

The Pandemic Impact on Congregations

What do we know and what still needs to be learned?



EXPLORING THE
PANDEMIC IMPACT
ON CONGREGATIONS

<https://covidreligionresearch.org>

Overview

- A five-year study of Christian Churches across the nation.
- Generous grant from Lilly Endowment.
- Multi-faceted, collaborative, mixed methods study to explore the impact of COVID-19 on congregational life.
- Faith communities tracked across time to understand and document the changing and long-lasting effects of the pandemic on religious community practices and health.
- This is a moving target! It is ever-evolving.

Three primary questions guide our work

- How did congregations respond to the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What does congregational life look like now?
- What are, and will be, the long-term consequences of COVID on congregational life in the US?

Three subsidiary questions of primary importance:

- How is congregational leadership coping with such drastic and sudden changes?
- What unique challenges has the pandemic put upon congregations of color?
- How is technology changing congregational life in the United States?

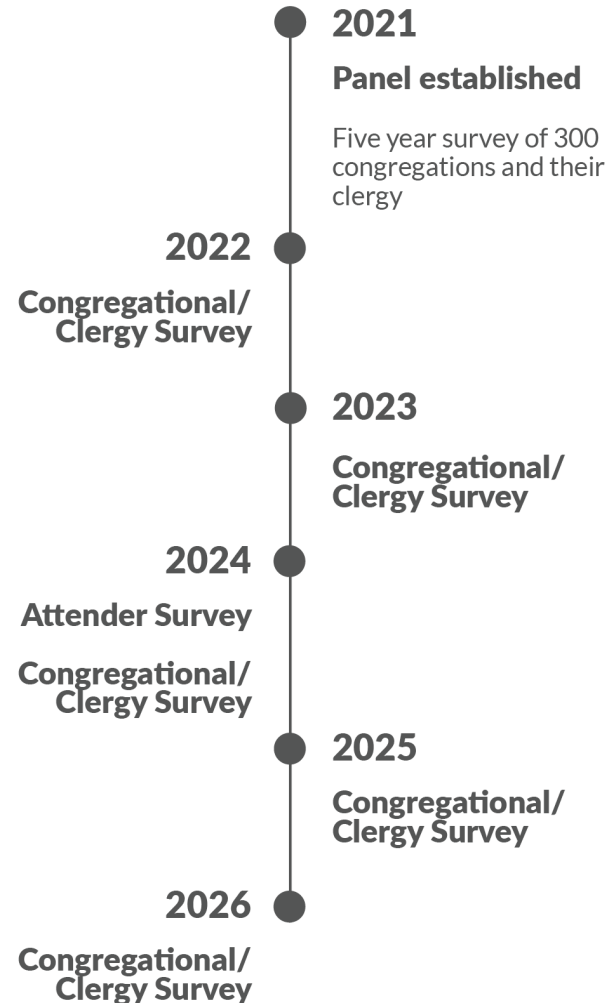
Overall Research Timeline of Components

Ongoing: Coordinate research with collaborating groups

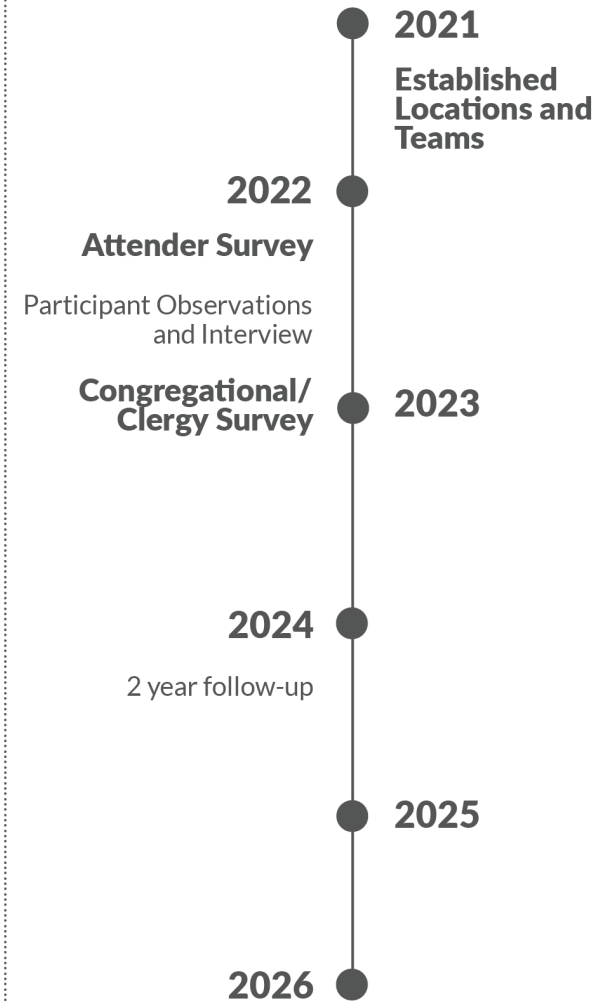
National Survey Efforts with Faith Communities Today Partners



Longitudinal Panel



Regional Qualitative Study



Research efforts so far:

FACT 2020 pre-pandemic – 15,278

Median worship attendance – **65 persons**

EPIC #1 – June-Aug 2021 – 2,074

Median in person worship attendance – 45 persons

Median virtual/remote attendance – 20 persons

EPIC #2 – November 2021 – 820

Median in person worship attendance – 45 persons

Median virtual/remote attendance – 20 persons

EPIC #3 – March 2022 – 615

Median in person worship attendance – 50 persons

Median virtual/remote attendance – 15 persons

Longitudinal Panel – 220 churches at this point

Regional Case Studies – 70 completed so far

EPIC/FACT #4 – March 2023



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FINDINGS

Pre-Omicron

Most churches members who tested positive – nearly 90%

37-40% had ministry staff test positive

28% had 1 or more member die of the virus

2% had staff die of COVID-19

62% of clergy encouraged getting the vaccine

28% had medical personnel address the congregation

8% served as a testing or vaccination site

Conflict over mask-wearing, vaccines, or closures:

27% no conflict

52% mild conflict

15% moderate conflict

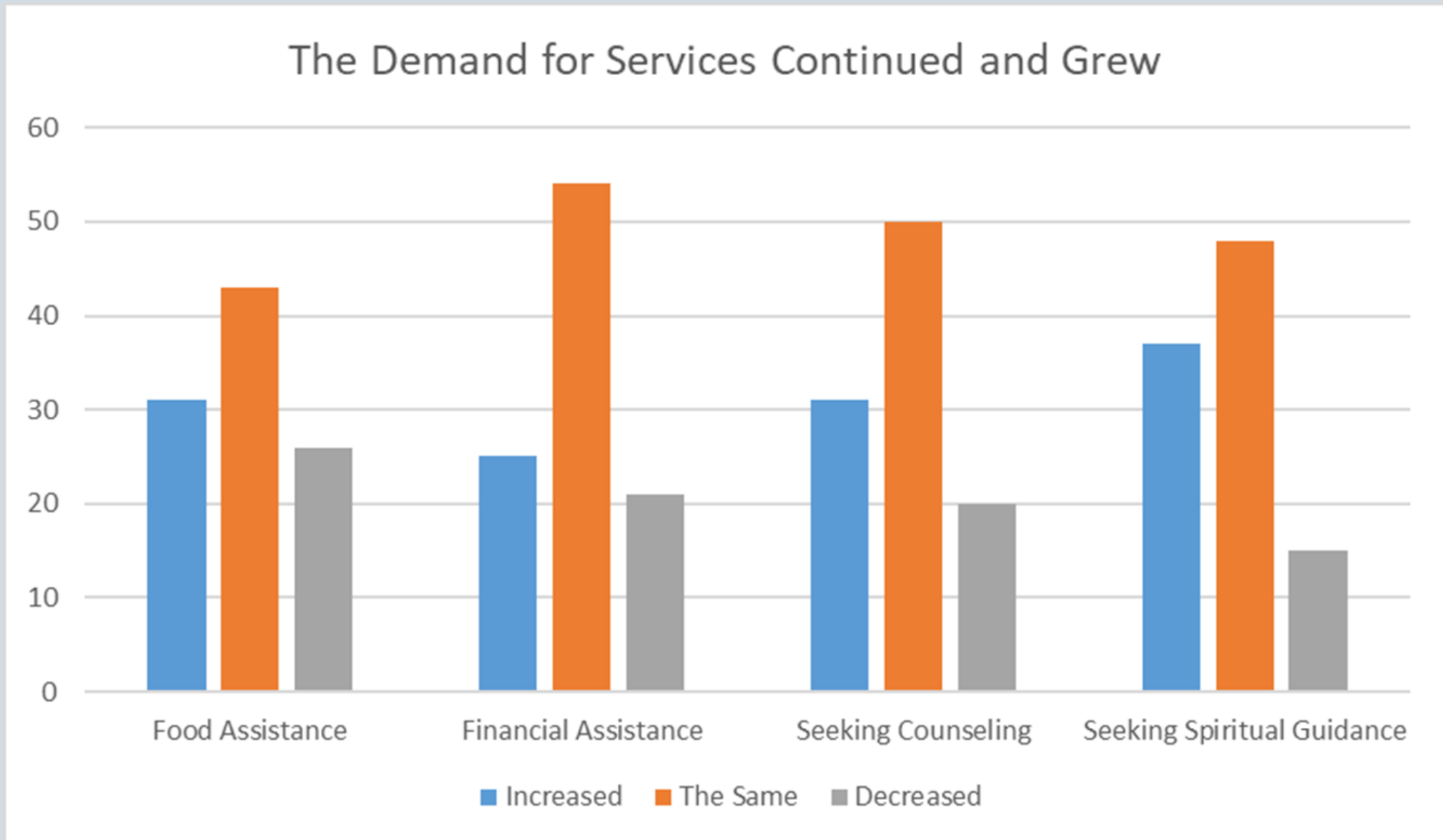
7% severe conflict

In Person Only –15%

Online/Remote Only – 5%

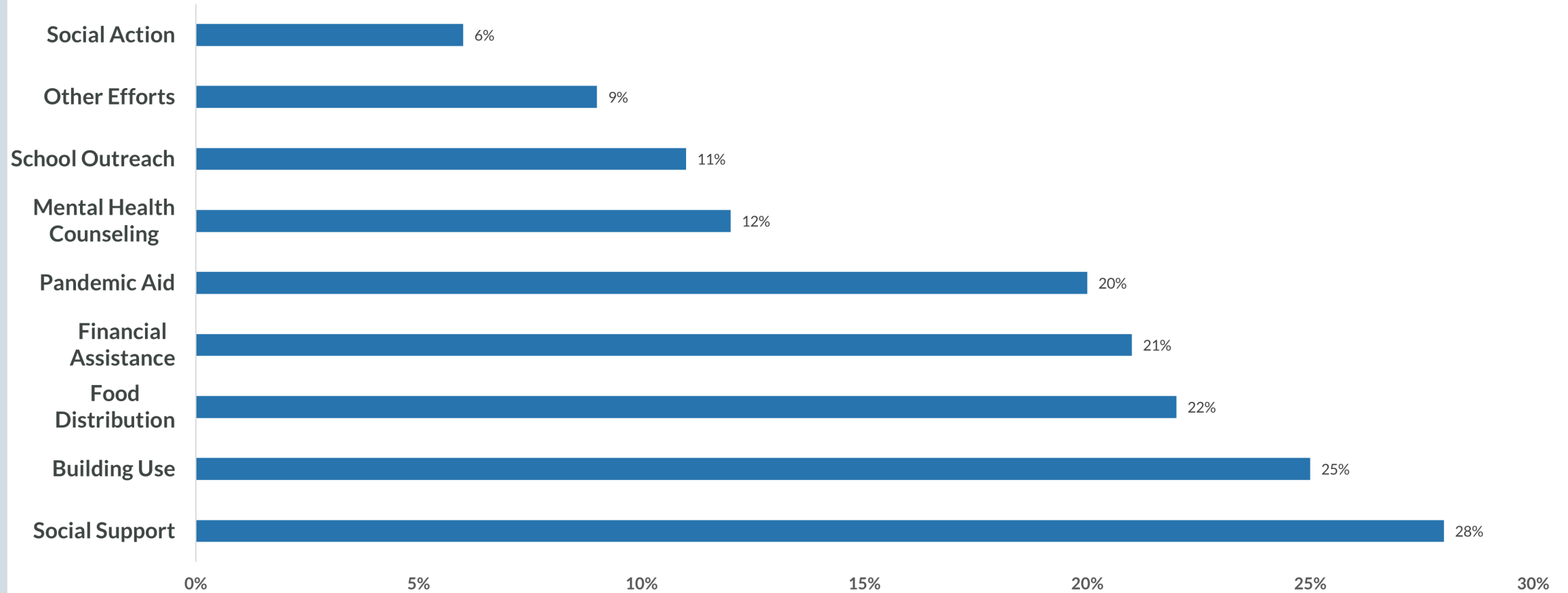
Both in person and online Hybrid – 80%

Increased demand on congregations



Increased response to that need

A Variety of Increased Outreach Efforts
% of churches adding or increasing ministry in these areas

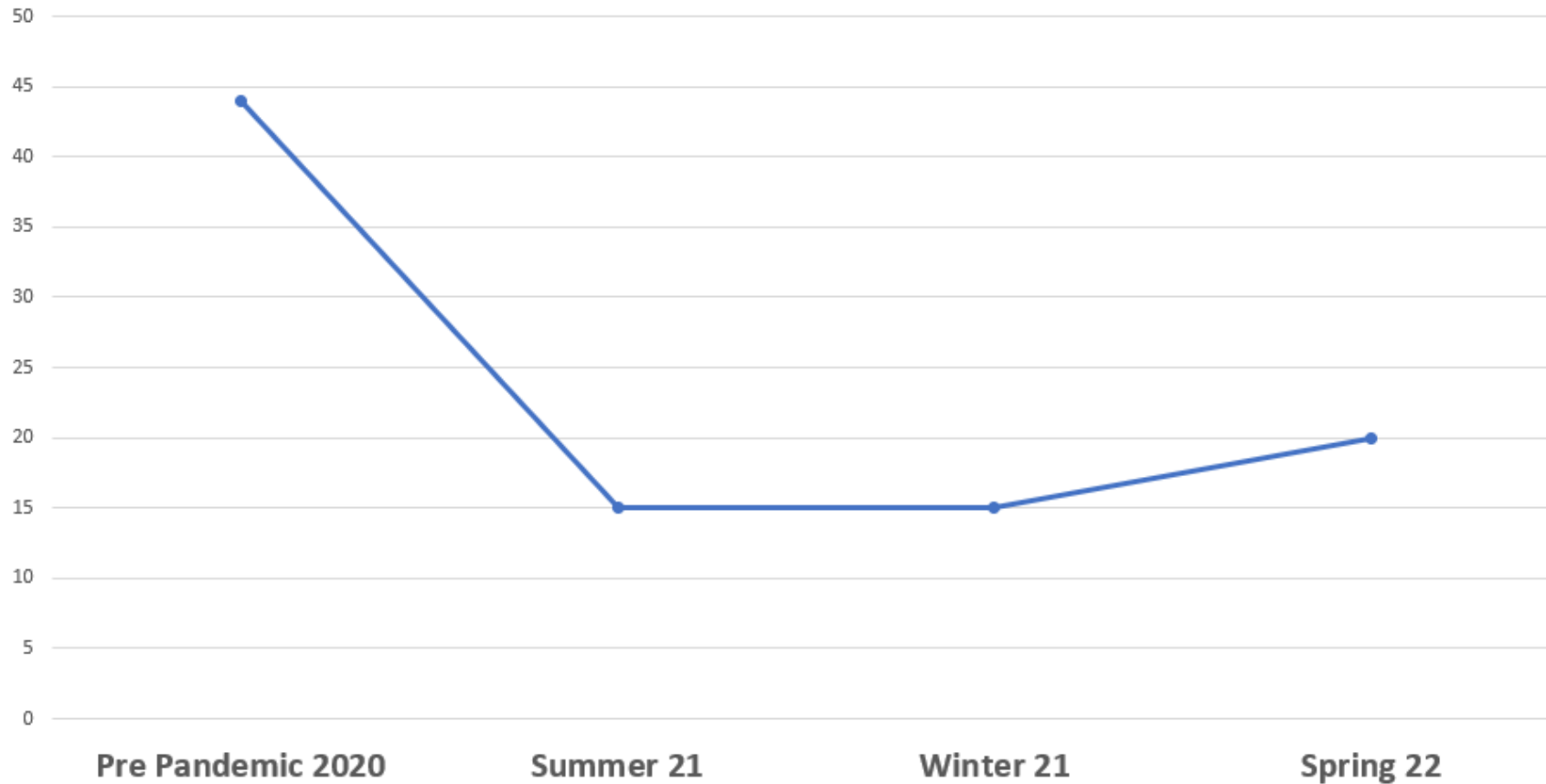


Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

With far fewer volunteers & staff

Dramatic Decline in Volunteers

% of regular adults attenders that volunteer



15% of churches had to make staffing changes – decreasing hours, cutting personnel, or shift from full to part time.

And a mixed financial picture

Median income – 2019 \$120,000 6/21 \$140,000 11/21 \$150,000 3/22 \$120,000

In summer 2021 - 41% saw increased giving & 30% decreased

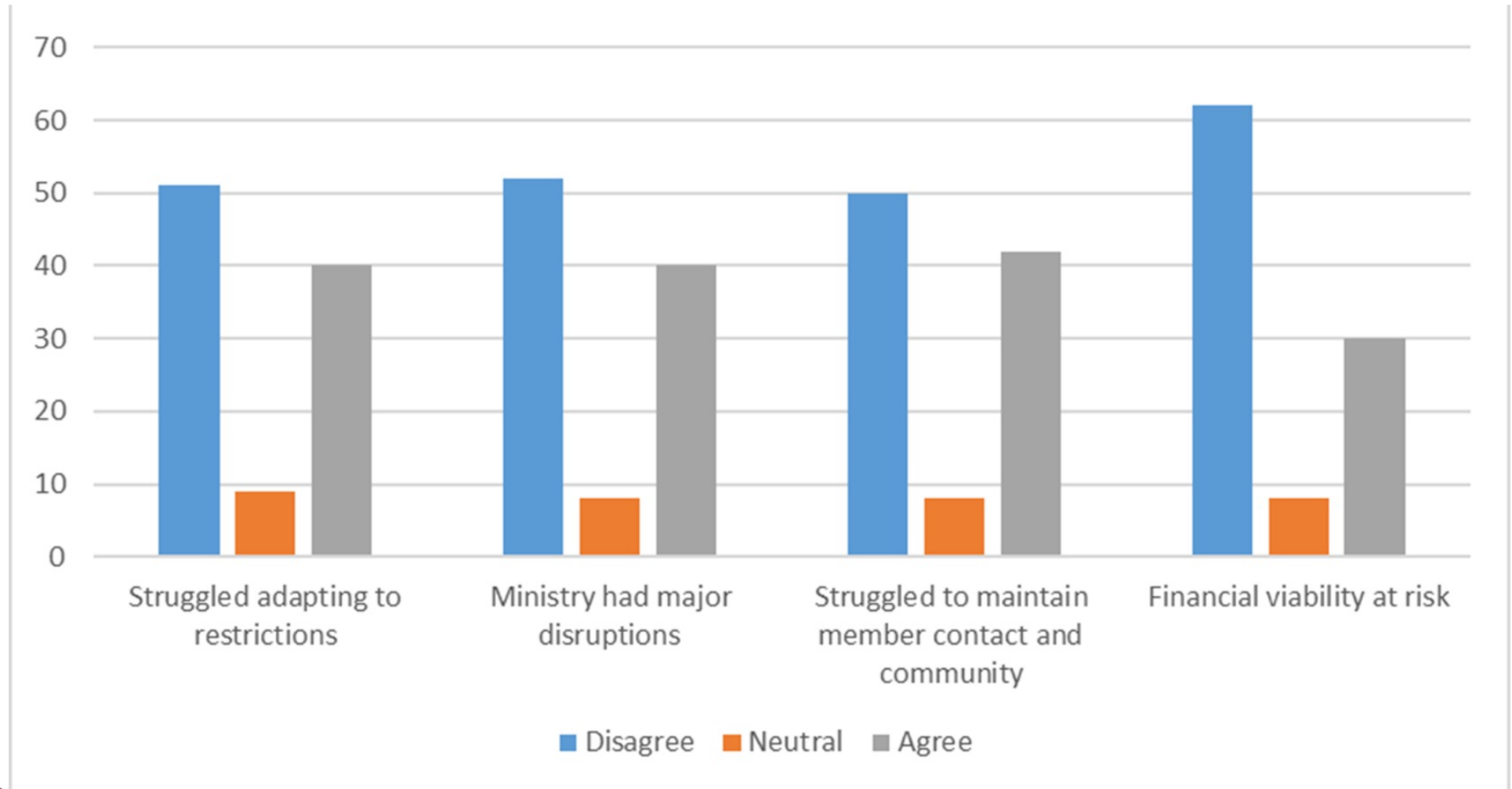
In winter 2021 - 33% had giving increase & 29% decreased

30% agree their financial viability is at risk due to the pandemic

19% agree their church's continued existence is threatened

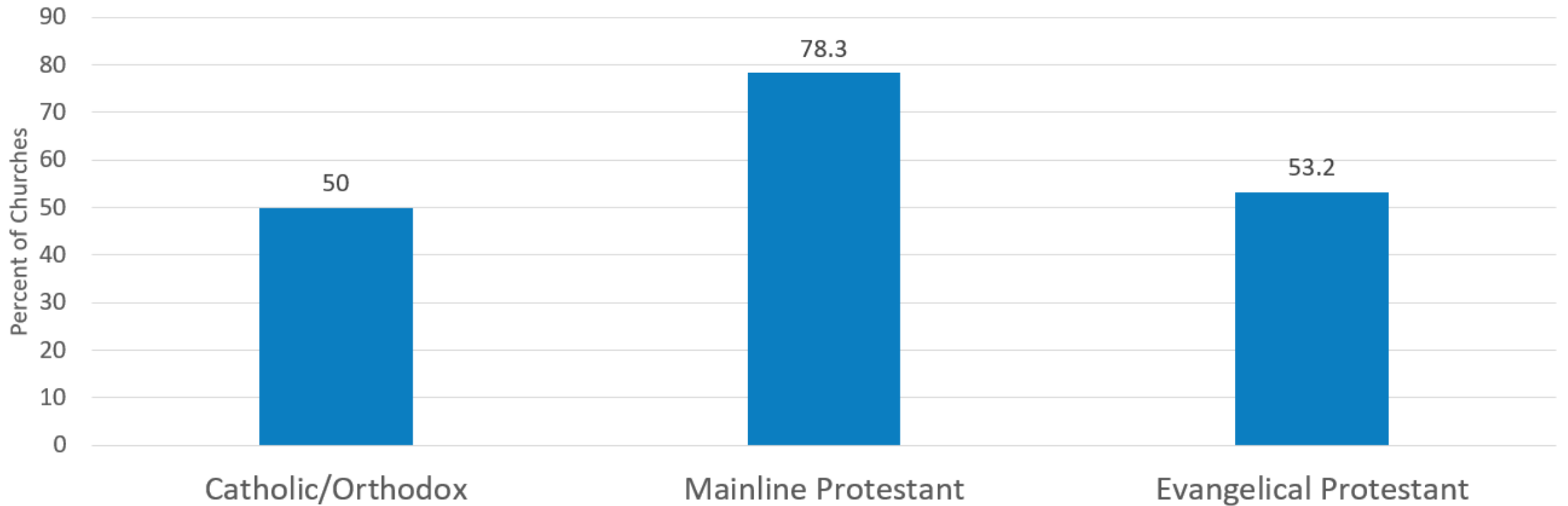
This “challenged” group was previously in trouble, in decline, and in conflict; the pandemic intensified their difficulties.

A tale of differing pandemic perceptions



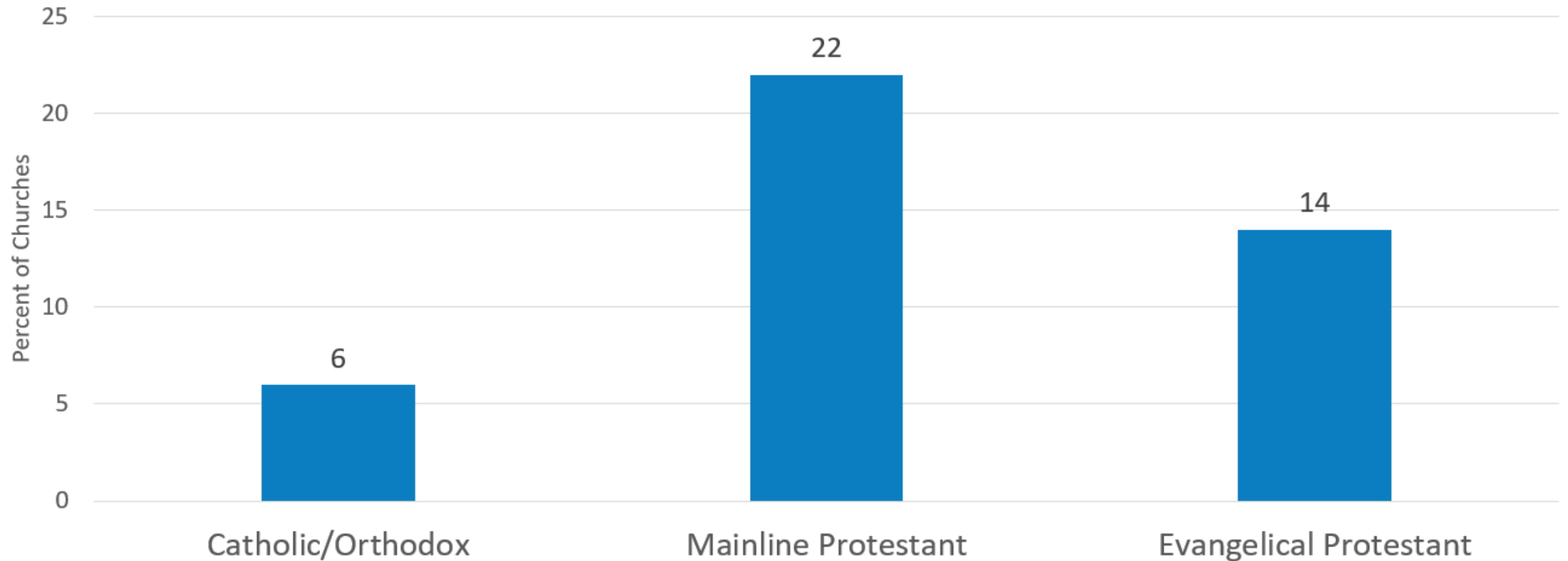
Held different ideas about vaccination

Our religious leader publicly encouraged the congregation to get vaccinated.



Perceived the pandemic as a threat

Because of the pandemic, our continued existence is threatened.



A tale of congregational size

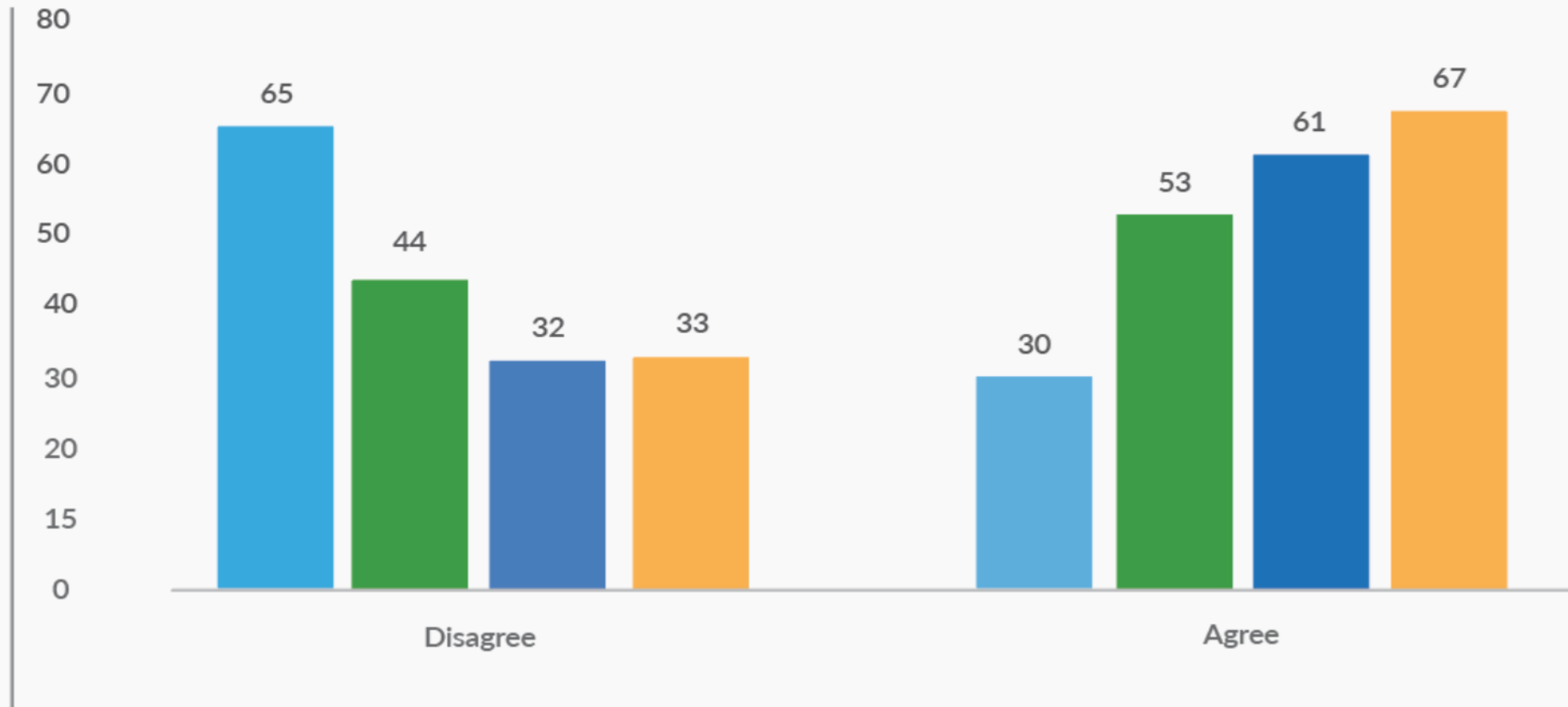
Budget woes

	1-50 attendees	51-100	101-250	250+
Increased	25.6%	32.3%	39.7%	44.4%
Stayed the same	39.3%	41.4%	37.2%	33.3%
Decreased	35.1%	26.3%	23.1%	22.2%

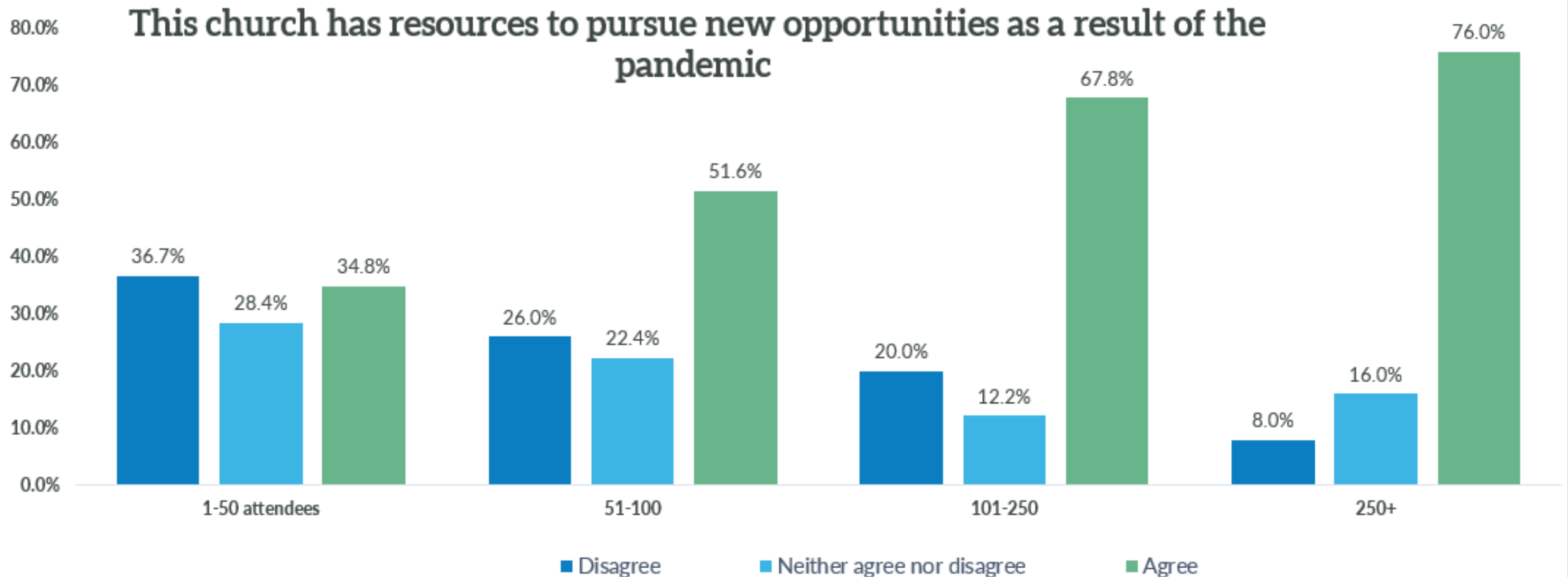
Disruptions in religious education

RE Program Continued Without Major Disruption

1-50 51-100 101-250 Over 250



Capacity for continued outreach



An Optimistic Outlook makes a big difference

“Always look on the bright side of life”

Monty Python, Life of Brian



Another definition of the Gospel –

"the permission and commandment to enter difficulty with hope."

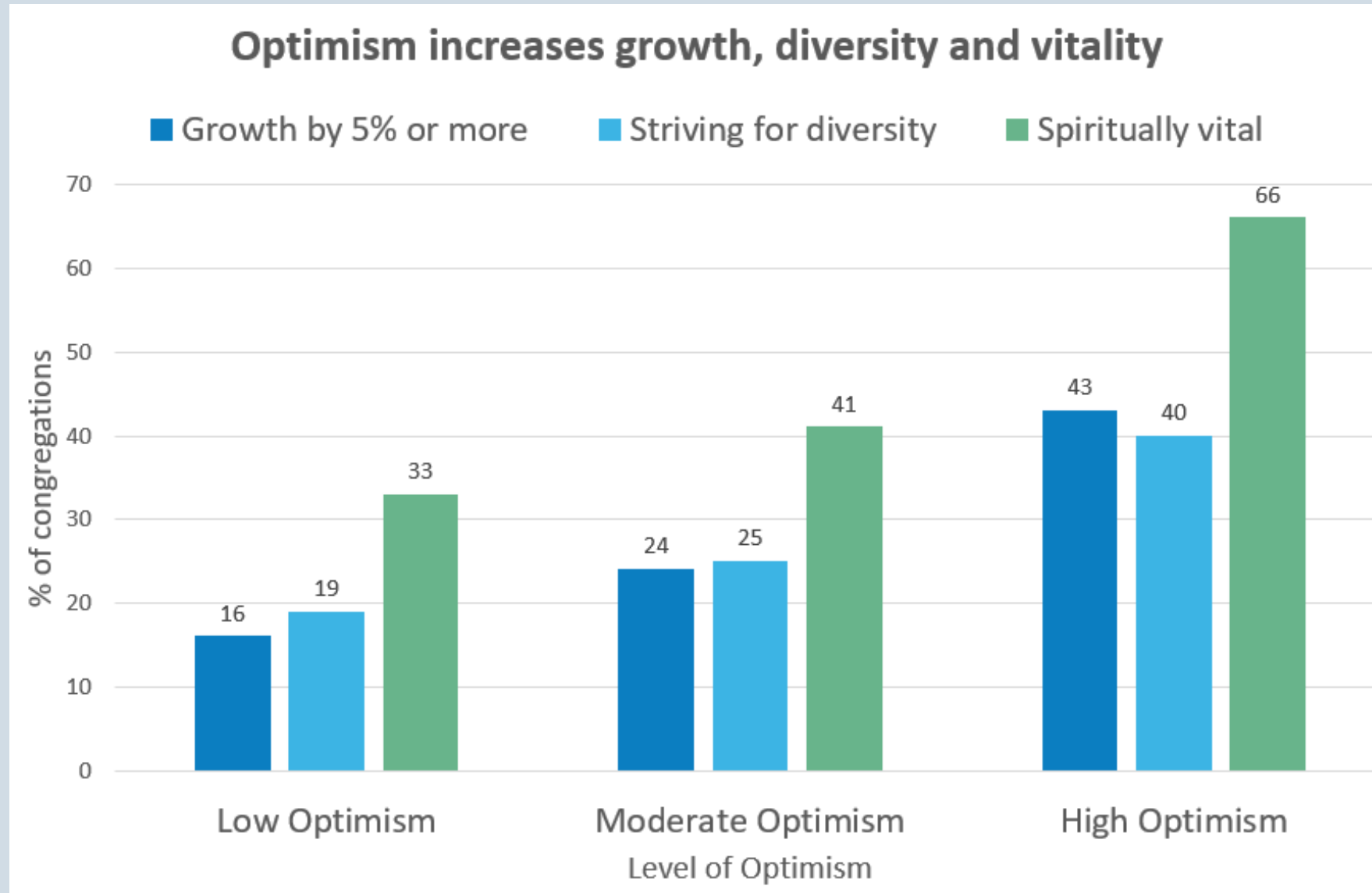
Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall

Which comes first, Flourishing or Optimism?

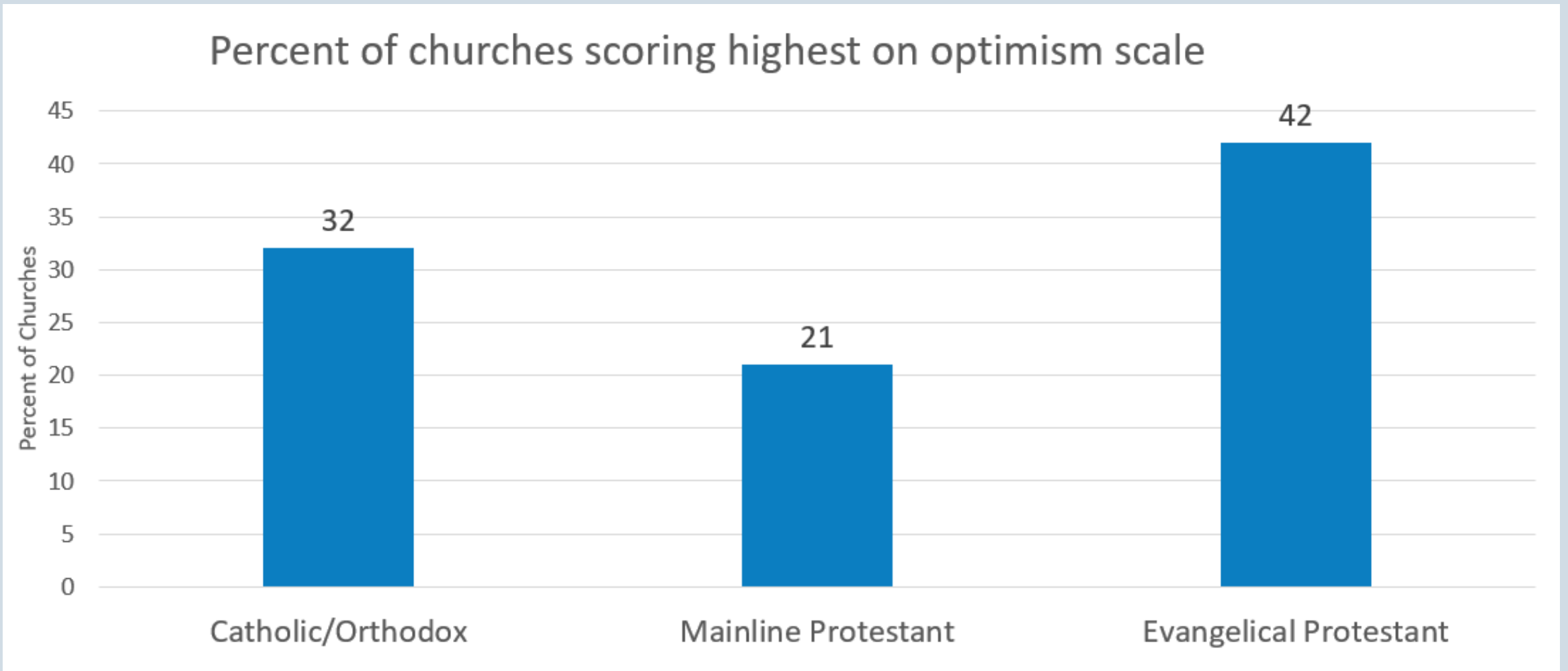
Optimistic Outlook Scale

- **Our congregation is willing to change to meet new challenges.**
- **This church will emerge from the pandemic stronger than before.**
- **As a result of the pandemic, we are thinking in new ways about our future mission and direction.**
- **This church has identified and embraced new opportunities for ministry since the pandemic.**

Congregational Optimism

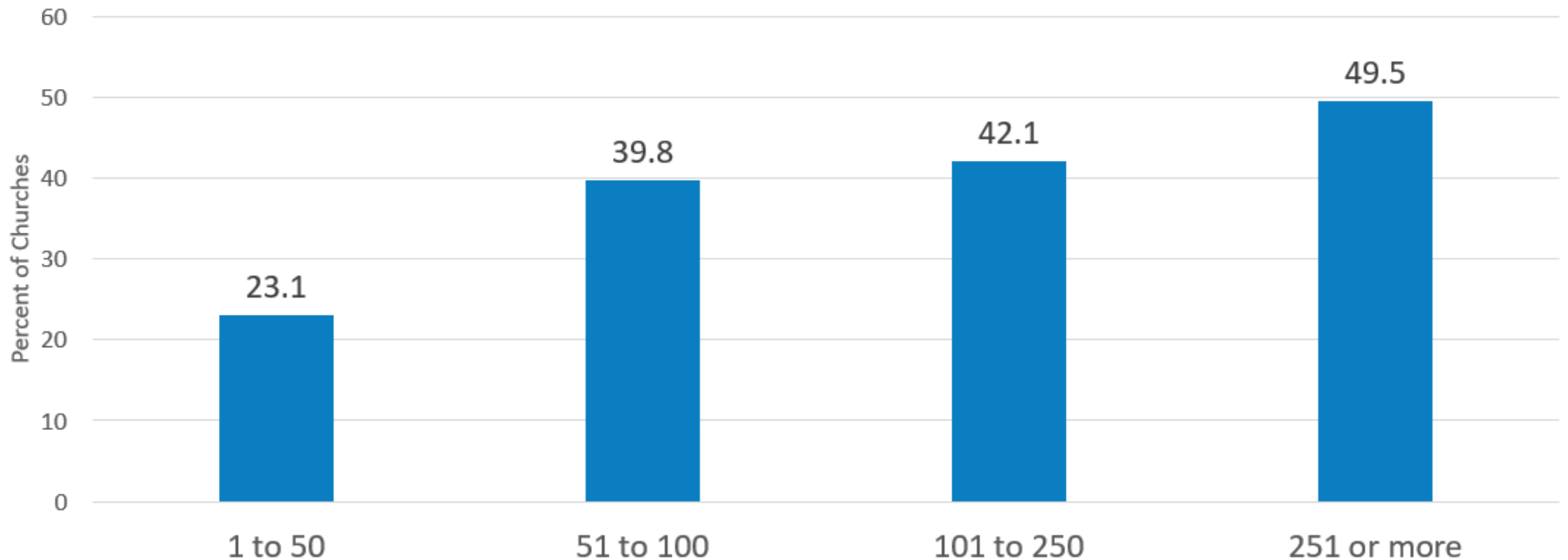


Optimistic outlook by Tradition



Larger equals a more positive outlook

Percent of churches scoring highest on optimism scale





IMPLICATIONS

Likely Challenges

- Attendance, Volunteering, & Giving Concerns – Commitment?
- Virtual Participation will not go away – Engagement? Membership?
- Changing facility needs – Alternative use of the space?
- New ministry patterns are still evolving – Hybridity?
- Continued need for change and adaptation – Exhaustion?
- Closures and evolving demographic patterns – Our future?

Positive Opportunities & Silver Linings

- The “way we have always done it” has been seriously disturbed, innovate now while unsettledness.
- New models, different dynamics & more possibilities.
- A new clientele, community, and visitors – including those previously excluded.
- You can reinvent rather than replicate the old patterns. Is it really what you want?
- Partner with others to share the work. Network with other churches, social services, government, and for-profits.
- Optimism makes all the difference. Expect a positive outcome; a new vision of the future.

Resources:

EPIC research – www.covidreligionresearch.org

Faith Communities Today research – www.faithcommunitiestoday.org

Hartford Institute for Religion Research – www.hartfordinstitute.org

Hartford International University – www.hartfordinternational.edu

sthumma@hartfordinternational.edu

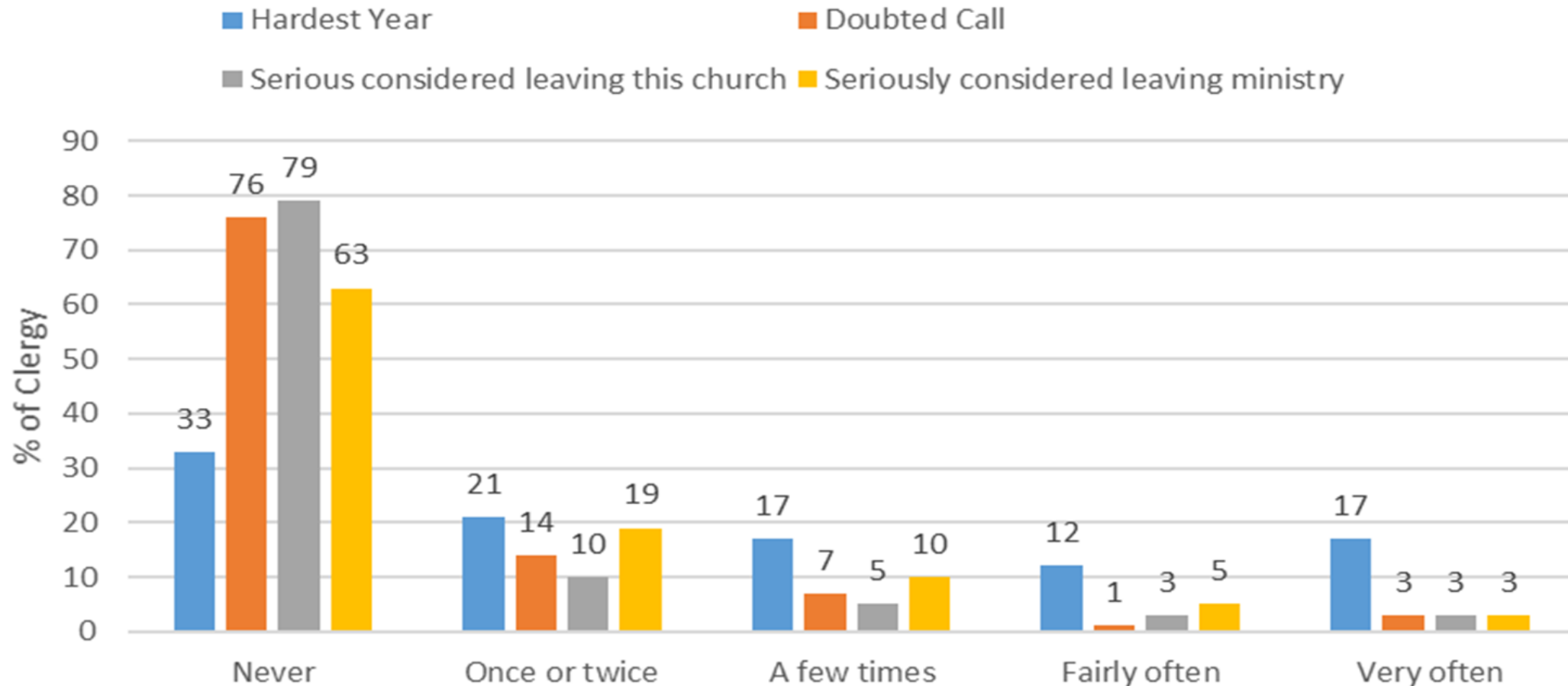


THANK YOU

Is a major clergy defection on the horizon?

The Hardest Ministry Year Ever...

How often have you considered this in the past year?



Some congregations never closed

