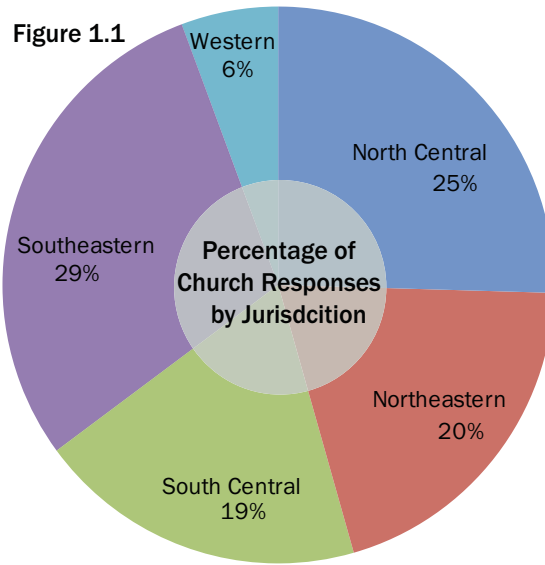




# **2008 Congregational Leadership Survey**

Beginning in the fall of 2008, the General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA) distributed surveys to over 10,000 randomly-selected local churches throughout the United States in order to gain local church perspective on conditions in the local church. The survey spanned a broad range of topics, including worship, program, finance, pastoral leadership, membership demographics, and congregational conflict. It was designed by, and conducted in cooperation with, Faith Communities Today, a multi-denominational, interreligious research consortium supported by Harford Seminary, a non-denominational seminary in Hartford, Connecticut. More information on the methodology used for this survey can be found on page 11.



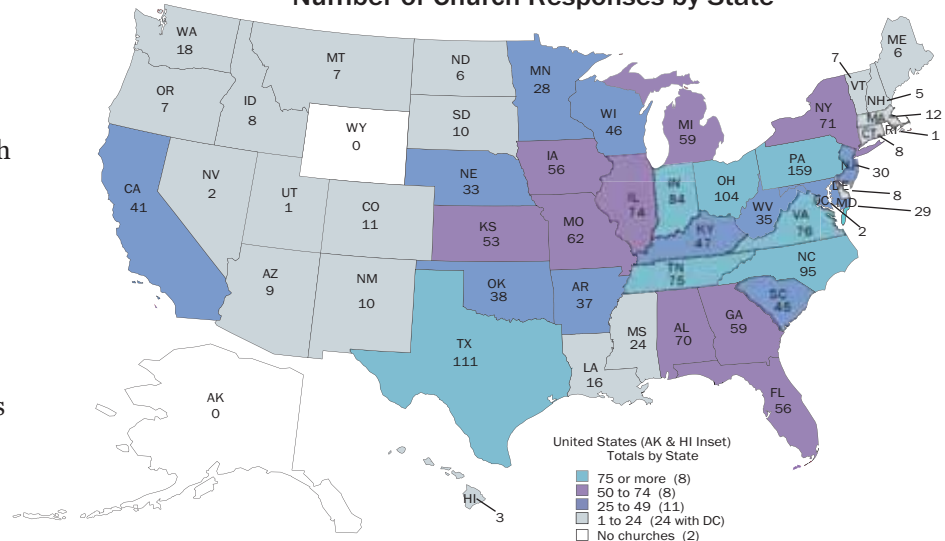
From the 10,000 surveys sent to churches, 1,855 were completed and returned. As Figure 1.3 shows, response group churches were from 48 states and the District of Columbia. Seven states had over 75 responses, and nine states sent 50-74 surveys. As we continued to receive returns in significant numbers after the planned close of the survey, it was kept open for several additional weeks, increasing the number of participants, but delaying the release of the survey results.

**Figure 1.2**

Jurisdiction	Church at Large
North Central	21.3%
Northeastern	21.5%
South Central	17.4%
Southeastern	34.6%
Western	5.1%

The breakdown of the response group by jurisdiction generally reflects the pattern of congregational distribution seen in the church at large (Figure 1.1). Churches in the Western Jurisdiction were slightly over-represented; churches from the Southeast were slightly under-represented.

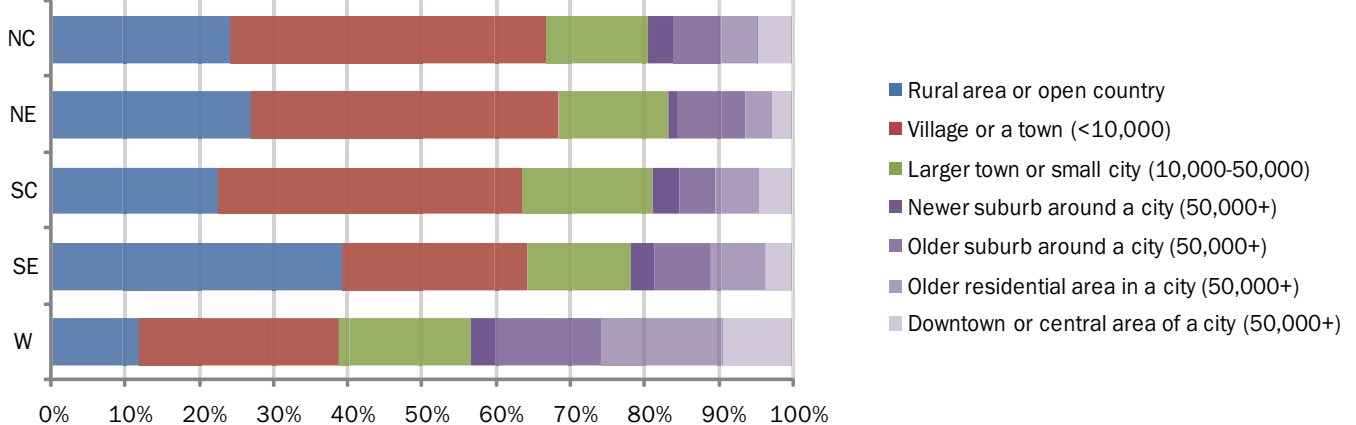
**Figure 1.3**  
Number of Church Responses by State



As Figure 1.4 indicates, most responses came from churches in town and country settings, reflecting the general distribution of churches in the United States.

**Figure 1.4**

**Percentage of Church Responses by Community Size/Type**



# Active Participants

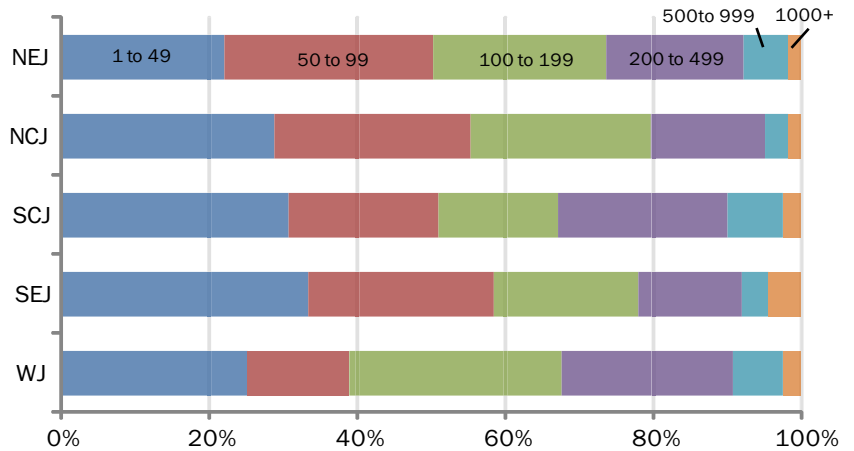
In the survey, we asked respondents a number of questions about active participants in the church. This wording allowed our research partners to use the survey in faith traditions where membership and attendance are not always useful concepts. Although the number of active participants is not directly analogous to either membership or attendance (active participants make up an average of 54.6% of professing membership in responding United Methodist Churches, attendance on average makes up 44.7% of membership) it is a useful measure for understanding congregational life and for making comparisons between denominations and faith traditions.

Figure 2.1 shows the numbers of active participants in responding churches by jurisdiction. As you will note, churches in the Western and South Central Jurisdictions tend to be slightly larger, churches in the other jurisdictions tended to be slightly smaller.

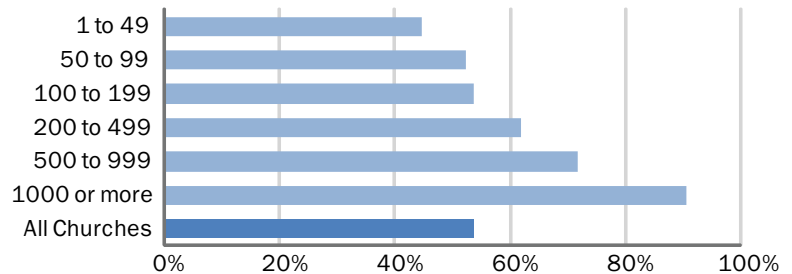
Grouped by the number of reported active participants, Figure 2.2 shows the percentage of professing membership that active participants make up in different sizes of church. The graph demonstrates a clear pattern of higher level of active participants as a percentage of membership in larger churches, than in smaller ones. Further research is required to better understand the dynamics behind this pattern as it directly contradicts the pattern of average attendance as a percentage of professing membership reported by churches in their statistics.

Sample churches follow the attendance trend of the church at large. Churches experienced a slight surge in attendance in 2001 followed by a gradually decline to pre-2000 levels.

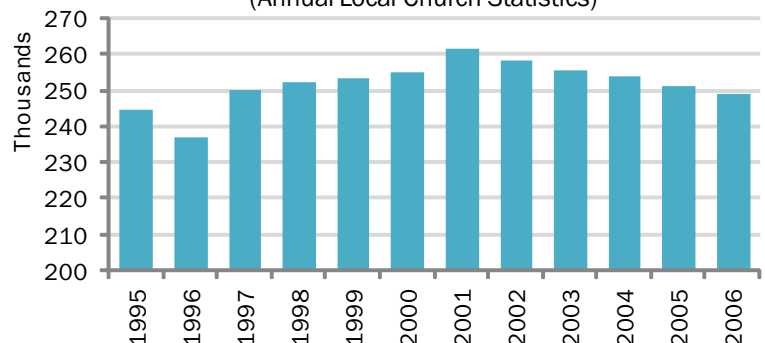
**Figure 2.1**  
Church Size (by Active Participants) by Jurisdiction



**Figure 2.2**  
Median Congregational Active Participation as a Percentage of Membership by Church Size



**Figure 2.3**  
Average Weekly Worship Attendance, 1995-2006  
(Annual Local Church Statistics)



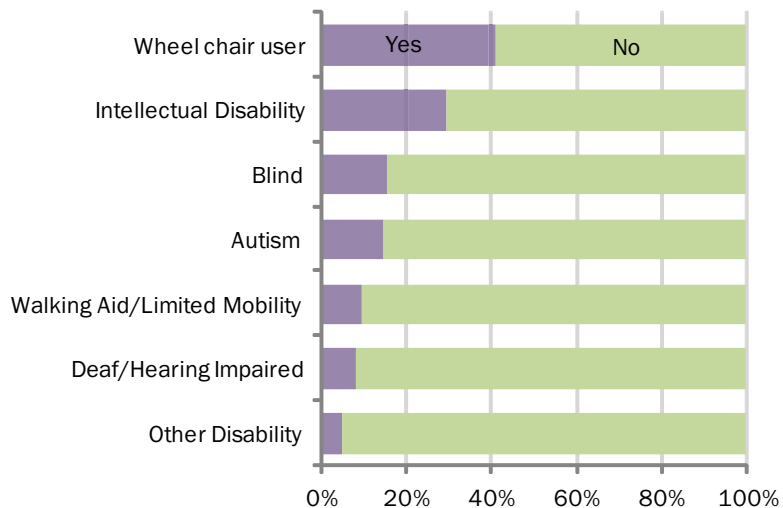
# A Better Look at the People in the Pew

The survey included a significant amount of demographic information providing a rich and detailed look at active participants, including disabling conditions, age, and race/ethnicity. Many congregations report age-related disabilities such as hearing loss and reduced mobility. In the past five years, over 85% of congregations have made accessibility modifications to their facilities. About 12% of congregations report programming for children and/or adults with physical or intellectual disabilities and nearly 4% have a deaf ministry or interpreter for the deaf.

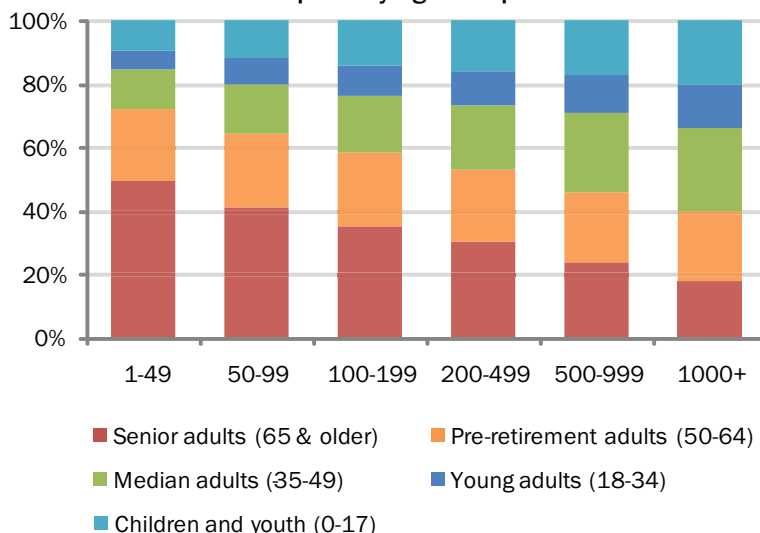
The survey provides critically-needed data on the relative age of the United Methodist Church in the United States. This is the first such data collected at the denominational level in nearly a decade. Much as expected, Figure 3.2 shows that larger churches are significantly younger than smaller churches. The greatest difference can be seen among “Median Adults” (ages 35-49). With over a quarter of active participants reported as 65 or older, and half of active participants the United Methodist Church over age 50, Figure 3.3 demonstrates, the average United Methodist is significantly older than the average United States resident aged 36.6 years (US Census 2007 Population Estimates).

The racial/ethnic breakdowns shown in Figure 3.4 generally reflect the racial/ethnic membership data reported in the local church statistics. However, the number of African American participants was notably lower. Return information will be reviewed to develop strategies to ensure future surveys are more reflective of United Methodist membership.

**Figure 3.1**  
Percentage of Churches Reporting Persons with Readily Apparent Disabilities



**Figure 3.2**  
Active Participants by Age Group and Church Size

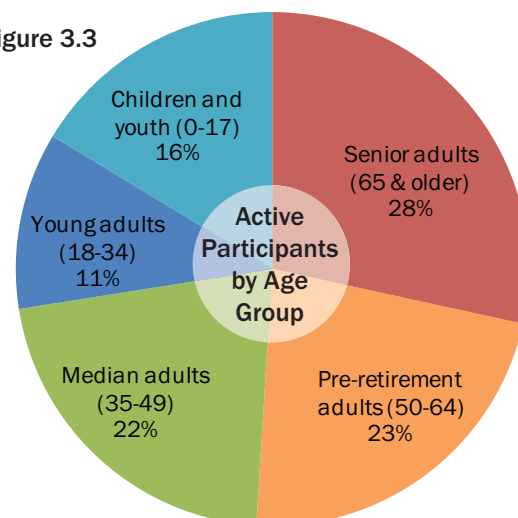


**Figure 3.4**

Race/Ethnicity	Survey Sample	UMC Membership	US Population*
Asian	1.4%	1.1%	4.3%
African American/Black	3.2%	5.8%	12.3%
Hispanic/Latino(a)	1.7%	0.8%	14.9%
Native American	0.5%	0.3%	0.8%
Pacific Islander	0.2%	0.2%	0.1%
White (non-Hispanic)	90.6%	91.4%	66.0%
Multi-Racial	2.4%	0.4%	1.6%

\*US Census 2007 Population Estimates

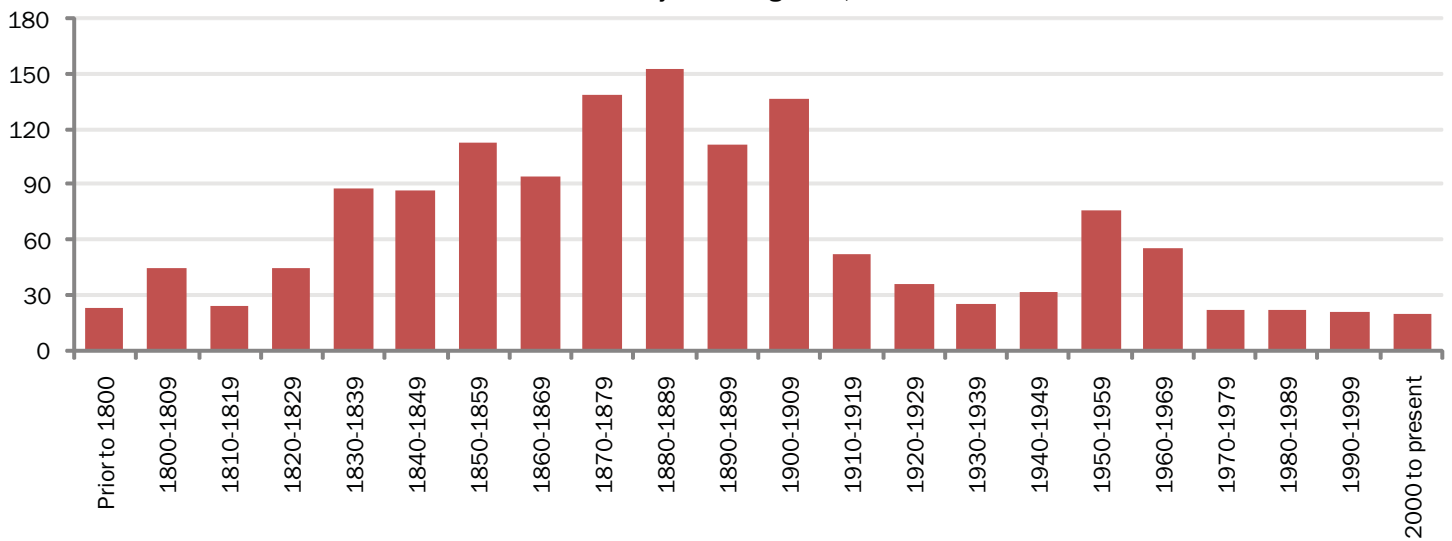
**Figure 3.3**



# A History of New Church Starts

The majority of sample churches (Figure 4.1) were founded in the period from the 1830's through the beginning of the twentieth century. The 1950's and 1960's also provided surge in church starts followed by a plateau in recent decades. As the denomination has struggled with the reality of declining membership for the past century, the most recently founded sample churches have experienced more growth than decline. Nearly 60% of churches founded during the 1980's have experienced an increase in membership in the past five years compared to 39% of all sample churches and 36% of all United Methodist churches (Figure 4.2).

**Figure 4.1**  
Number of Churches by Founding Year, Pre-1800 to Present



**Figure 4.2**  
Percentage of Churches with Membership Growth/Decline by Founding Year

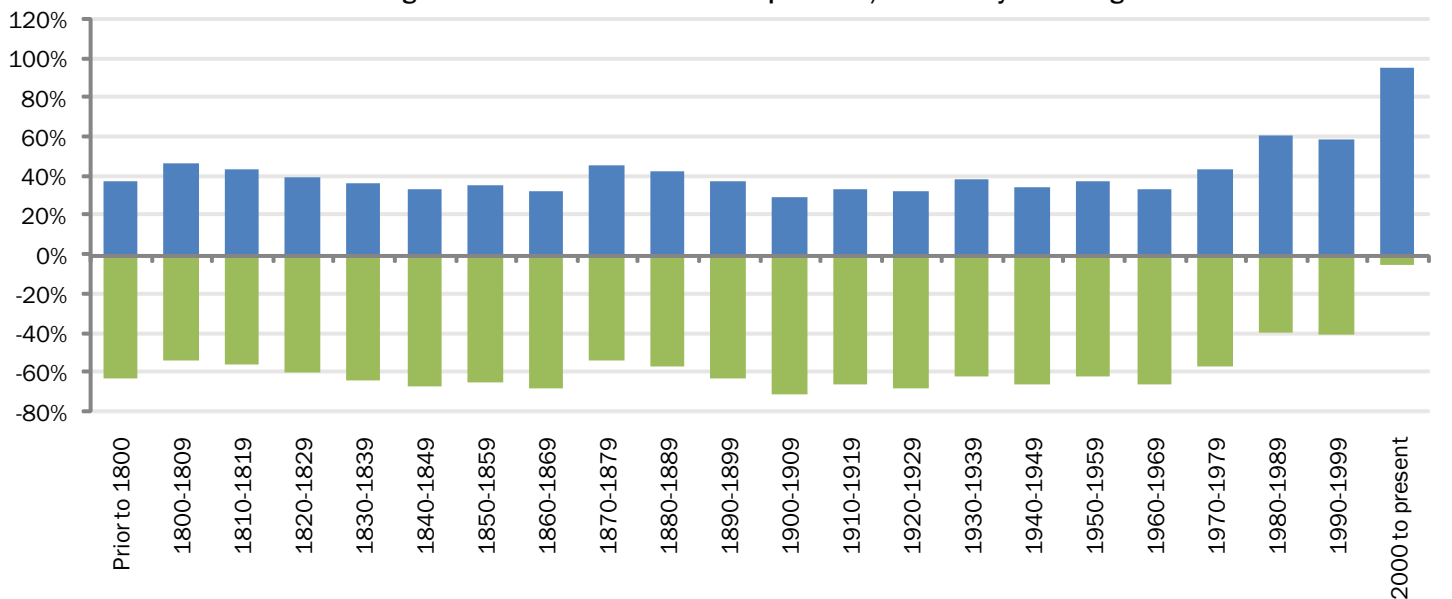


Figure 5.1

How often are the following a part of your congregation's regular weekend worship services?

	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always
Baptisms	3.3%	43.6%	44.0%	7.5%	1.6%
Reception of new members	2.7%	39.9%	42.7%	9.8%	4.9%
Kneeling by the congregation	30.6%	27.0%	27.5%	10.7%	4.3%
Drums or other percussion instruments	48.0%	19.6%	10.5%	8.4%	13.6%
Reading or performing by children or youth	8.1%	26.6%	42.6%	17.3%	5.4%
Visual projection equipment	36.9%	16.2%	8.8%	6.8%	31.3%
Choir	19.4%	7.5%	8.1%	20.9%	44.1%
Prayer for healing	1.3%	9.2%	23.4%	27.0%	39.1%
Eucharist, Communion, or Lord's Supper	0.3%	1.1%	29.9%	60.2%	8.5%
A printed order of service or worship bulletin	2.2%	0.8%	1.0%	3.2%	92.7%

## Worship Demonstrates Unity and Diversity

The survey provides information on worship and activities held in local churches. The chart below shows the percentage of churches offering regularly-held services for each day/time. While many churches offer Sunday morning alternatives, the United Methodist Church continues to be primarily a Sunday-worshipping church.

Day/Time	% Churches
Weekday (Monday-Thursday)	13.8%
Friday	1.2%
Saturday	4.0%
Sunday AM	99.0%
Sunday PM	11.0%

There are areas of significant diversity and unanimity in United Methodist congregational worship. Figure 5.1 indicates the prevalence of various practices in worship across the denomination. The most common responses for each practice are highlighted in red. As you can see, while about as many churches always use visual projection equipment as never use it, nearly every church reported celebrating Communion at least sometimes.

Nearly 4% of churches offer a non-English weekly worship service. While Spanish and Korean are the most widely offered, participating churches also offer services in Akan, Chinese, Creole, Hmong, Ilocano, Karen, Malayalam, Portuguese, Samoan, Tagalog, and Tongan.

Over 27% of sample congregations have added a new worship service in the past 5 years (Figure 5.2). Nearly 66% of churches reporting recently added worship services said that they were growing (Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.2  
During the past 5 years, have you added one or more regularly-held worship services?

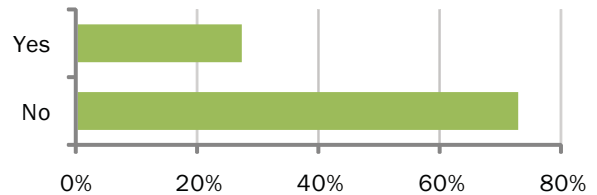
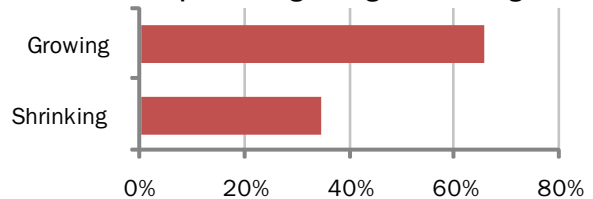


Figure 5.3  
Is attendance at your most recently added worship service growing or shrinking?



# Worship Styles, Continued

Based upon statistical information matched up to the survey returns, churches who added a new service in the past five years were more likely to show an overall increase in attendance increase during the same time period (Figure 6.1). Additional research is needed to better understand the relationship between new services and changes in worship attendance.

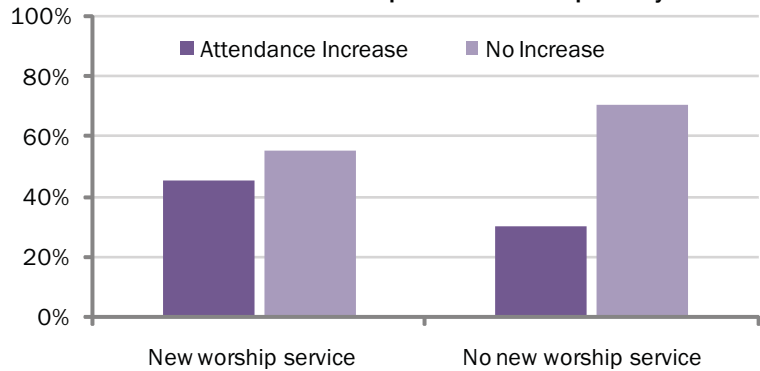
Generally speaking, congregations did not report significant changes in worship over the last five years (Figure 6.2).

Survey responses do indicate, however, that new worship services tend to be different in style than larger, more established services. Congregations were asked to identify how well various worship style characteristics described both their largest regular weekend service and their most recently added service, if any. Figure 6.3 shows the number of congregations that responded “quite well” or “very well” to the list of characteristics shown at the left edge of the graph. While the largest weekend services were more often identified as traditional, recently added services were more likely to be labeled contemporary.

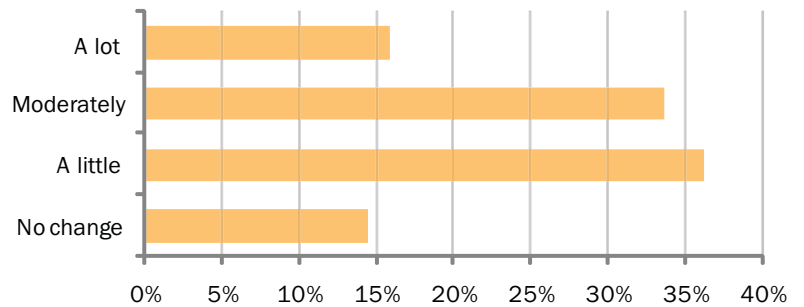
Although churches where the largest regular service was described as contemporary were more likely to report congregational growth, other factors such as the age of active participants, vitality of evangelistic efforts and other characteristics likely play a significant role in that growth.

Whether a church holds contemporary or traditional worship services, most respondents report that their worship is joyful, thought-provoking, welcoming to newcomers, and filled with a sense of God’s presence.

**Figure 6.1**  
Change in attendance in churches that did and did not establish a new worship service in the past 5 years



**Figure 6.2**  
During the past 5 years, has your congregation changed the format or style of one or more weekend worship services?



**Figure 6.3**  
How well do the following describe your congregation’s largest regular weekend and your most recently added worship services? (“Quite Well” and “Very Well”)

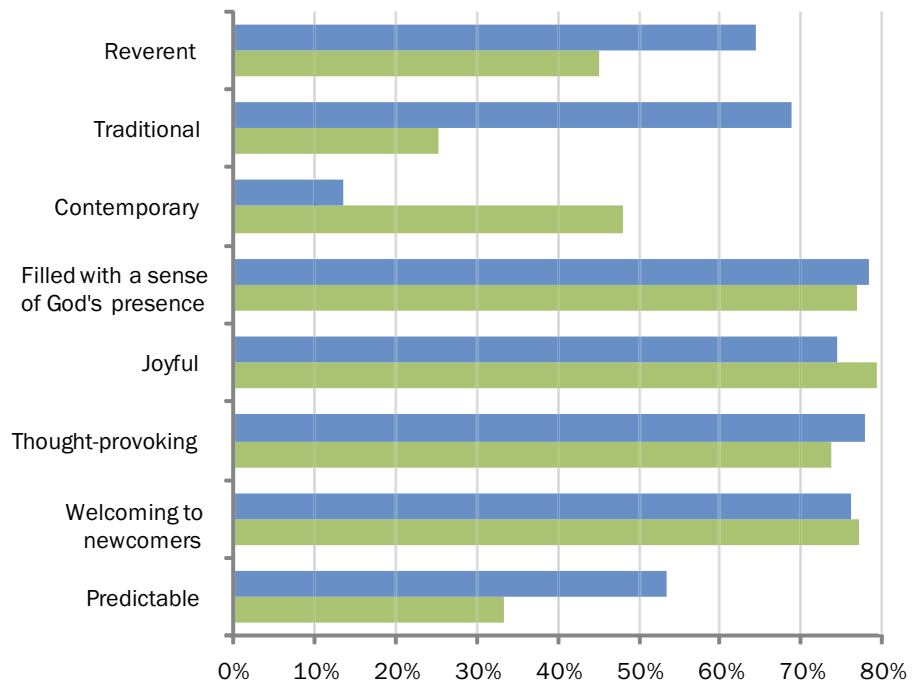
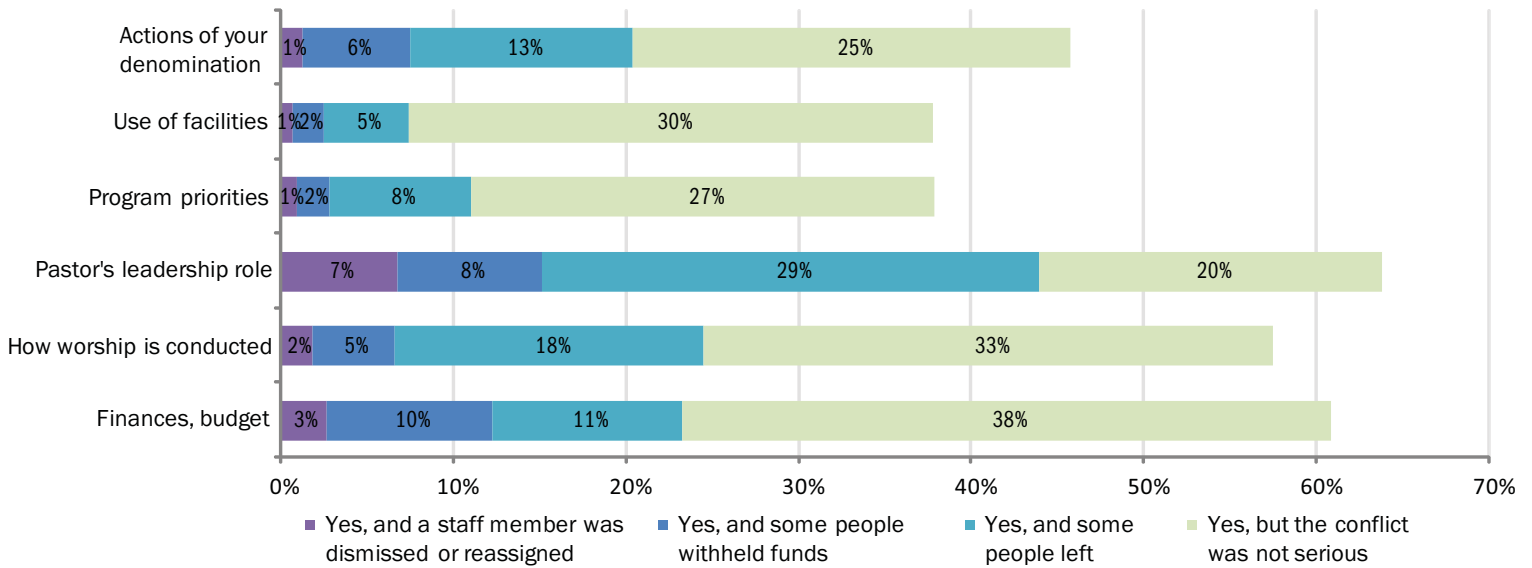


Figure 7.1

During the past 5 years, has your congregation experienced any conflict or disagreement in the following areas?



## Conflict is a Part of Congregational Life

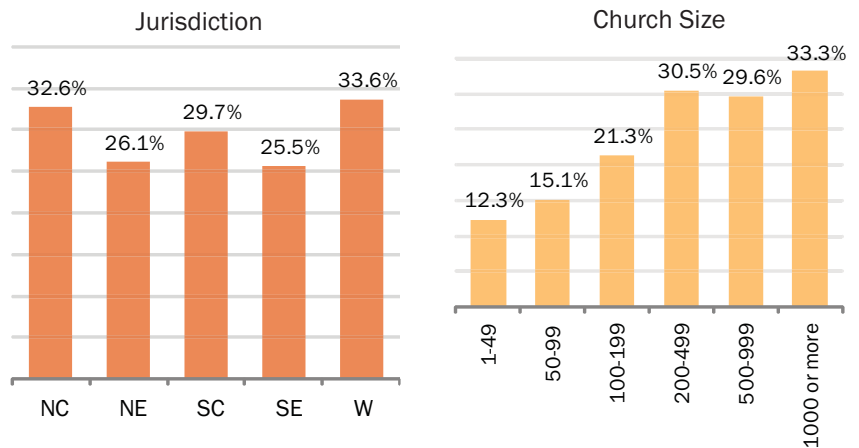
Participating congregations were asked to identify sources of conflict within the local church along with the consequences, if any, of the conflict. Figure 7.1 illustrates which potential subjects of conflict and reactions were most prevalent. The pastor's leadership role stands out as both the most common source of conflict and the source of conflict that most often led to a serious reaction by the congregation (i.e. a staff member was dismissed or reassigned, people withheld funds, or people left the congregation). While the conduct of worship and finances/budget were also prevalent, churches were less likely to identify those as a source of serious conflict.

The graphs in Figure 7.2 show jurisdictional and congregation size differences in the prevalence of serious conflict due to pastoral leadership or how worship is conducted. The Northeastern and Southeastern jurisdictions experienced less conflict for both topics than other jurisdictions. The larger the congregation, the more likely pastor's leadership role was identified as a serious conflict. Although worship-based conflict followed a similar jurisdictional pattern as that seen for pastor-based conflict, serious disagreements over worship style were more common in mid-sized churches.

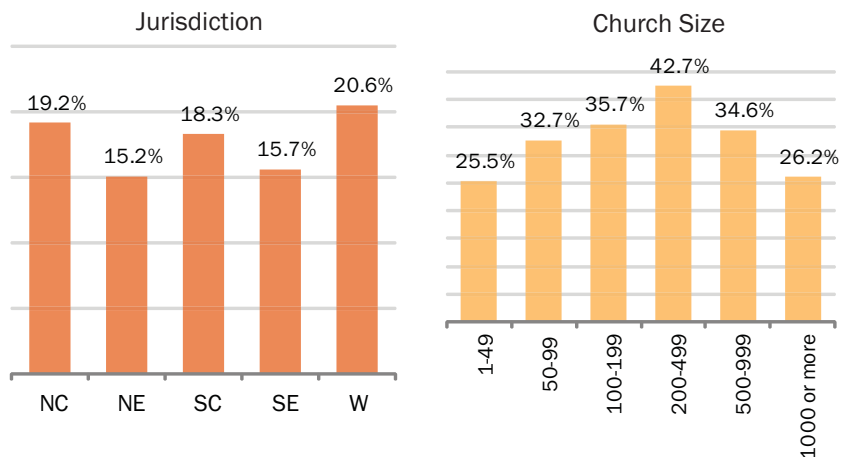
### Differences in Conflict

Figure 7.2

Pastor's Leadership Role



How Worship is Conducted





# Recruiting New People

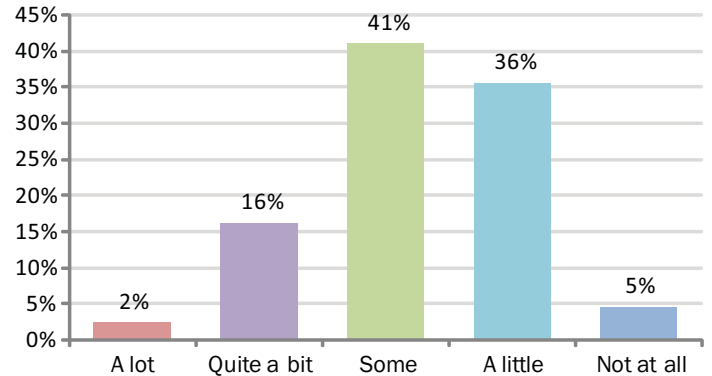
Congregations may be successful in growing membership by both recruiting new people and retaining existing membership.

While the majority of sample churches indicate that members are involved in at least some recruitment activities, very few churches indicate that they spend a lot of time recruiting new people (Figure 8.1).

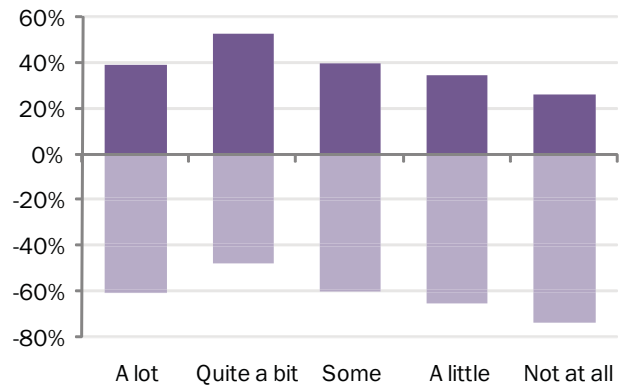
Figure 8.2 illustrates the percentage of churches with growing/declining membership (as reported in the local church statistics over a five year period) by degree of recruitment involvement. Nearly 53% of churches that spend “quite a bit” of time on recruitment have grown in the past five years compared to 36% of all United Methodist churches. Churches who responded “a lot” or “some” outperformed the church average with nearly 40% of churches growing. Somewhat surprising, churches that reported spending “a lot” of time on new members recruitment were not as successful in growing over the five year period as did churches reporting “quite a bit”. The small number of churches reporting “a lot” significantly contributes to the volatility of data in this category, however, further research is necessary to better understand this pattern.

Figure 8.3 illustrates how likely congregations are to investigate why an active member has stopped attending. About half of churches indicated that they would definitely contact the person.

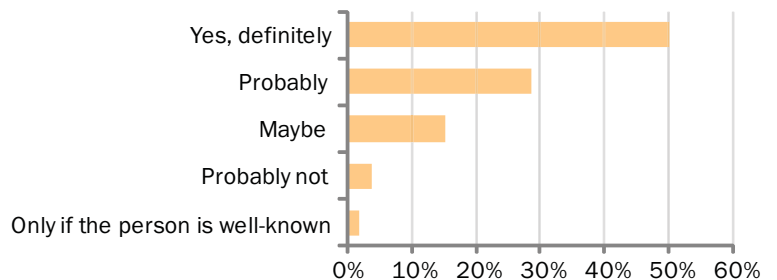
**Figure 8.1**  
To what extent are your members involved in recruiting new people?



**Figure 8.2**  
Percentage of Church with Membership Growth/Decline by Recruitment Involvement



**Figure 8.3**  
If an active member of your congregation stopped attending, would that person be contacted to find out why?



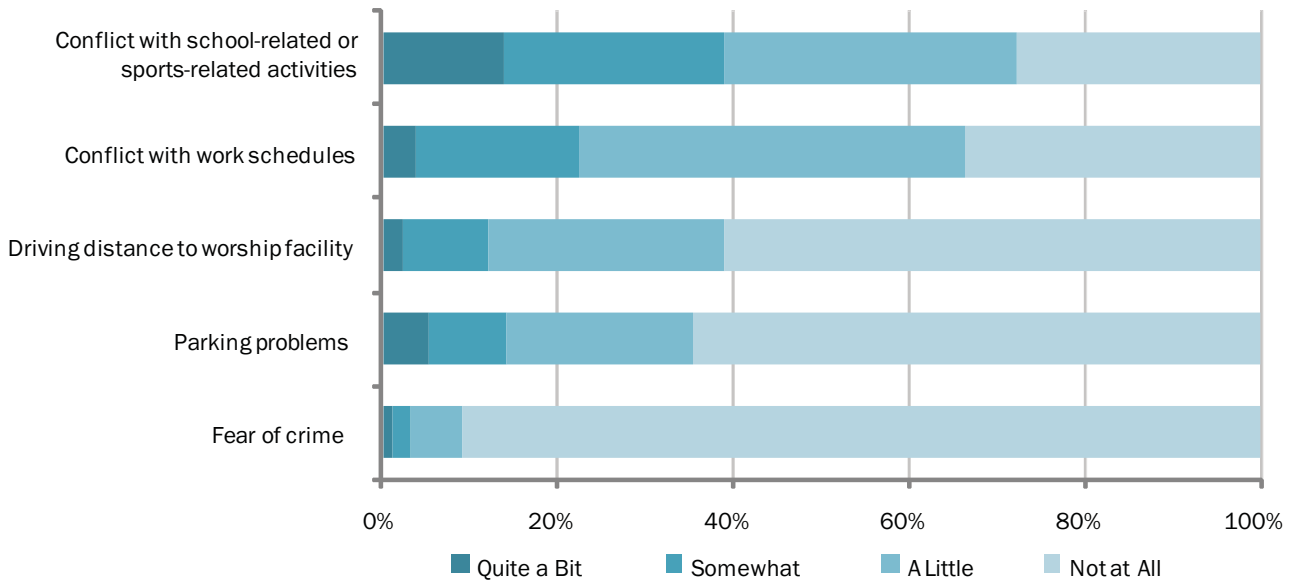
# The Challenges to Congregational Growth

The busy American lifestyle may pose challenges for the full participation of existing and potential members in congregational life. In many cases, school, sports and work schedules conflict with church activities (Figure 9.1). Convenience factors may also limit church participation such as the distance a person must drive to a church facility or difficulty parking once there.

Social and cultural factors may also inhibit growth for some congregations. Figure 9.2 illustrates the impact of

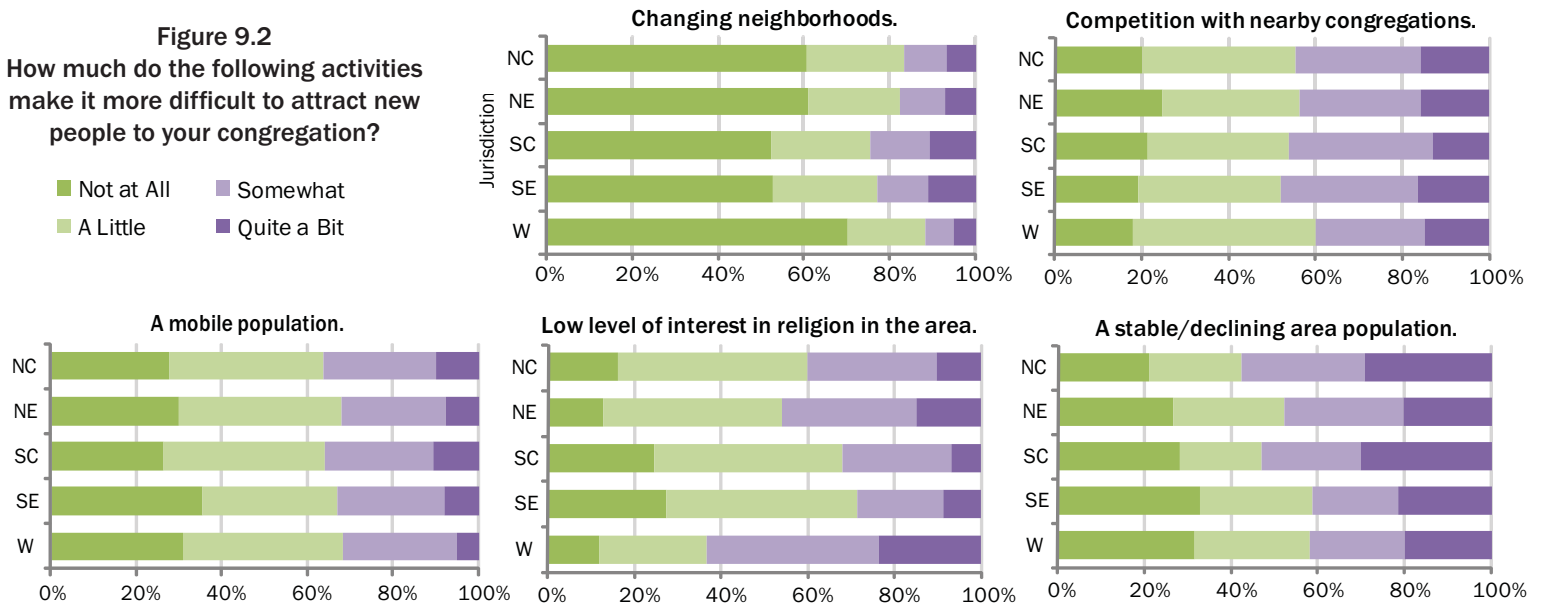
the social landscape on the ability of congregations to attract new people. Congregations were asked to indicate the degree to which these factors affect their membership recruitment efforts. As indicated in previous research on religion in the United States, lower levels of interest in religion in the West poses hardship for recruitment efforts in that region. Declining populations in the Midwest pose additional difficulties for congregations in both the South Central and North Central jurisdictions.

**Figure 9.1**  
How much do the following make it more difficult for people to participate regularly in your congregation?



**Figure 9.2**  
How much do the following activities make it more difficult to attract new people to your congregation?

Legend for Figure 9.2:  
■ Not at All  
■ A Little  
■ Somewhat  
■ Quite a Bit



# Church Activities and Opportunities for Youth

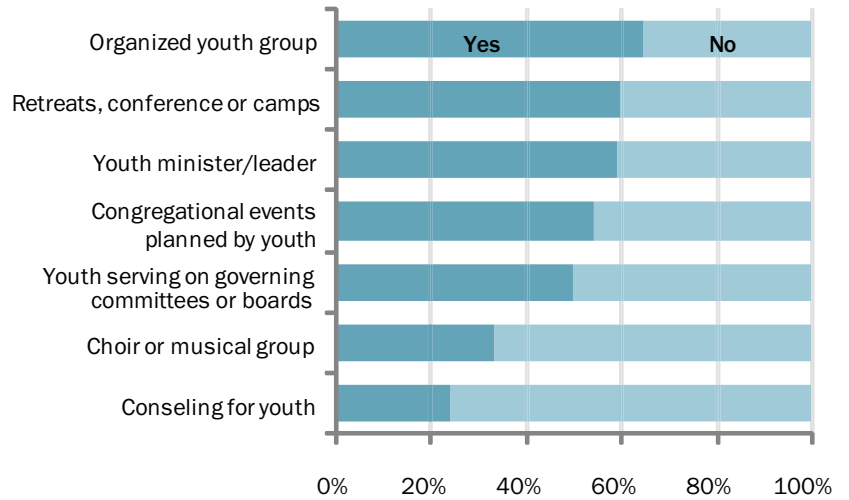
As the Church looks at an aging membership population, attention has been drawn to activities for youth and young adults. Figure 10.1 illustrates activities offered for youth. While fewer than half of churches offer activities for young, single adults (Figure 10.1), over 60% have organized youth groups.

United Methodist churches provide members with a wide array of programs and activities. Figure 10.2 shows how much emphasis local churches place on programs ranging from Sunday school and Bible study to community service and support groups. Music programs and community service were the activities most often identified as a “specialty” of the congregation. Parenting/marriage and sports activities were the least prevalent local church programs.

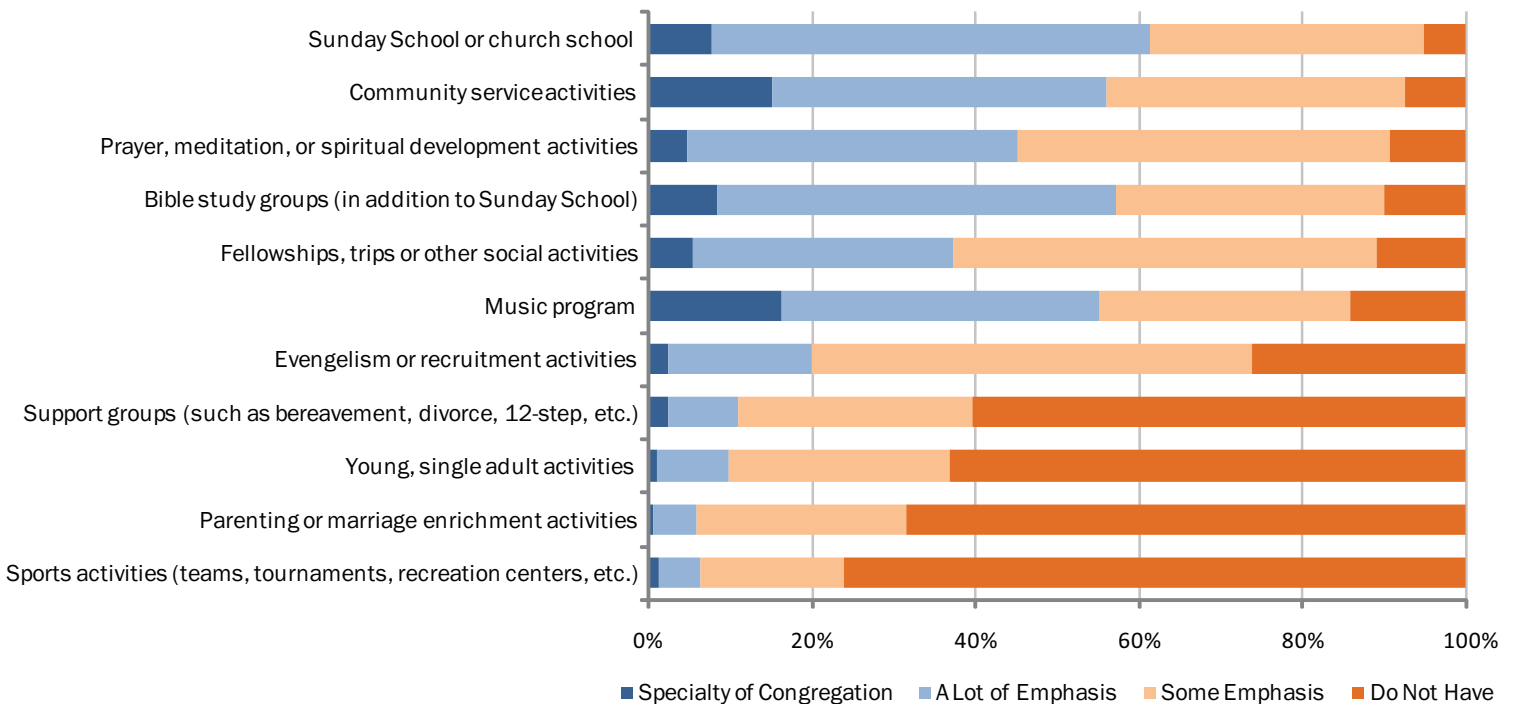
\* \* \*

In the coming months, more data from the Faith Communities Today project will be available and will allow us to compare United Methodists to other faith traditions. We want the resources developed from this data to be useful for the whole church. If you have questions, critiques, or great ideas on the sorts of resources you would like to see, please contact us at [research@gcfa.org](mailto:research@gcfa.org).

**Figure 10.1**  
Does your congregation have the following activities for youth?



**Figure 10.2**  
During the past 12 months, did your congregation conduct any of the following programs or activities?



# Survey Methodology

## Partnership with Faith Communities Today

The General Council on Finance and Administration conducted the 2008 Congregational Leadership Survey in conjunction with Faith Communities Today (FACT), an inter-faith research group hosted by Hartford Seminary.

## The Survey Instrument

Survey questions cover topics related to local church worship, leadership, program, and finances along with the basic demographics on membership and pastoral leadership.

While FACT supplied the primary survey instrument, UM general agencies including the General Board of Discipleship, the General Board of Global Ministries and United Methodist Communications provided additional questions tailored to UMC program interests.

## Distribution Methods

The survey was distributed to two groups: an online survey and a paper survey.

Ten thousand (10,000) randomly selected churches received invitations by mail to participate in the online version of the survey. Invitations included login instructions including a six-digit church ID. For tracking purposes, churches were required to enter this ID upon entering the online survey. Two weeks after the initial mailing, a reminder postcard was mailed to all churches who had not yet submitted an online survey.

An additional two hundred (200) randomly selected churches were mailed paper surveys and asked to return via mail. Three weeks after the initial mailing, churches who had not yet returned a completed survey were mailed a reminder postcard. Churches were given the option to take the online survey in lieu of returning a paper copy.

Surveys were completed in October and November 2008.

## Response Rate

Of the 10,200 total surveys distributed, 1,855 were returned. The chart below shows how many surveys were returned for each distribution method.

Surveys	Invited	Responded	Response Rate
Online	10,000	1,783	17.8%
Mail	200	72	36.0%
Combined	10,200	1,855	18.2%

For more information on the survey design, distribution and/or collection processes, please contact the GCFA Office of Research & Analysis at [research@gcfa.org](mailto:research@gcfa.org).

\* \* \*

*A special thanks to all the congregations who spent valuable time participating in this survey. Your efforts are very much appreciated!*

