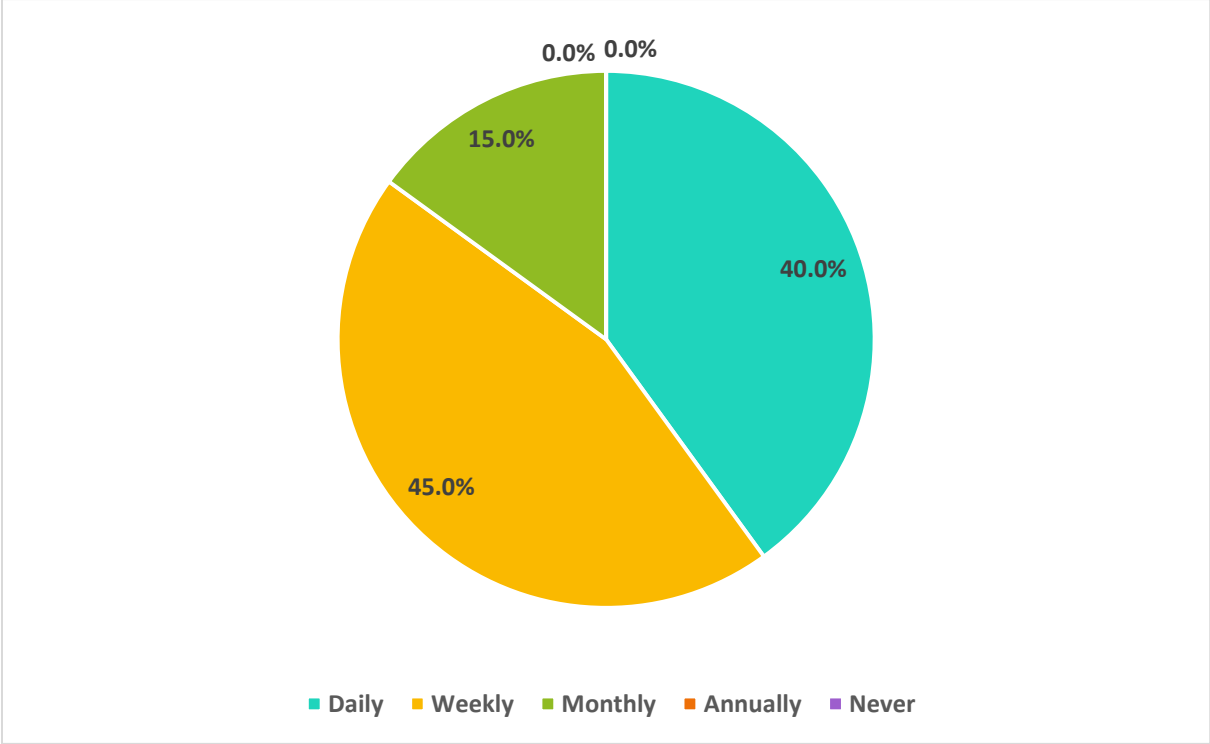
How important do those in your congregations/parish believe evangelism is, do they evangelize (and in what form), and what do they see as the effective pathways or the barriers to evangelism? These are the questions that anchor this dimension of your report.



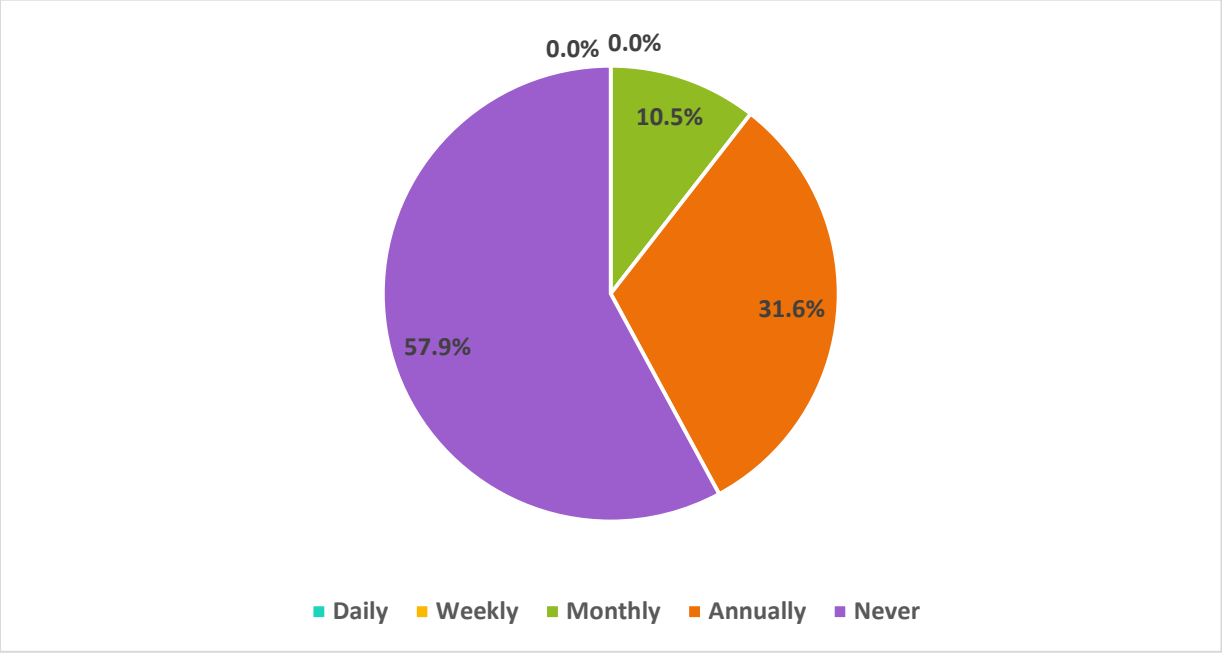
We asked: "How frequently do you verbally share your faith with others?"



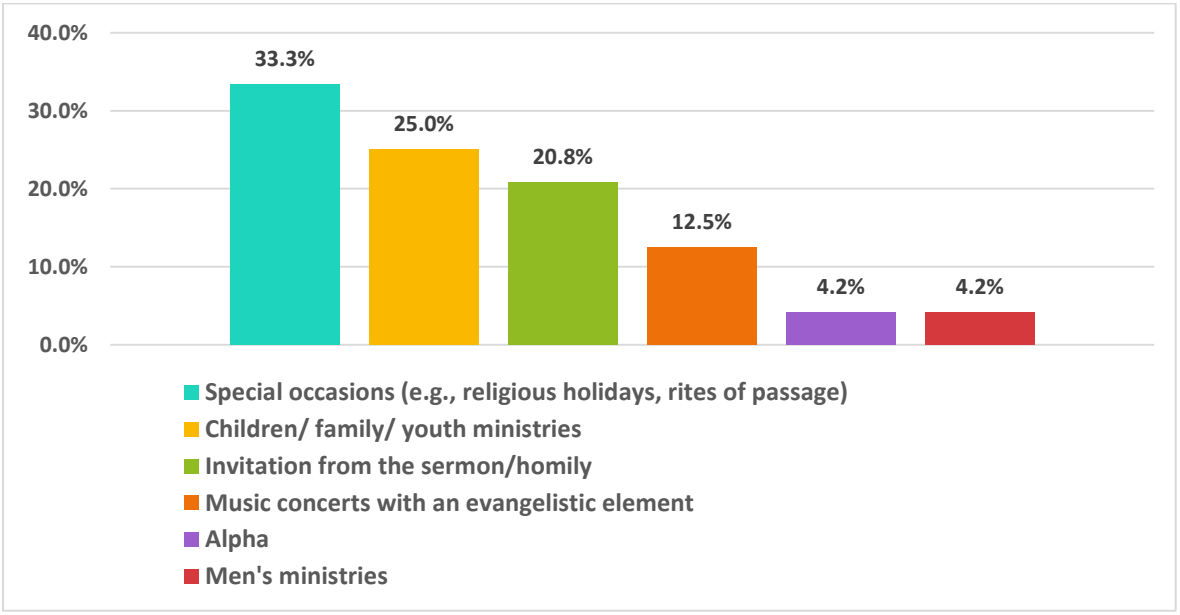
We asked: "How frequently do you show your faith to others through your actions?"



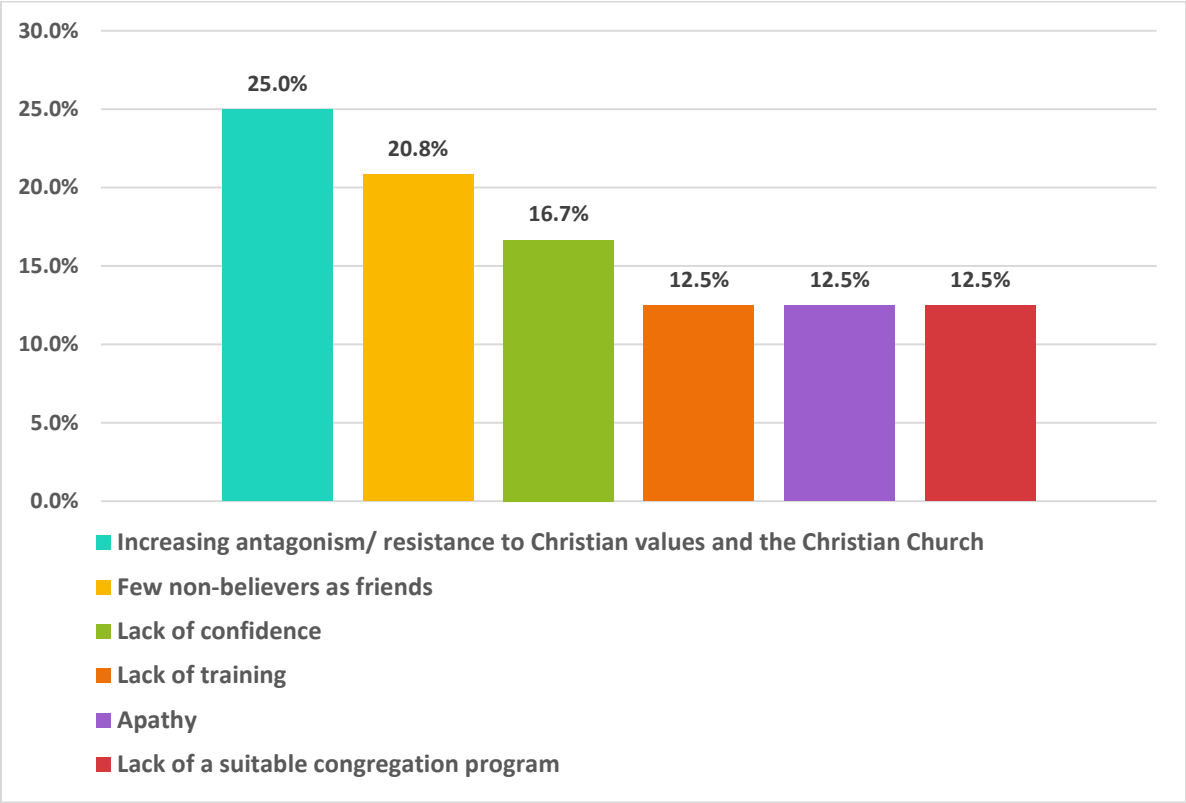
We asked: "How frequently do you invite people who you do not believe are Christian to your parish/congregation?"



We asked respondents to *identify the three most effective strategies for evangelism (understood as the proclamation of the Gospel to non-Christians and lapsed believers) used in their parish/congregation*. We have provided the six most cited responses. The following percentages capture people who included those responses within their "top three." *Note – these responses do not reveal whether these strategies *actually* are the most effective forms of evangelism in your context.

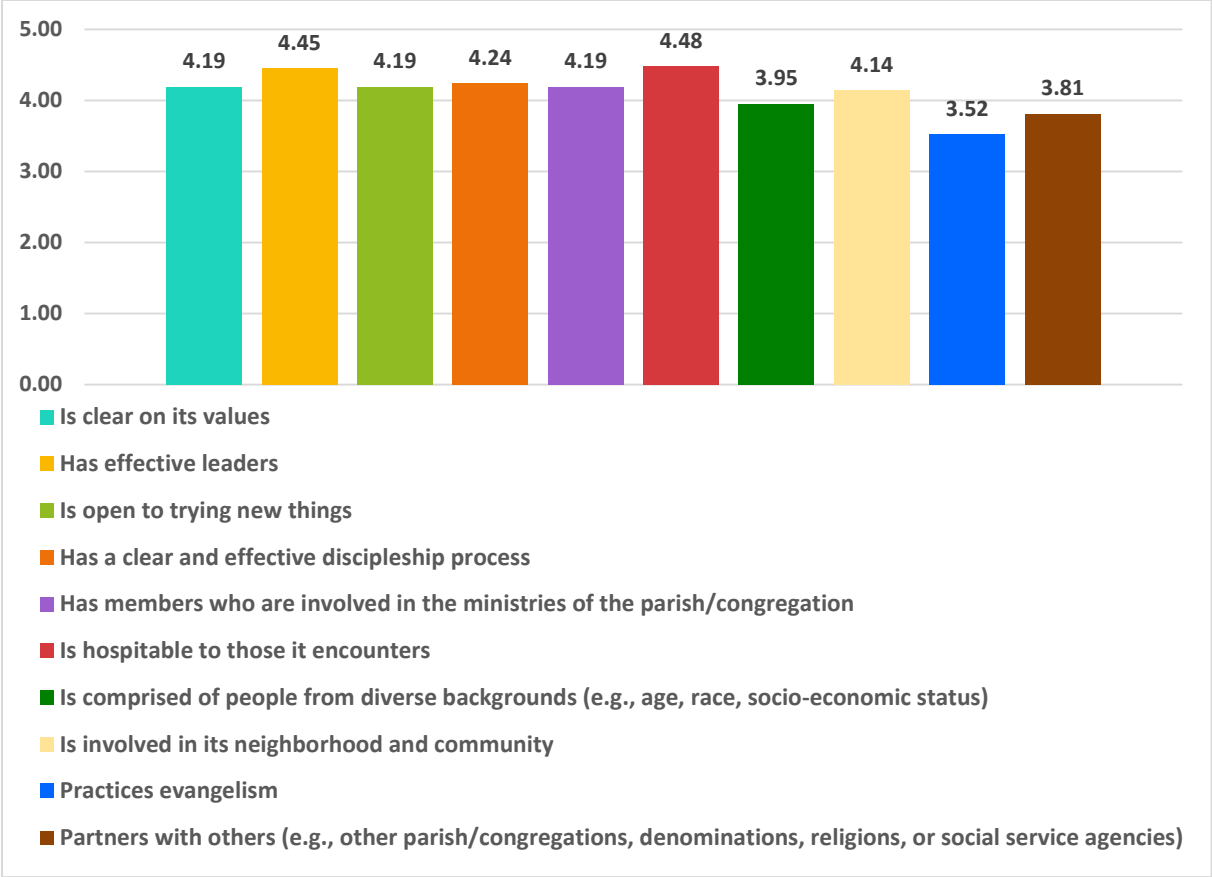


We asked respondents to *identify the three biggest challenges in evangelism for you personally*. We have provided the six most cited responses. The following percentages capture people who included those responses within their "top three."

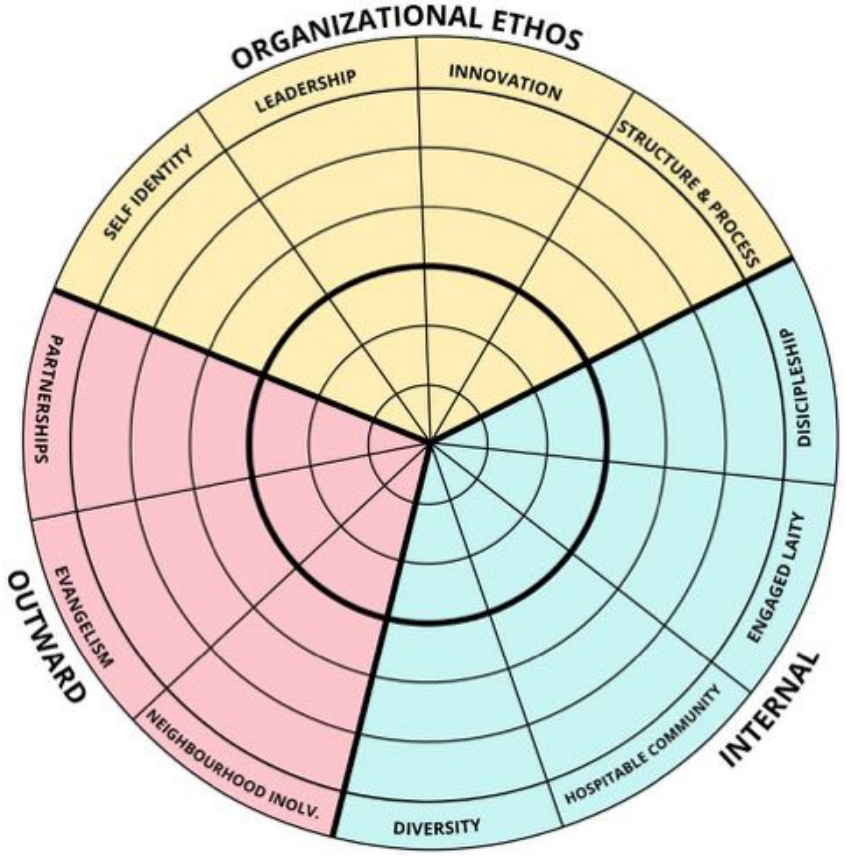


Flourishing Congregations Construct

We asked respondents to convey their level of agreement/disagreement that "a flourishing parish/congregation…" possesses the following features. We have provided the "mean" or average scores among those in your congregation/parish, on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).



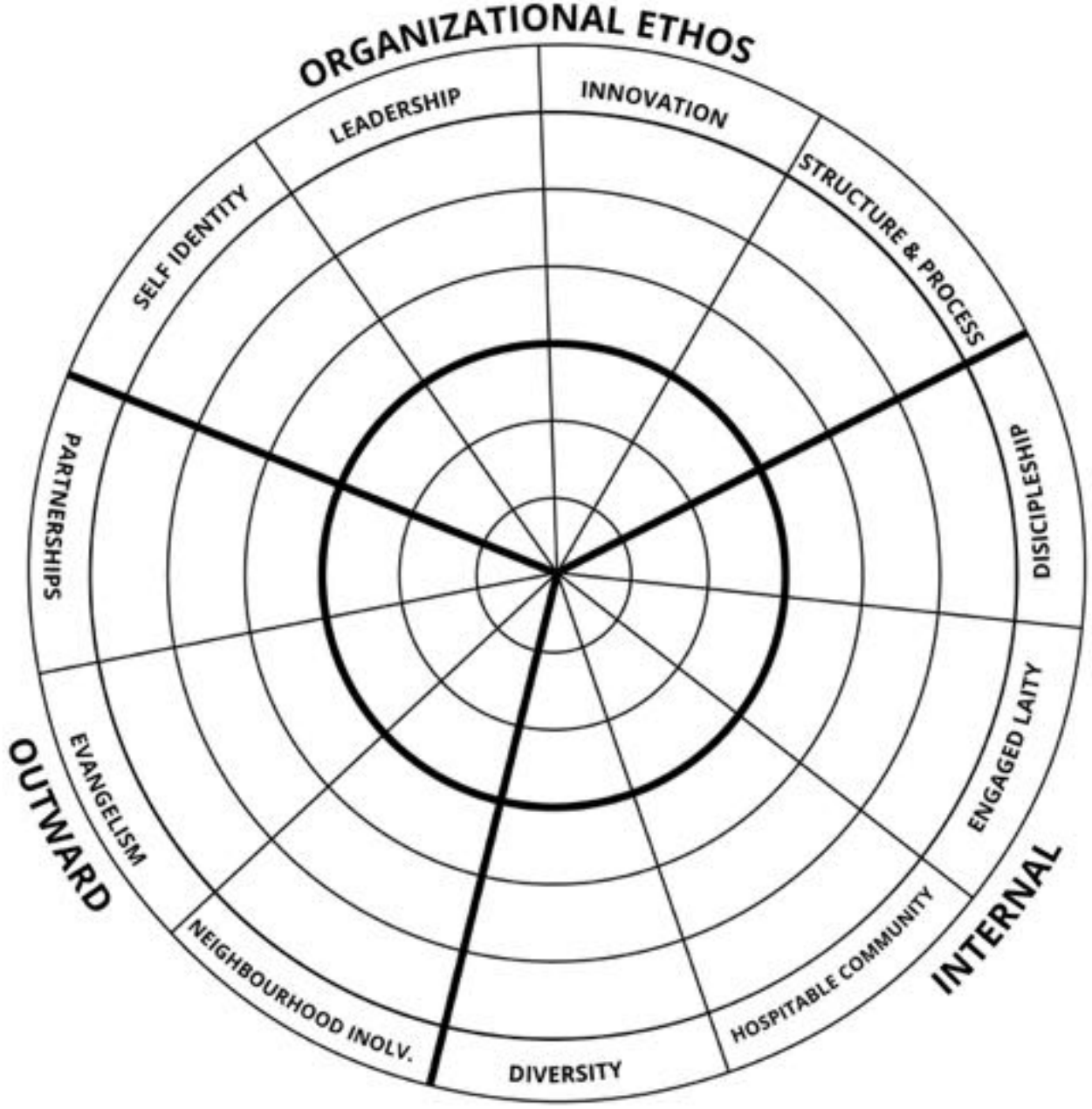
As you consider the dimensions and assume that every faith community will have some stronger dimensions than others, you may wish to positively consider your parish/congregation's overall flourishing by making use of the dimensions circumplex below.



As you think about survey responses received on many of these dimensions, together with your discernments and dialogue with others, to what extent does your parish/congregation evidence strengths in each of the dimensions?

Notice that there are concentric circles within the figure. Beginning in the centre and moving outward, shade-in the extent to which you sense your parish/congregation exhibits strengths for each dimension. Of course this is an informed but subjective activity. For example, you might shade in the space between the centre and the smallest inner circle for a particular dimension and shade in all the inner circles for another. As you do this for all the dimensions a larger picture or profile for your current congregational strengths will emerge and you will be able to see patterns and connections within domains (organizational ethos, internal and external) and dimensions.

To assist we have provided you with a blank image that you can use for your purposes.


ORGANIZATIONAL ETHOS
LEADERSHIP
INNOVATION
STRUCTURE & PROCESS
SELF IDENTITY
DISICIPLESHIP
PARTNERSHIPS
ENGAGED LAITY
EVANGELISM
HOSPITABLE COMMUNITY
NEIGHBOURHOOD INOLV.
DIVERSITY
OUTWARD
INTERNAL

Next Steps

Sharing this Report

We encourage you to share this report with your parish/congregation leaders, as well as with the congregation as a whole. In doing so, below are some suggestions for you to consider:

- Share the report with congregational leaders, such as an Elders' Board or Parish Council, in a regular meeting that helps with strategic planning
- Use the materials as a basis for retreats for leadership teams to discuss growth areas
- Use the results for preaching
- Use the data as a discussion starter for the various ministry areas of your congregation
- Use this material as a discussion starter for small group leaders, Sunday school teachers, and so on

What Now?

As you and your colleagues look through and reflect on this report, you may conclude that for a variety of reasons certain dimensions or items are more important and others might not have as much relevance for this time and place in your parish/congregation's life. Of course this is entirely okay.

Our research team encourages you to process which of these dimensions might be most integral to your call, identity and functioning as a congregation. It may be helpful for you to single out a number of areas where you seem particularly strong, as well as the areas where opportunities for improvement might exist. In our experience, it is most advantageous to focus on and leverage your areas of strengths. These dimensions should not be ignored, despite our natural tendency to look first at apparent weaknesses. Of course there is wisdom to giving prayerful and diligent attention to those areas where gains might be made. Here are some questions and considerations to help you determine next steps:

- Share, discuss, and discern your way through this report and the following questions with those in your congregation – actively pursue transparent communication, open discussion and dialogue, and shared ownership and participation in the process and outcomes.
- What is our core reason and purpose for existing as a congregation? How do we know if we are excelling in these areas?
- Where do we see signs of flourishing and how can we continue to celebrate and foster those areas?
- Where do we see opportunities for greater flourishing, and how do those areas align with who we believe God is calling us to be as a congregation moving forward?
- Where do we want to see our congregation in one year, three years, and five years from now? How do these desires compare with where we currently are?
- What aspects of our congregation's activities might we release or let go of, in order to more intentionally fulfill our core purposes for existing as a congregation?

- Identify one area that you wish to give greater attention to moving forward, identifying and pursuing definable actions and measurable outcomes at different time intervals (e.g., 30-days, 60-days, 90-days, 6 months, 1 year).

Concluding Words

Again, we cannot thank you and your congregation enough for investing the time and energy to participate in this national survey. We see this report as Version 1.0 in our attempt to share our research in ways that would benefit local congregations. If you have feedback on this report, on ways that we might change or strengthen this report, we welcome your feedback – and will see what we are able to do, with the resources that we have, to develop Version 2.0!

Resources

Approximately two times a month, our Institute circulates resources electronically to assist Canadian congregations – a short blog, a suggested book/article/video, and so forth. If you would like to receive those resources, sign up on our website. Alongside those resources, below is a sample of resources that might be helpful to your congregation as you process your congregation's report and take the next steps.

Bickers, Dennis W. 2005. *The Healthy Small Church*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press.

Bowen, John, ed. 2013. *Green Shoots out of Dry Ground: Growing a New Future for the Church in Canada.* Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock.

Breen Mike. 2011. *Building a Discipleship Culture: How to Release a Missional Movement by Discipling People like Jesus Did.* Pawleys Island, SC: 3 Dimension.

Carroll, Jackson W. 2006. *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Conner Benjamin. 2011 *Practicing Witness: A Missional Vision of Christian Practices*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Coutts, Peter. 2013. *Choosing Change: How to Motivate Congregations to Face the Future.* Herndon, VA: Alban.

James, Christopher B. 2018. *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Mallon, James. 2014. *Divine Renovation: From a Maintenance to a Missional Path*. Toronto, ON: Novalis Publishing.

Pathak, Jay and Runyon, Dave. 2012. *The Art of Neighboring: Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door*. Garand Rapids, MI: Baker.

Pentland, John. 2015. *Fishing Tips: How Curiosity Transformed a Community of Faith.* Toronto, ON: Edge.

Proeschold-Bell, Rae Jean and Jason Byassee. 2018. *Faithful and Fractured: Responding to the Clergy Health Crisis.* Ada, MI: Baker Publishing Group.

Schnase, Robert. 2007. *Five Practices of Fruitful Conversations: Revised and Updated.* Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.

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