

# **Pastor Attrition Study 2025: Mainline Pastors and Comparisons Among Religious Traditions**

A SURVEY OF 387 MAINLINE PASTORS and  
1,516 EVANGELICAL AND BLACK PROTESTANT PASTORS

**Lifeway**research

# Methodology

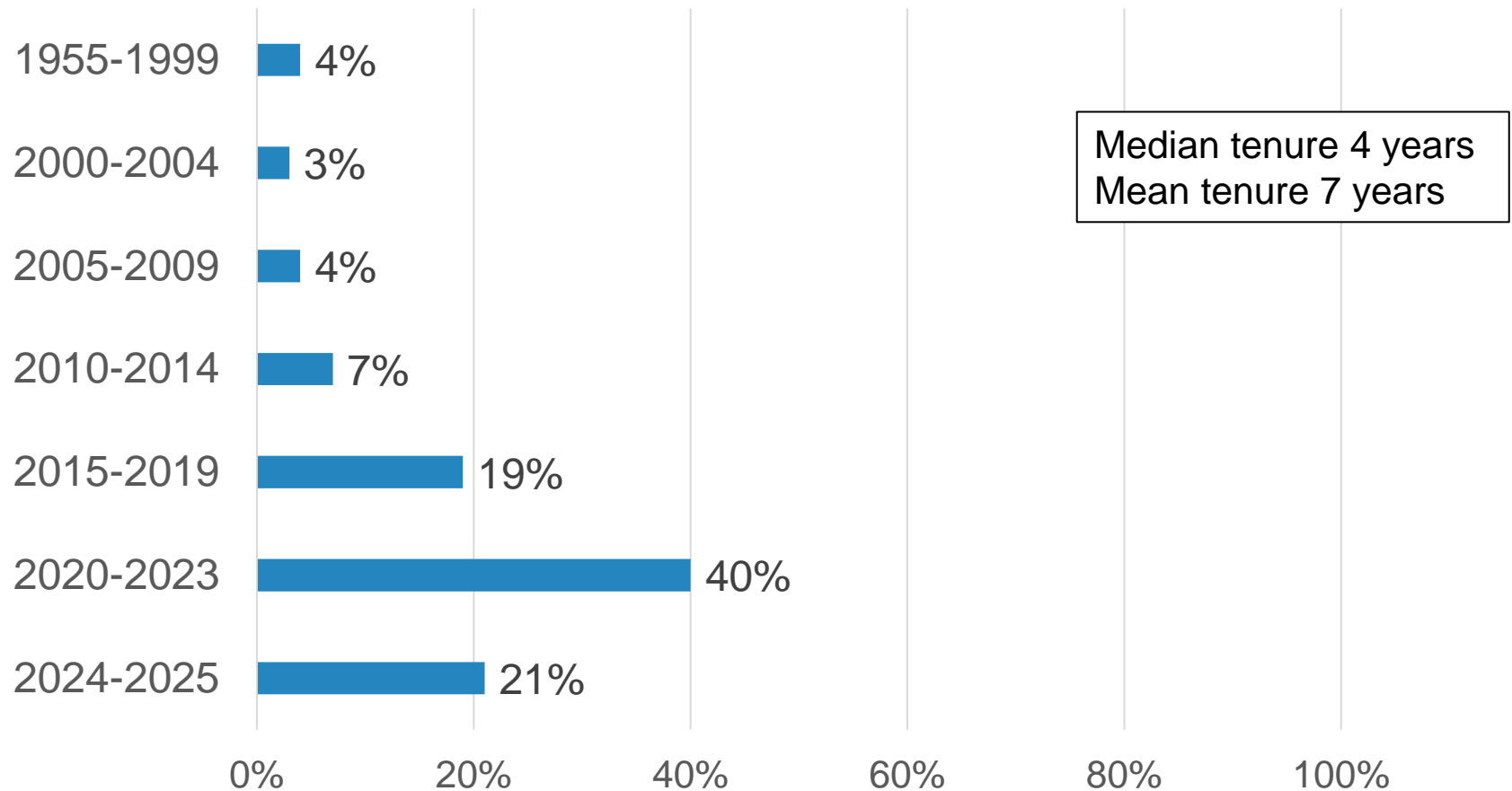
- The study was sponsored by Houston's First Baptist Church and Richard Dockins, MD
- The mixed mode survey of 387 Mainline Pastors and 1,516 Evangelical and Black Protestant pastors was conducted April 1 – May 8, 2025, using both phone and online interviews
- Phone: The calling list was a random sample, stratified by church membership, drawn from a list of all Protestant churches except Southern Baptists
- Online: The email list was a random sample drawn from all Southern Baptist congregations with an email address. Invitations were emailed to the pastor by Lifeway Research followed by two reminders
- Each survey was completed by the senior pastor, minister or priest at the church contacted

# Methodology

- The completed Mainline sample used in this report is 387 surveys
- Responses were weighted by region, church size, and denominational group to more accurately reflect the population
- The Mainline sample provides 95% confidence that the sampling error does not exceed  $\pm 5.0\%$
- Comparisons are made within the entire Protestant sample. This sample of 1,903 surveys provides 95% confidence that the sampling error does not exceed  $\pm 2.6\%$ . This margin of error accounts for the effect of weighting
- Margins of error are higher in sub-groups
- Churches are categorized as Mainline, Evangelical, or Black Protestant based on the RELTRAD religious traditions classification

# 81% of pastors started at their current church in the last 10 years

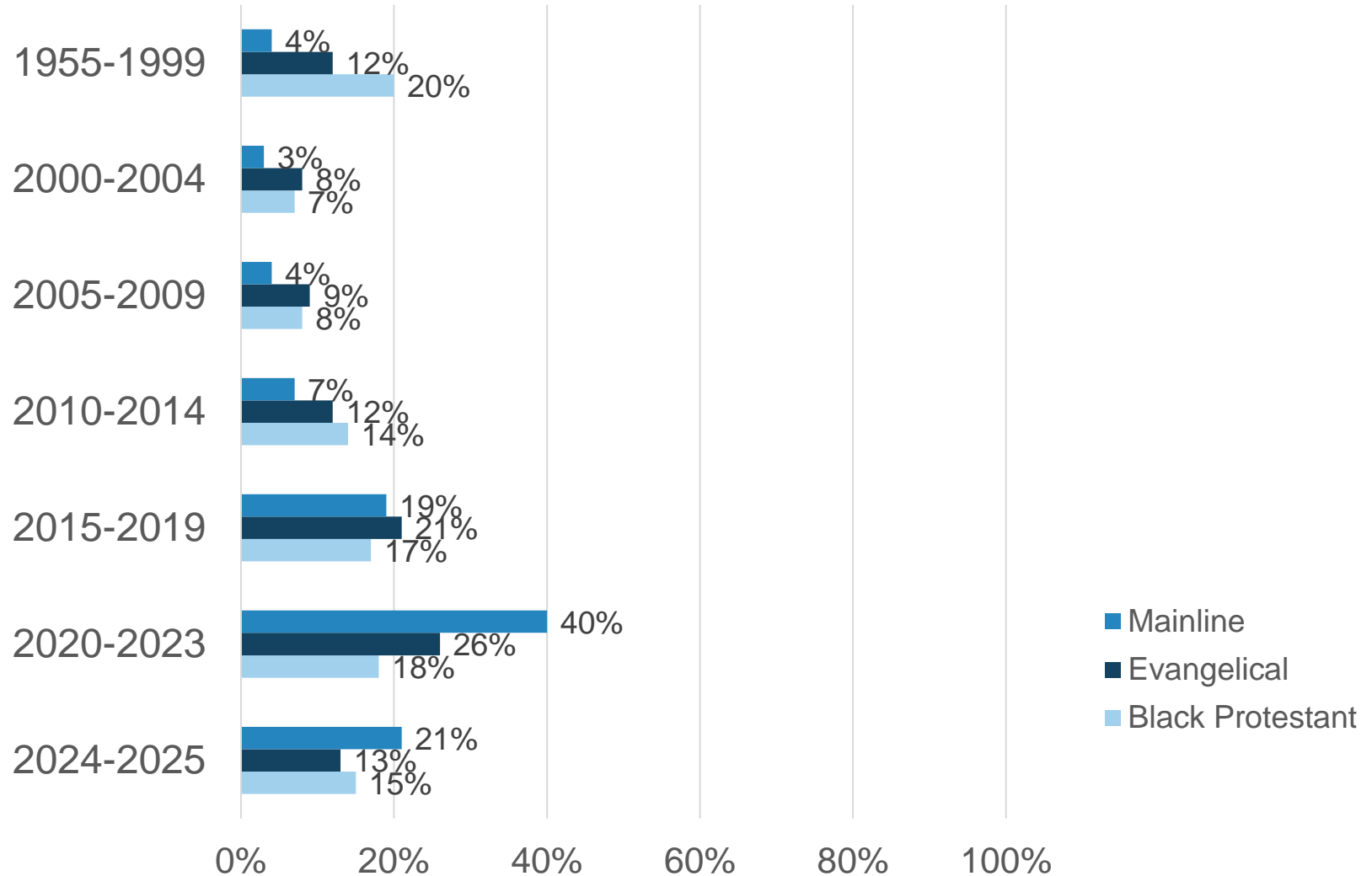
Among Mainline Pastors



Lifewayresearch

# Year pastors started at their current church

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

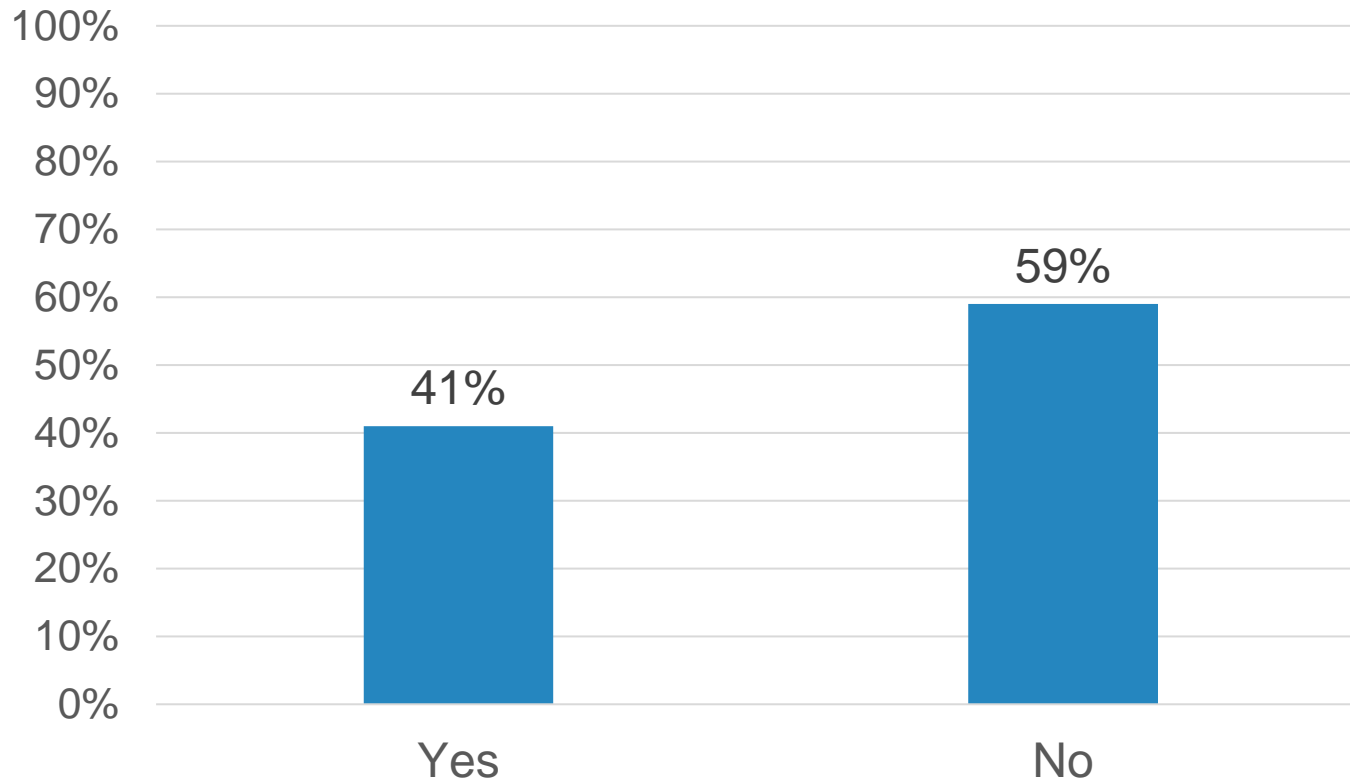


Lifewayresearch

Q2: "In what year did you become the senior pastor of this church?" n= 1,903

# 59% of today's pastors previously pastored elsewhere

Among Mainline Pastors

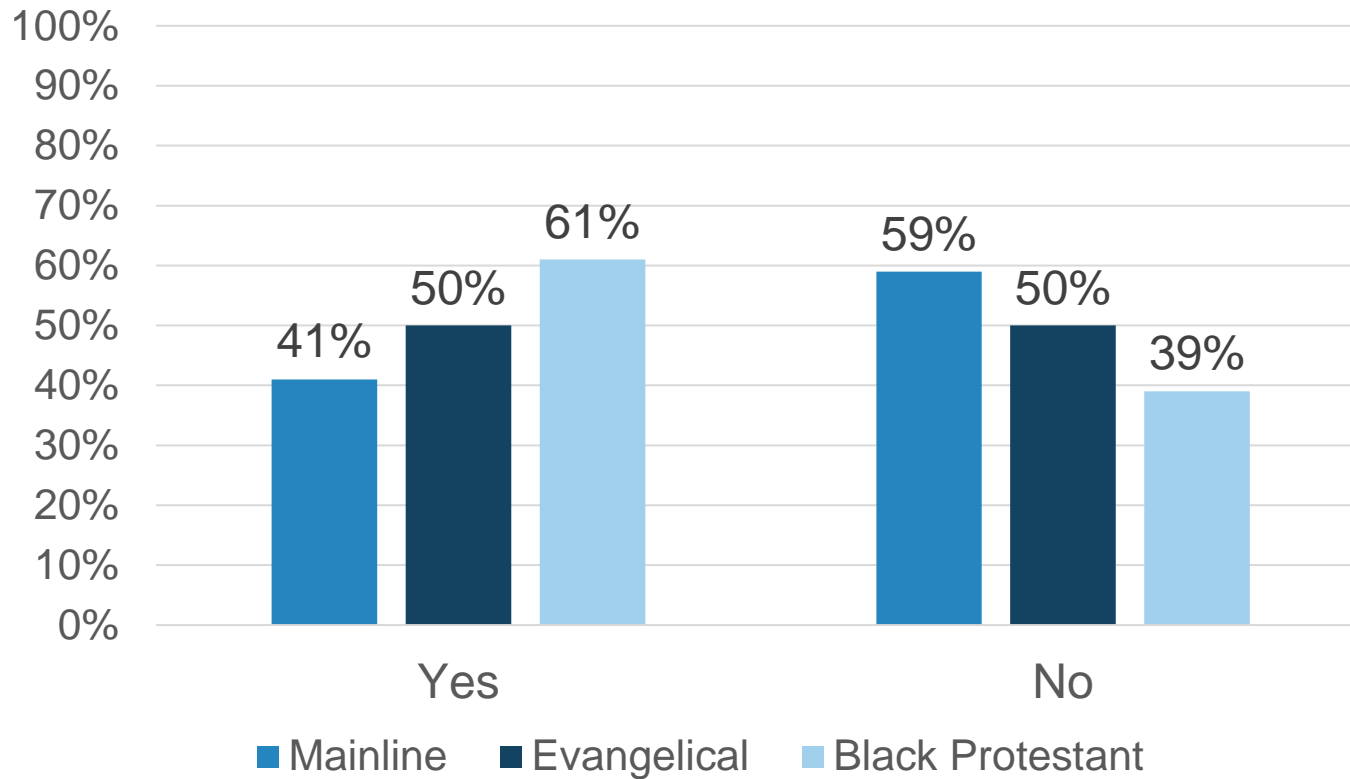


**Lifeway**research

Q3: "Is this the first church you have served as senior pastor?" n=387

# Mainline pastors are less likely to be pastoring their first church than Evangelical or Black Protestant pastors

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

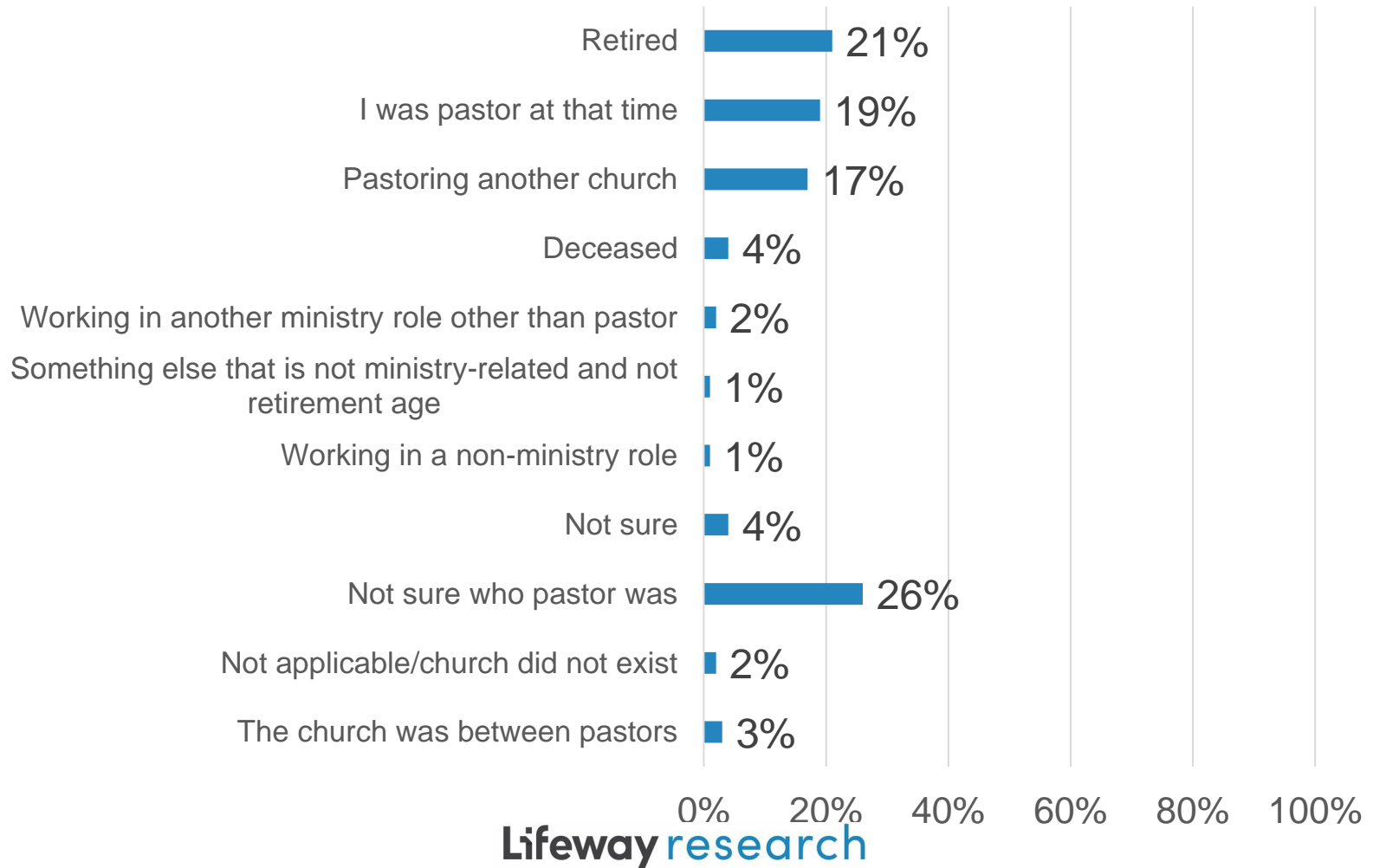


**Lifeway**research

Q3: "Is this the first church you have served as senior pastor?" n=

# Where is the pastor who was pastoring this church 10 years ago?

Whereabouts of person who pastored this church in March 2015



Q2: "In what year did you become the senior pastor of this church?"

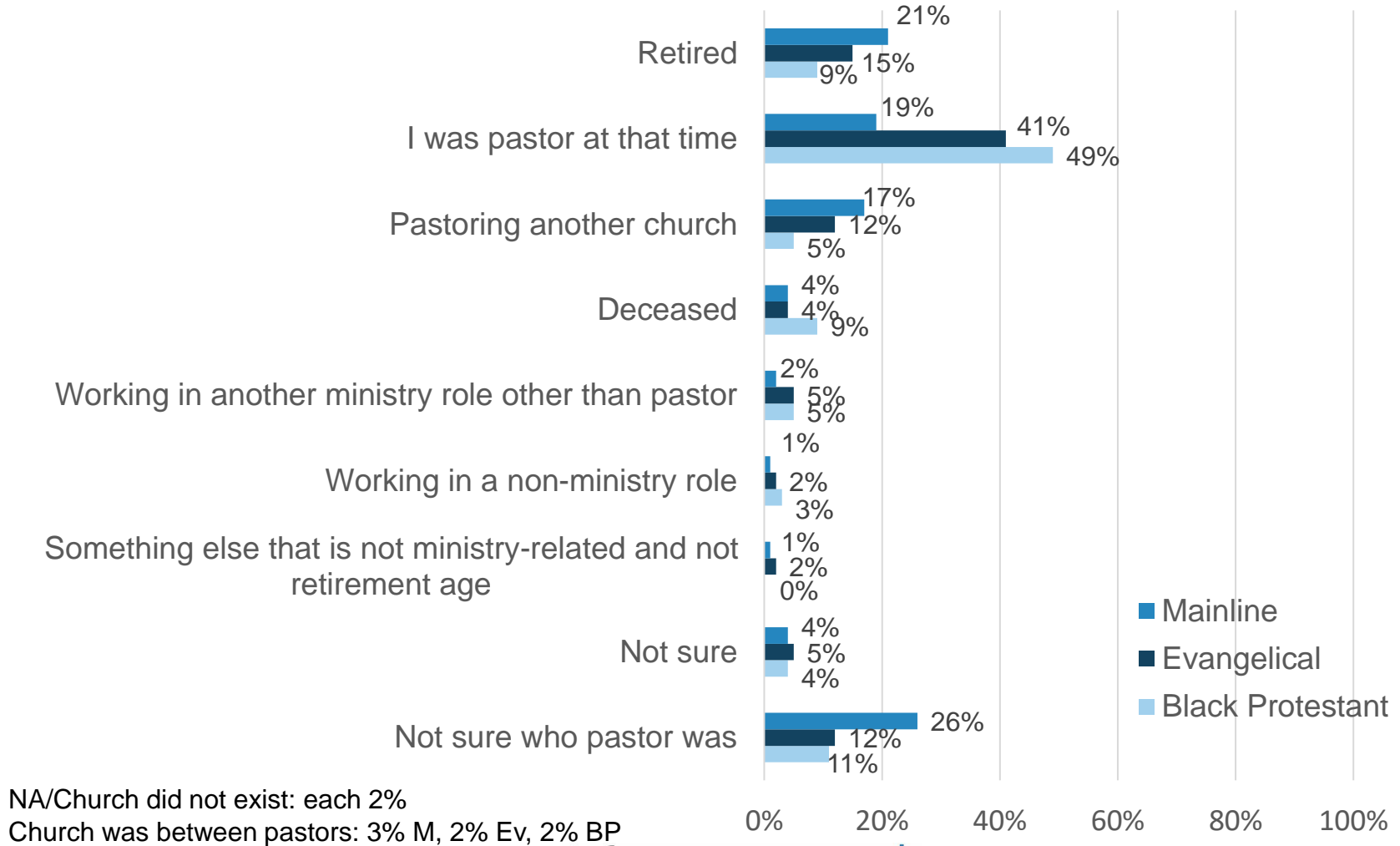
Q4: "Do you know the name of the person who was pastor of your current church in March 2015?"

Q5: "As far as you know, which of the following best describes where that pastor is today?" combined n=387



# Where is the pastor who was pastoring this church 10 years ago?

Whereabouts of person who pastored this church in March 2015



Lifeway research

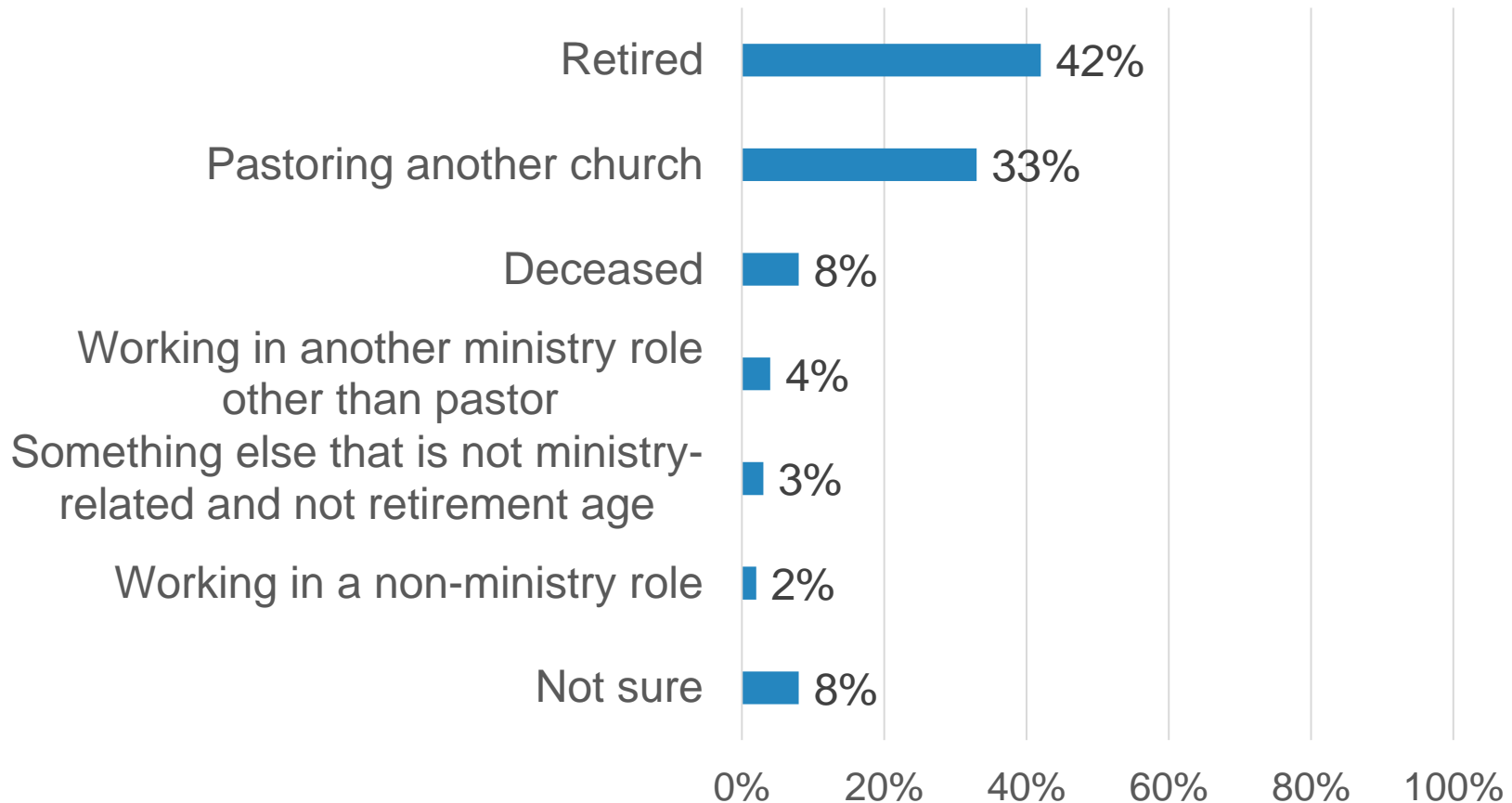
Q2: "In what year did you become the senior pastor of this church?"

Q4: "Do you know the name of the person who was pastor of your current church in March 2015?"

Q5: "As far as you know, which of the following best describes where that pastor is today?" n=1,903

# Pastors who have left a church in the past 10 years tend to be retired or pastoring another church

Among Mainline pastors who were not at their current church in March 2015 and who can name the pastor at that time

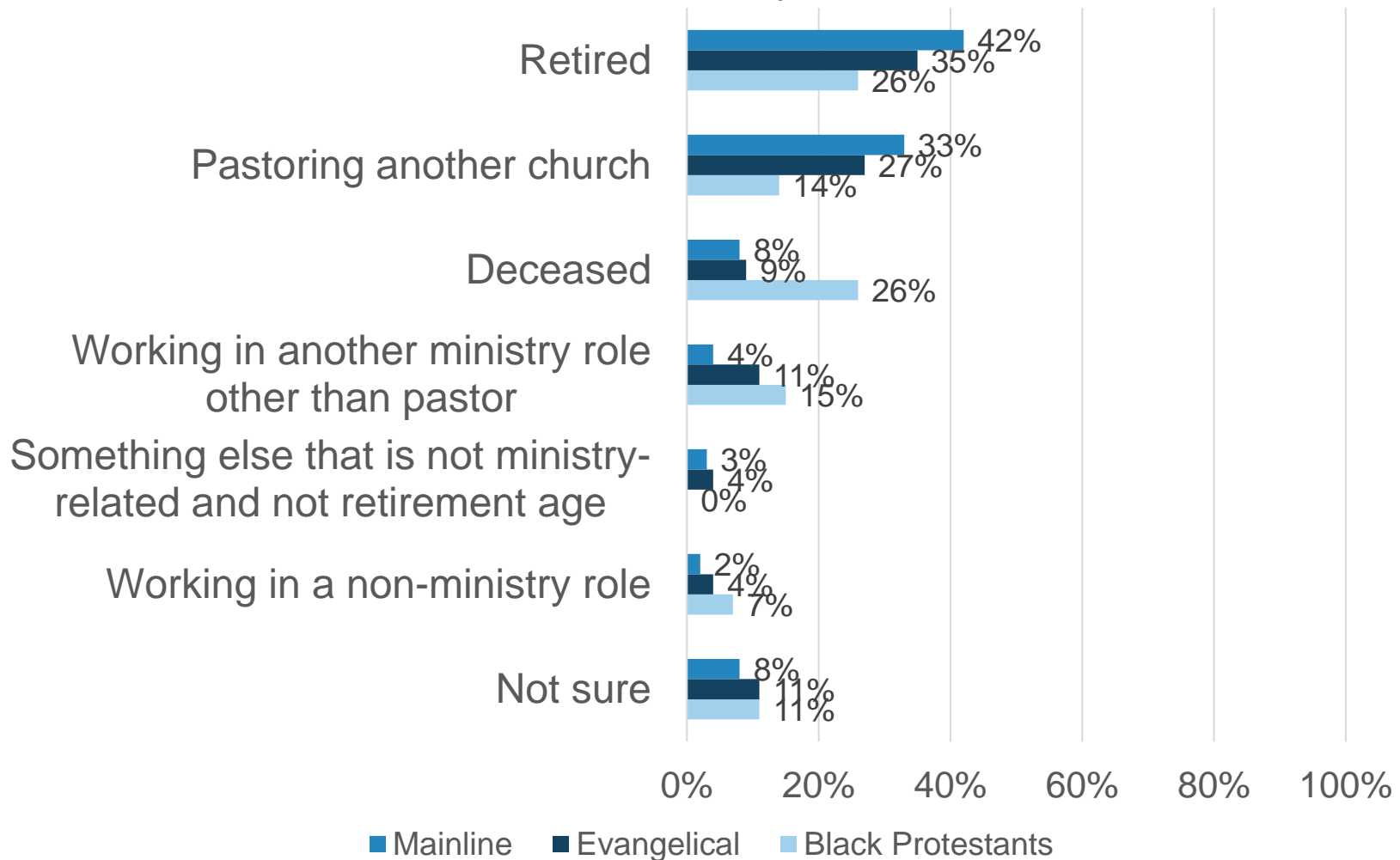


**Lifeway**research

Q5: "As far as you know, which of the following best describes where that pastor is today?" n=202

# Mainline Pastors from 10 years ago are more likely to be pastoring another church than Evangelical or Black Protestant pastors

Among Mainline pastors who were not at their current church in March 2015 and who can name the pastor at that time



Lifewayresearch

Q5: "As far as you know, which of the following best describes where that pastor is today?" n=896

# Mainline Pastor Attrition

- Defined as Mainline pastors who have left the pastorate for reasons other than retirement or death in the last 10 years.
- Cohort studied are those who were pastoring in March 2015
- Estimate of Mainline Pastor Attrition assumes that the current whereabouts for pastors unknown to the current pastor of their church is the same as those in which their whereabouts is known.
  - The cumulative *known* attrition rate (5% over 10 years) undercounts attrition where the previous pastor's whereabouts are unknown.
  - **The Mainline Pastor Attrition Rate Estimate is 8% over 10 years or about 0.8% a year**

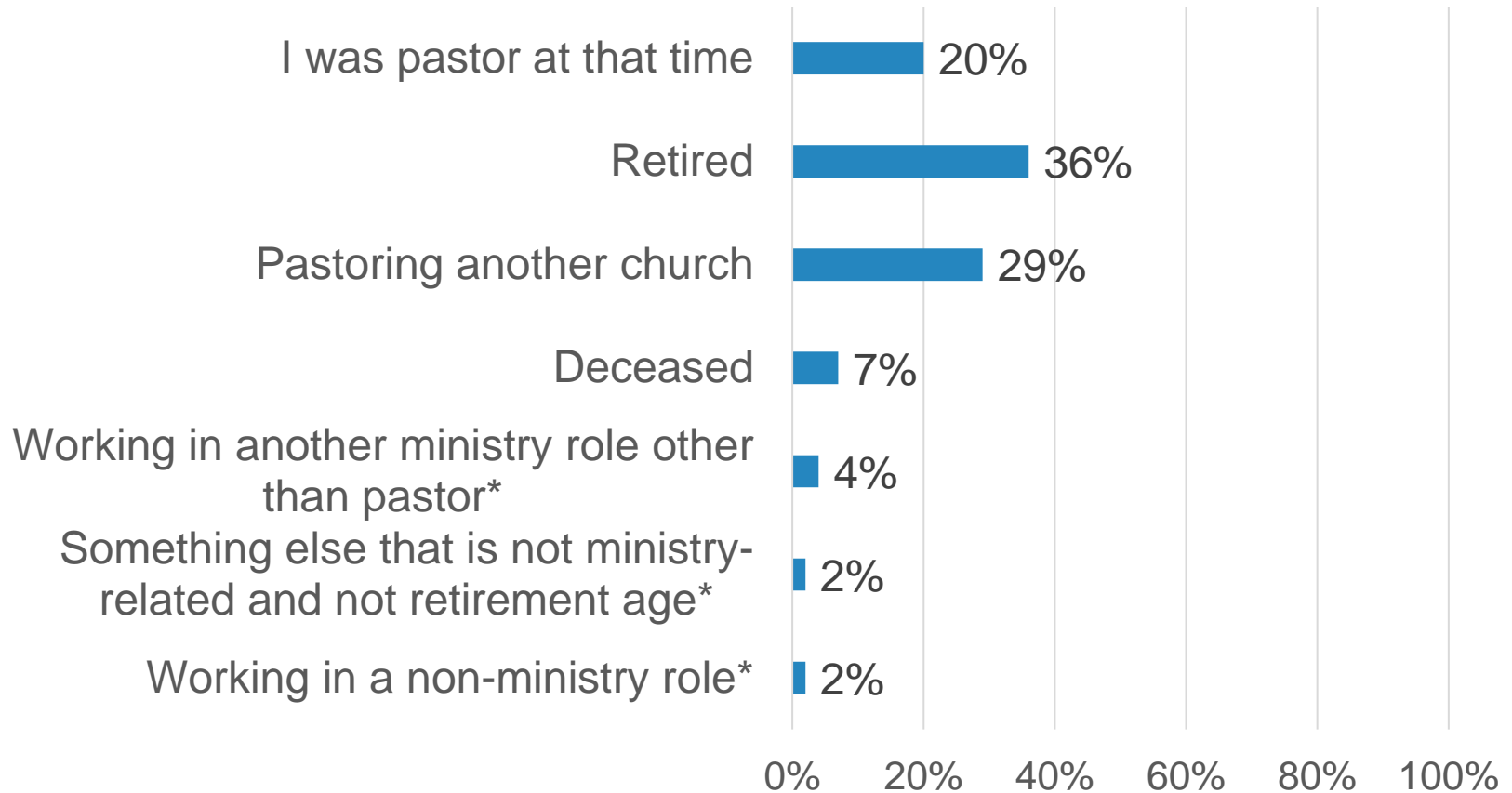
Based on churches where the current pastor knows the whereabouts of the March 2015 pastor applied to all congregations that existed in 2015 and had a pastor

# Protestant Pastor Attrition

- Defined as Protestant pastors who have left the pastorate for reasons other than retirement or death in the last 10 years.
- Cohort studied are those who were pastoring in March 2015
- Estimate of Protestant Pastor Attrition assumes that the current whereabouts for pastors unknown to the current pastor of their church is the same as those in which their whereabouts is known.
  - The cumulative *known* attrition rate (5% over 10 years) undercounts attrition where the previous pastor's whereabouts are unknown.
  - **The Protestant Pastor Attrition Rate Estimate is 11% over 10 years or about 1.1% a year**  
Based on churches where the current pastor knows the whereabouts of the March 2015 pastor applied to all congregations that existed in 2015 and had a pastor

# Estimated whereabouts of all March 2015 Mainline pastors (known percentages applied to all pastors)

Whereabouts of person who pastored this church in March 2015



\*Pastor Attrition

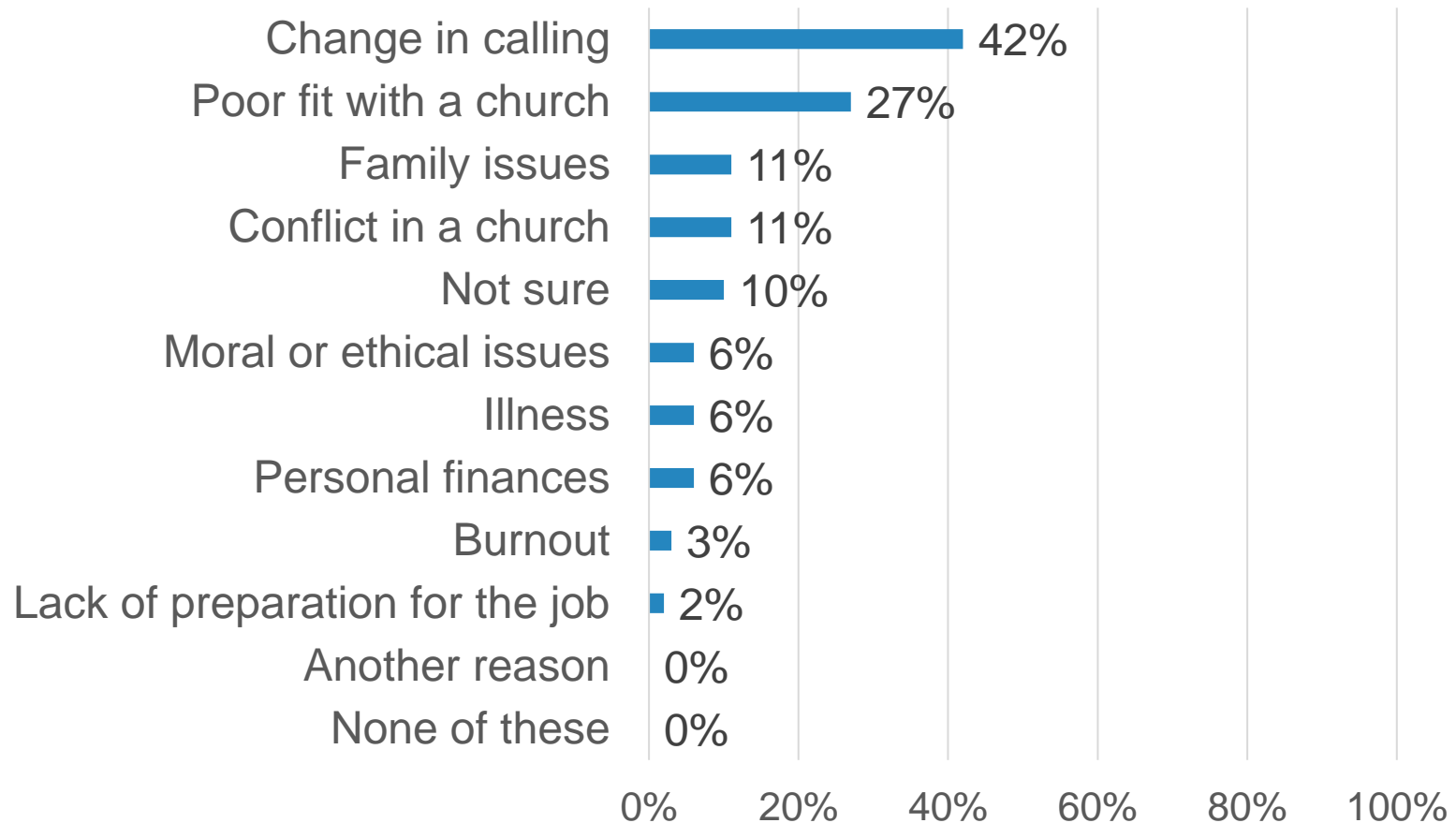
**Lifeway**research

Q5: "As far as you know, which of the following best describes where that pastor is today?"

Base: Churches that existed and had a pastor in March 2015

# Top reasons previous pastor left the pastorate: change in calling, conflict, burnout

Among Mainline Pastors



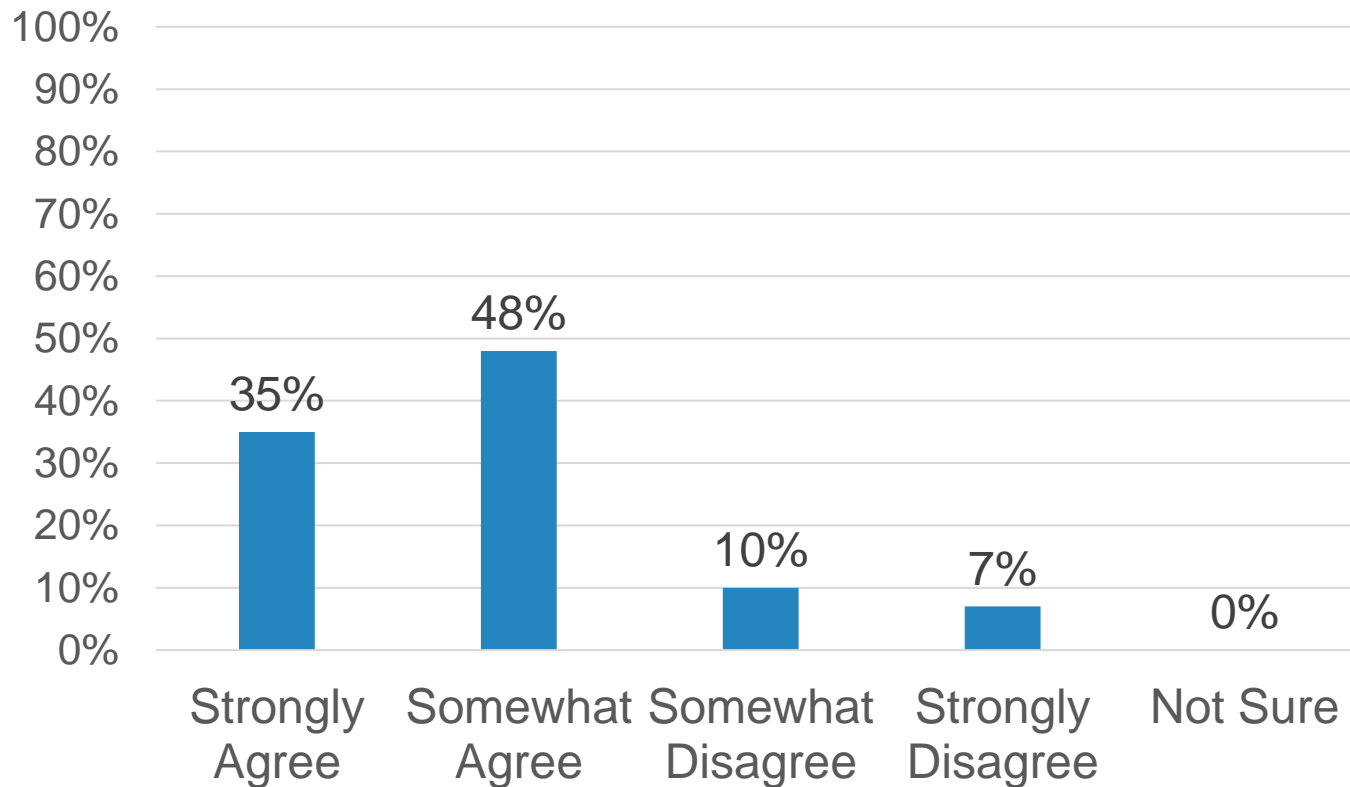
CAUTION: Small sample size

**Lifeway**research

Q6: "To the best of your knowledge, why did this pastor leave the pastorate? (Select all that apply)" n=20  
Base: March 2015 pastor is working in another ministry role other than pastor or working in a non-ministry role

# 83% of pastors agree their training prepared them for the people side of ministry

Among Mainline Pastors



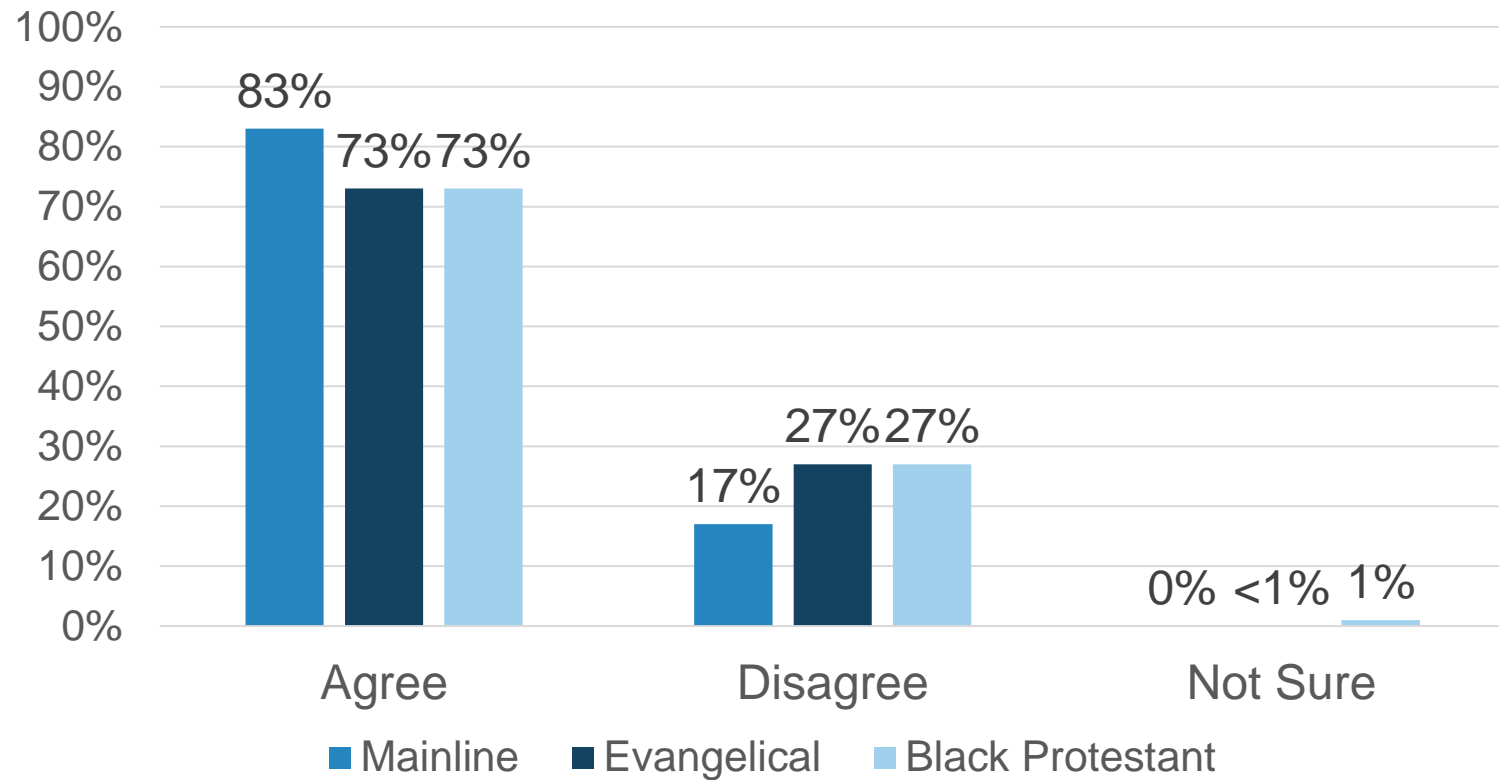
**Lifeway**research

Q7: "My seminary or ministry training prepared me to handle the people side of ministry." n=370



# Mainline pastors are the most likely to agree their training prepared them for the people side of ministry

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

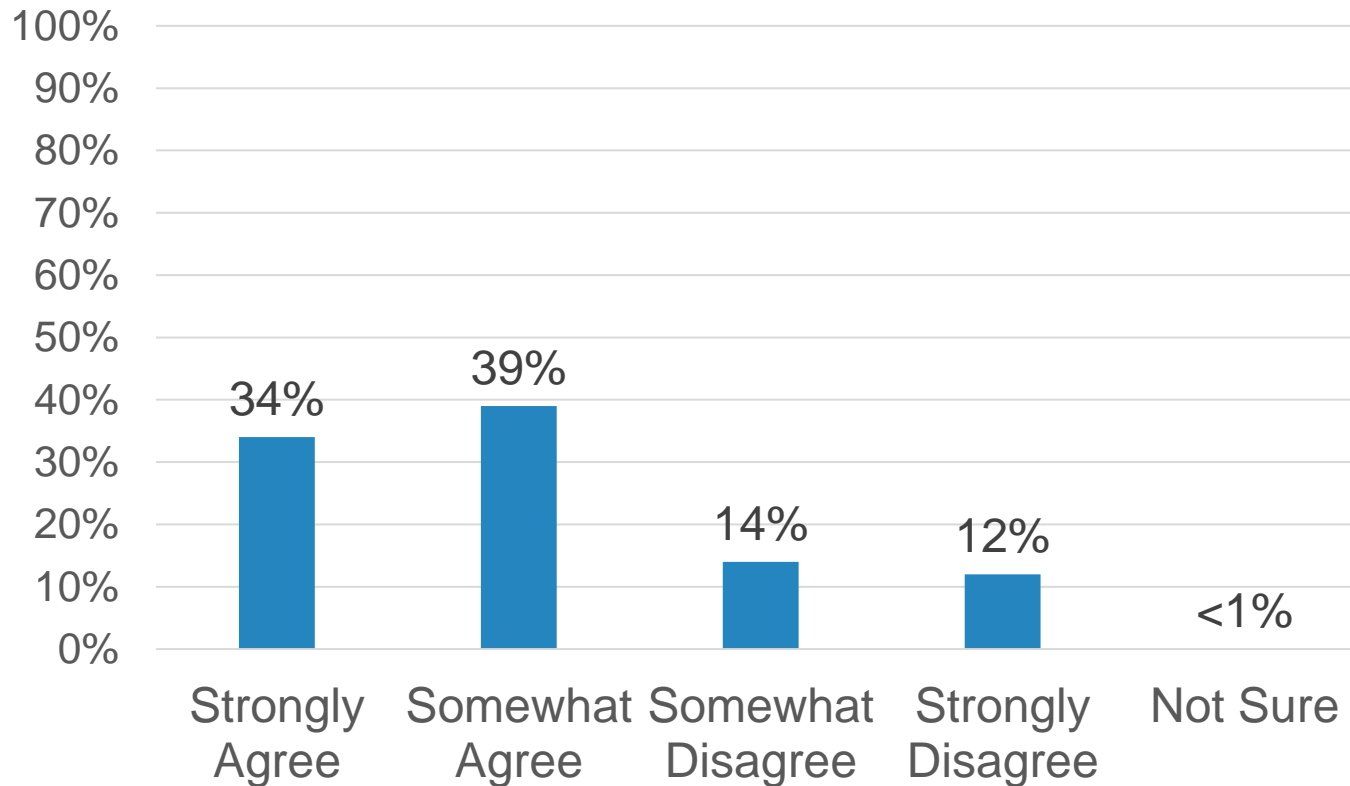


**Lifeway**research

Q7: "My seminary or ministry training prepared me to handle the people side of ministry." *n* = 1,770

# 73% of pastors agree they will need to confront conflict in this church in the future

Among Mainline Pastors

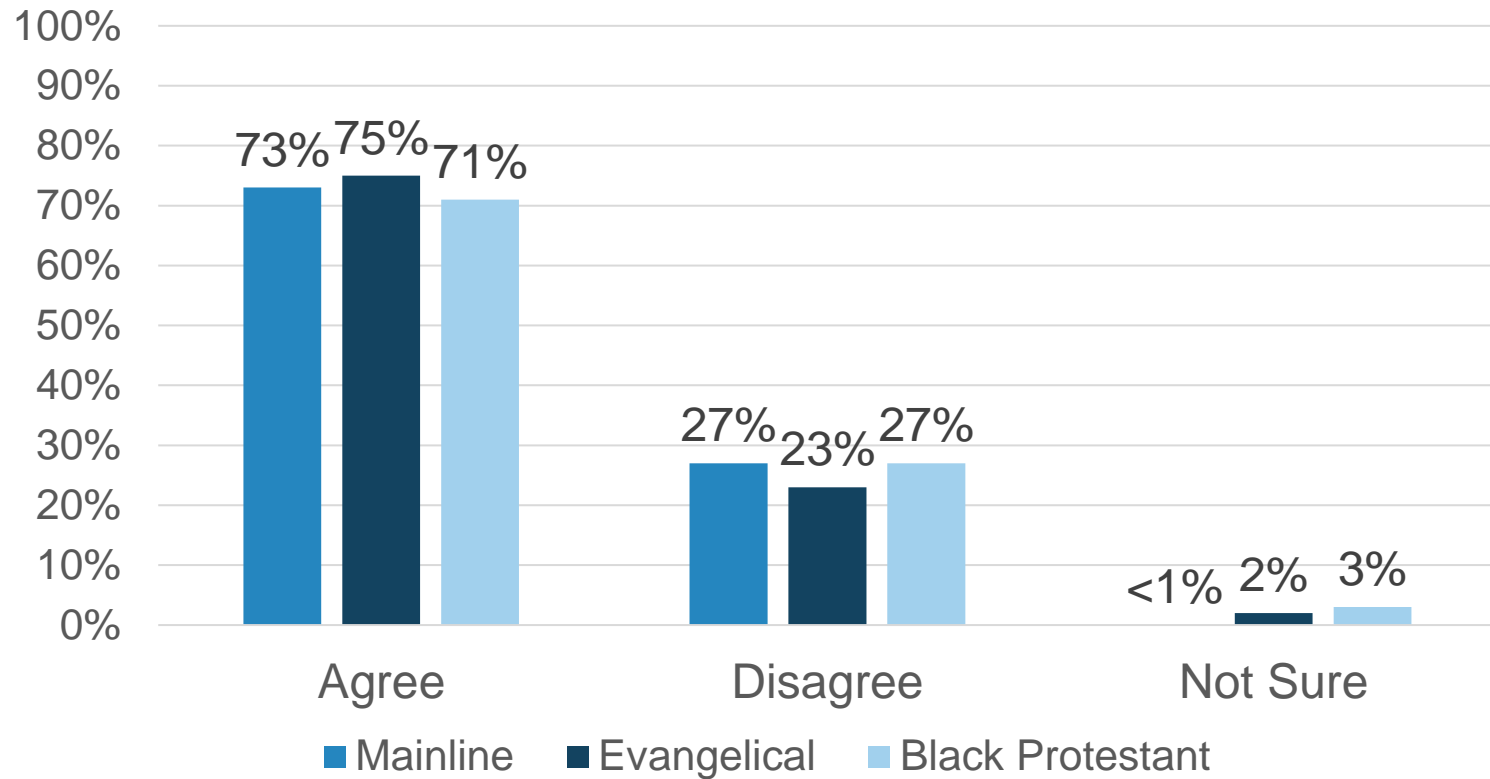


**Lifeway**research

Q8: "I expect I will need to confront conflict in this church in the future." n=387

# Pastors agree they will need to confront conflict in this church in the future

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

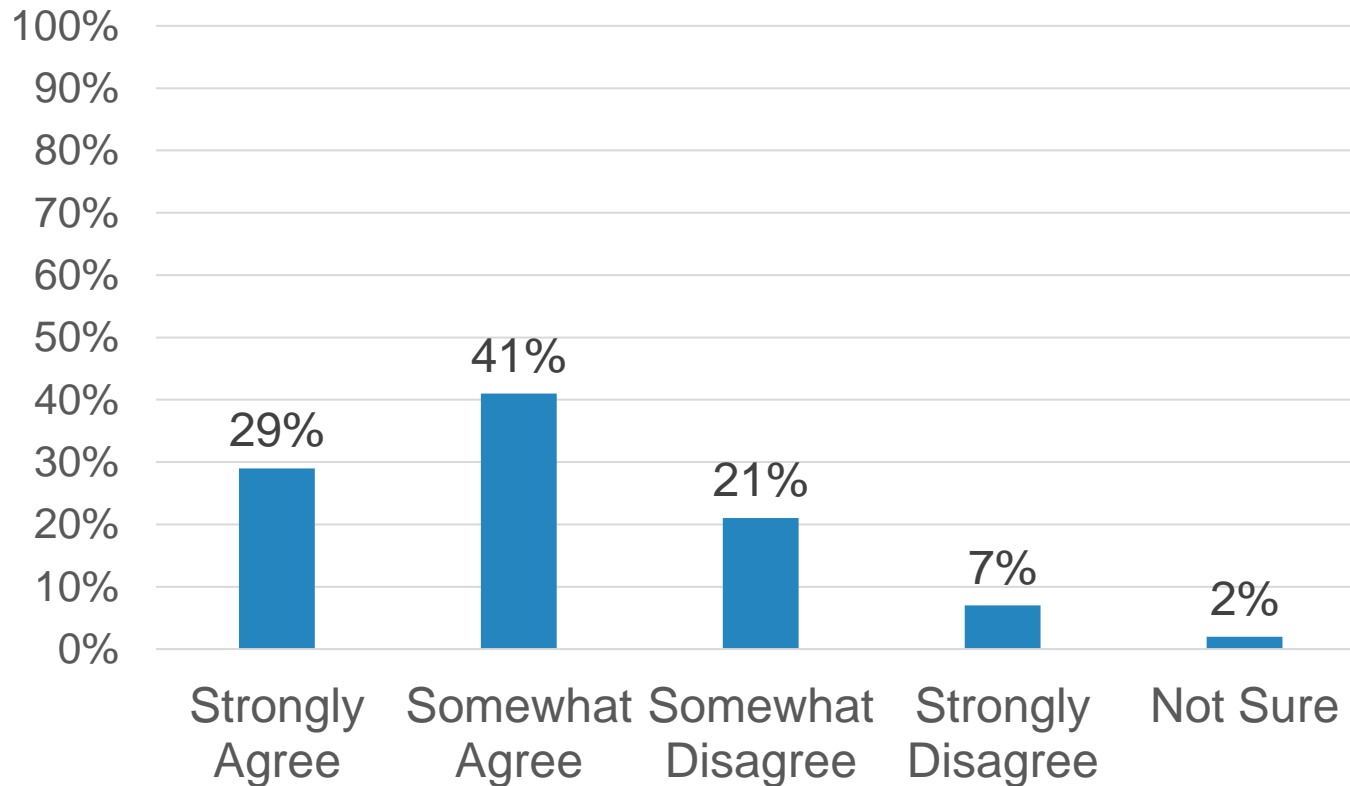


**Lifeway**research

Q8: "I expect I will need to confront conflict in this church in the future." *n* = 1,903

# 70% of pastors agree that amidst time conflicts they consistently put their family first

Among Mainline Pastors

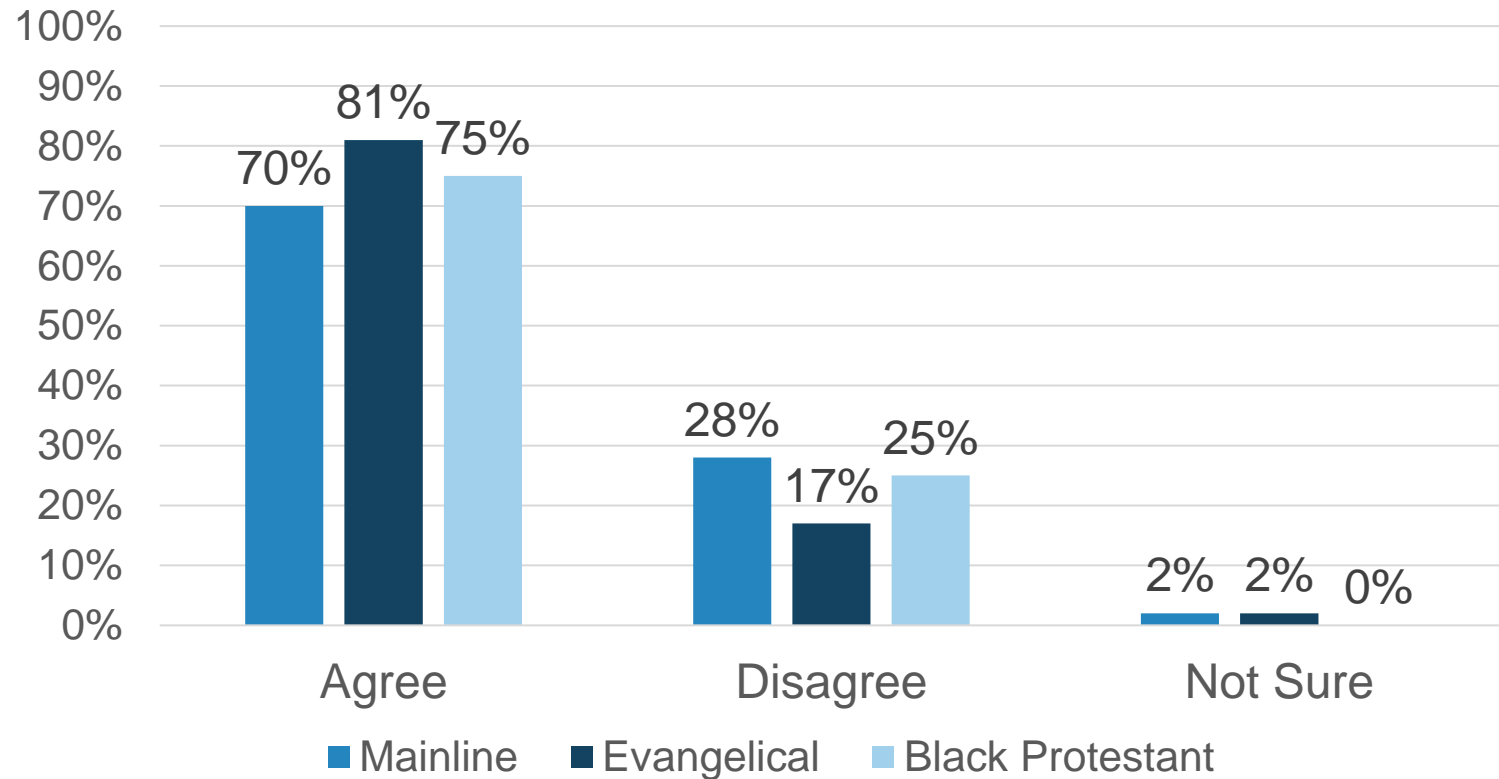


**Lifeway**research

Q9: "When time conflicts arise, I consistently put my family first." n=380

# Mainline pastors are the least likely to agree they consistently put their family first amidst time conflicts

Among Evangelical and Black Protestant Pastors

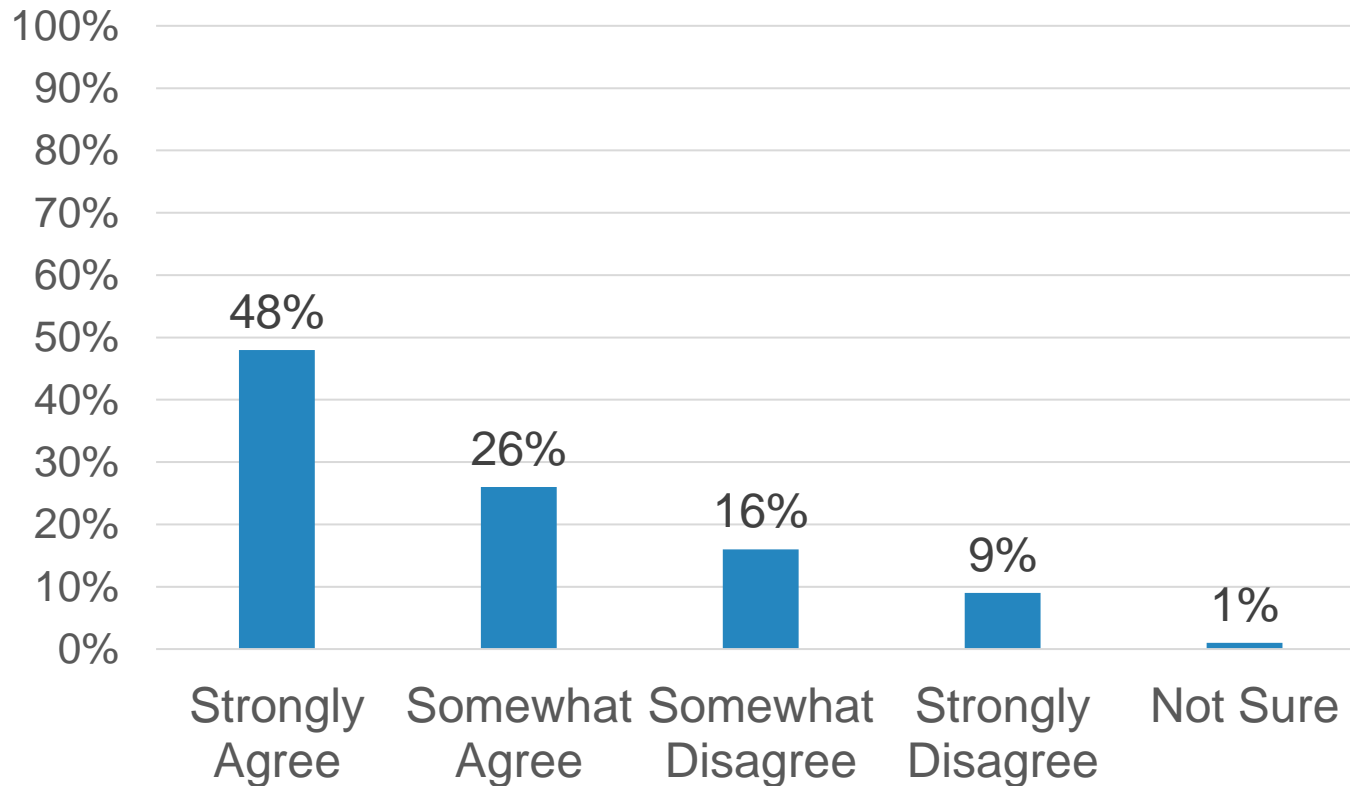


**Lifeway**research

Q9: "When time conflicts arise, I consistently put my family first." n= 1,872

# 74% of pastors agree they are sure they can stay at their church as long as they want

Among Mainline Pastors

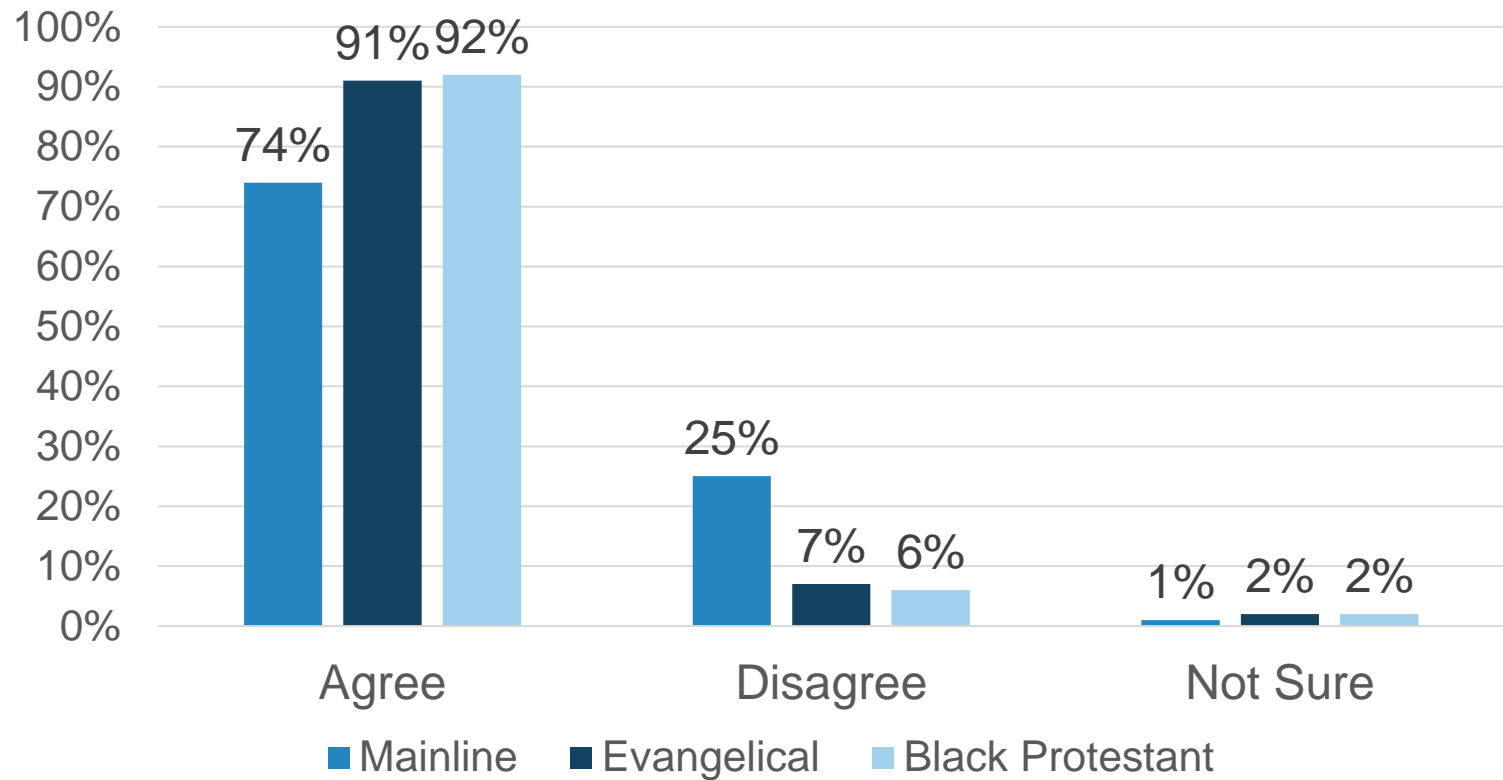


**Lifeway**research

Q10: "I am sure I can stay at this church as long as I want." n=387

# Mainline pastors are the least likely to agree they can stay at their church as long as they want

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

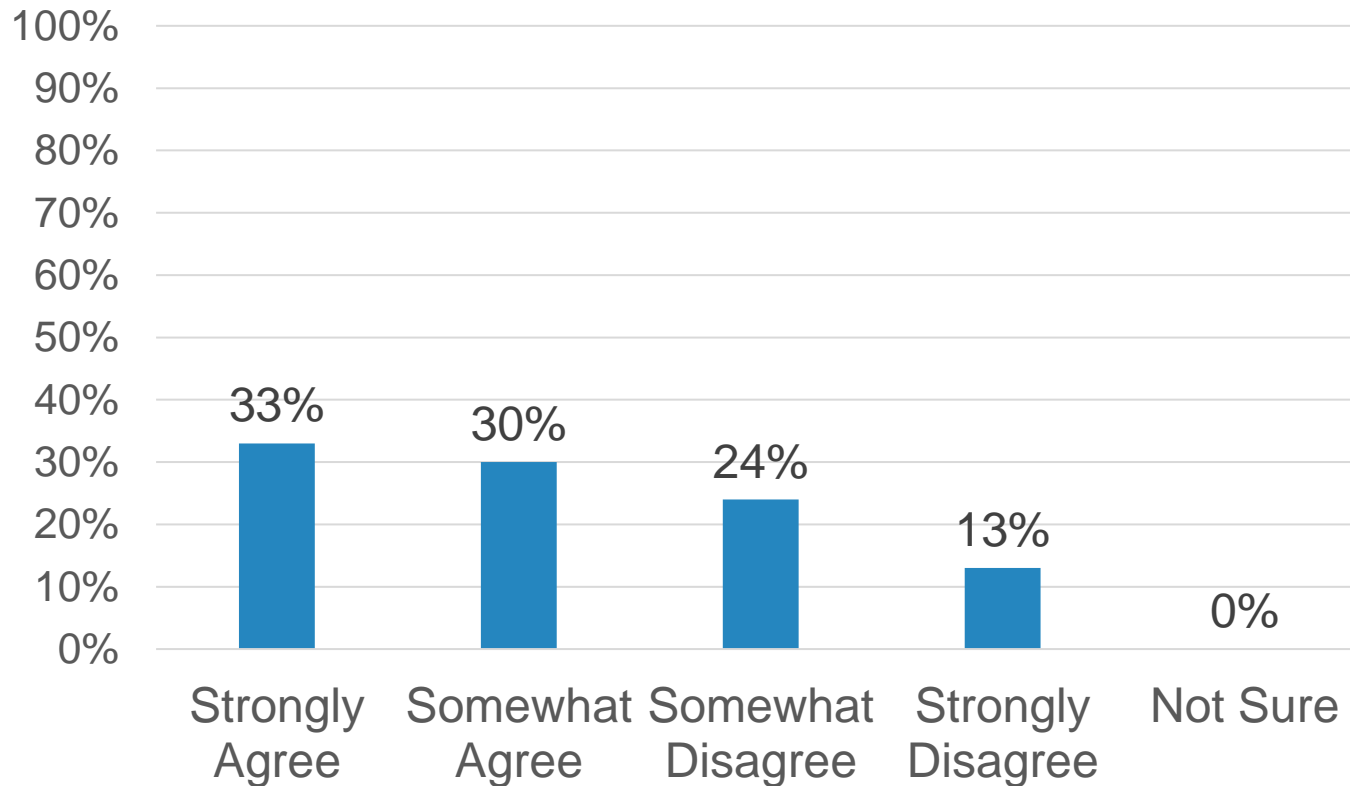


**Lifeway**research

Q10: "I am sure I can stay at this church as long as I want." *n*= 1,903

# 63% of pastors agree they feel they must be 'on-call' 24 hours a day

Among Mainline Pastors



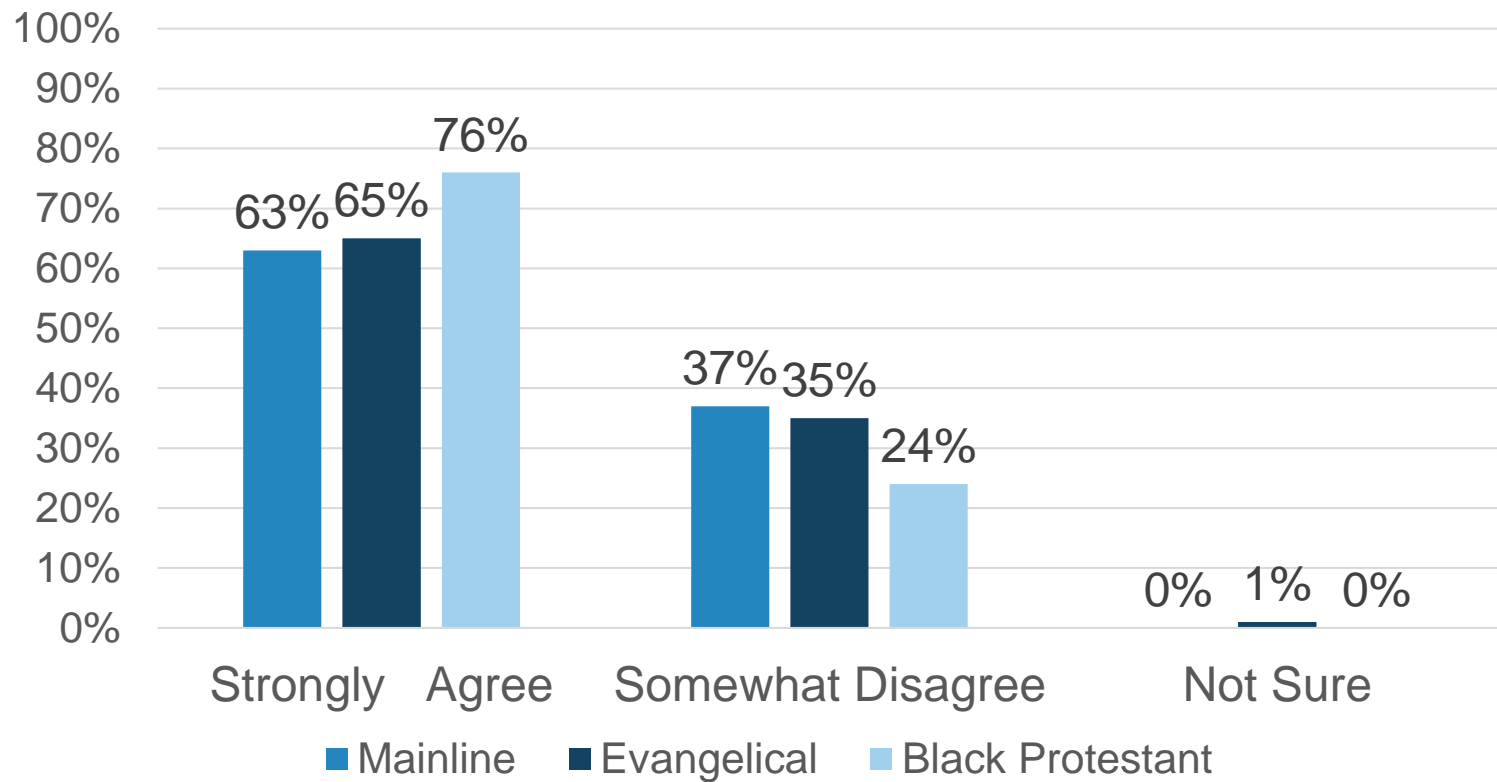
**Lifeway**research

Q11: "I feel I must be 'on-call' 24 hours a day." n=387



# Black Protestant pastors are the most likely to agree they feel they must be 'on-call' 24 hours a day

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

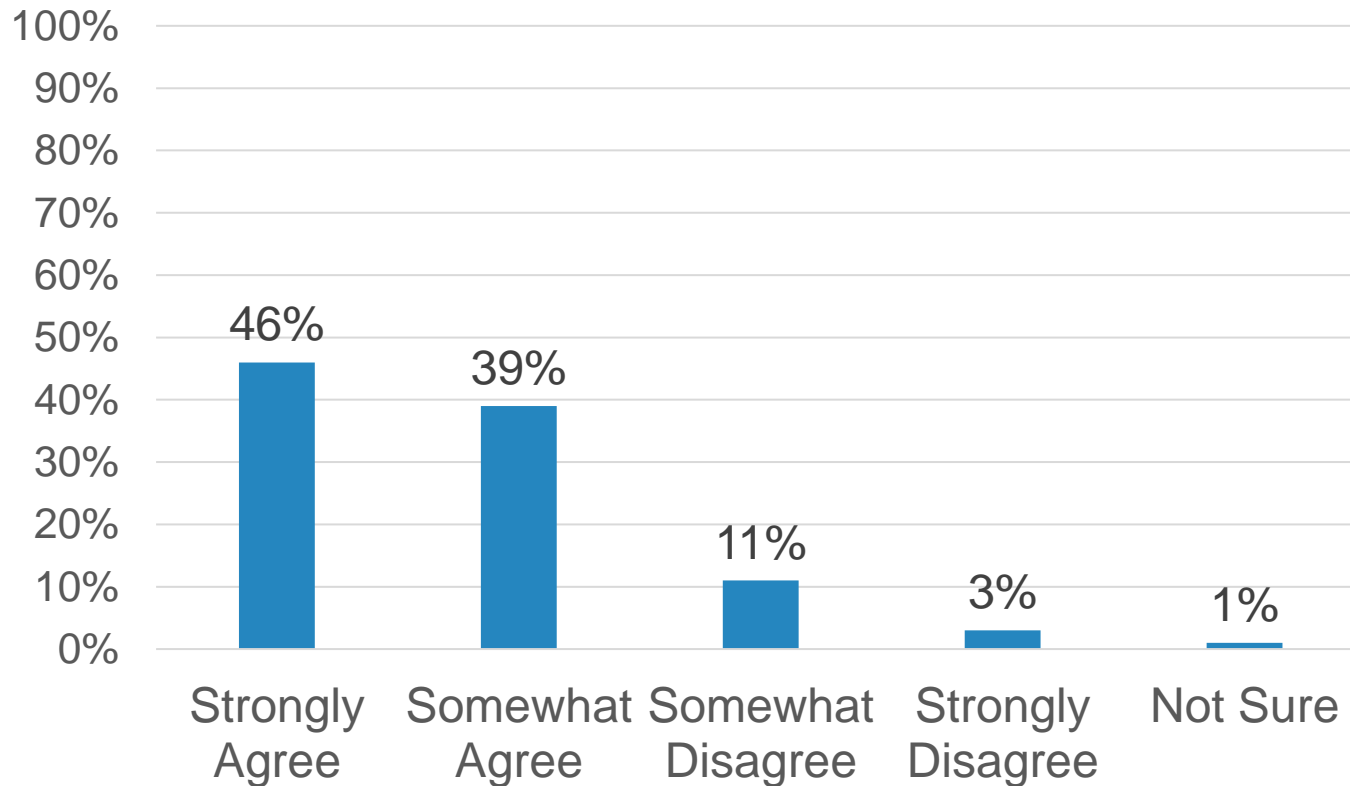


**Lifeway**research

Q11: "I feel I must be 'on-call' 24 hours a day." n= 1,903

# 84% of pastors agree they work hard to protect their image as a pastor

Among Mainline Pastors

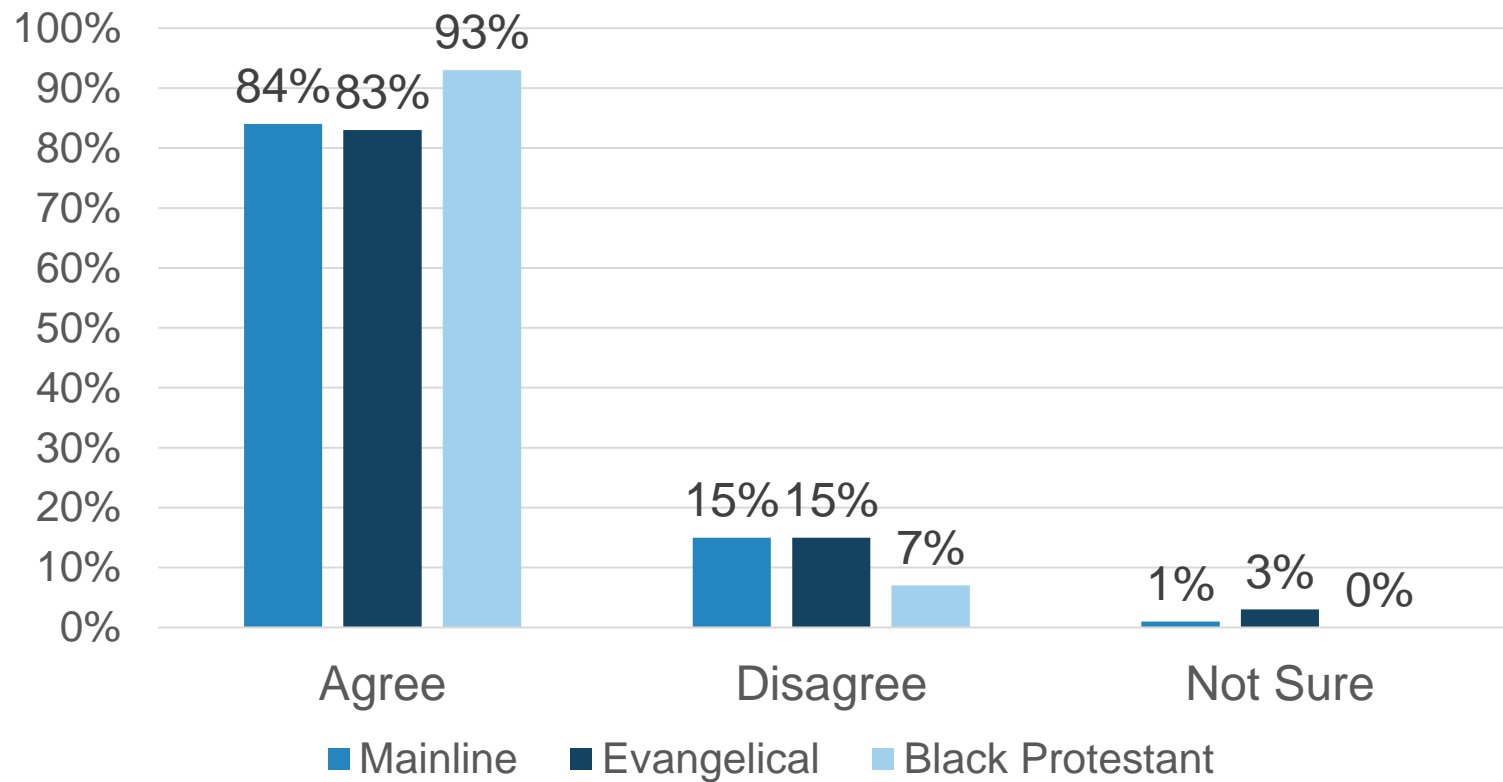


**Lifeway**research

Q12: "I work hard to protect my image as a pastor." n=387

# Black Protestant pastors are the most likely to agree they work hard to protect their image as a pastor

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

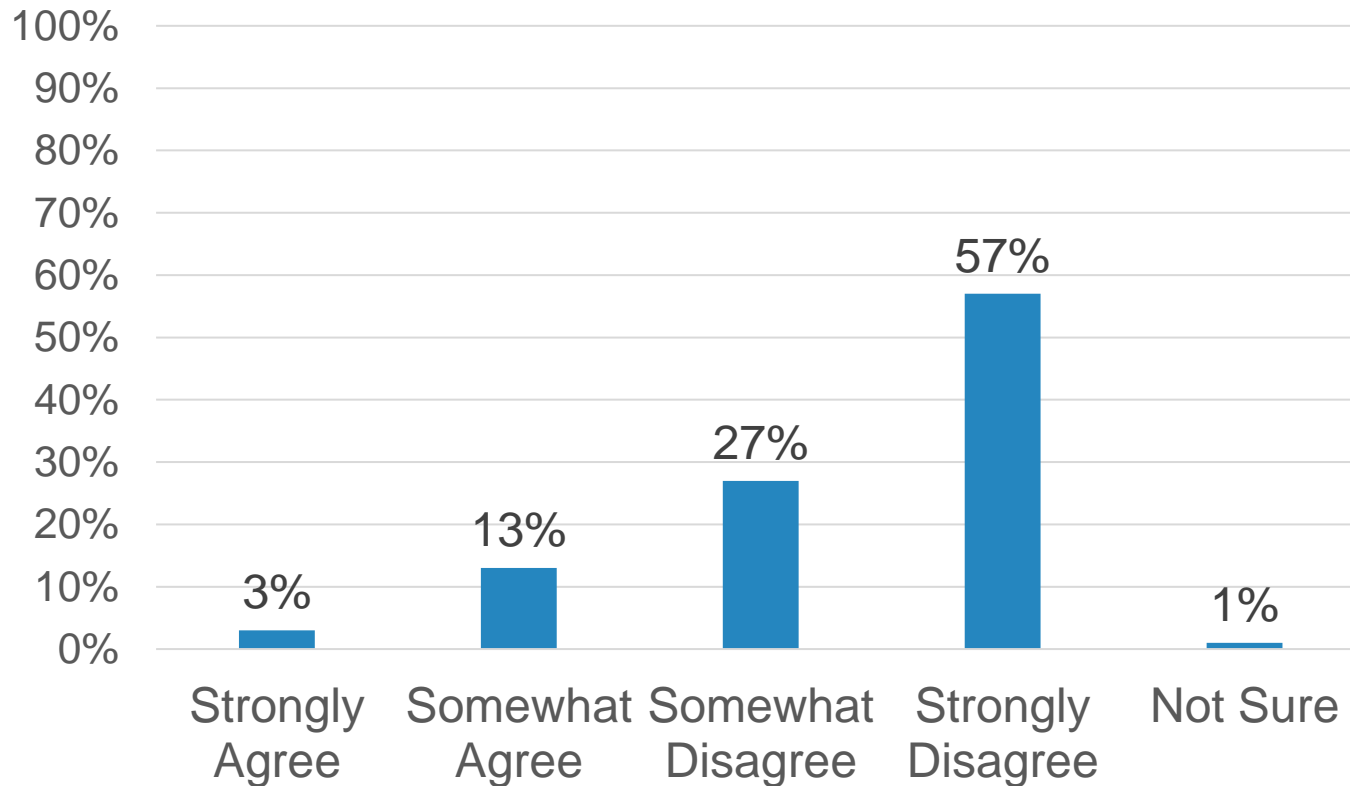


**Lifeway**research

Q12: "I work hard to protect my image as a pastor." n= 1,903

# 16% of pastors agree their family resents the demands of pastoral ministry

Among Mainline Pastors

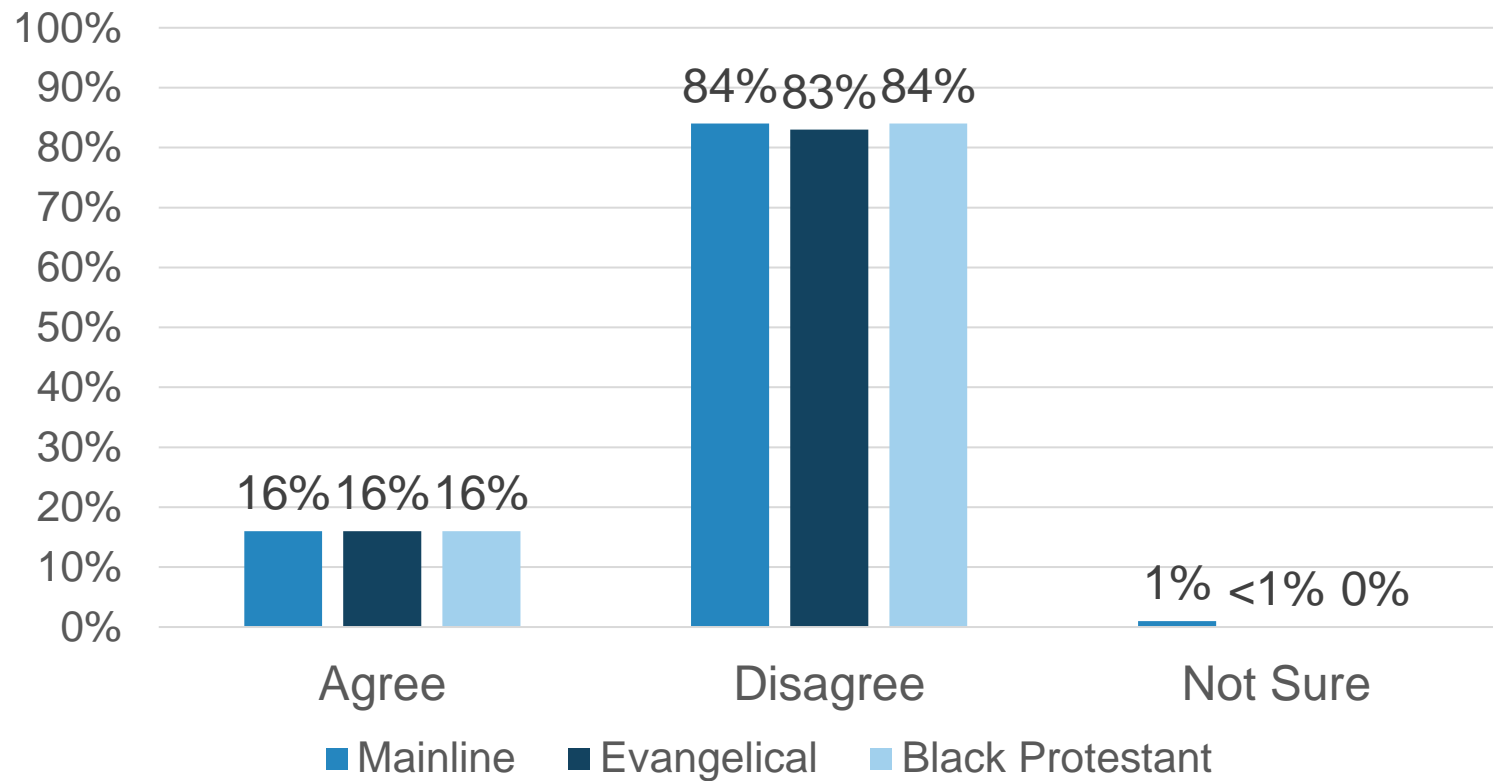


**Lifeway**research

Q13: "My family resents the demands of pastoral ministry." n=375

# There is no difference in the frequency that pastors agree their family resents the demands of pastoral ministry

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

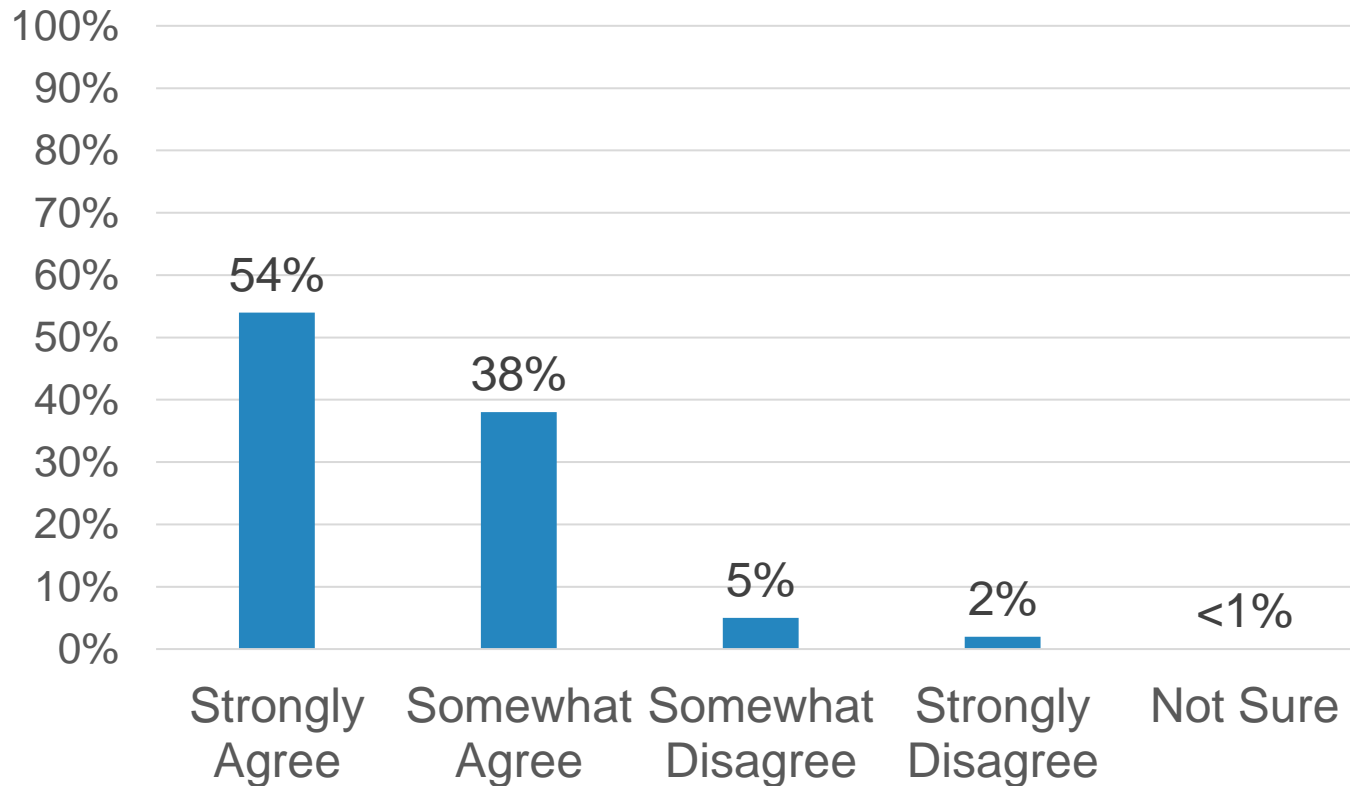


**Lifeway**research

Q13: "My family resents the demands of pastoral ministry." *n* = 1,871

# 92% of pastors agree they consistently listen for signs of conflict in their church

Among Mainline Pastors

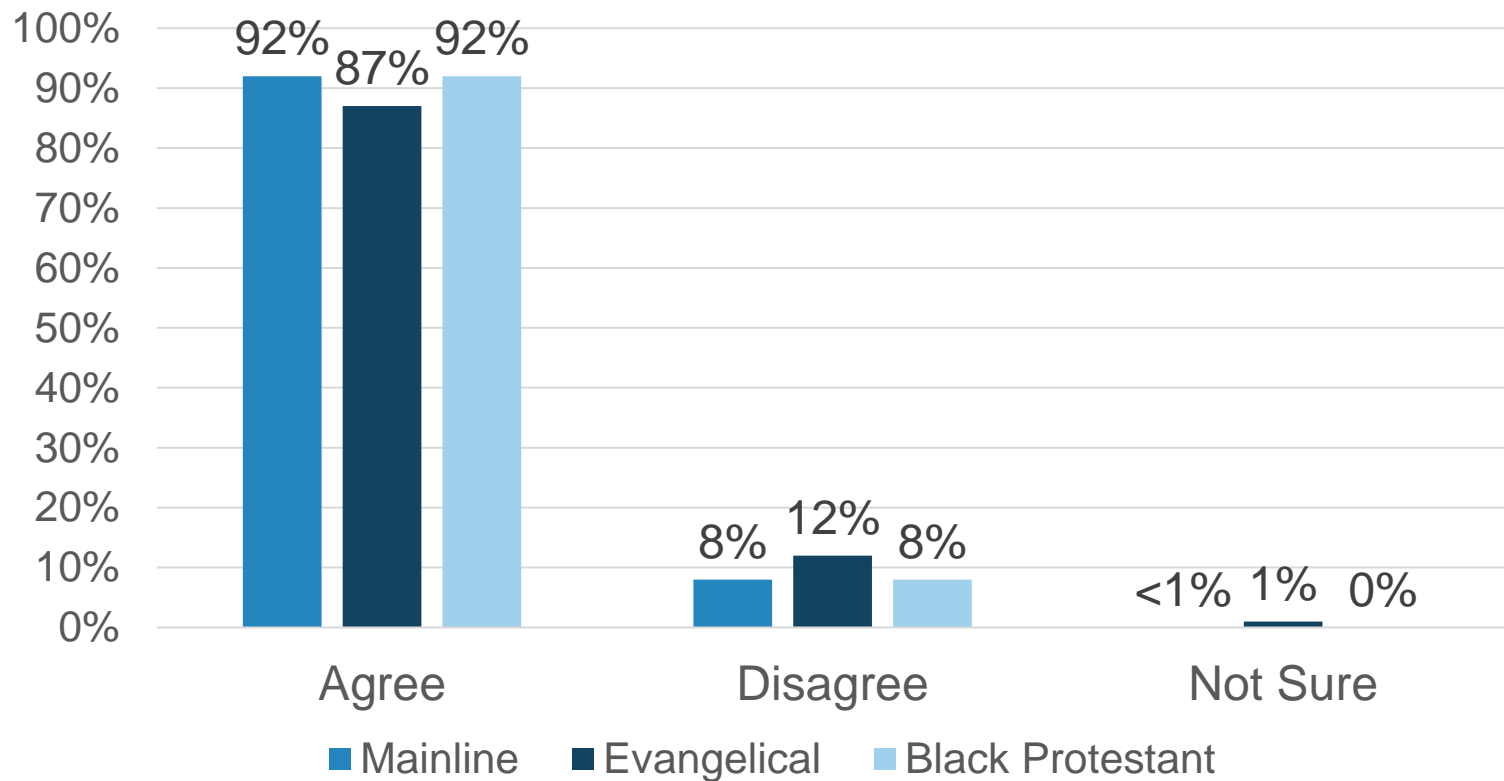


**Lifeway**research

Q14: "I consistently listen to people in our church for signs of conflict." n=387

# Evangelical pastors are a little less likely to agree they consistently listen for signs of conflict in their church

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

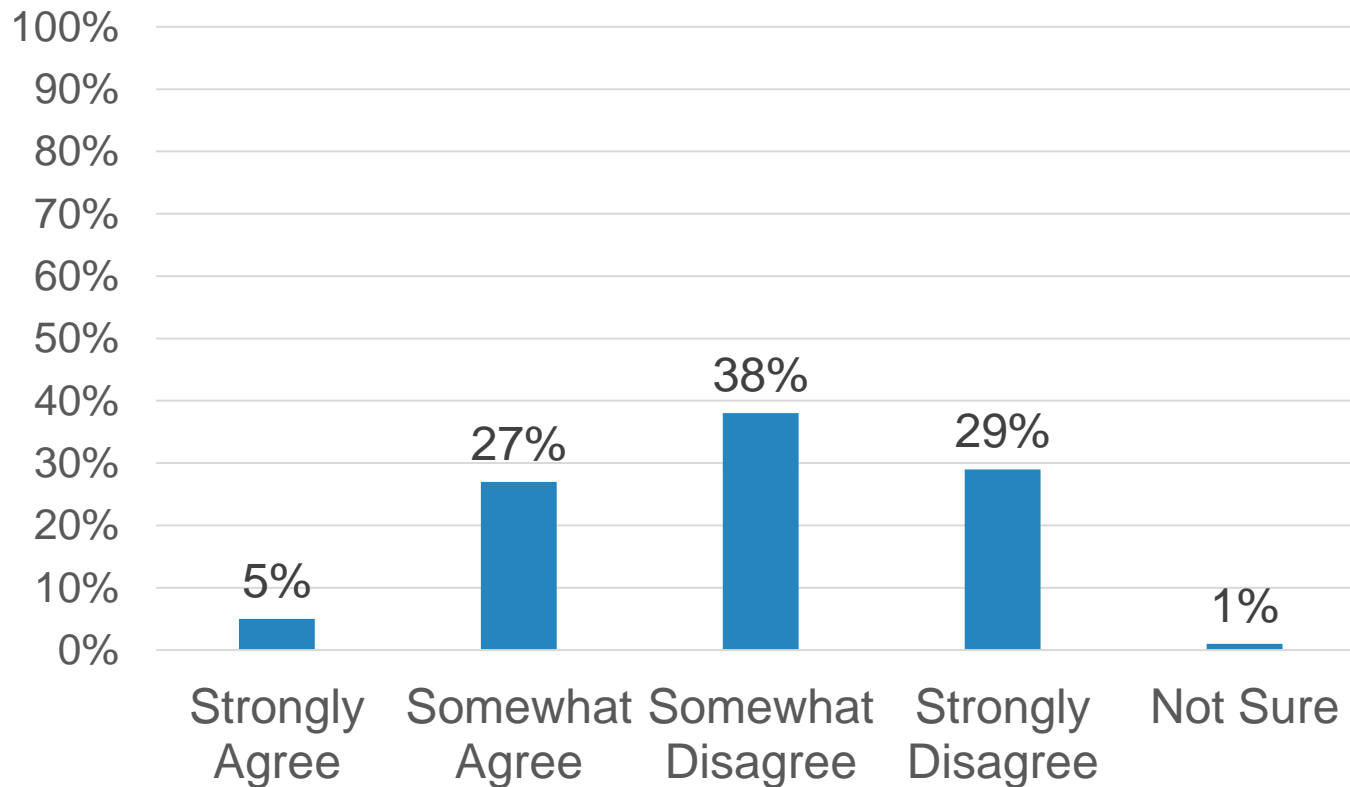


**Lifeway**research

Q14: "I consistently listen to people in our church for signs of conflict." *n*= 1,903

# 32% of pastors agree they often feel the demands of ministry are greater than they can handle

Among Mainline Pastors



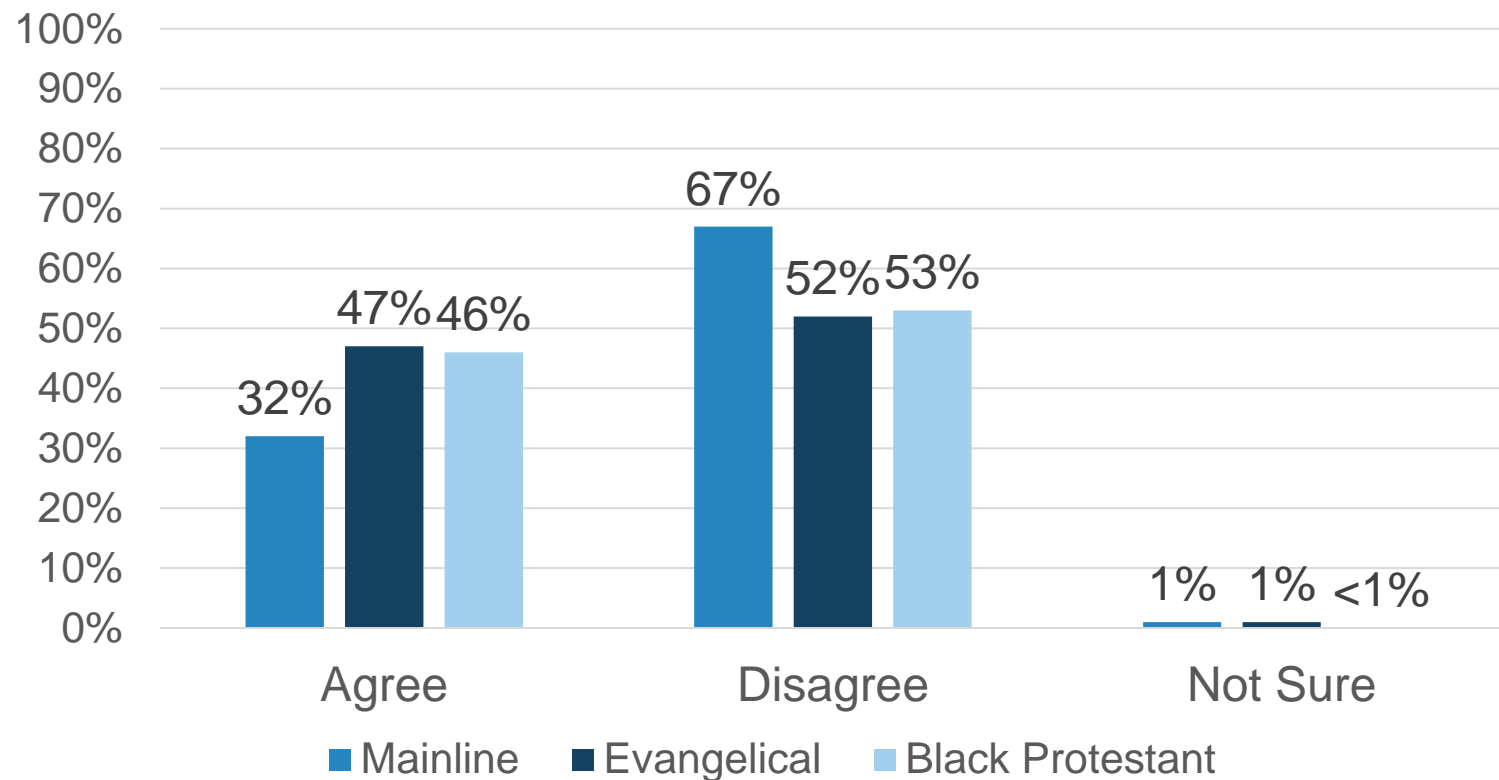
**Lifeway**research

Q15: "I often feel the demands of ministry are greater than I can handle." n=387



# Mainline pastors are the most likely to disagree they often feel the demands of ministry are greater than they can handle

Among Evangelical and Black Protestant Pastors

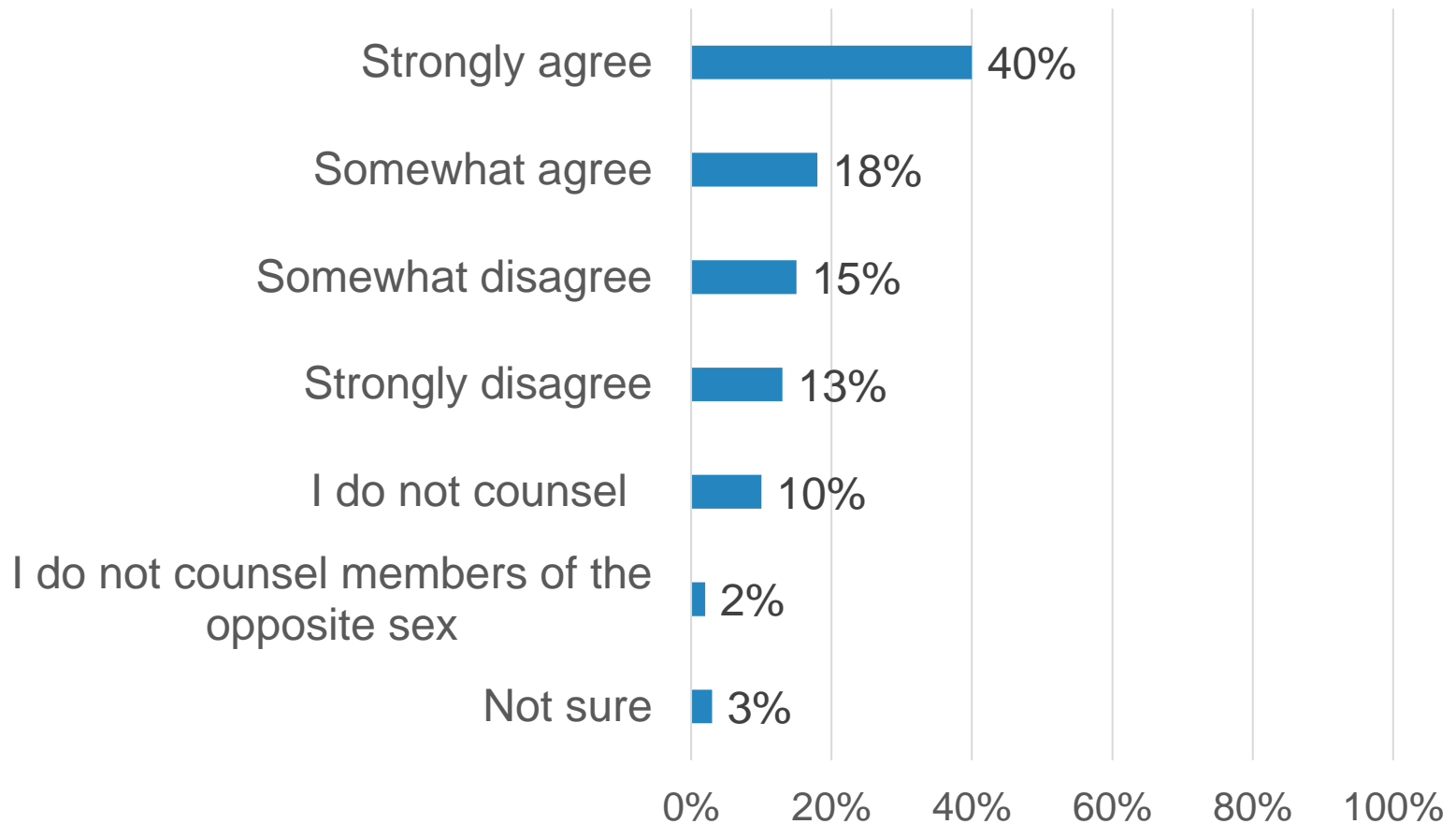


**Lifeway**research

Q15: "I often feel the demands of ministry are greater than I can handle." n= 1,903

# 58% have a staff member present when counseling members of the opposite sex

Among Mainline Pastors

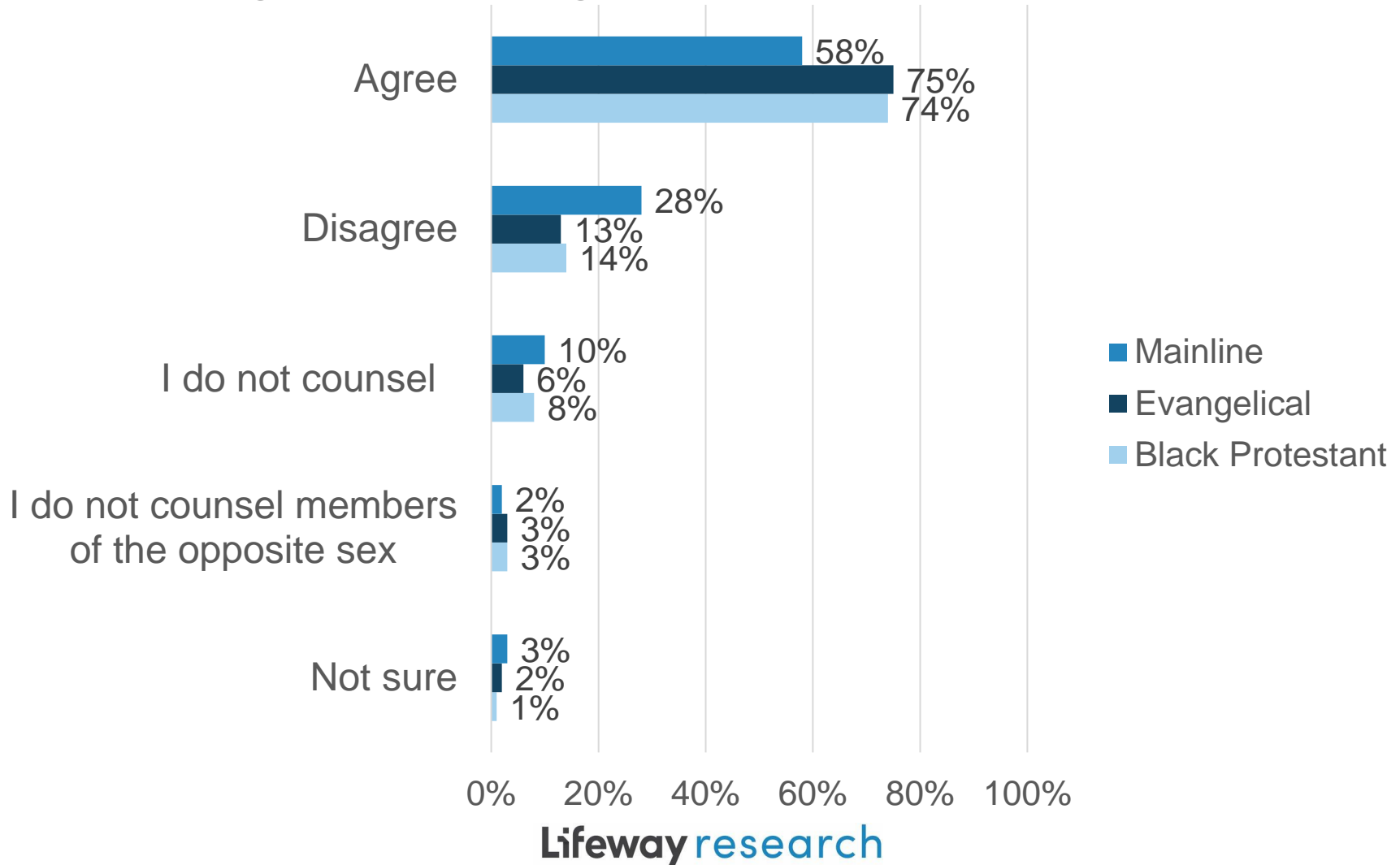


**Lifeway**research

Q16: "I have another staff member present when counseling church members of the opposite sex." n=387

# Mainline pastors are the most likely to disagree they have a staff member present when counseling members of the opposite sex

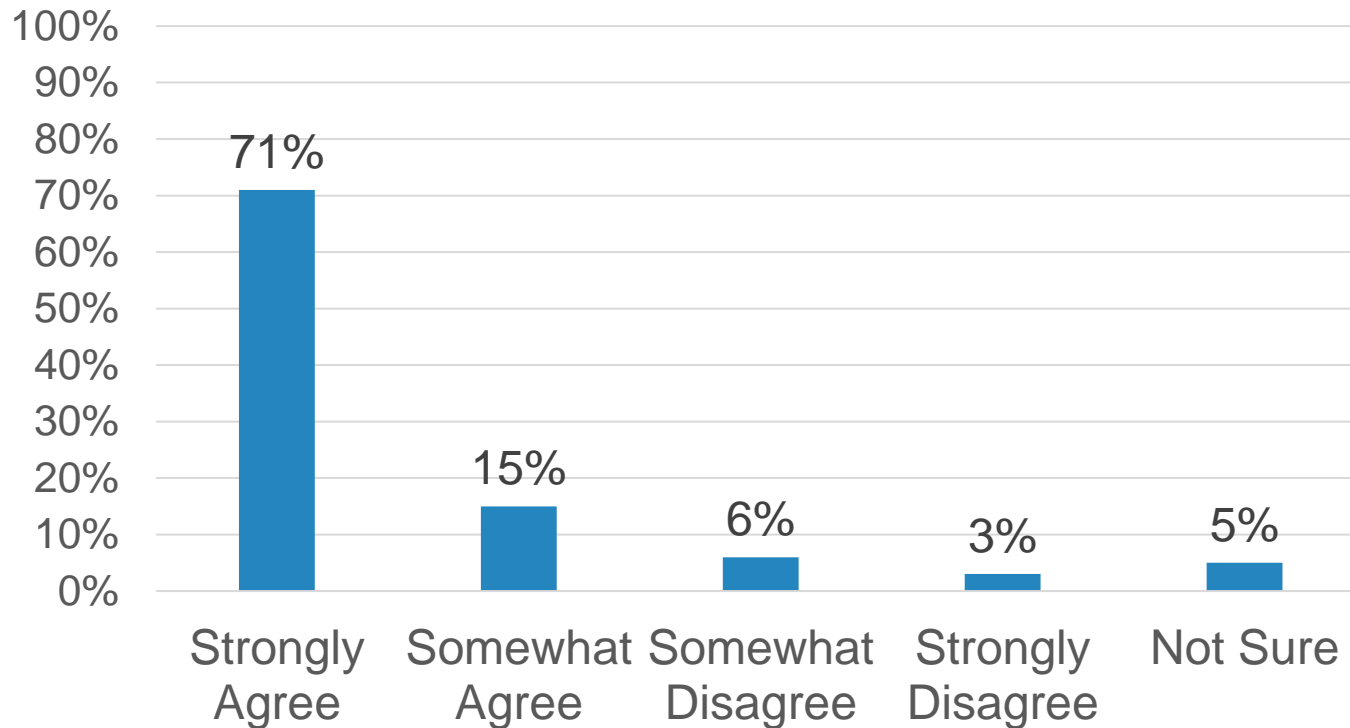
Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors



Q16: "I have another staff member present when counseling church members of the opposite sex." *n*= 1,903

# 86% of pastors refer members to a professional counselor if the situation requires more than two sessions

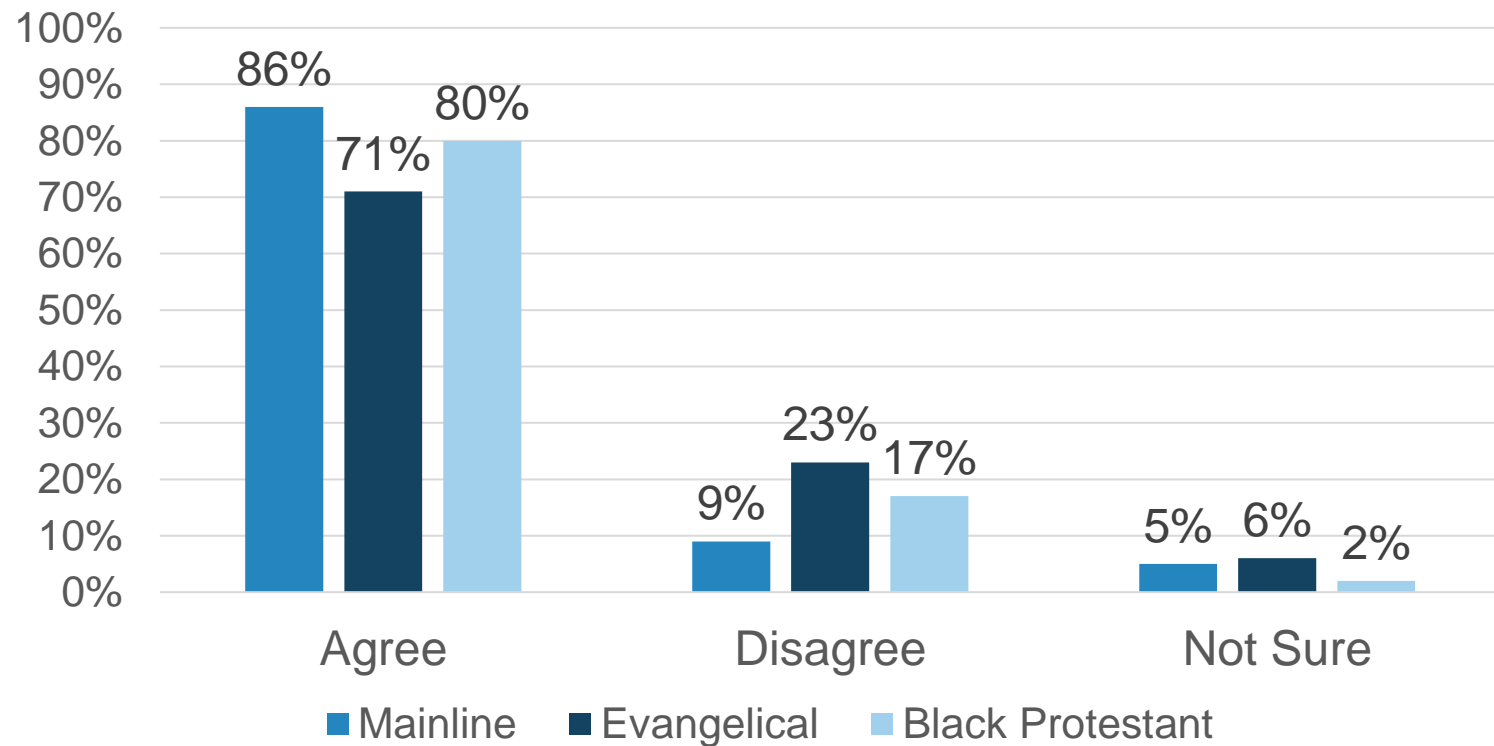
Among Mainline Pastors



**Lifeway**research

# Mainline pastors are the most likely to refer members to a professional counselor if the situation requires more than two sessions

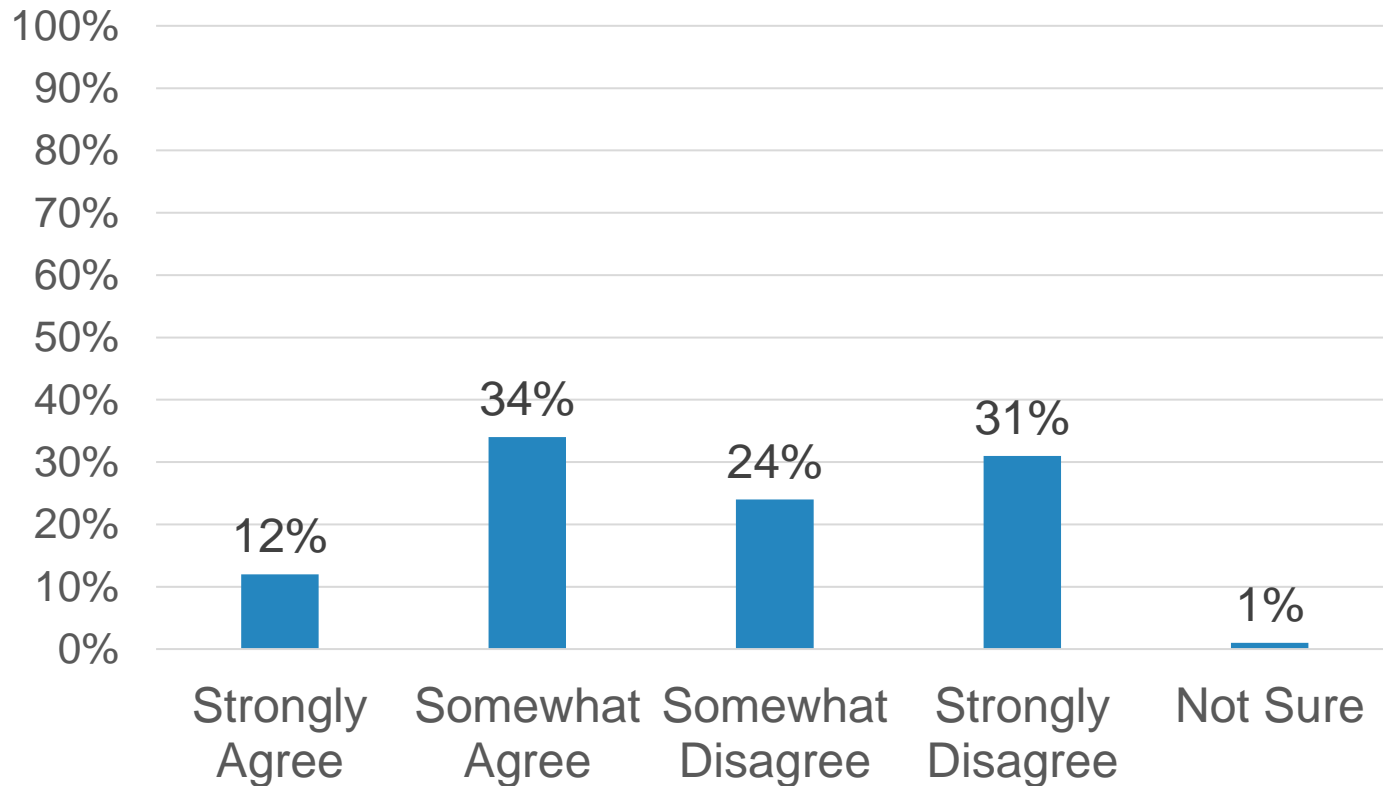
Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors



**Lifeway**research

# 45% of pastors agree they are often concerned about their family's financial security

Among Mainline Pastors

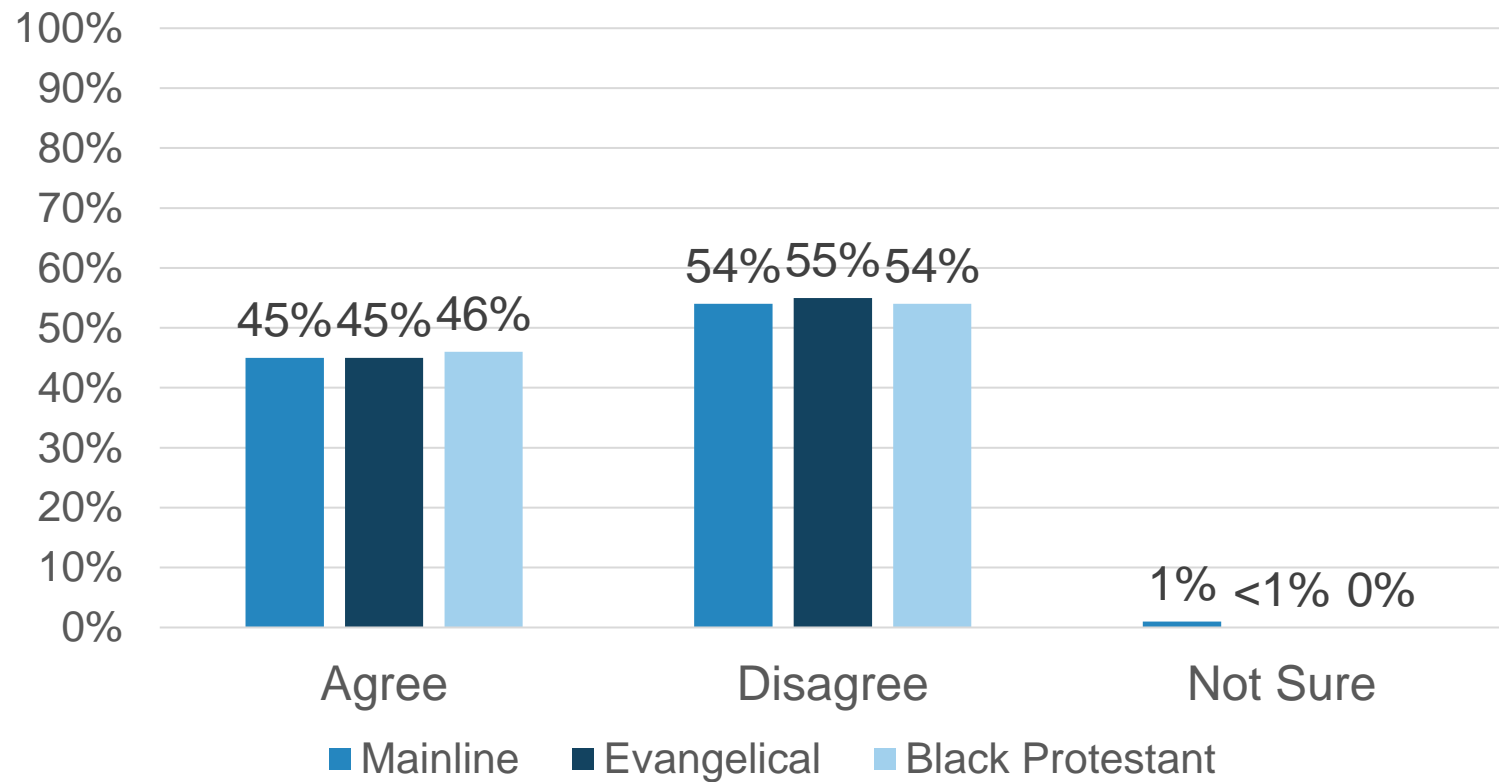


**Lifeway**research

Q18: "I am often concerned about the financial security of my family." n=383

# There is no difference in the frequency that pastors agree they are often concerned about their family's financial security

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

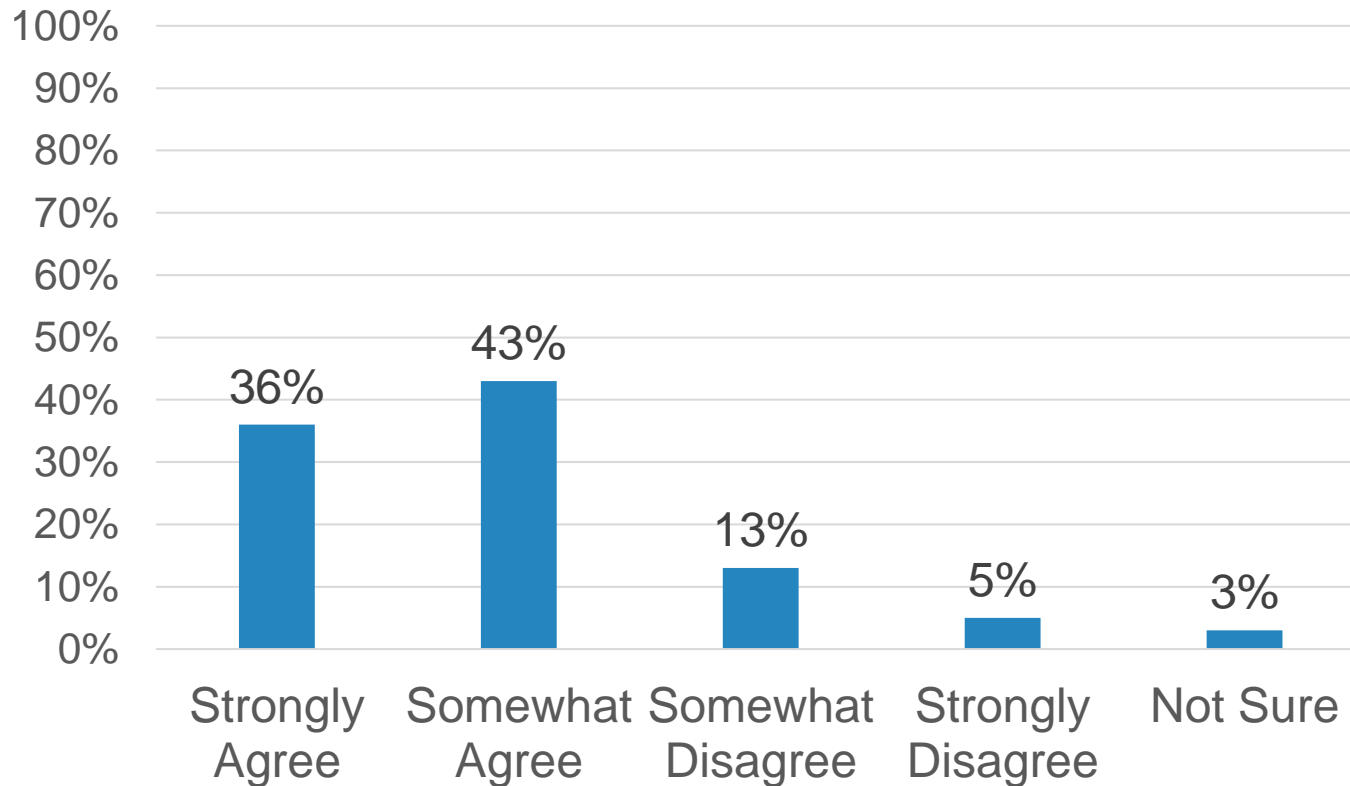


**Lifeway**research

Q18: "I am often concerned about the financial security of my family." n= 1,876

# 79% of pastors agree they deserve the respect of their people

Among Mainline Pastors



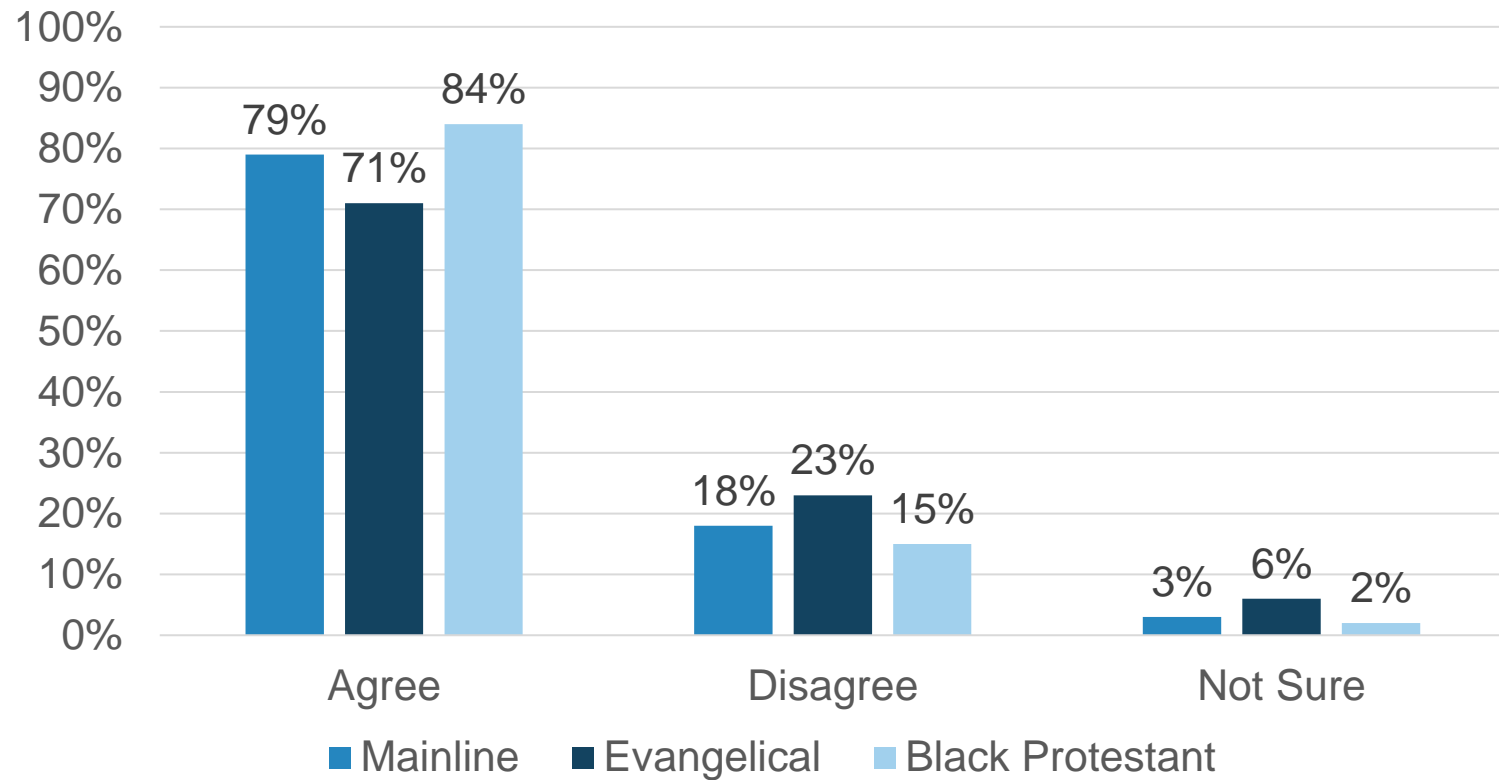
**Lifeway**research

Q19: "I deserve the respect of my people." n=387



# Evangelical pastors are the most likely to disagree they deserve the respect of their people

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

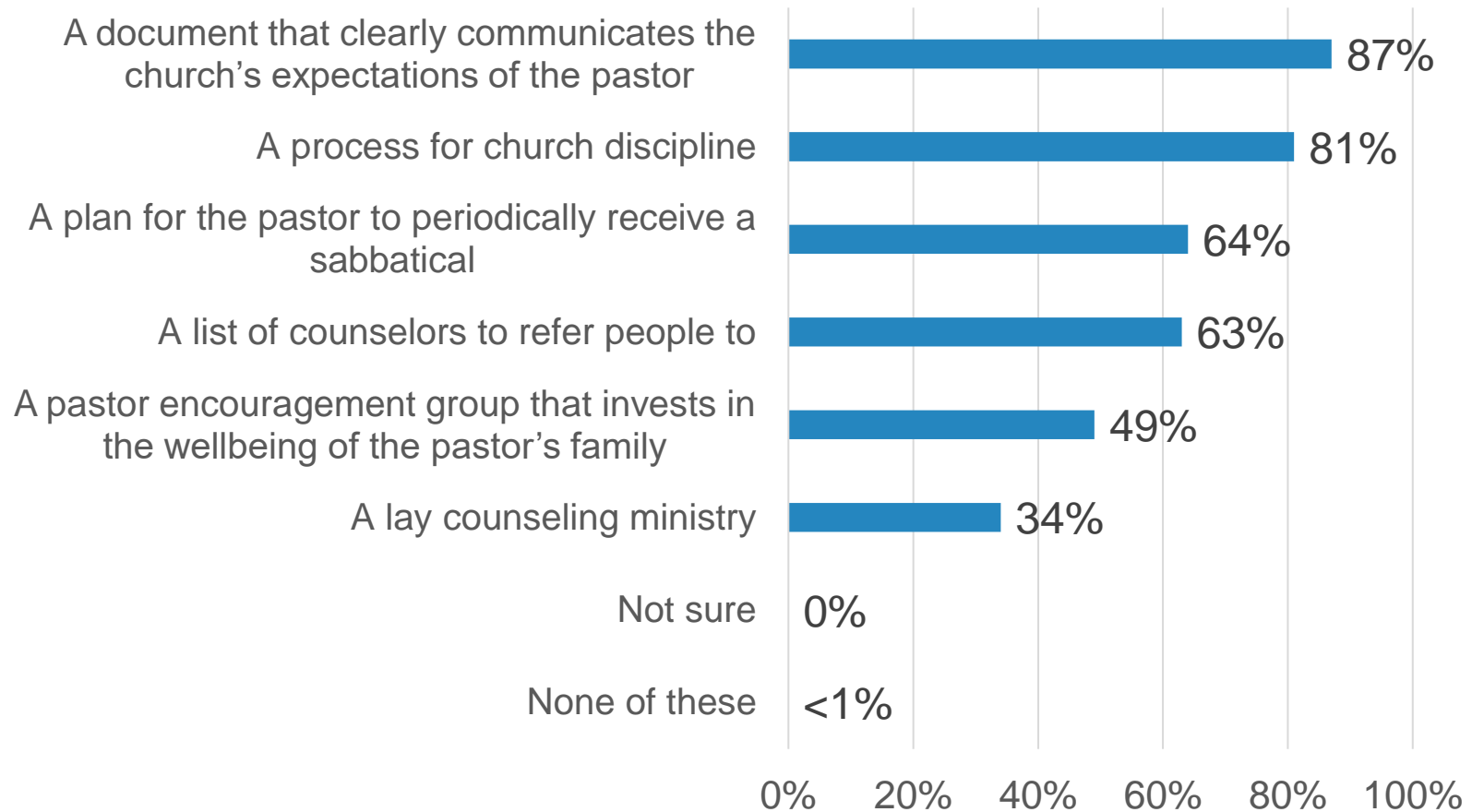


**Lifeway**research

Q19: "I deserve the respect of my people." n= 1,903

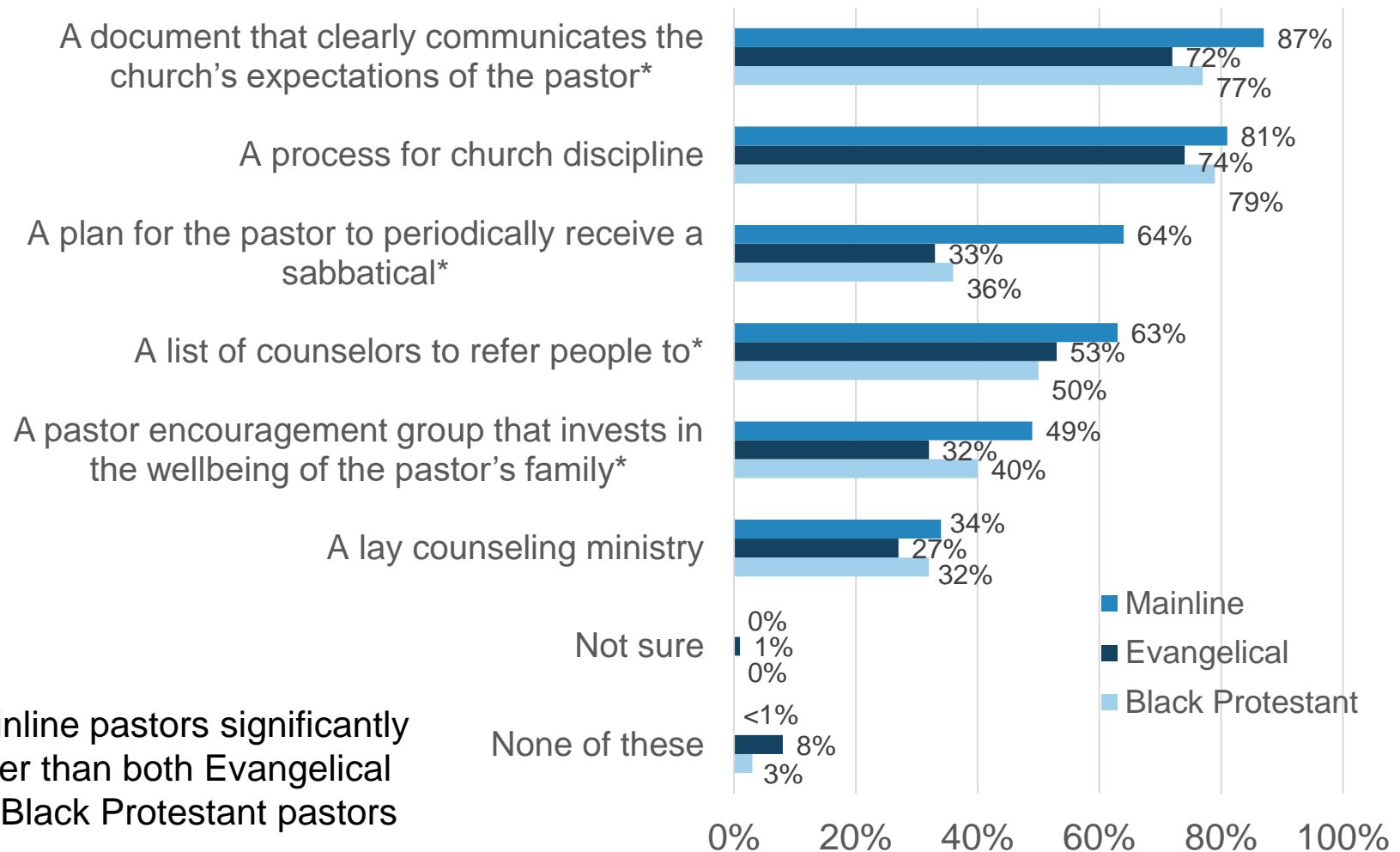
# Almost 7 in 8 churches have a document that communicates expectations of the pastor

## Among Mainline Pastors



# Mainline churches are much more likely to have a sabbatical plan than Evangelical or Black Protestant churches

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

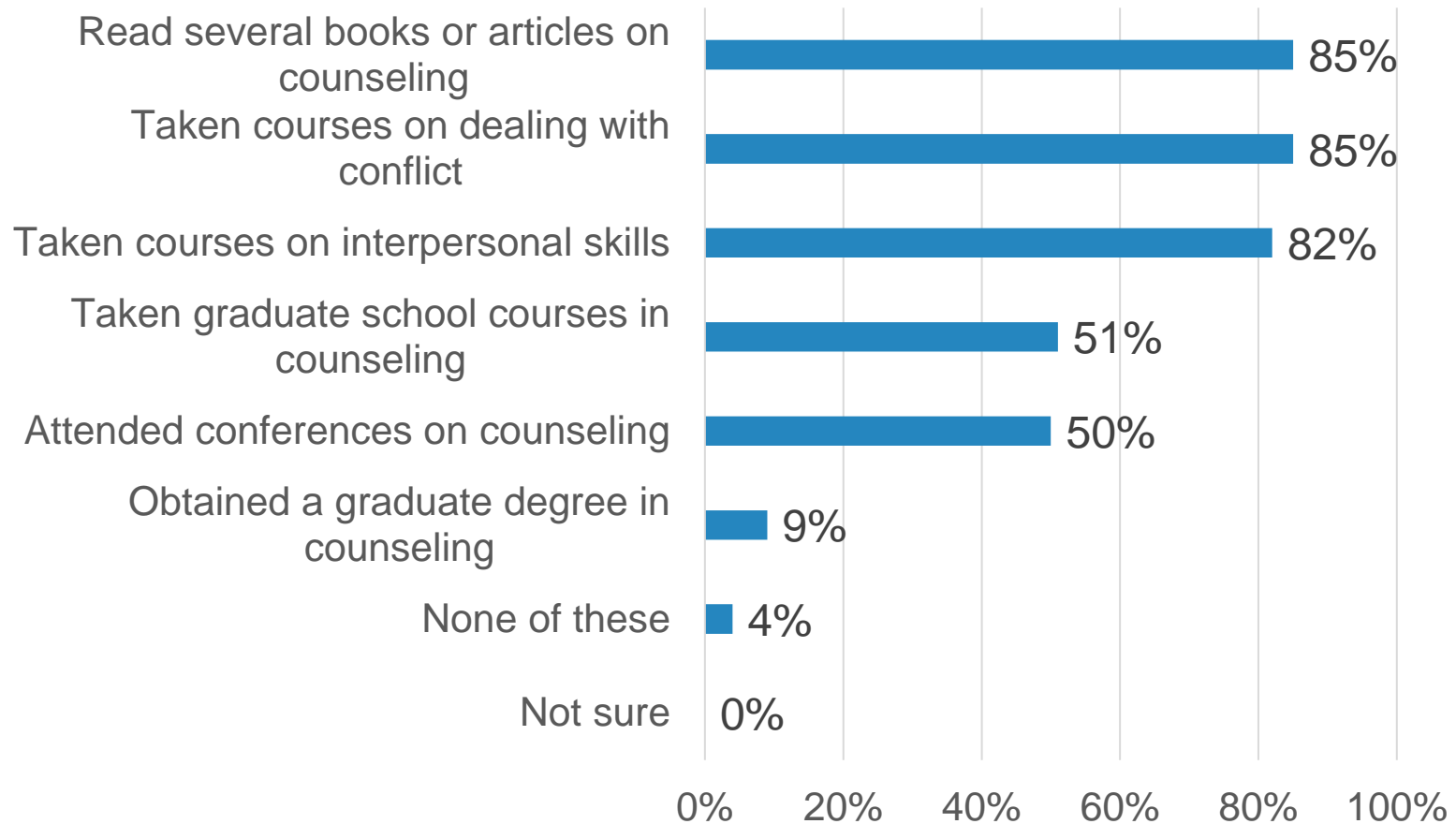


\*Mainline pastors significantly higher than both Evangelical and Black Protestant pastors

Lifeway research

# The majority of pastors have had training and coursework in counseling and conflict

Among Mainline Pastors

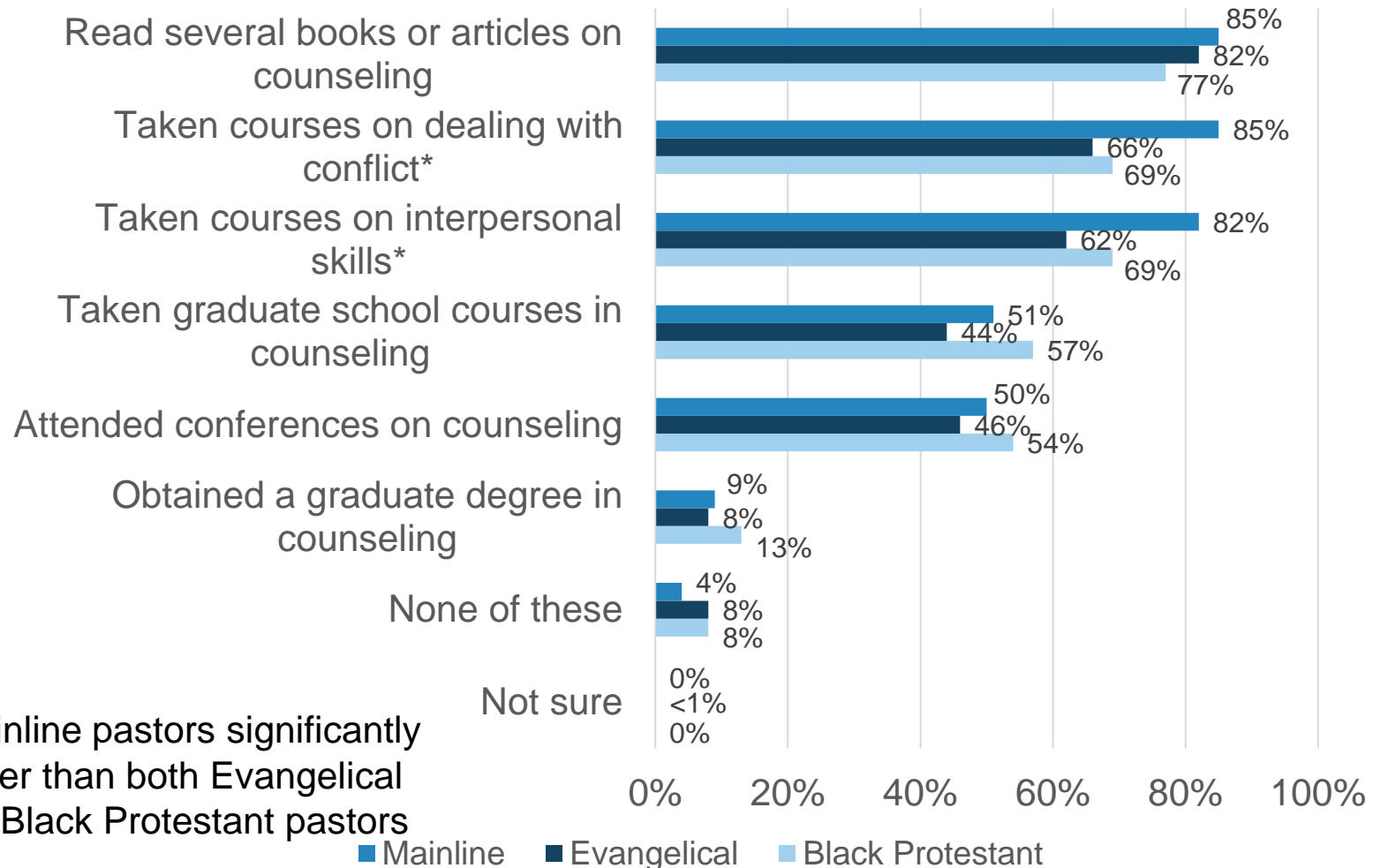


**Lifeway**research

Q22: "Which of the following training, if any, have you received? (Select all that apply)" n=387

# Mainline pastors are much more likely to have had courses on interpersonal skills

Among Mainline, Evangelical and Black Protestant Pastors

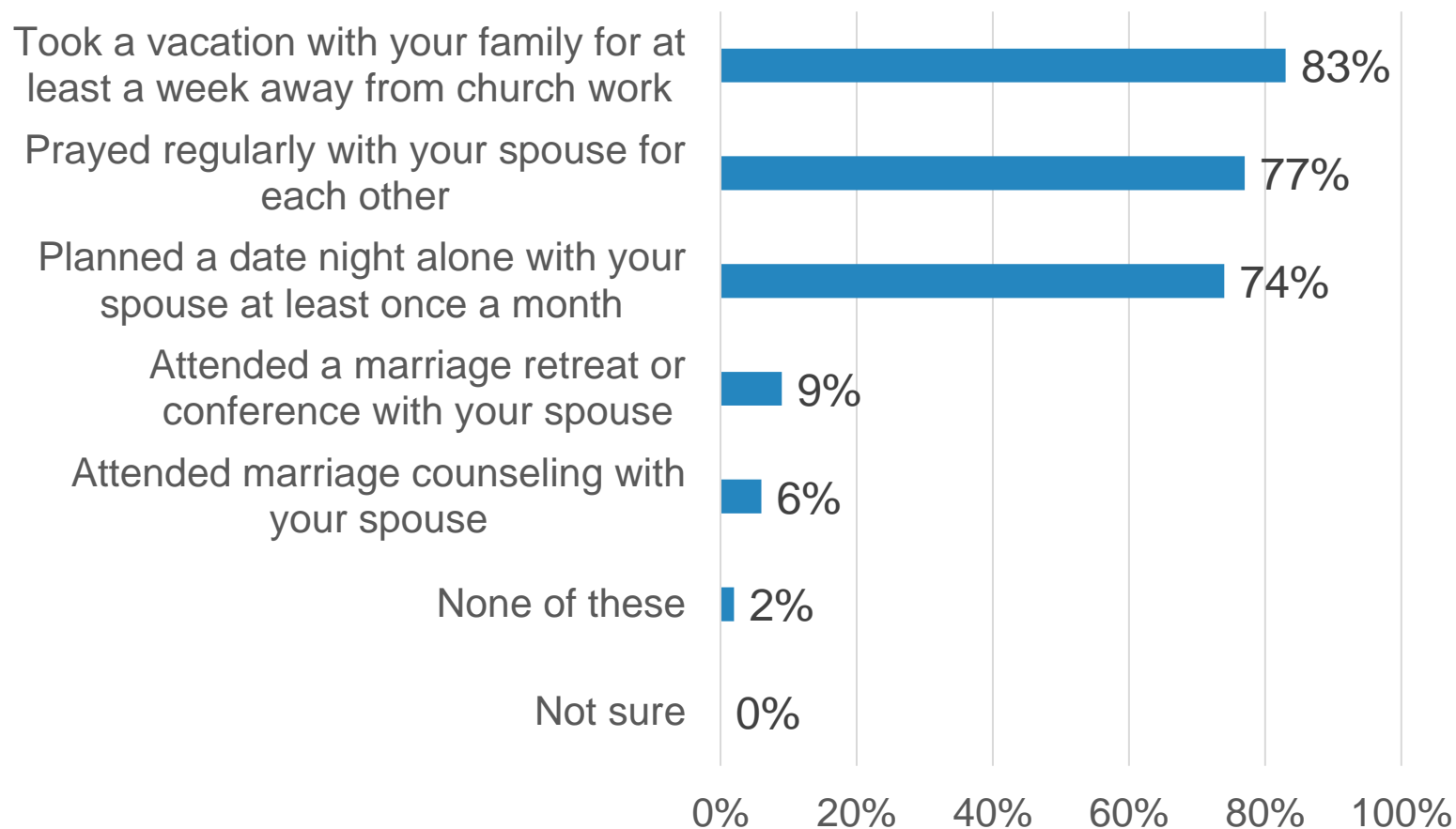


Lifeway research

Q22: "Which of the following training, if any, have you received? (Select all that apply)" n= 1,903

# 83% of pastors have had a vacation with their family in the past year

Among Married Mainline Pastors

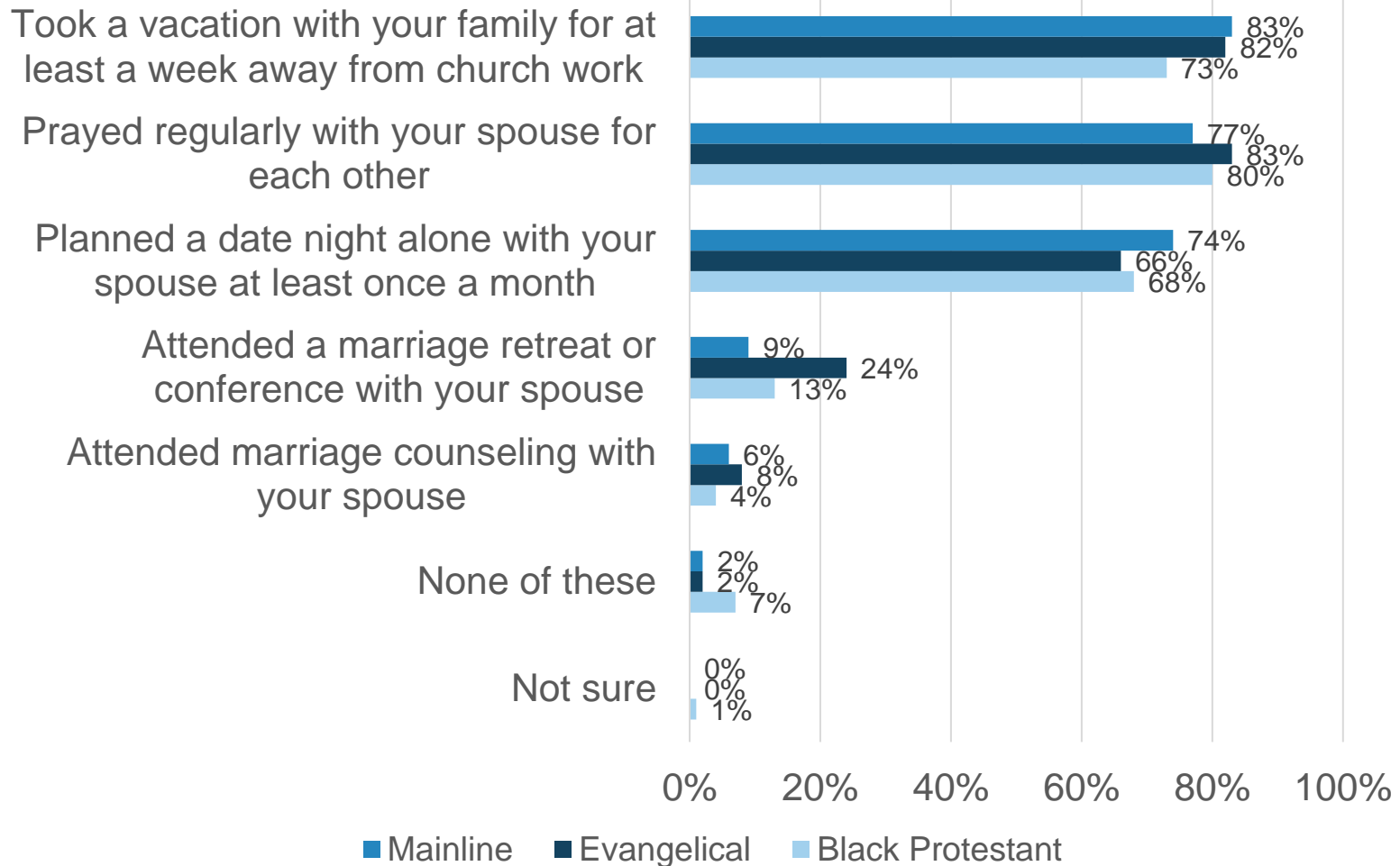


**Lifeway**research

Q23: "Which of the following activities have you done this past year? (Select all that apply)" n=318

# Black Protestant pastors are the least likely to have had a vacation with their family in the past year

Among Married Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

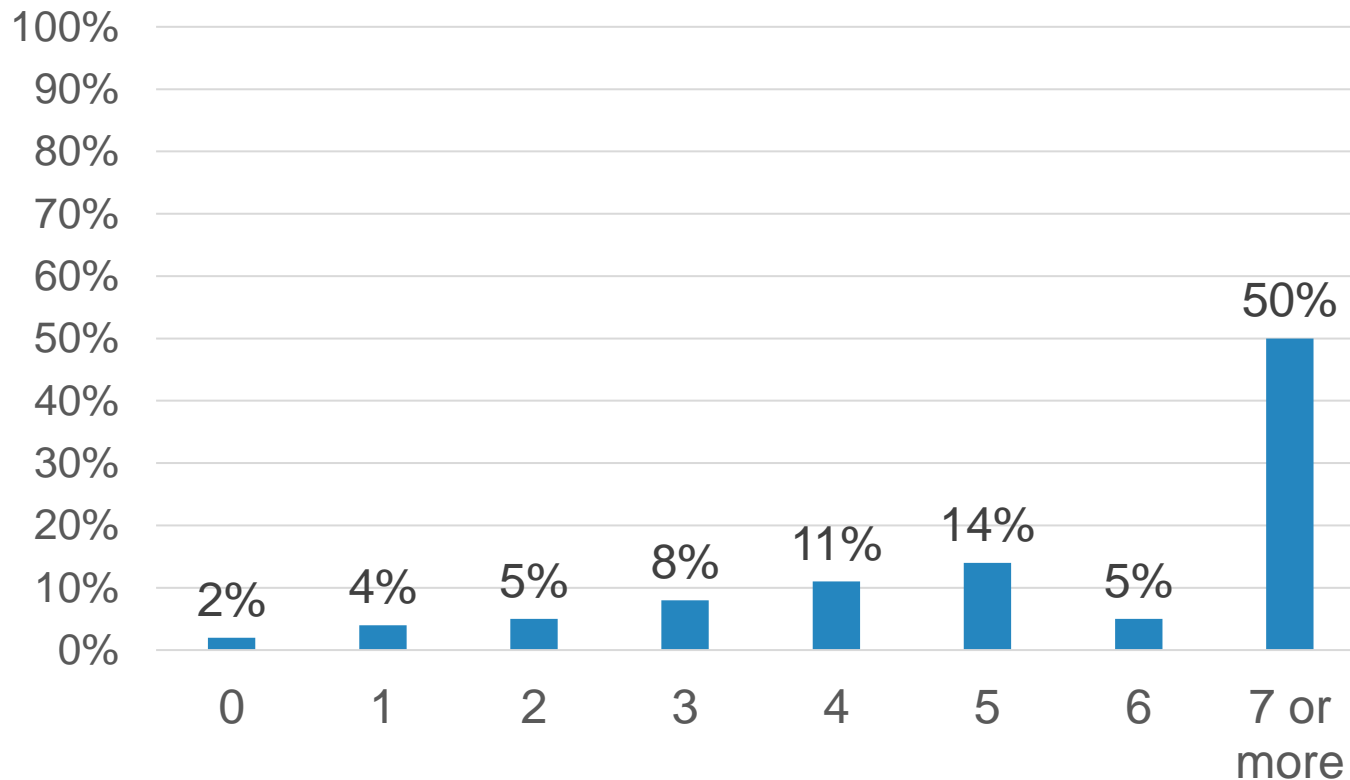


Lifewayresearch

Q23: "Which of the following activities have you done this past year? (Select all that apply)" *n* = 1,718

# 50% of pastors spend time alone with the Lord every day of the week

Among Mainline Pastors

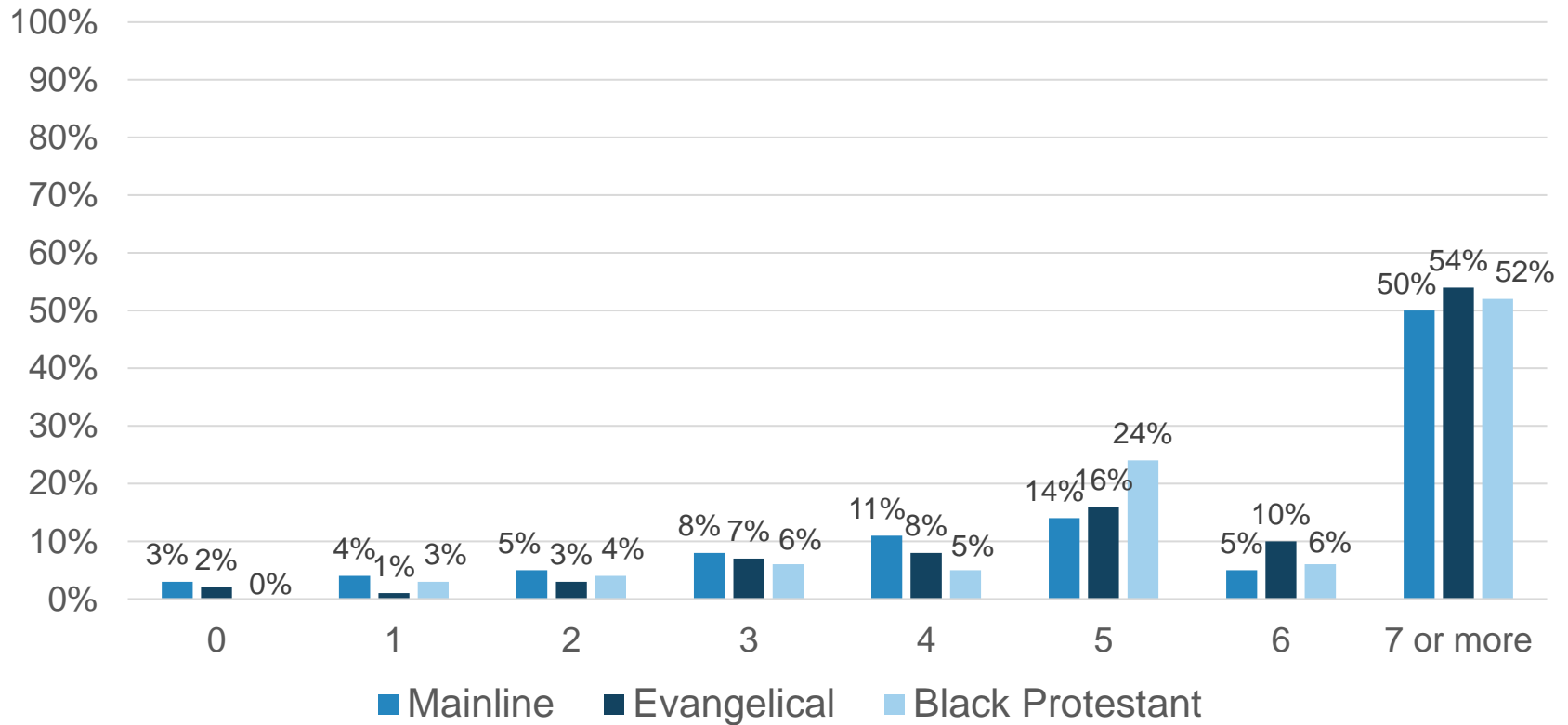


Lifewayresearch



# Mainline pastors are the least likely to spend time alone with the Lord 5 or more days a week

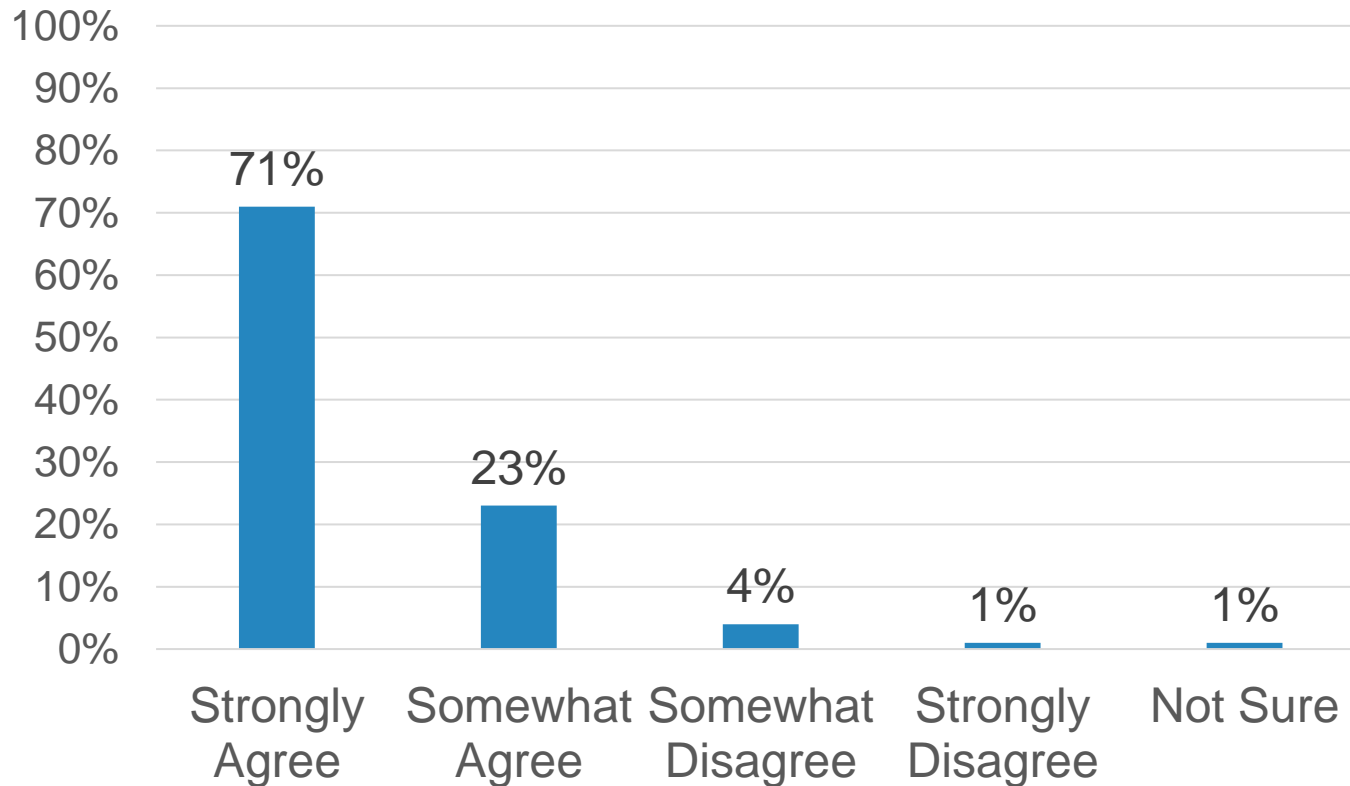
Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors



Lifewayresearch

# 94% of pastors agree their spouse is very satisfied with their marriage today

Among Mainline Pastors

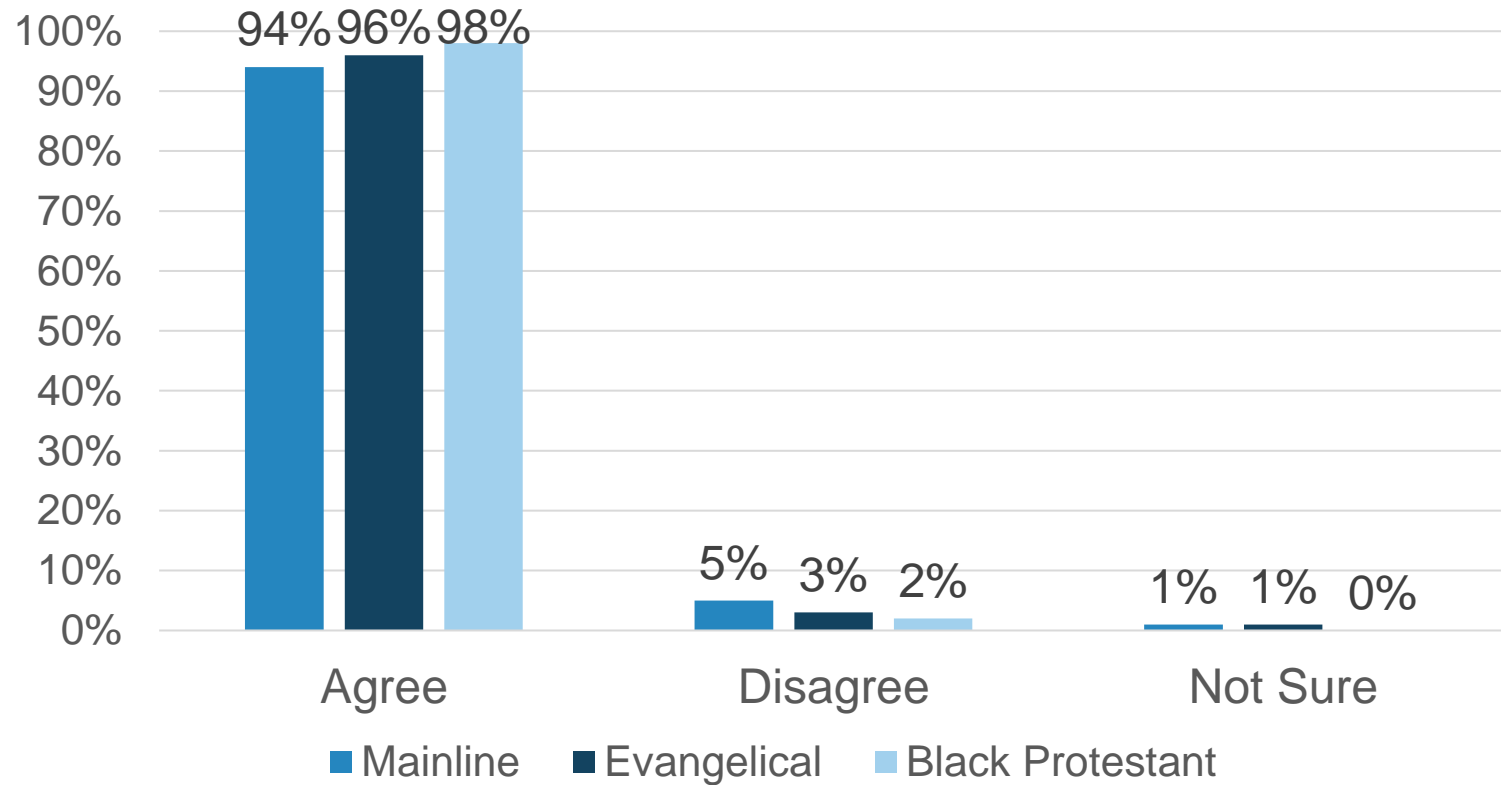


**Lifeway**research

Q25: "My spouse is very satisfied with my marriage today." n=318

# There is no difference in the frequency that pastors agree their spouse is very satisfied with their marriage today

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

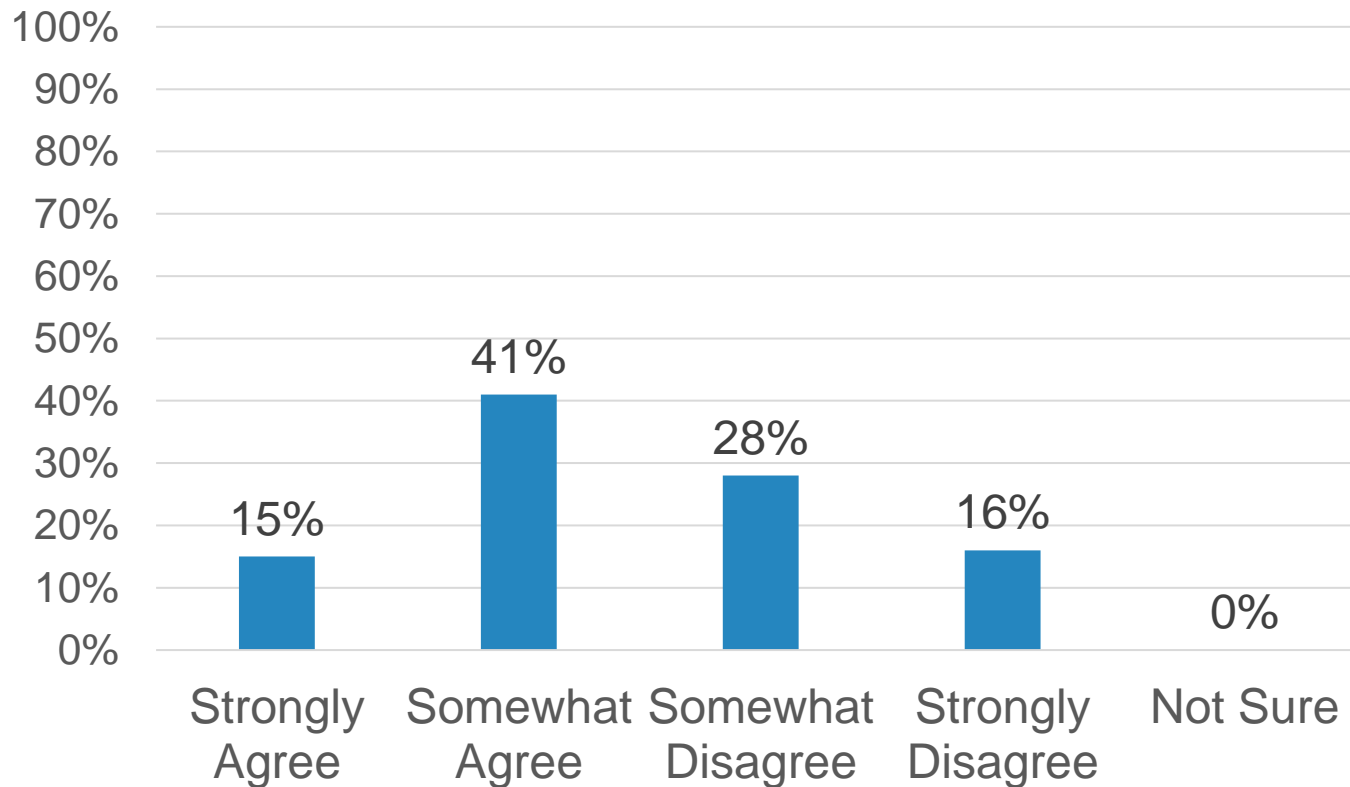


**Lifeway**research

Q25: "My spouse is very satisfied with my marriage today." *n*= 1,718

# 56% of pastors agree their role is frequently overwhelming

Among Mainline Pastors

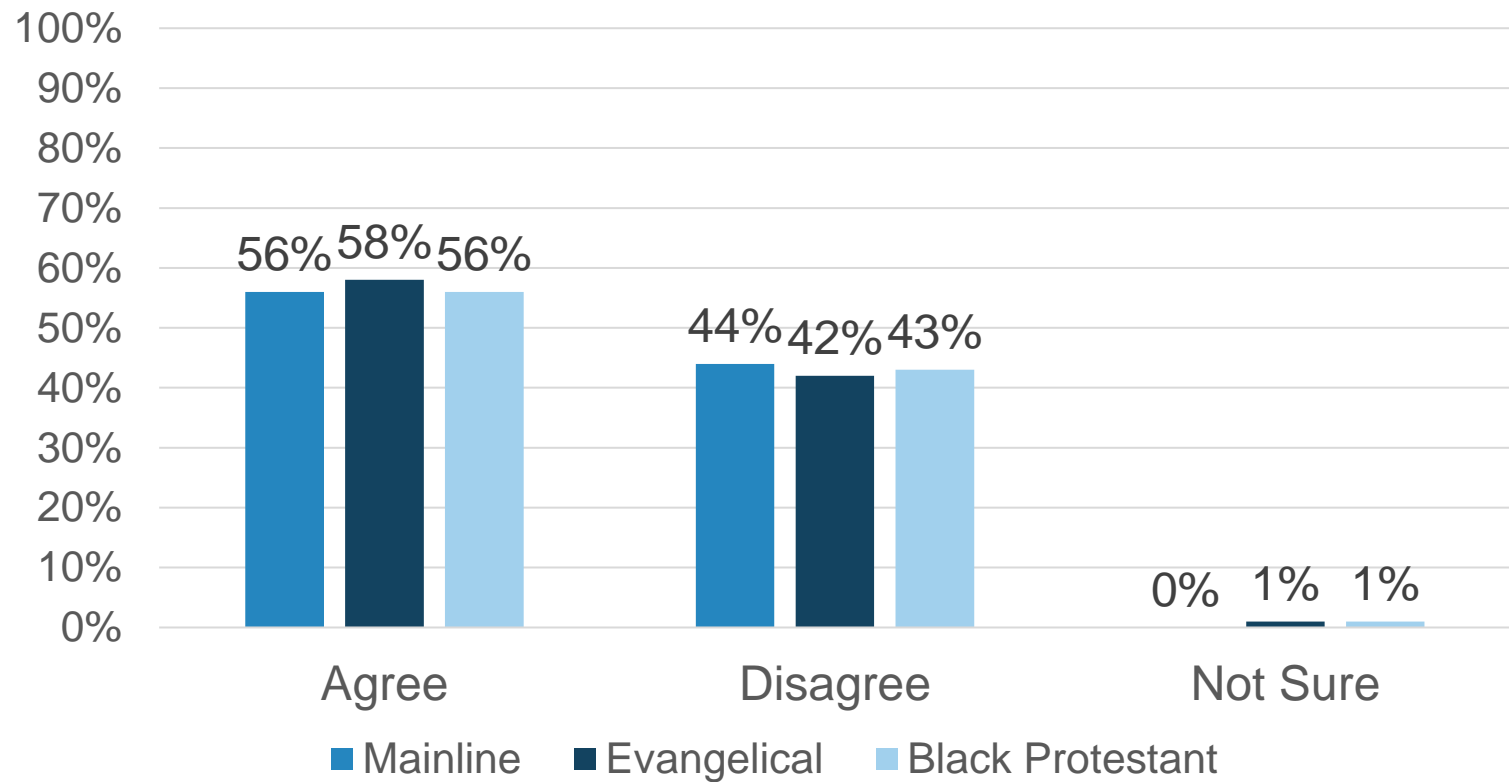


**Lifeway**research

Q26: "The role of being a pastor is frequently overwhelming." n=387

# There is no difference in the frequency that pastors agree their role is frequently overwhelming

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

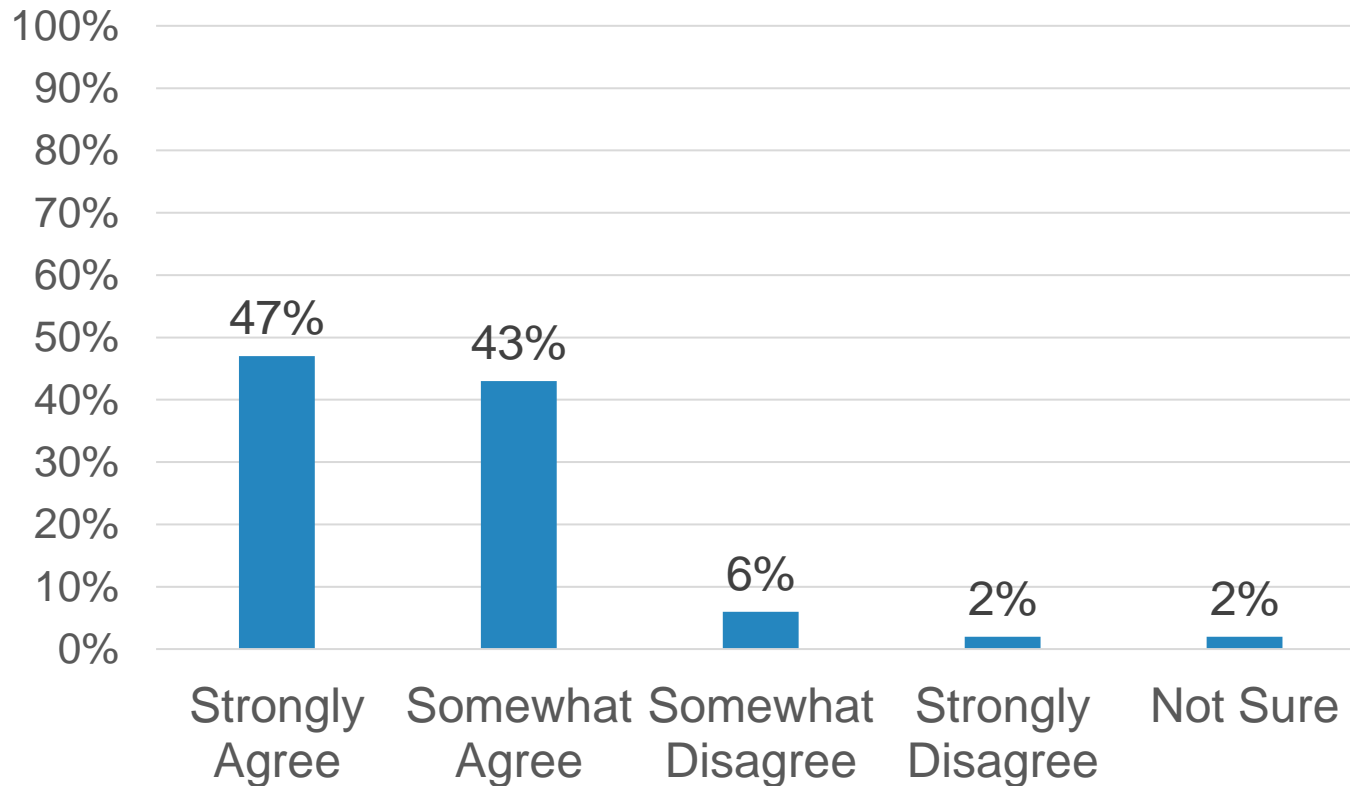


**Lifeway**research

Q26: "The role of being a pastor is frequently overwhelming." *n*= 1,903

# 90% of pastors agree they invest in processes and behaviors to prevent conflict

Among Mainline Pastors

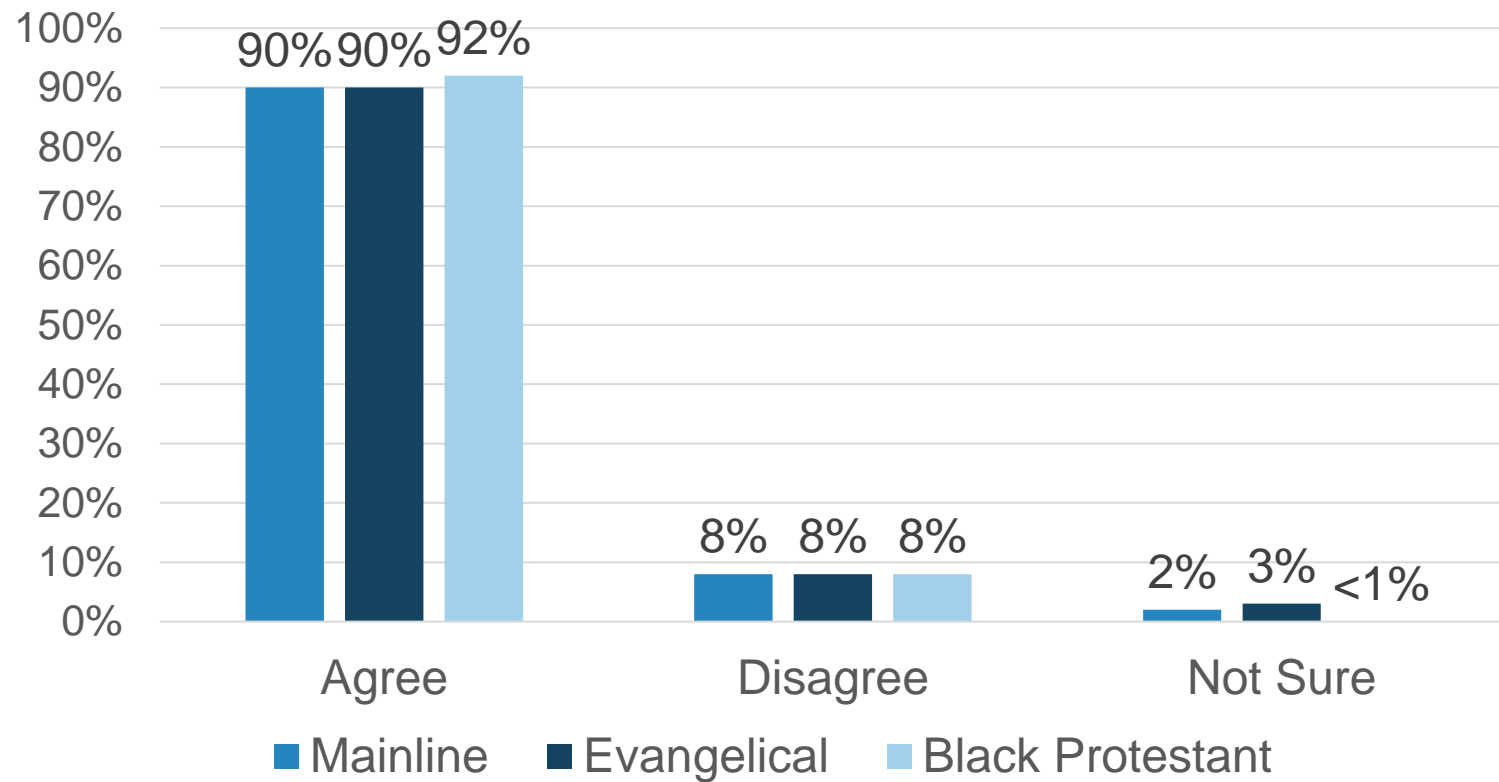


**Lifeway**research

Q27: "I invest in processes and behaviors to prevent conflict." n=387

# There is no difference in the proportion of pastors who agree they invest in processes and behaviors to prevent conflict

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

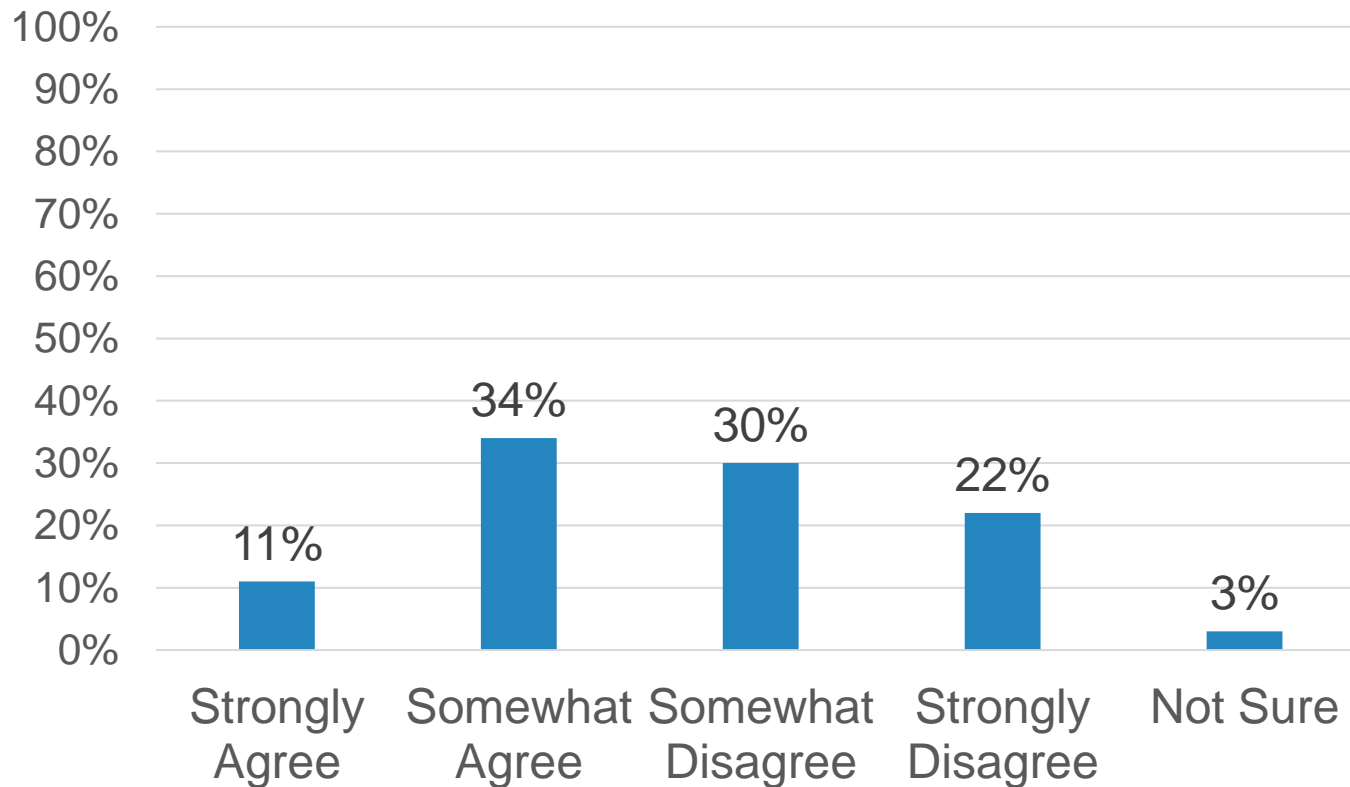


**Lifeway**research

Q27: "I invest in processes and behaviors to prevent conflict." *n*= 1,903

# 45% of pastors agree their church would not have achieved the progress it has without them

Among Mainline Pastors



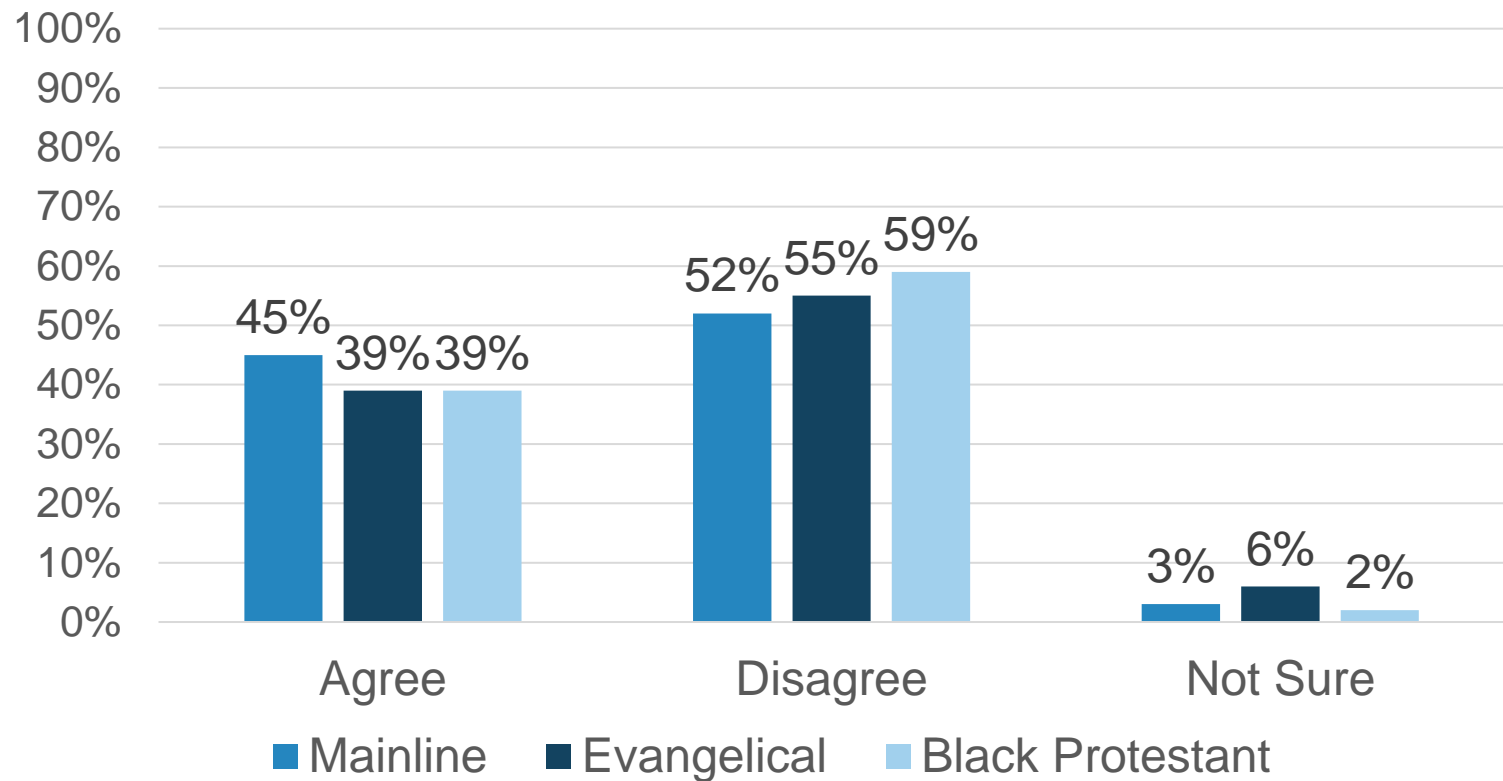
**Lifeway**research

Q28: "This church would not have achieved the progress it has without me." n=387



# Mainline pastors are more likely to agree their church would not have achieved the progress it has without them than Evangelical pastors

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

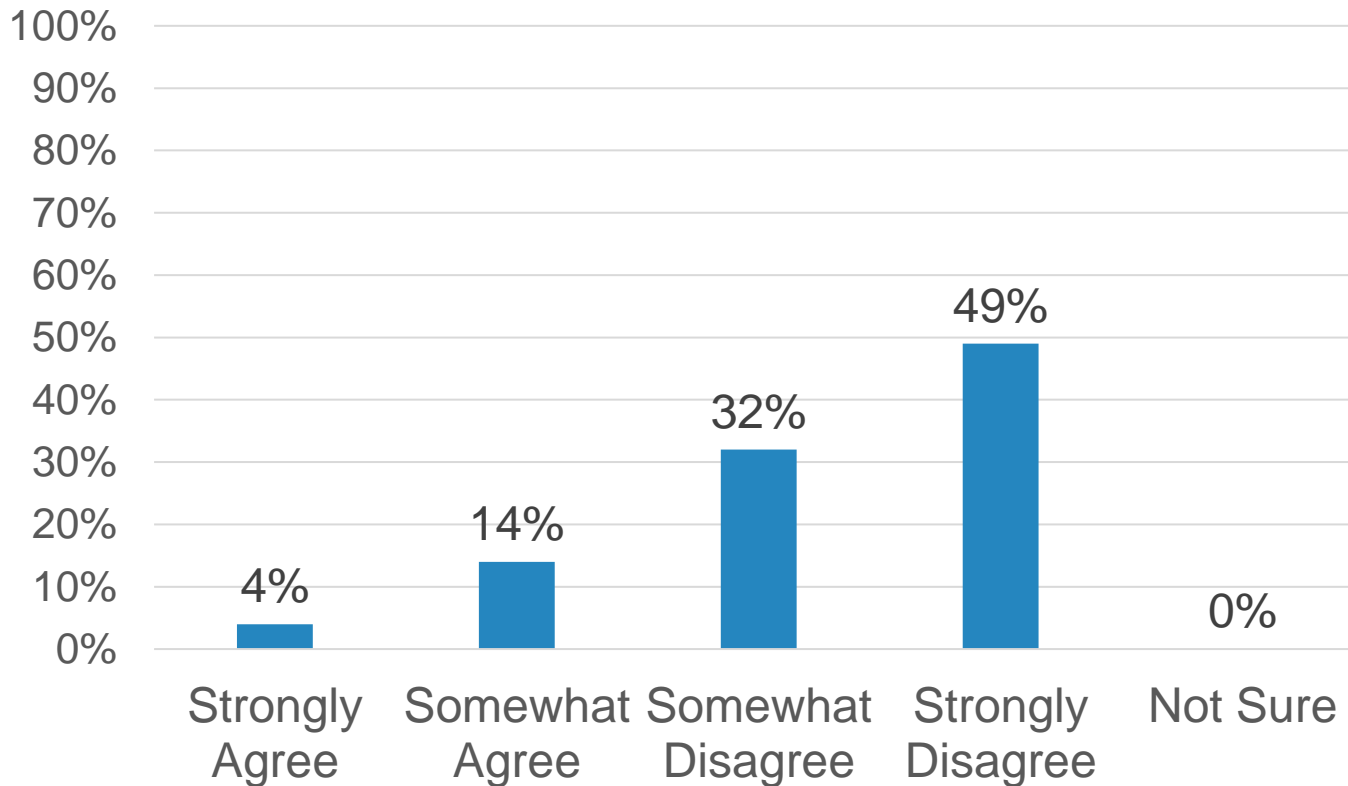


**Lifeway**research

Q28: "This church would not have achieved the progress it has without me." n= 1,903

# 19% of pastors agree their church has unrealistic expectations of them

Among Mainline Pastors

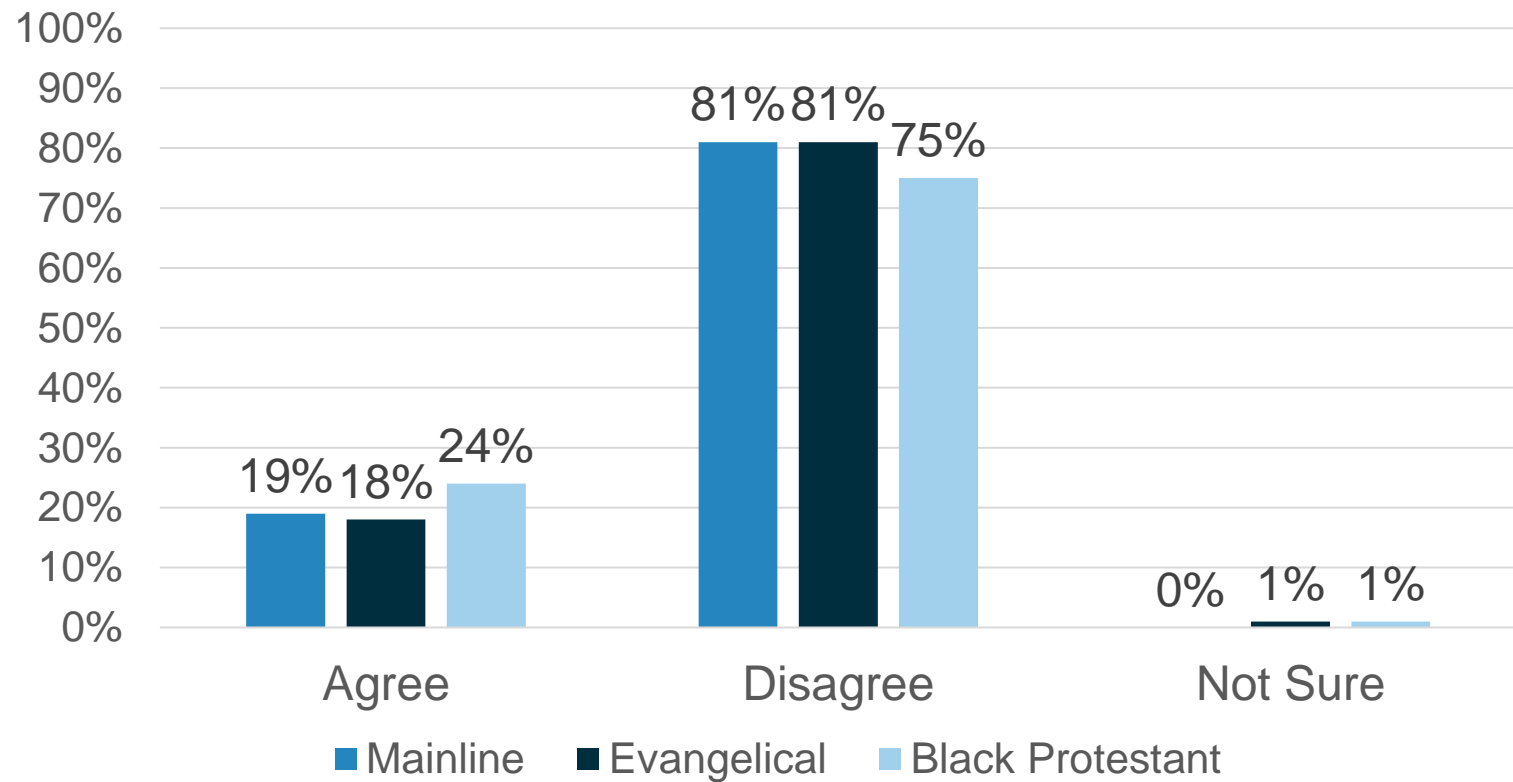


**Lifeway**research

Q29: "My church has unrealistic expectations of me." n=387

# Black Protestant pastors are more likely to agree their church has unrealistic expectations of them than Evangelical pastors

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

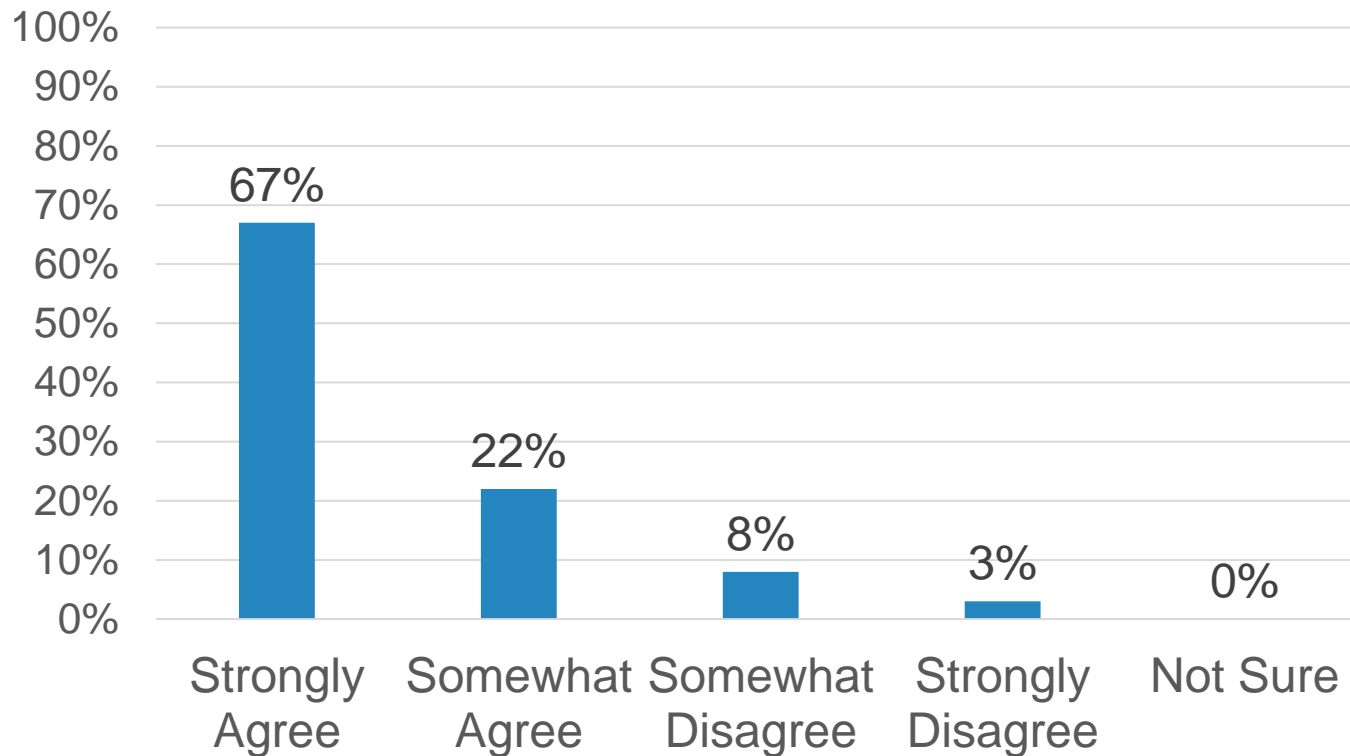


**Lifeway**research

Q29: "My church has unrealistic expectations of me." *n* = 1,903

# 88% of pastors agree they “unplug” from ministerial work and have a day of rest at least one day a week

Among Mainline Pastors

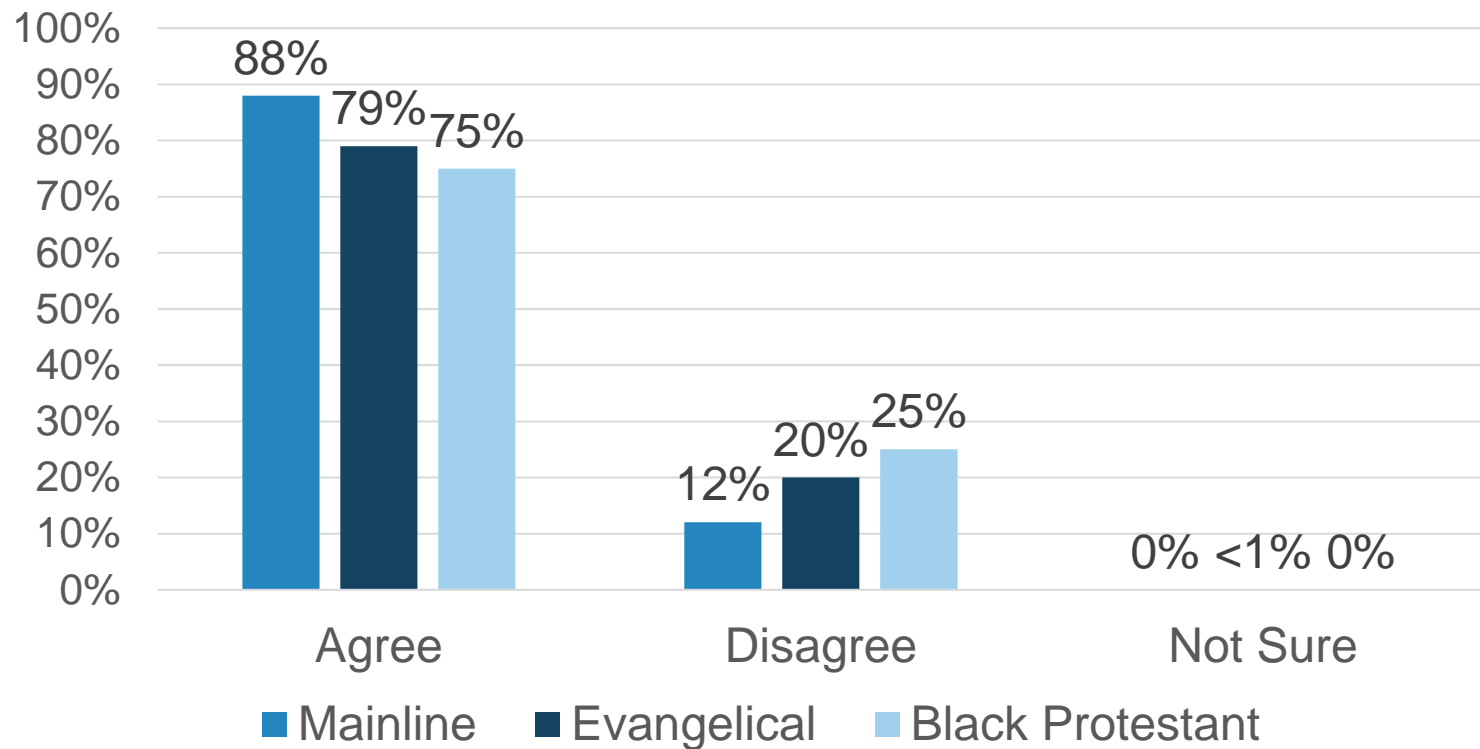


**Lifeway**research

Q30: "At least one day a week I "unplug" from ministerial work and have a day of rest." n=387

# Mainline pastors are the most likely to agree they “unplug” from ministerial work and have a day of rest at least one day a week

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

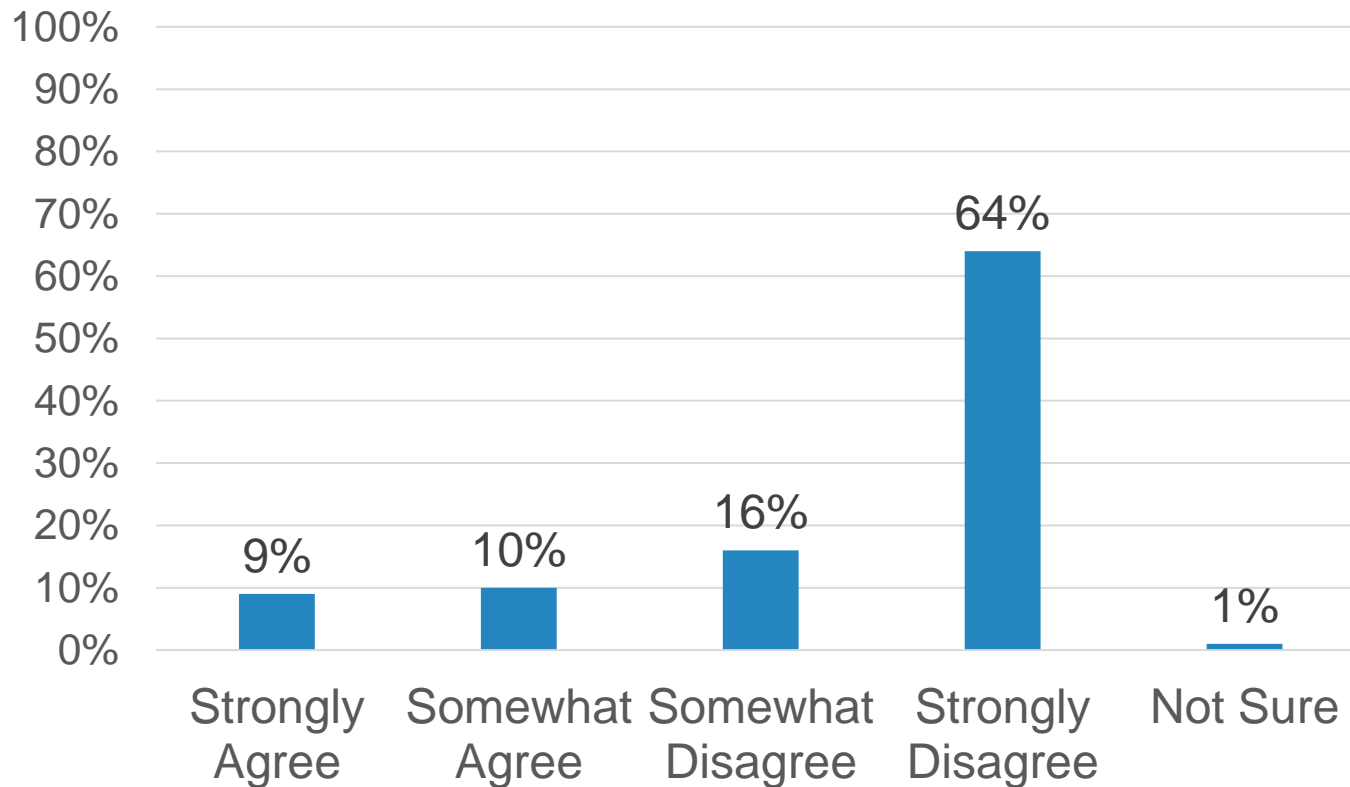


Lifewayresearch

Q30: "At least one day a week I "unplug" from ministerial work and have a day of rest." n= 1,903

# 19% of pastors agree their church has experienced significant conflict this last year

Among Mainline Pastors

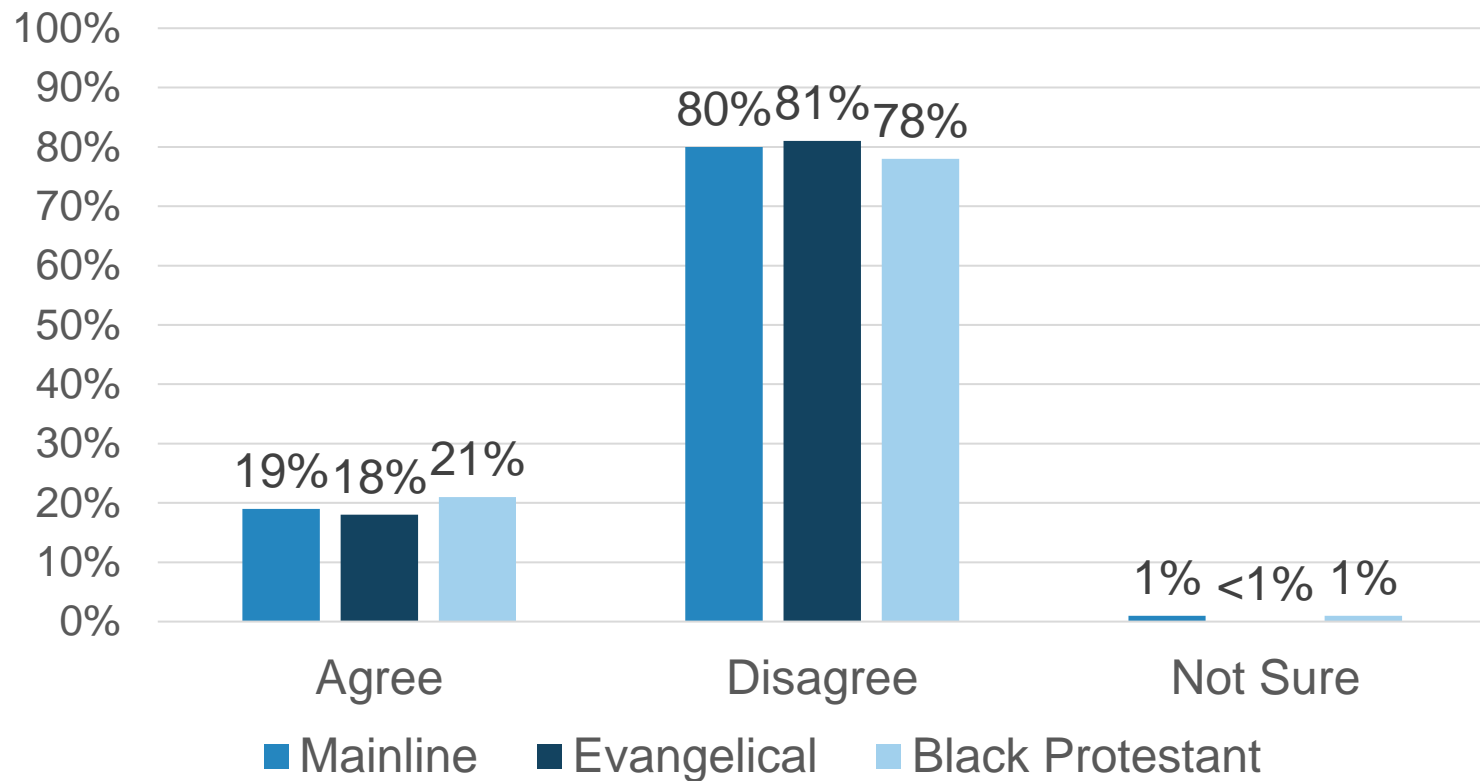


**Lifeway**research

Q31: "Our church has experienced significant conflict this last year." n=387

# There is no difference in the frequency that pastors agree their church has experienced significant conflict this last year

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

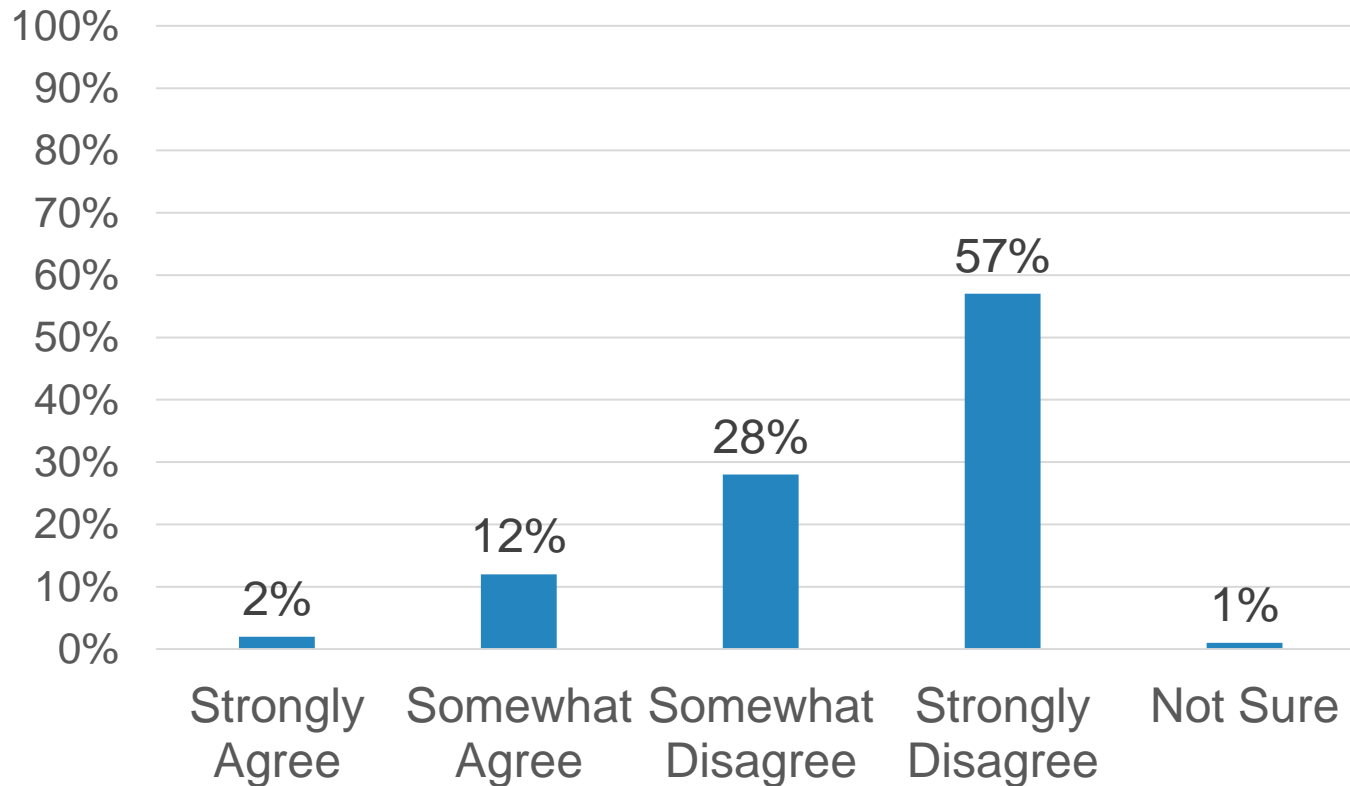


**Lifeway**research

Q31: "Our church has experienced significant conflict this last year." n= 1,903

# 14% of pastors frequently get irritated with people at their church

Among Mainline Pastors



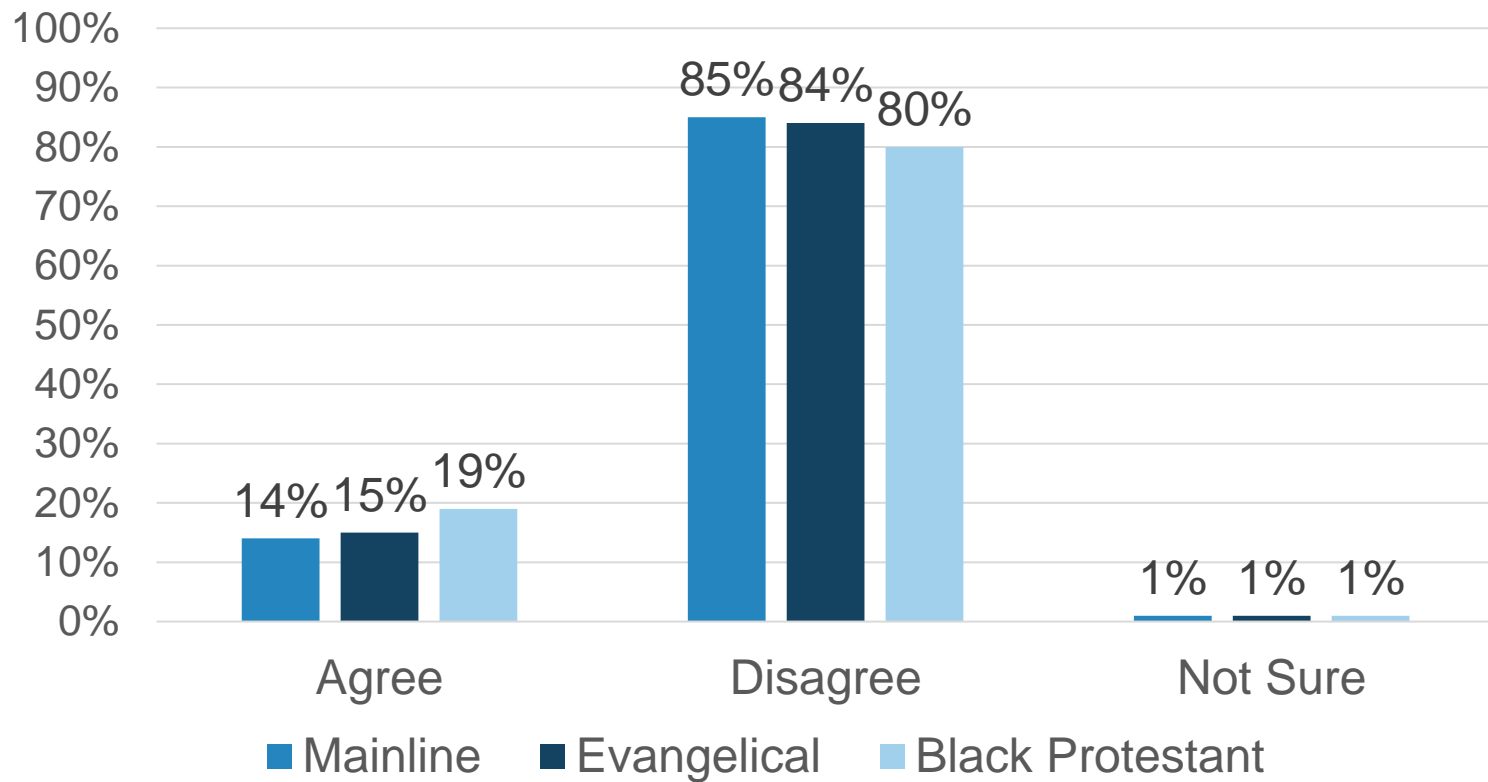
**Lifeway**research

Q32: "I frequently get irritated with people at the church." n=387



# There is no difference in the proportion of pastors that frequently get irritated with people at their church

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

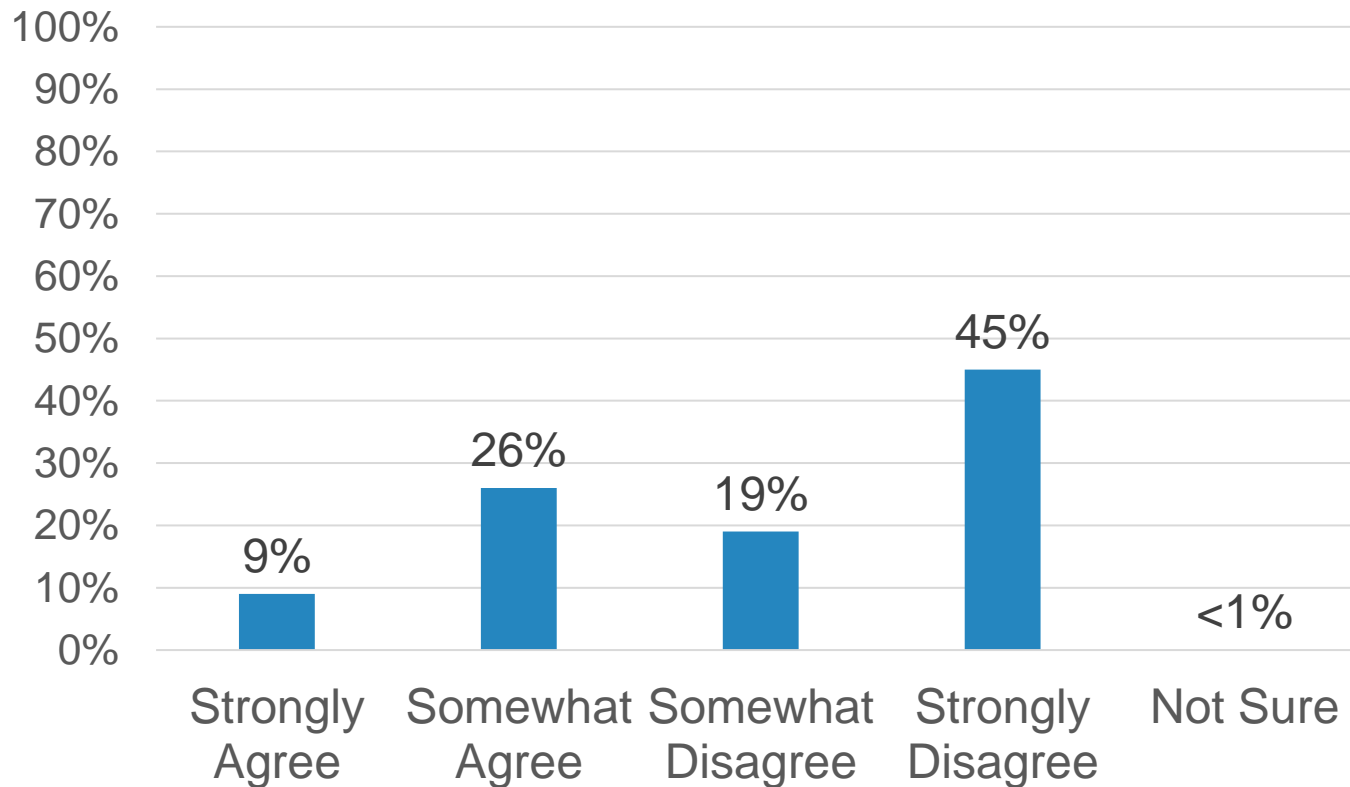


**Lifeway**research

Q32: "I frequently get irritated with people at the church." n= 1,903

# 35% of pastors agree they feel isolated as a pastor

Among Mainline Pastors

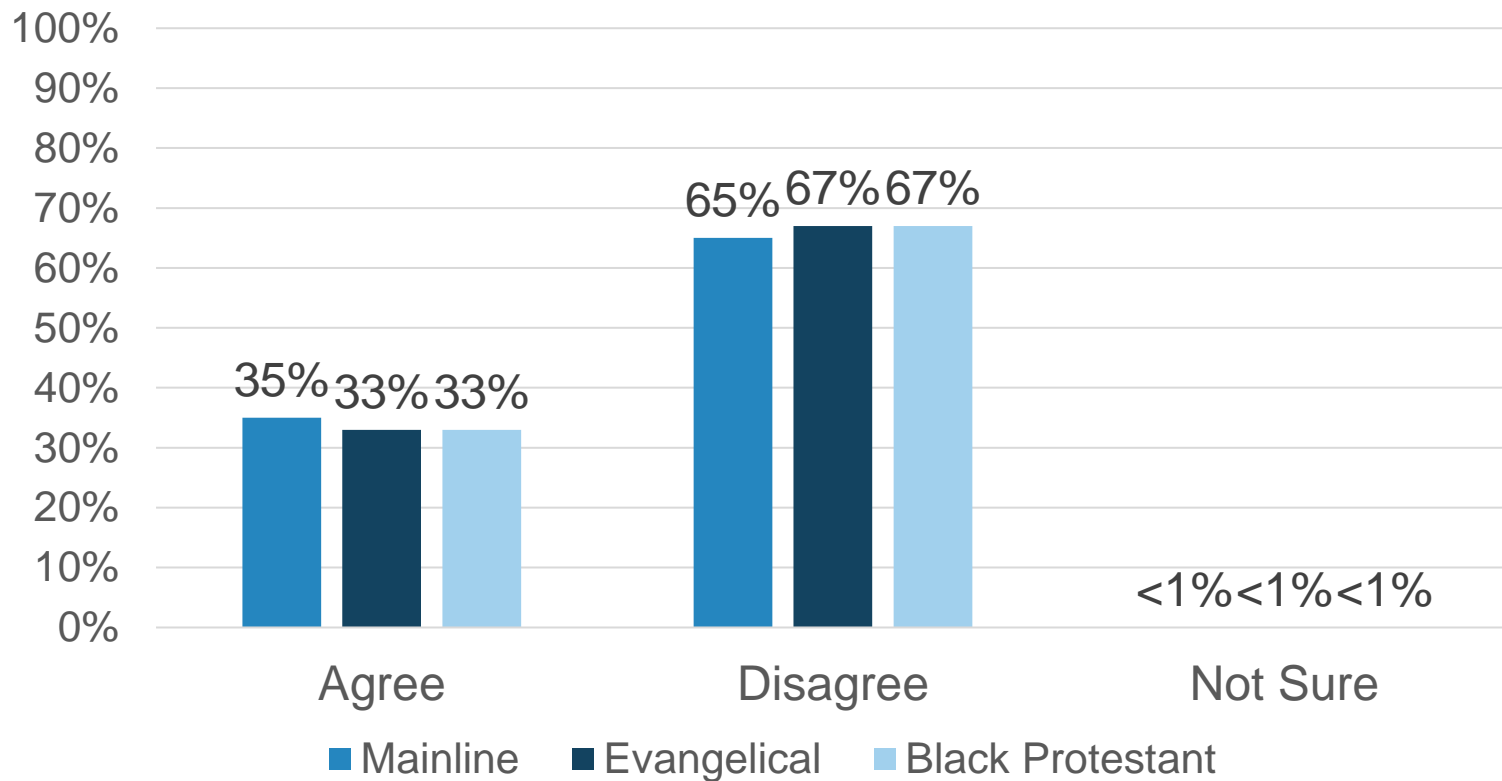


**Lifeway**research

Q33: "I feel isolated as a pastor." n=387

# There is no difference in the proportion of pastors that agree they feel isolated as a pastor

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

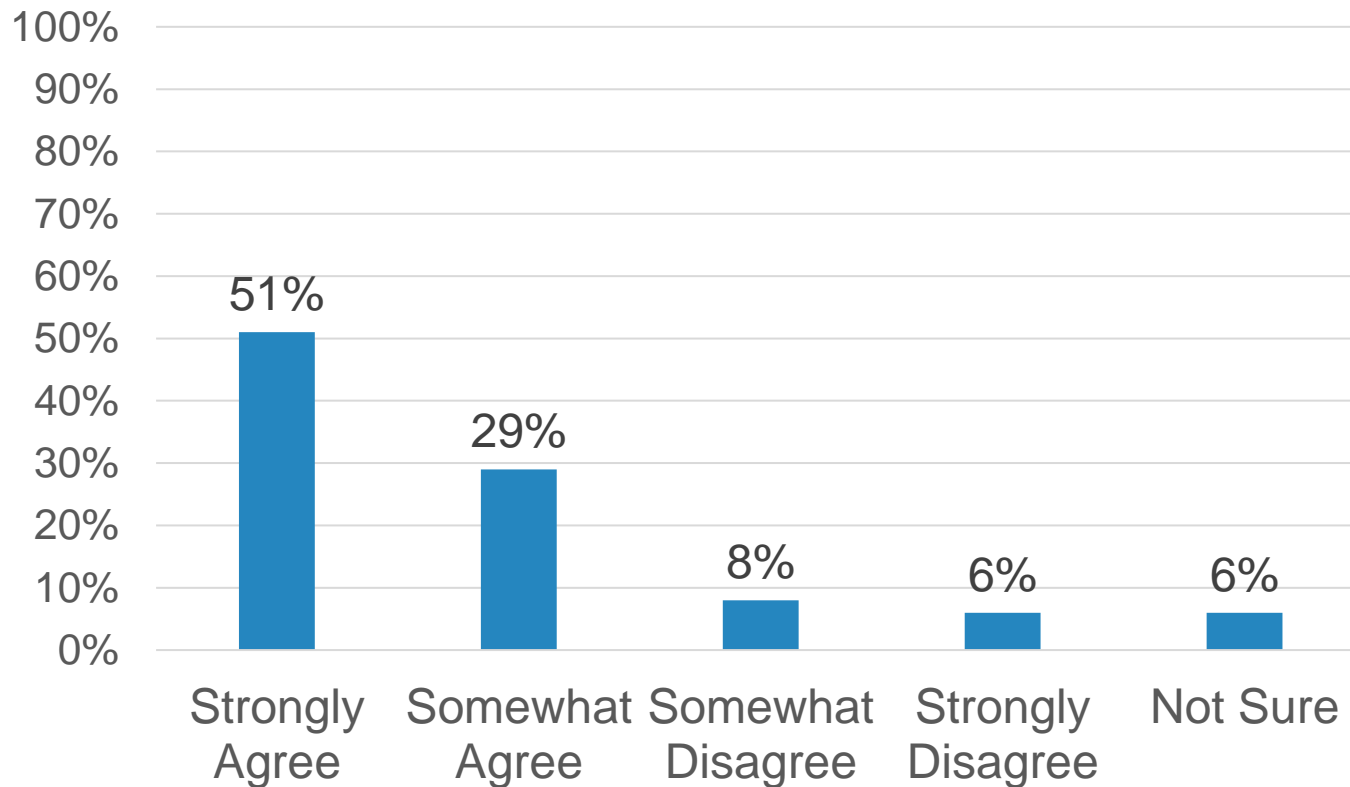


**Lifeway**research

Q33: "I feel isolated as a pastor." *n* = 1,903

# 80% of pastors agree that the church accurately described the church before they arrived

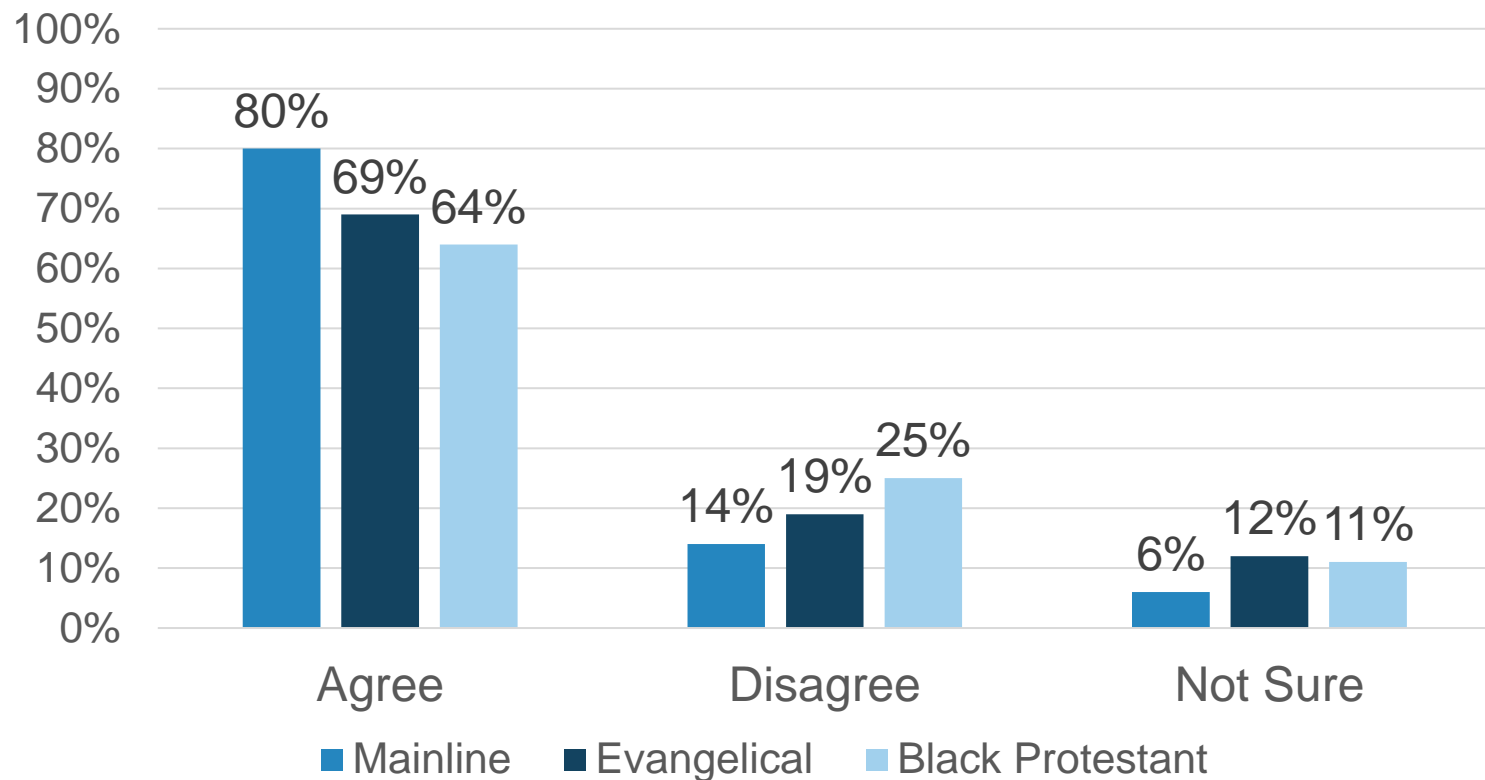
Among Mainline Pastors



**Lifeway**research

# Mainline pastors are most likely to agree that the church accurately described the church before they arrived

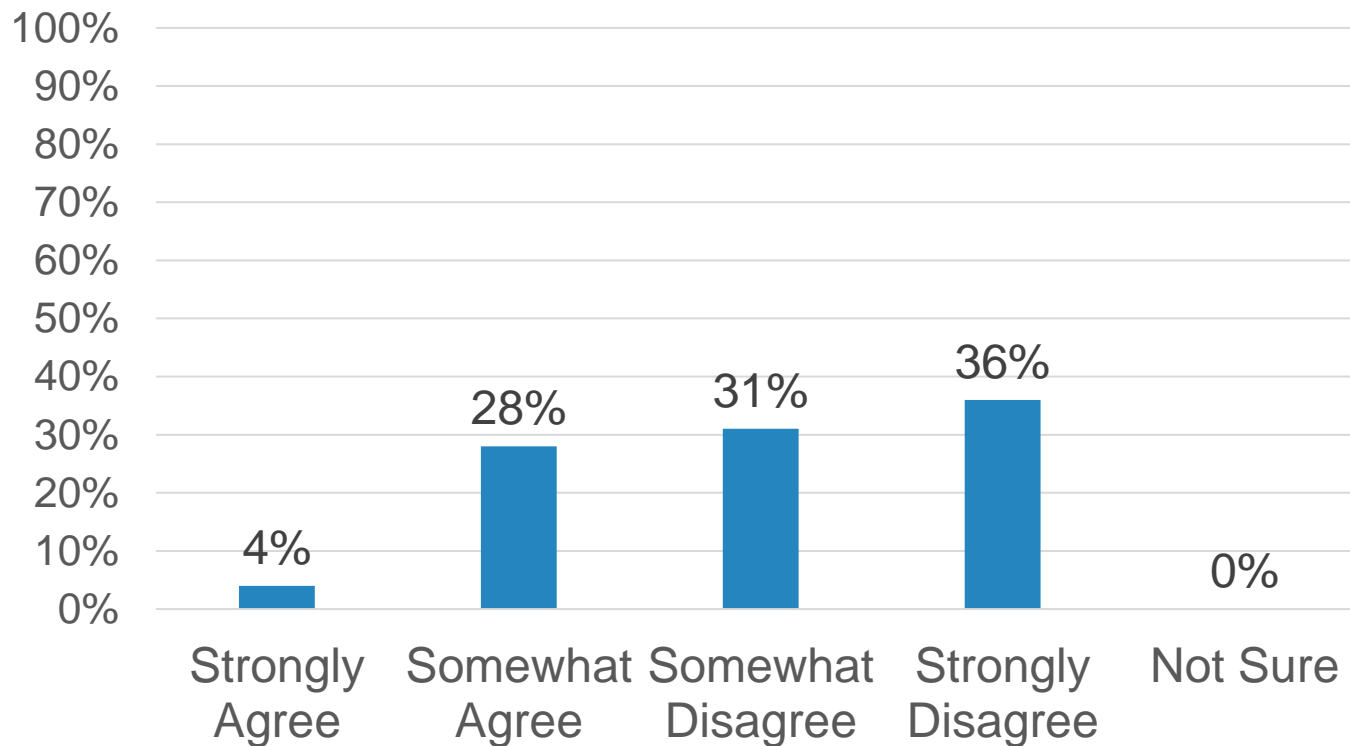
Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors



**Lifeway**research

# 33% of pastors agree the demands of ministry keep them from spending time with their family

Among Mainline Pastors

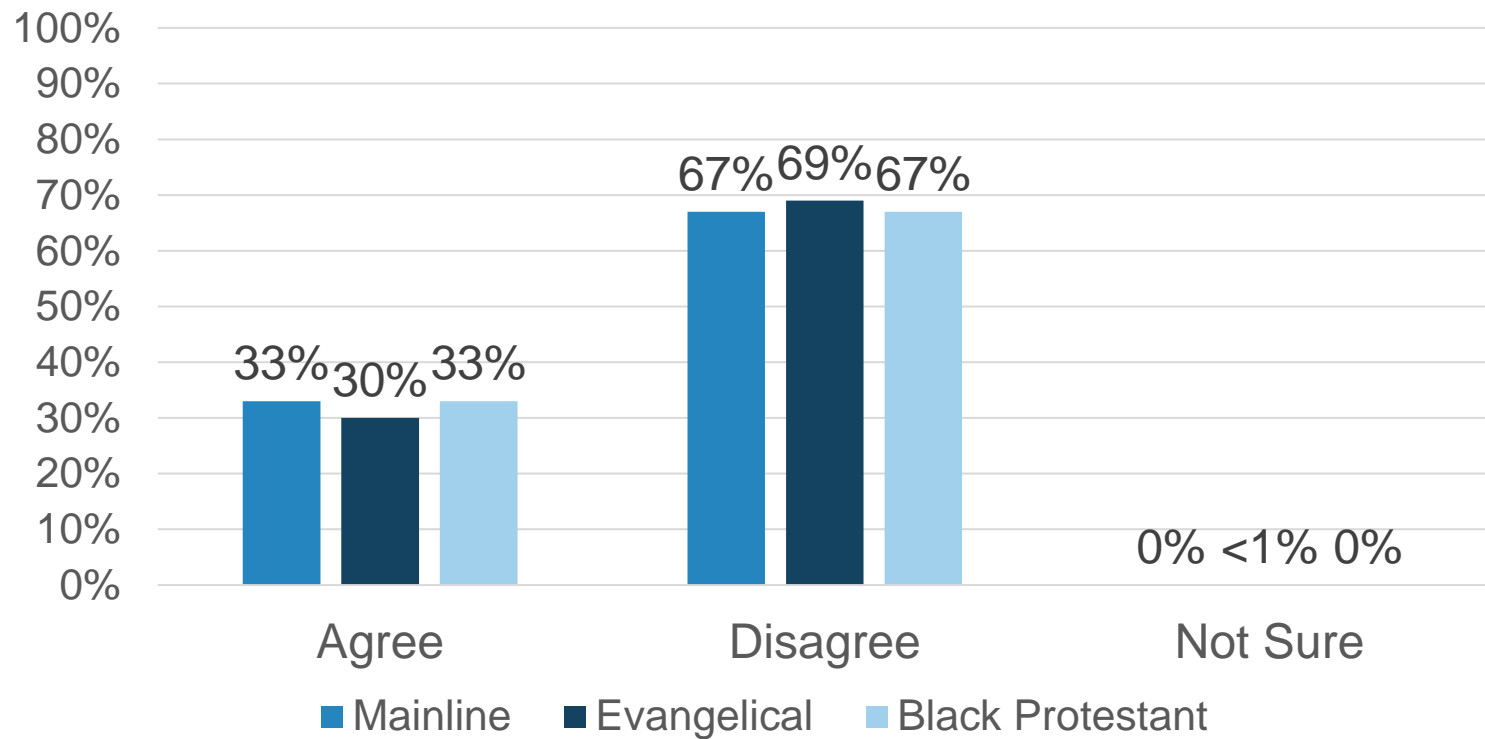


**Lifeway**research

Q35: "The demands of ministry keep me from spending time with my family." n=381

# There is no difference in the frequency of pastors that agree the demands of ministry keep them from spending time with their family

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

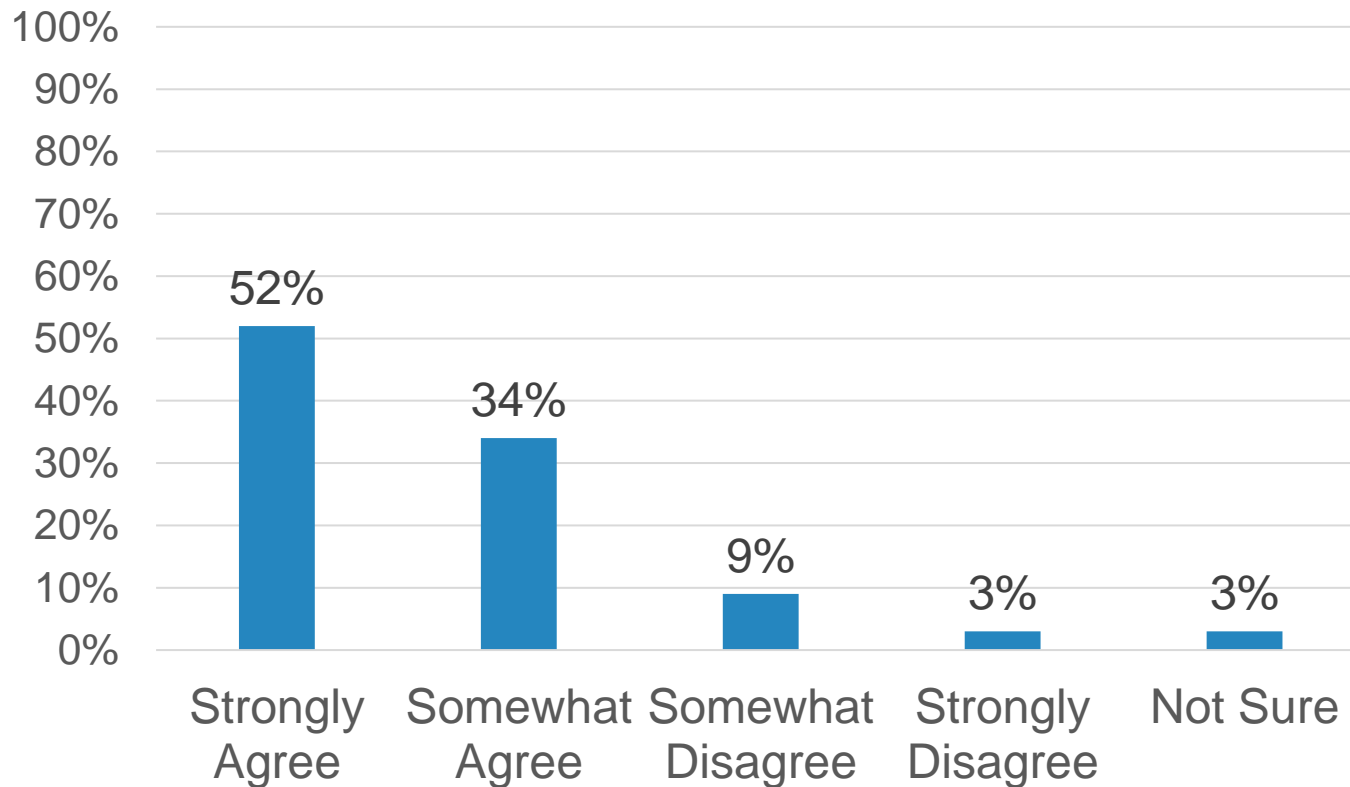


**Lifeway**research

Q35: "The demands of ministry keep me from spending time with my family." *n*=1,881

# 85% of married pastors agree their spouse is enthusiastic about life in ministry together

Among Married Mainline Pastors



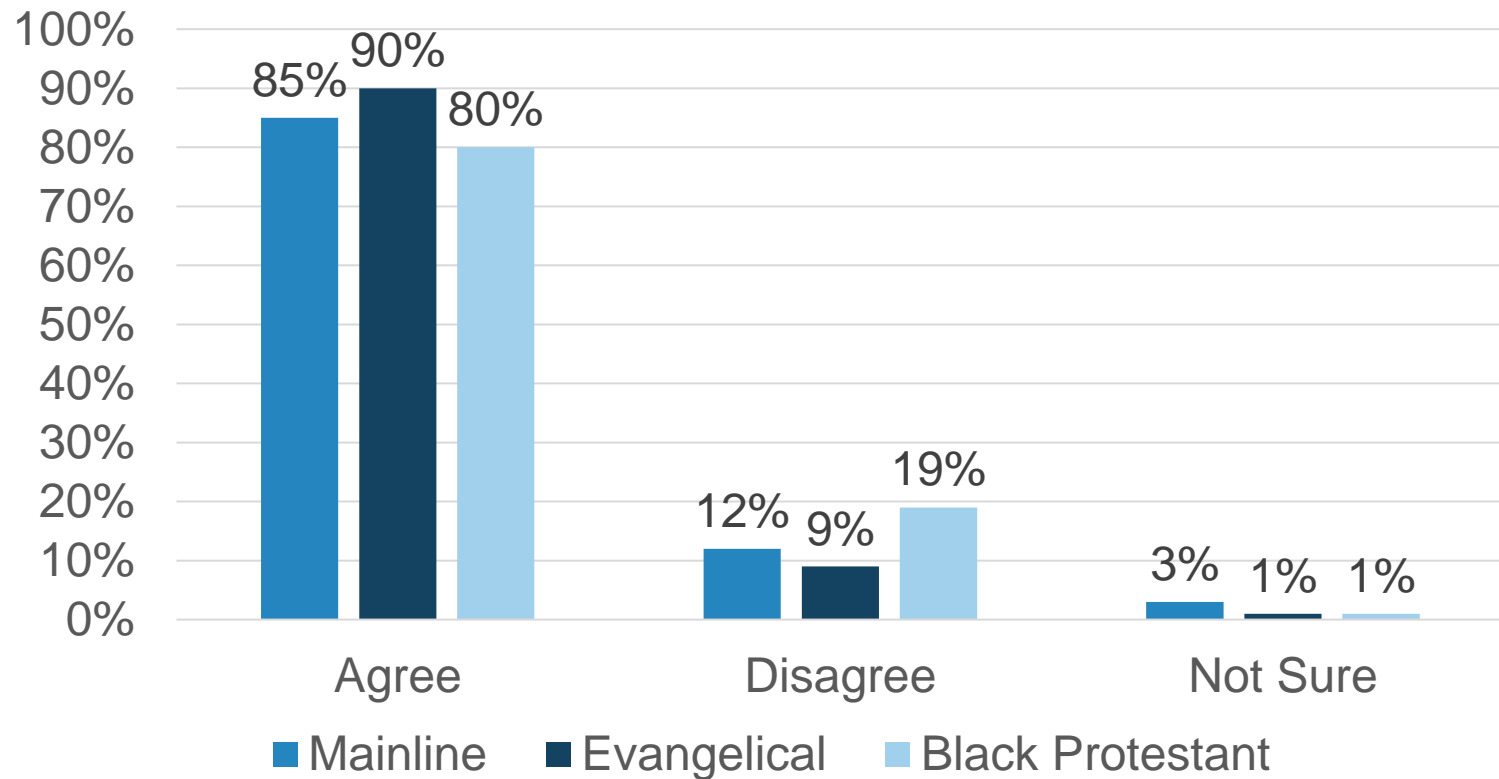
**Lifeway**research

Q36: "My spouse is enthusiastic about our life in ministry together." n=318



# Evangelical pastors are the most likely to agree their spouse is enthusiastic about life in ministry together

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

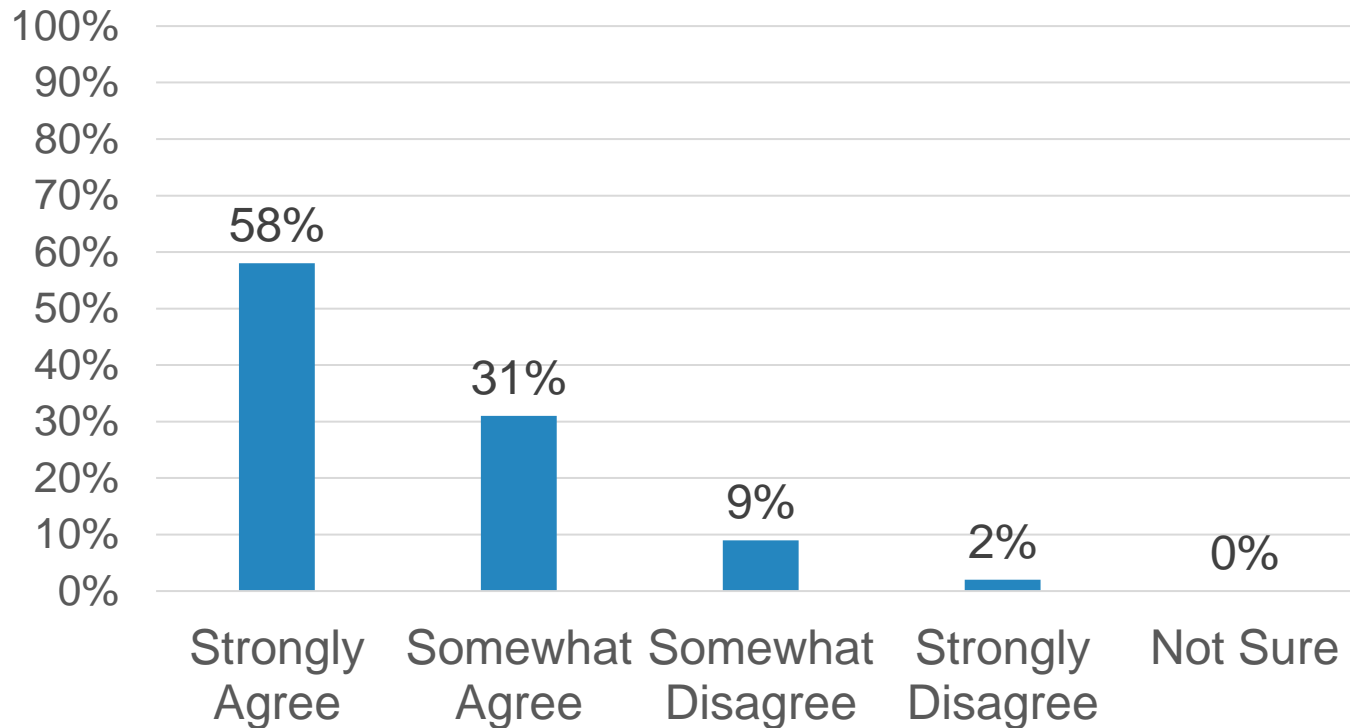


**Lifeway**research

Q36: "My spouse is enthusiastic about our life in ministry together." *n* = 1,718

# 89% of pastors agree their family regularly receives genuine encouragement from the church

Among Mainline Pastors

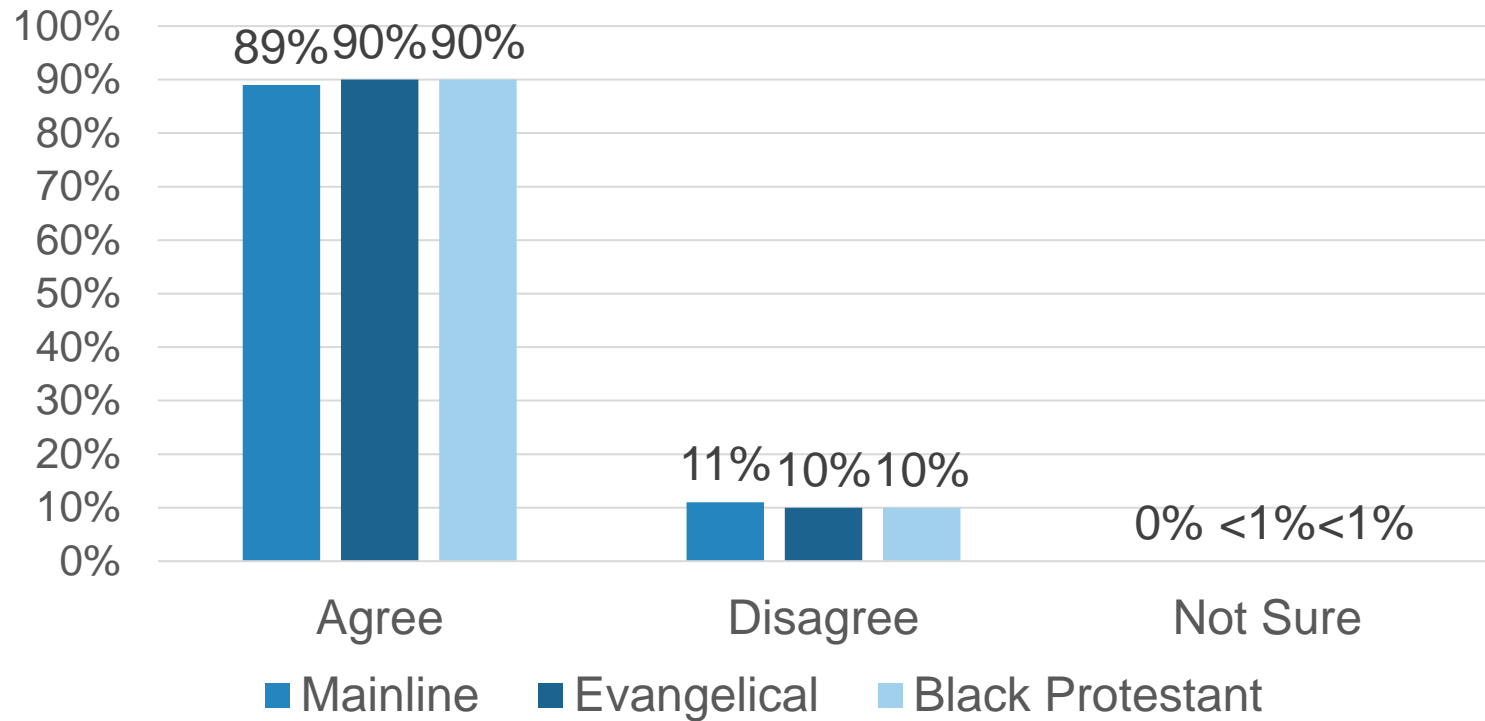


**Lifeway**research

Q37: "My congregation regularly provides my family with genuine encouragement." n=374

# There is no difference in the frequency of pastors that agree their family regularly receives genuine encouragement from the church

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

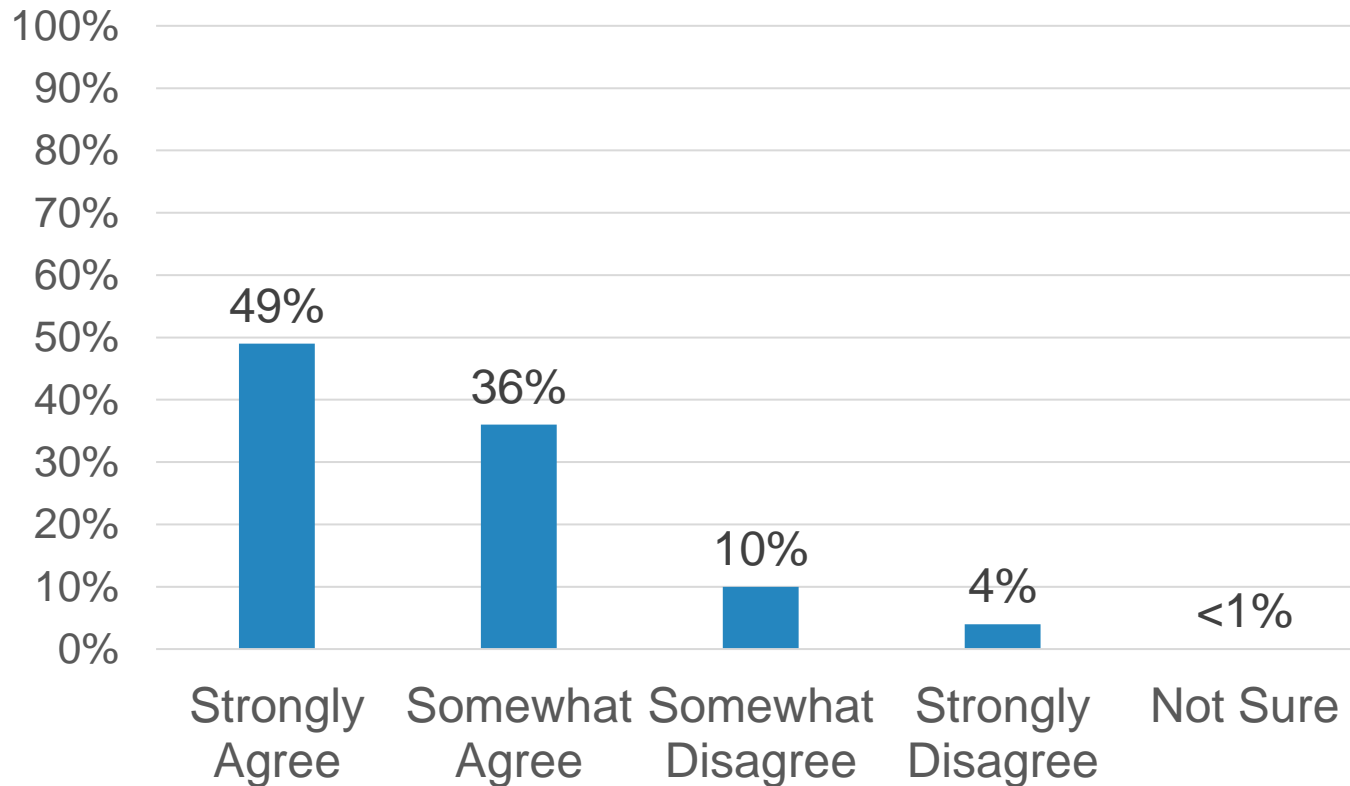


**Lifeway**research

Q37: "My congregation regularly provides my family with genuine encouragement."  $n = 1,870$

# 86% of pastors agree they feel free to say “no” when expectations are unrealistic

Among Mainline Pastors

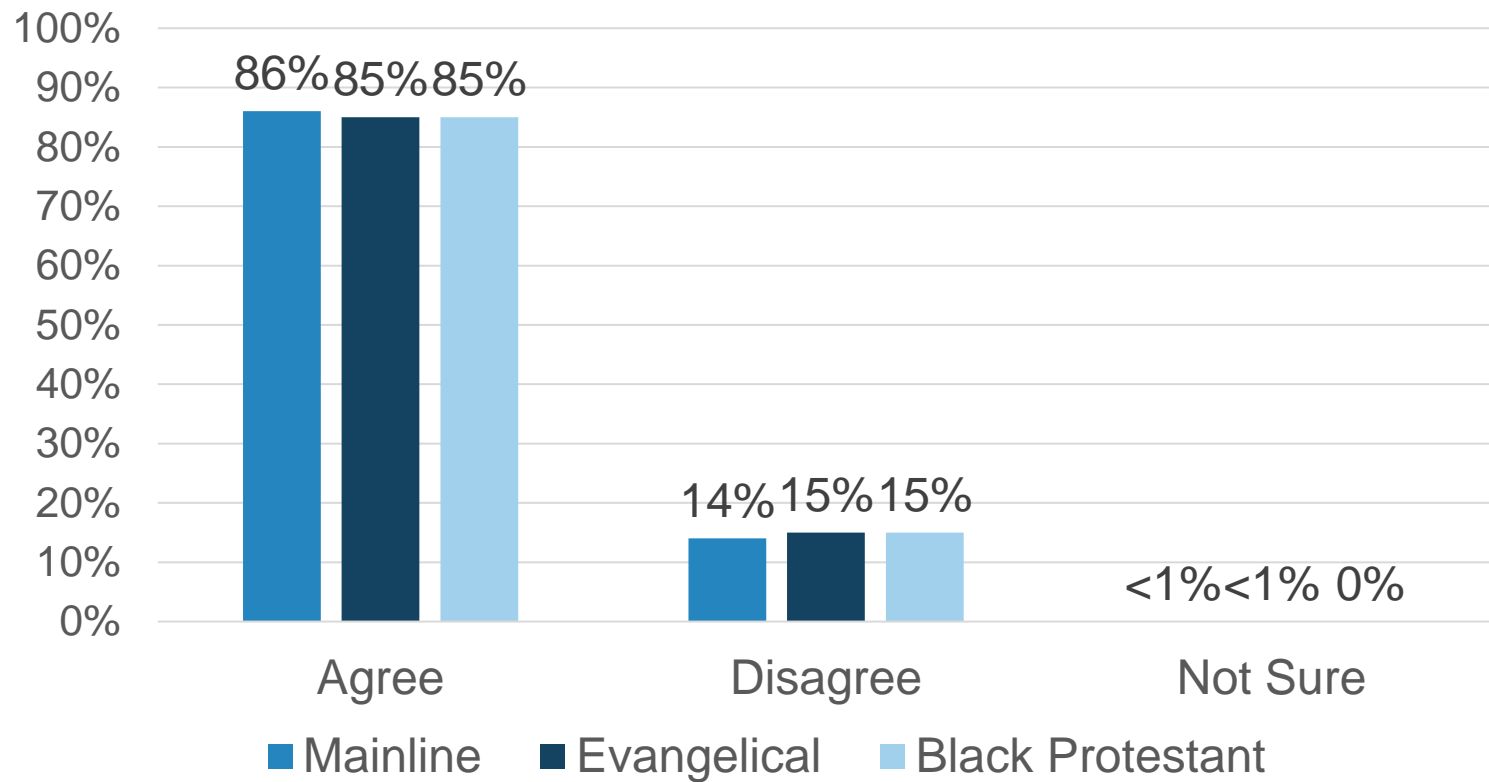


**Lifeway**research

Q38: "I feel free to say 'no' when expectations of me are unrealistic." n=387

# There is no difference in the proportion of pastors who agree they feel free to say “no” when expectations are unrealistic

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

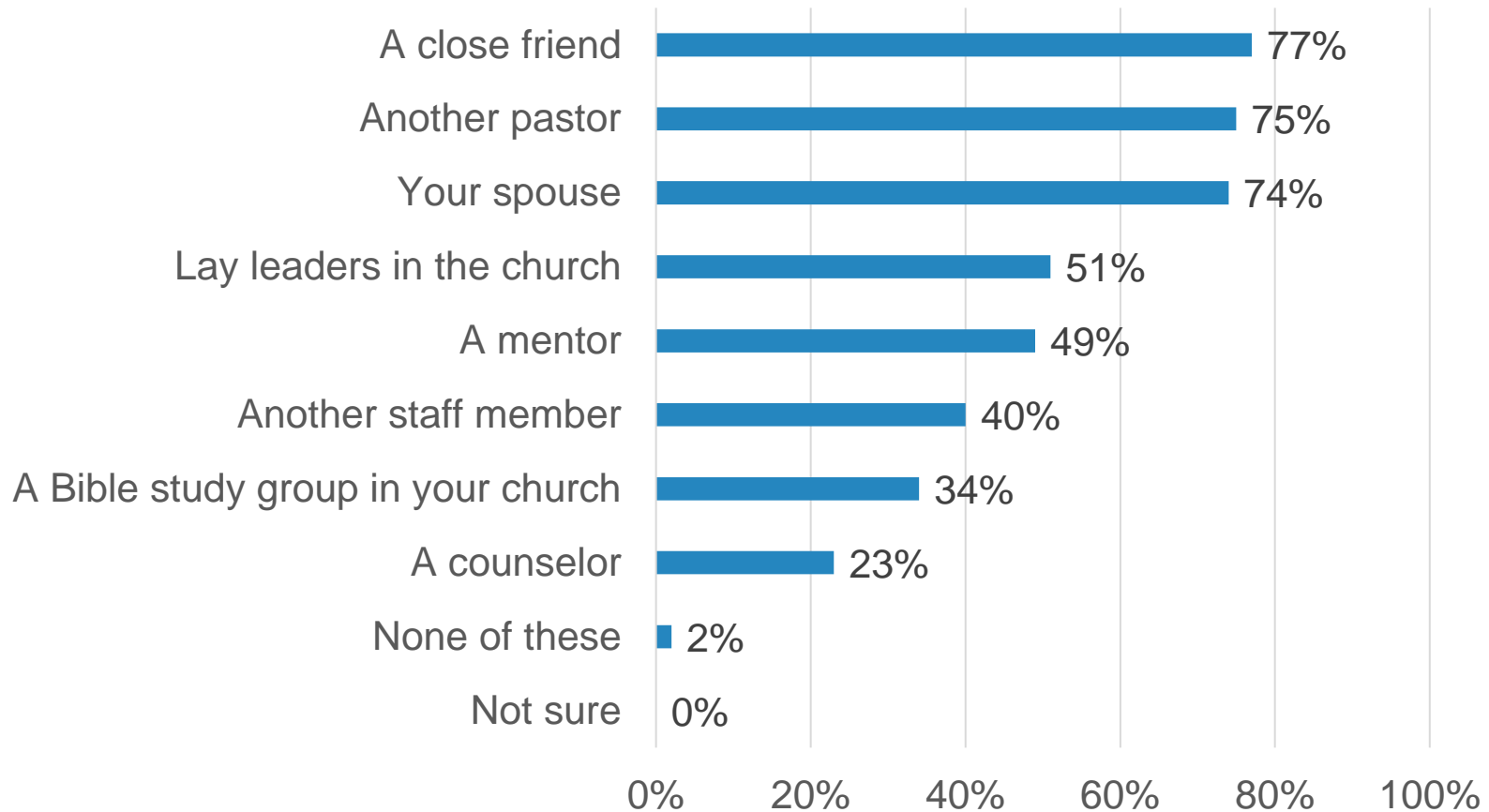


**Lifeway**research

Q38: "I feel free to say 'no' when expectations of me are unrealistic." *n*= 1,903

# At least once a month 7 in 10 pastors meet to share struggles with their spouse, close friend, or another pastor

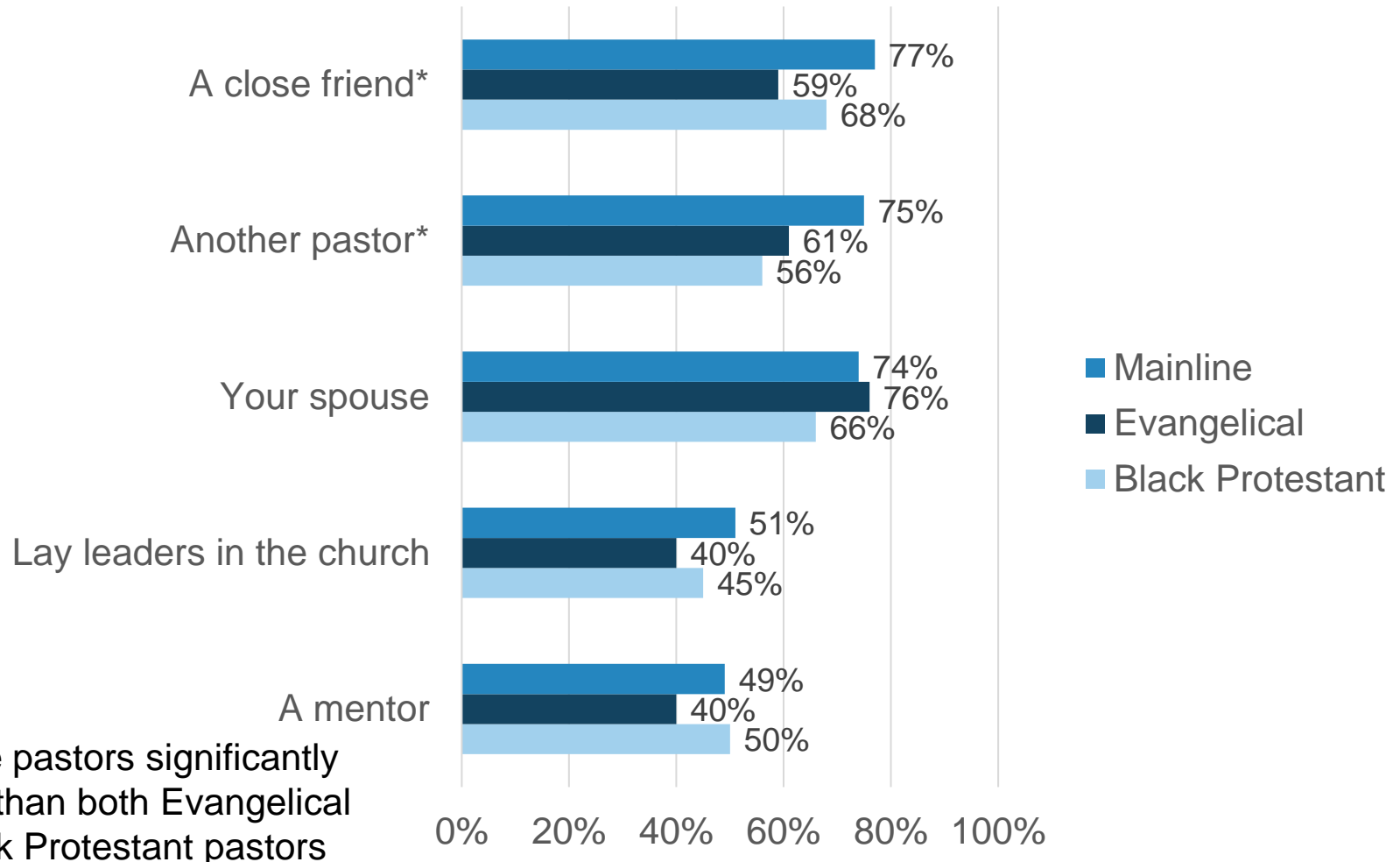
Among Mainline Pastors



**Lifeway**research

# Mainline pastors are the most likely to have anyone, a close friend, or another pastor to share struggles with their at least once a month

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

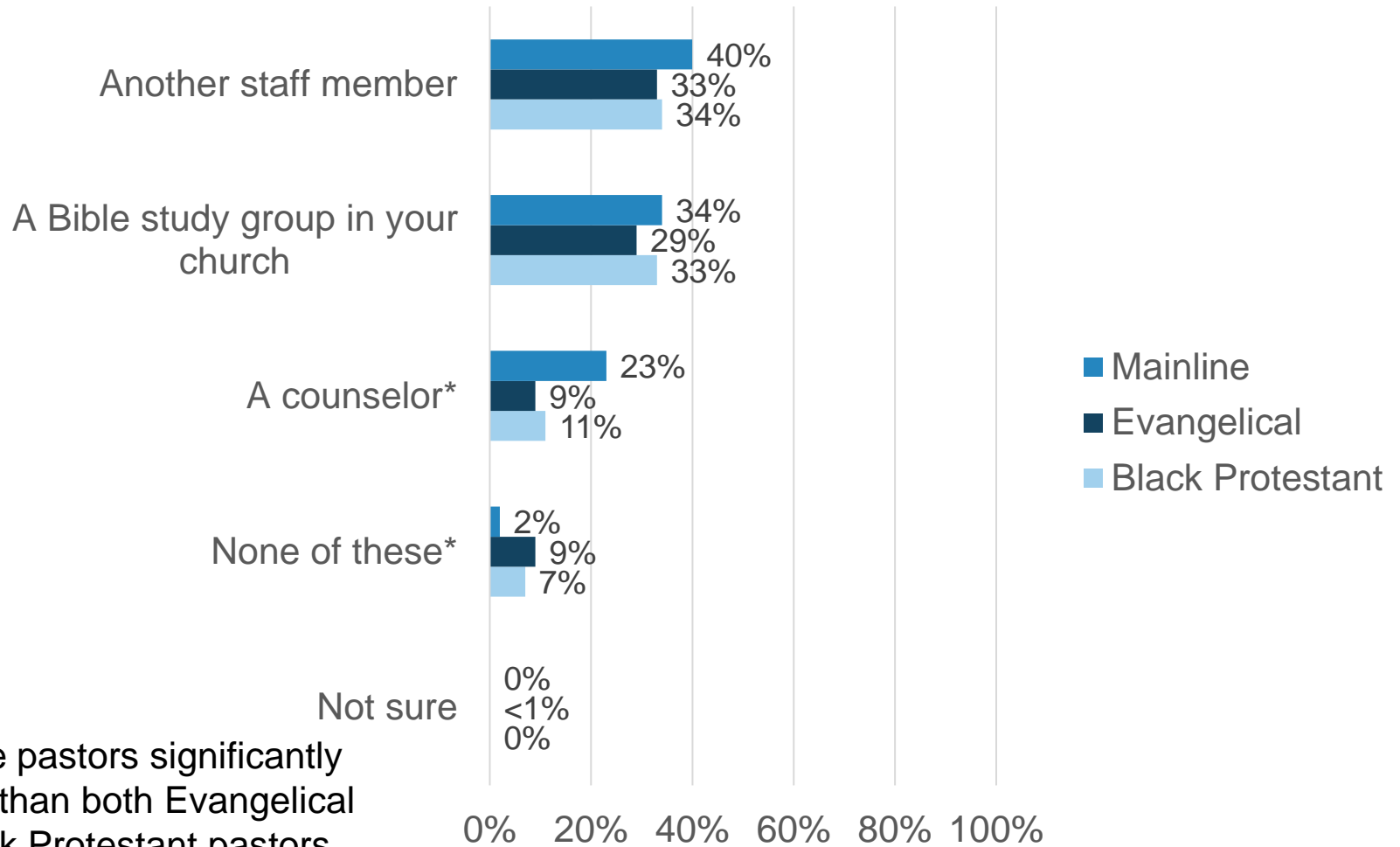


\*Mainline pastors significantly different than both Evangelical and Black Protestant pastors

Lifeway research

# Mainline pastors are the most likely to have anyone, a close friend, or another pastor to share struggles with their at least once a month *Continued*

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors

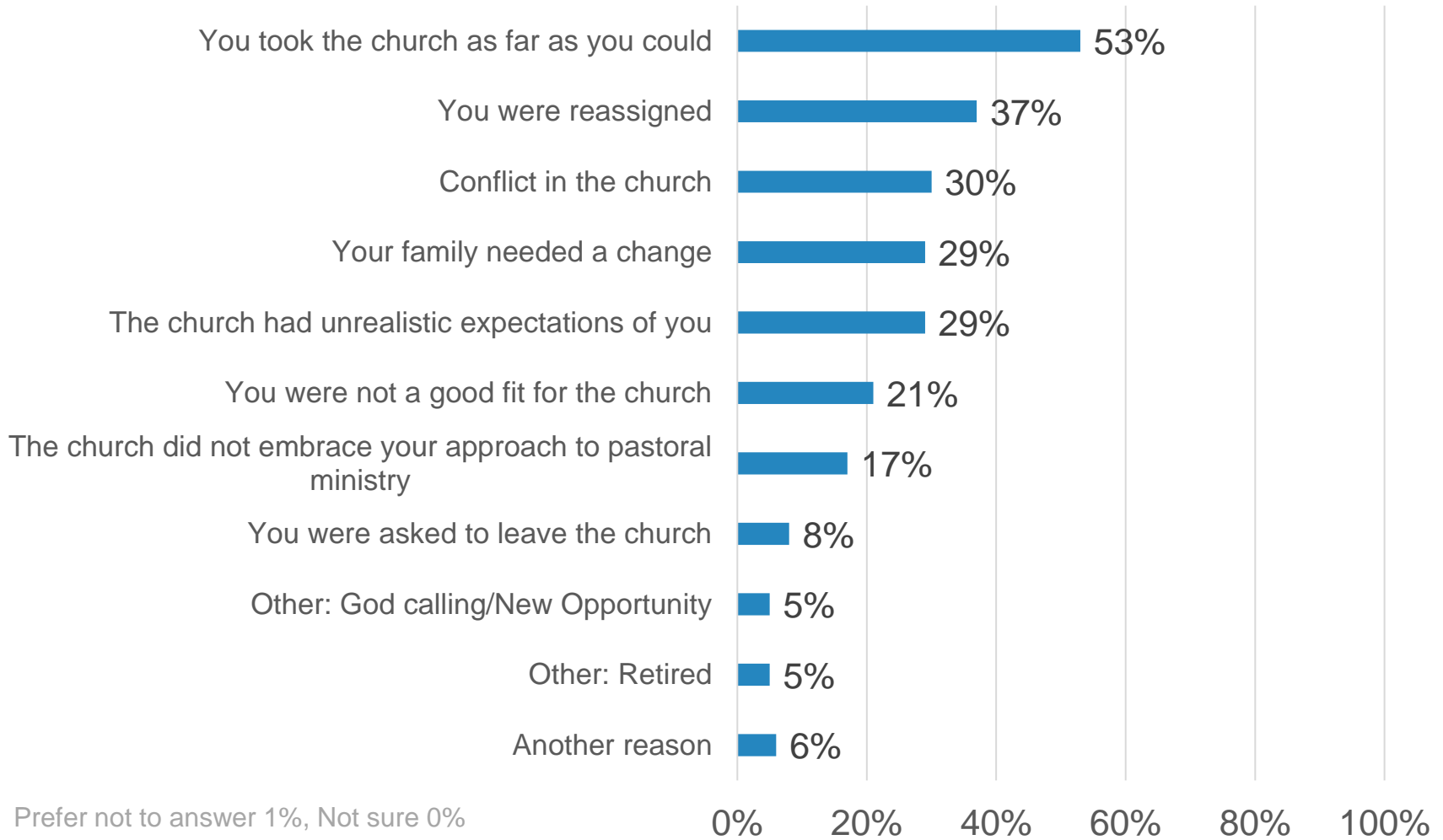


Lifeway research



# Reasons pastors left their last church

Among Mainline Pastors who Served in a Previous Church

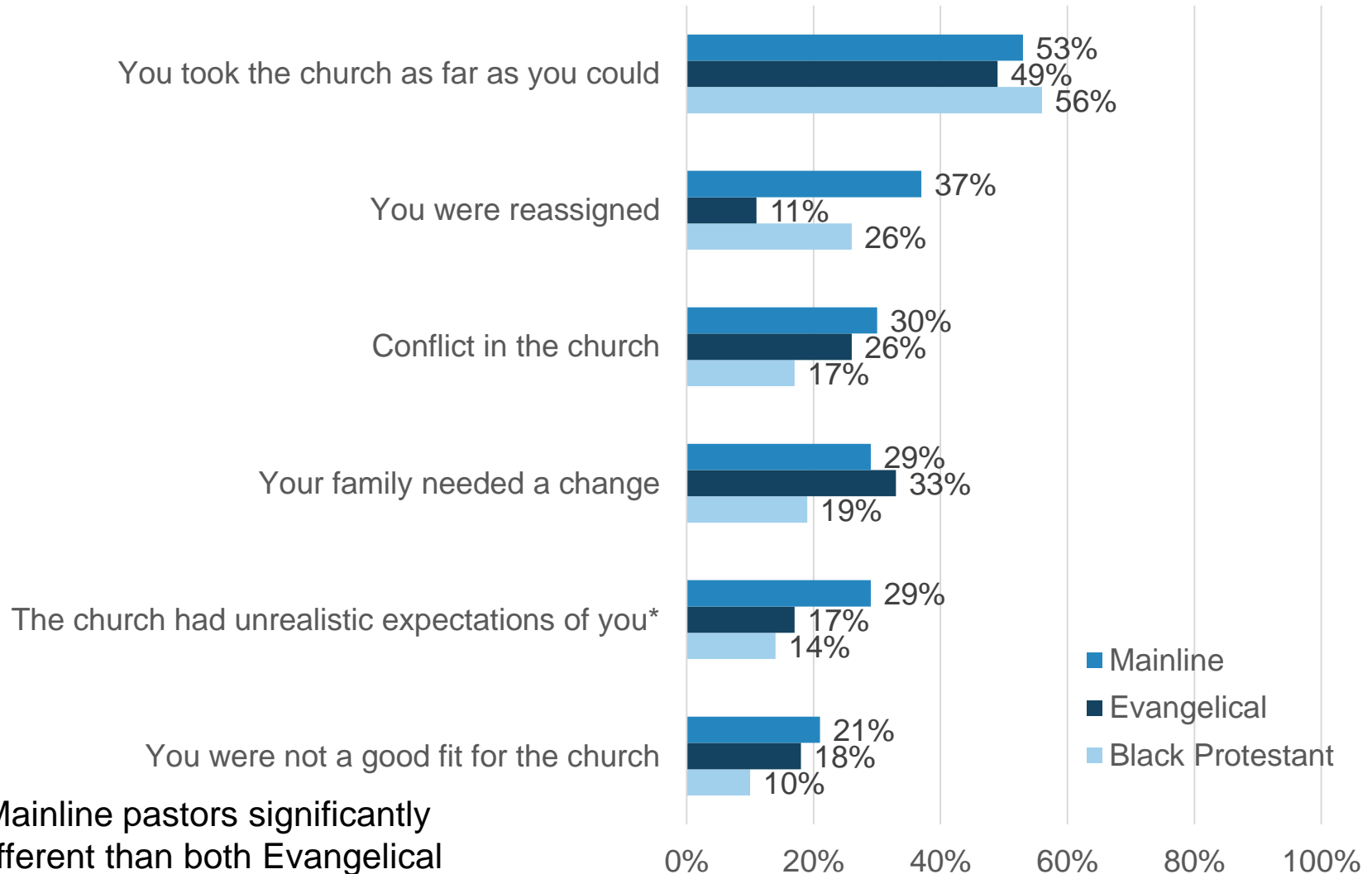


**Lifeway**research

Q40: "Which of the following reasons describe why you left your last church? (Select all that apply)" n=230

# Reasons pastors left their last church

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant  
Pastors who Served in a Previous Church



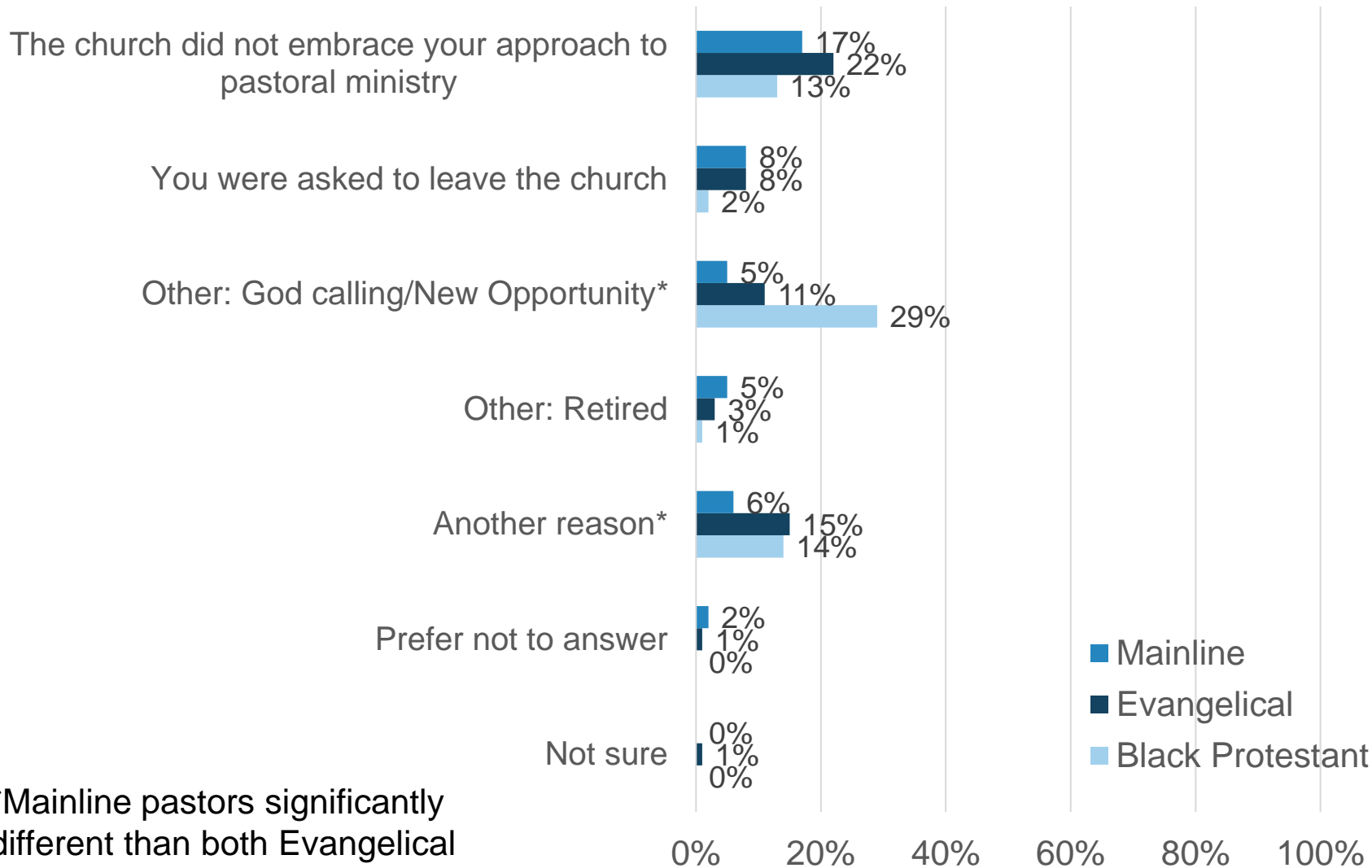
\*Mainline pastors significantly  
different than both Evangelical  
and Black Protestant pastors

Lifewayresearch

Q40: "Which of the following reasons describe why you left your last church? (Select all that apply)" n= 973

# Reasons pastors left their last church *continued*

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant  
Pastors who Served in a Previous Church

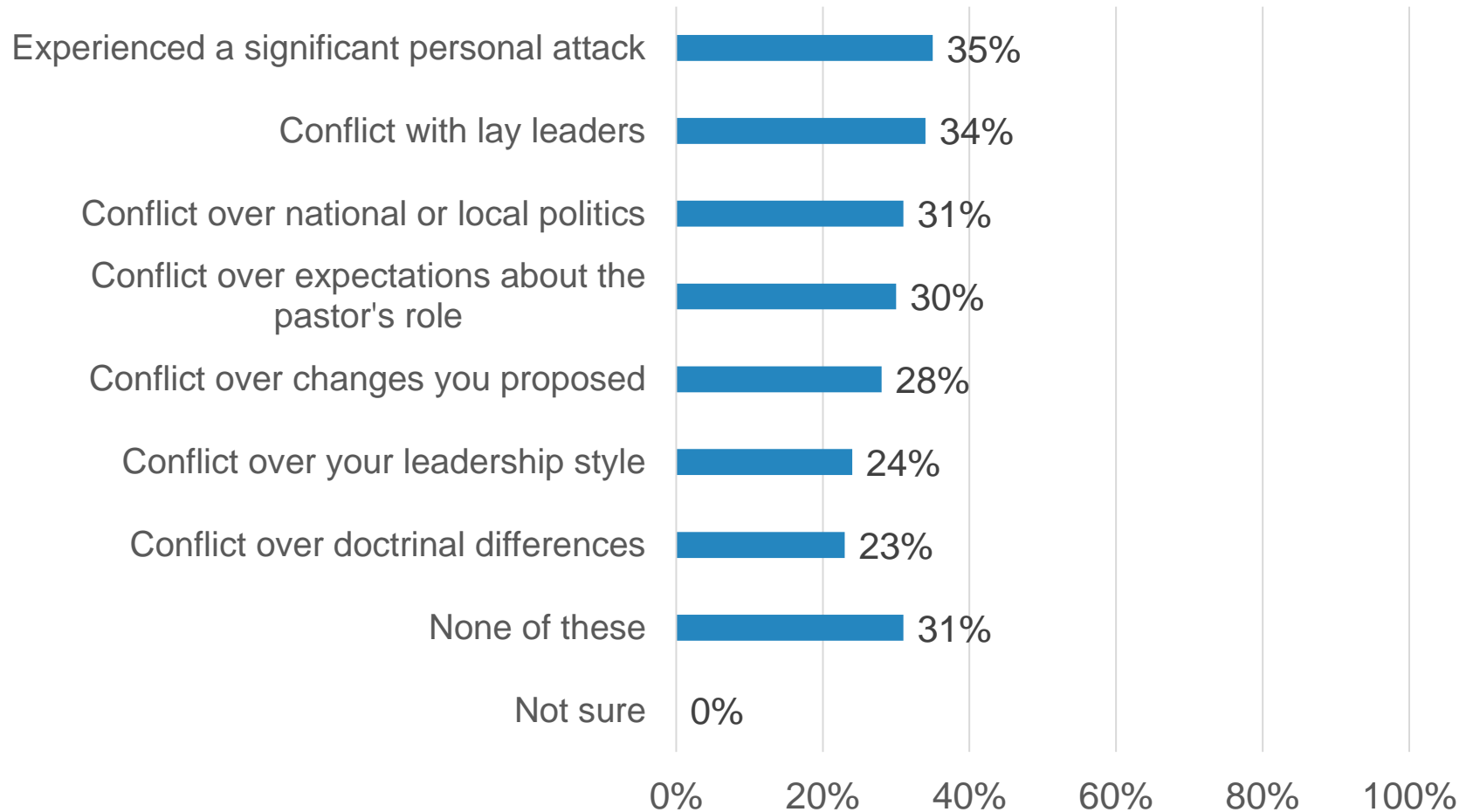


\*Mainline pastors significantly  
different than both Evangelical  
and Black Protestant pastors

Lifewayresearch

# 69% of pastors experienced conflict in their last church

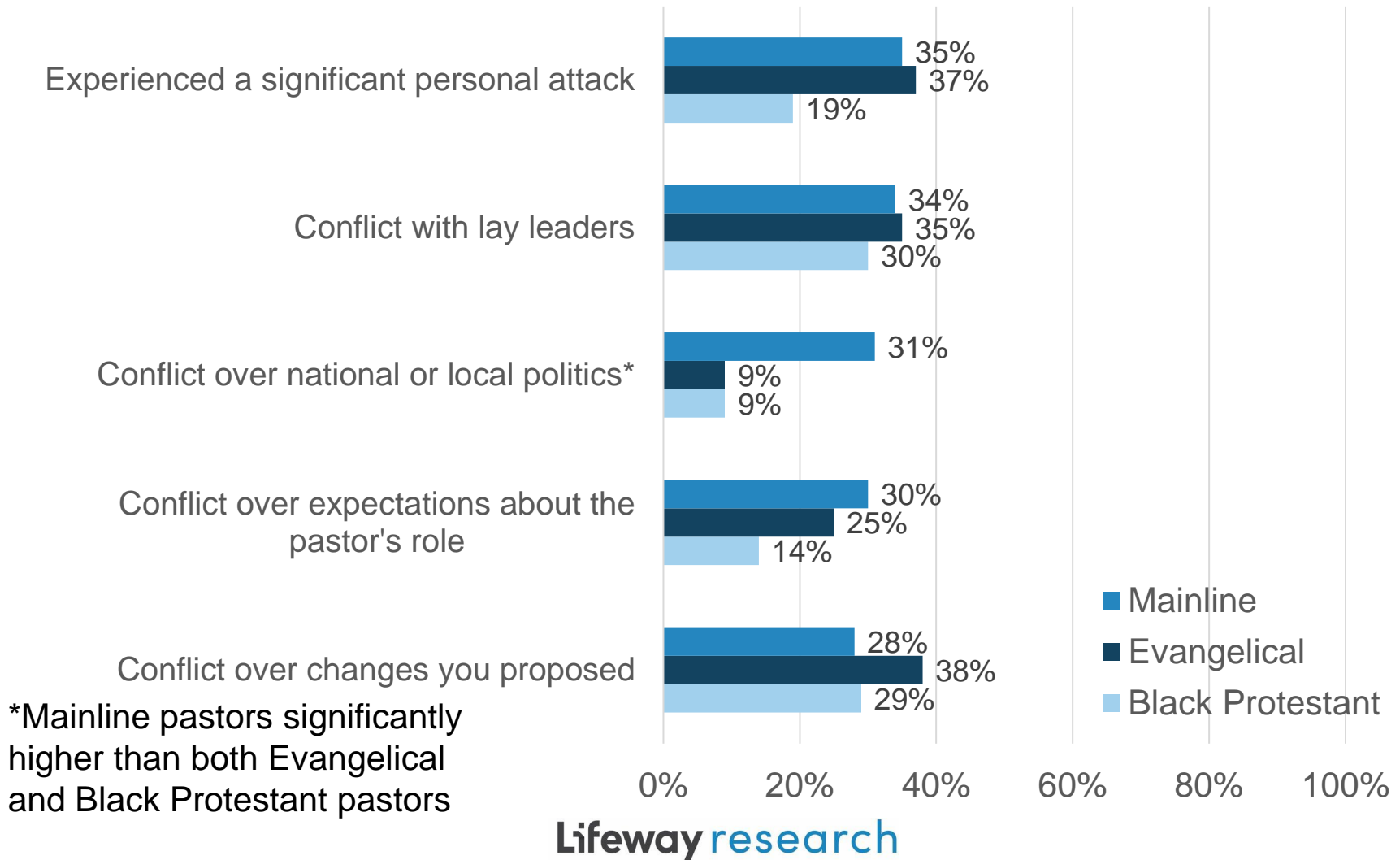
Among Mainline Pastors who Served in a Previous Church



**Lifeway**research

# Types of conflict pastors experienced in their last church

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors who Served in a Previous Church



# Types of conflict pastors experienced in their last church *continued*

Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Black Protestant Pastors who Served in a Previous Church

