

Pastors' Views on Discipleship

A SURVEY OF AMERICAN PROTESTANT PASTORS

Lifewayresearch

Methodology

- The survey of 2,620 Protestant pastors was conducted September 10-30, 2024
- Invitations were emailed to a probability sample of Protestant pastors who were recruited by phone using random samples selected from all Protestant churches.
- An oversample of Southern Baptist pastors were randomly selected from all SBC churches with pastor and an email listed. The 2,176 Baptist responses were weighted down to reflect their correct proportion of Protestant churches.
- Each survey was completed by the senior pastor, minister or priest at the church
- Responses were weighted by region, church size, and denominational category to more accurately reflect the population
- The completed sample is 2,620 surveys
- The sample provides 95% confidence that the sampling error does not exceed $\pm 2.05\%$ This margin of error accounts for the effect of weighting
- Margins of error are higher in sub-groups

Components of Discipleship

Among Protestant Pastors

Spiritual growth/discipline	12%
Bible study and reading/Scripture memorization	10%
Mentoring/One on one	7%
Teaching/Training	6%
Prayer	6%
Making disciples	5%
Groups	5%
Relationships	4%
Accountability	4%
Obedience/Following Jesus	4%
Equipping believers	4%
Sanctification/Become more Christlike	4%
Community	4%
Time	3%
Serving	3%

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Q8: "What are a couple of key things you think of when you think of discipleship" n=2,620

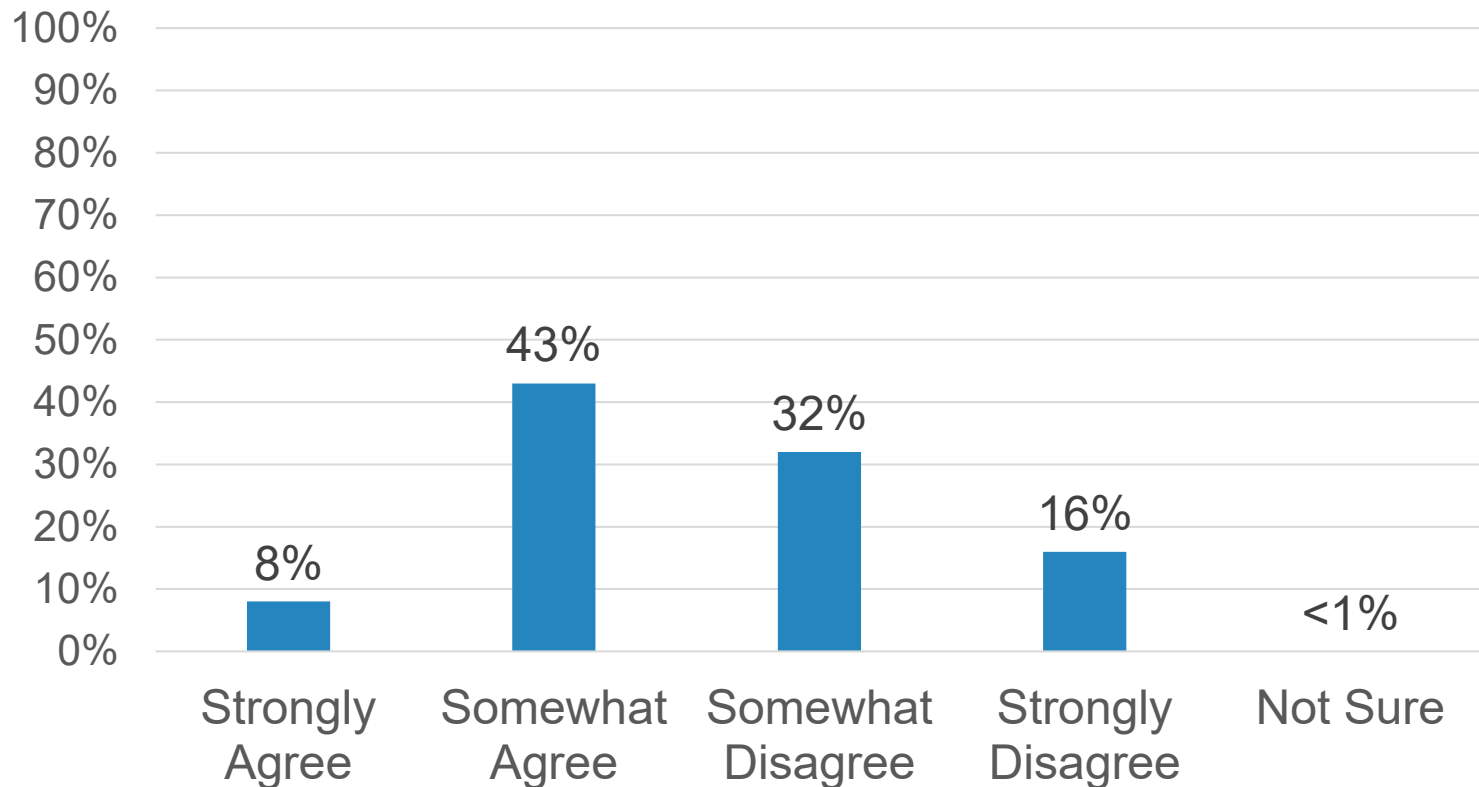
Components of Discipleship (*continued*)

Among Protestant Pastors

Bible knowledge/literacy	2%
Evangelism/Outreach	2%
Application	2%
Maturity	2%
Leadership	2%
Commitment	2%
Doctrine	1%
Great Commission	1%
Intentionality	1%
Multiplication	1%
Gospel	1%
Strengthening/Iron sharpens iron	<1%
Fellowship	<1%
Don't know/None	1%

52% are satisfied with the state of discipleship and spiritual formation in their church

Among Protestant Pastors

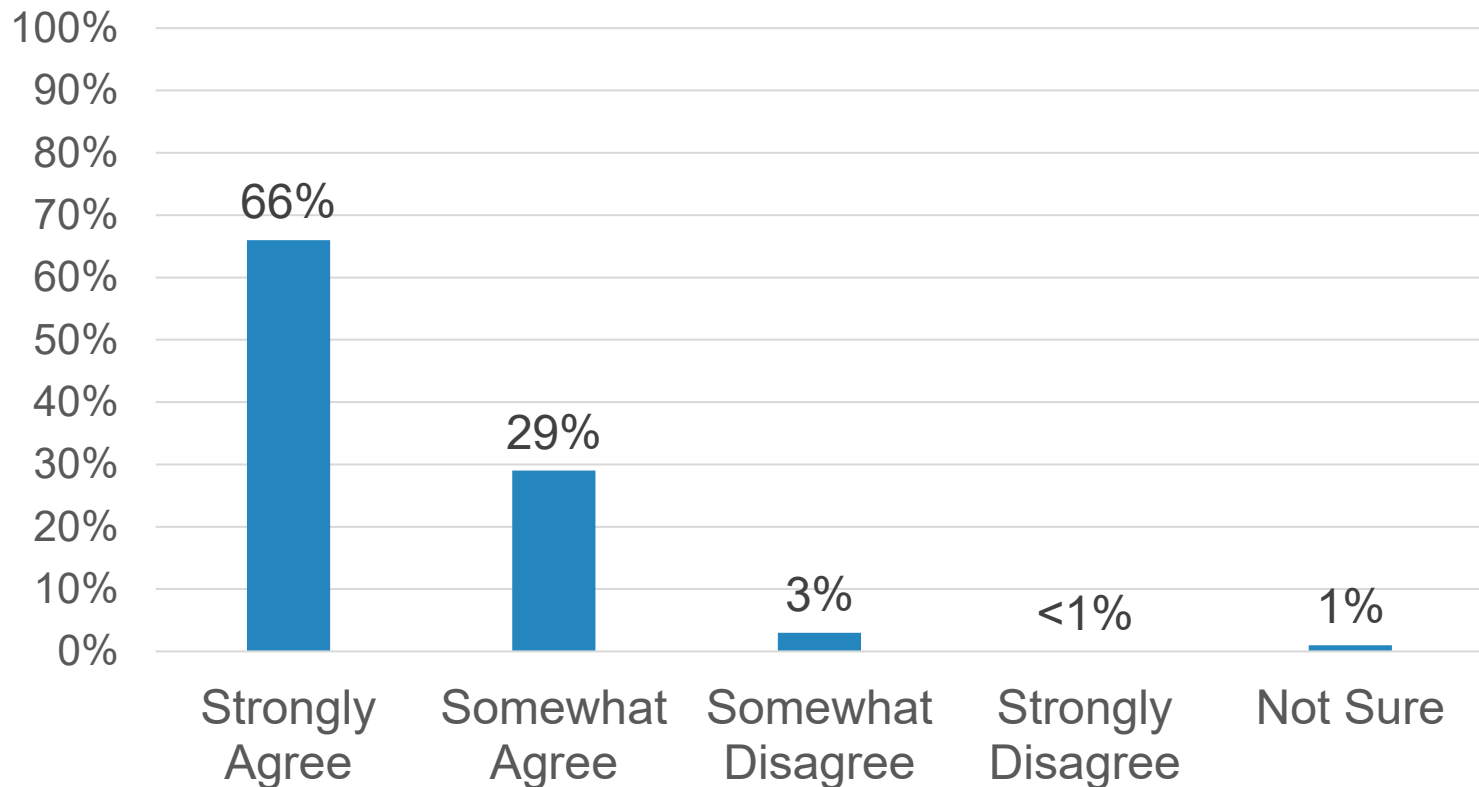


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Q9: "I am satisfied with the state of discipleship and spiritual formation in our local church." n=2,620

95% say that discipleship is not completed in a program but in a relationship

Among Protestant Pastors

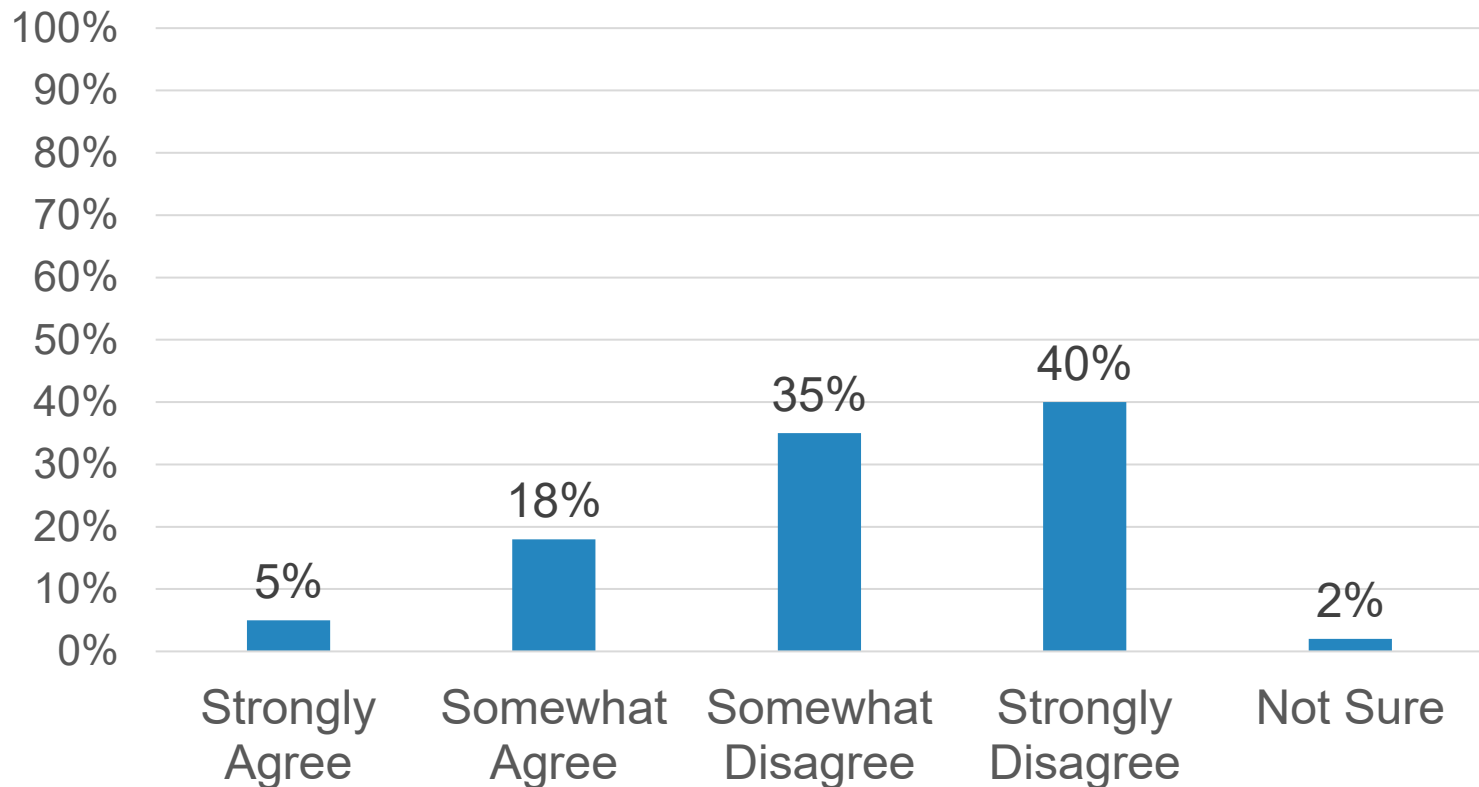


Lifewayresearch

Q13: "Discipleship is not completed inside a program but in a relationship." n=2,620

Only 22% believe that discipleship can be as effective virtually as in-person

Among Protestant Pastors

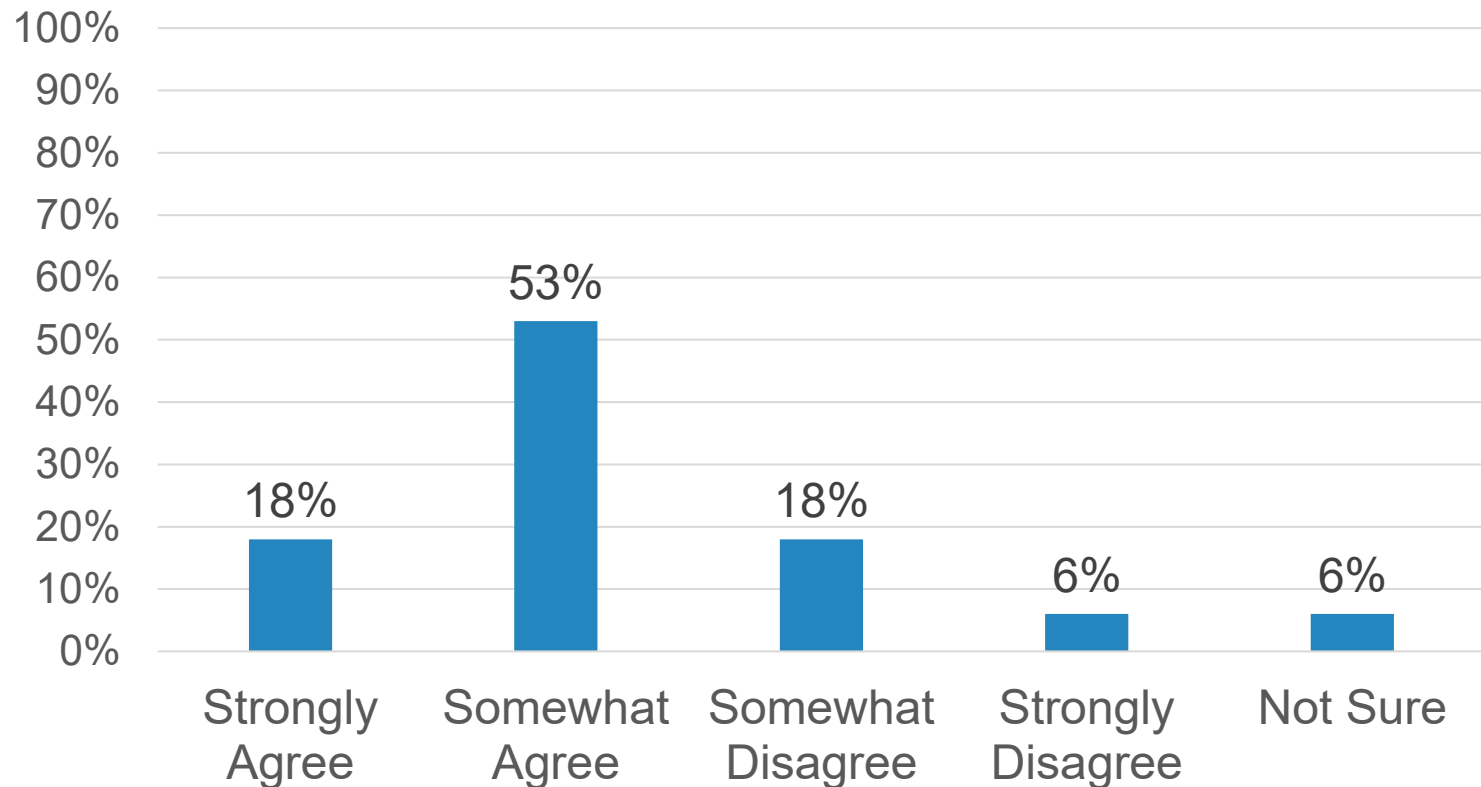


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Q14: "Discipleship can be as effective virtually as in-person." n=2,620

71% believe there are methods for measuring discipleship in a congregation

Among Protestant Pastors

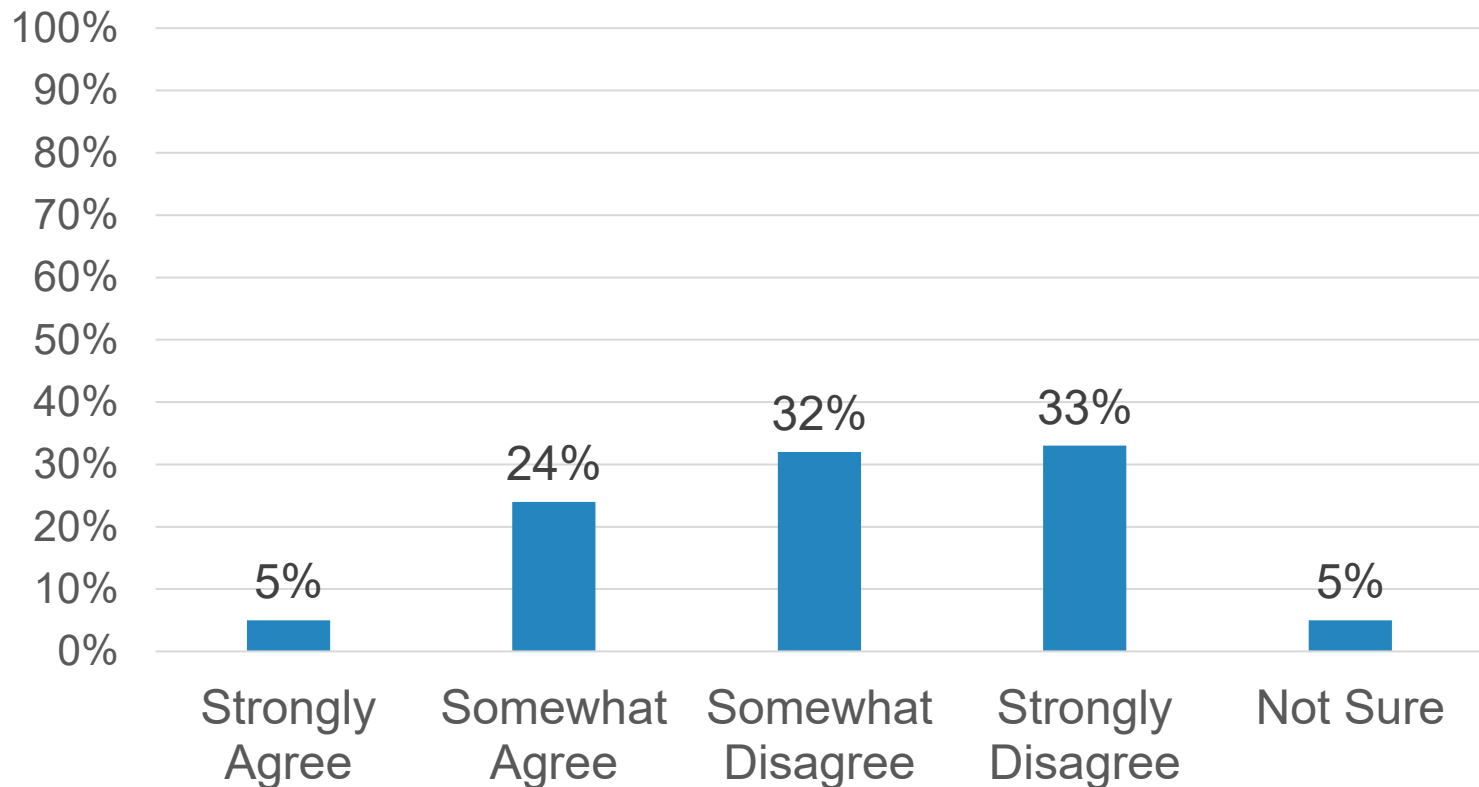


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Q18: "There are methods for measuring discipleship in a congregation." n=2,620

30% say their church has specific methods for measuring discipleship

Among Protestant Pastors

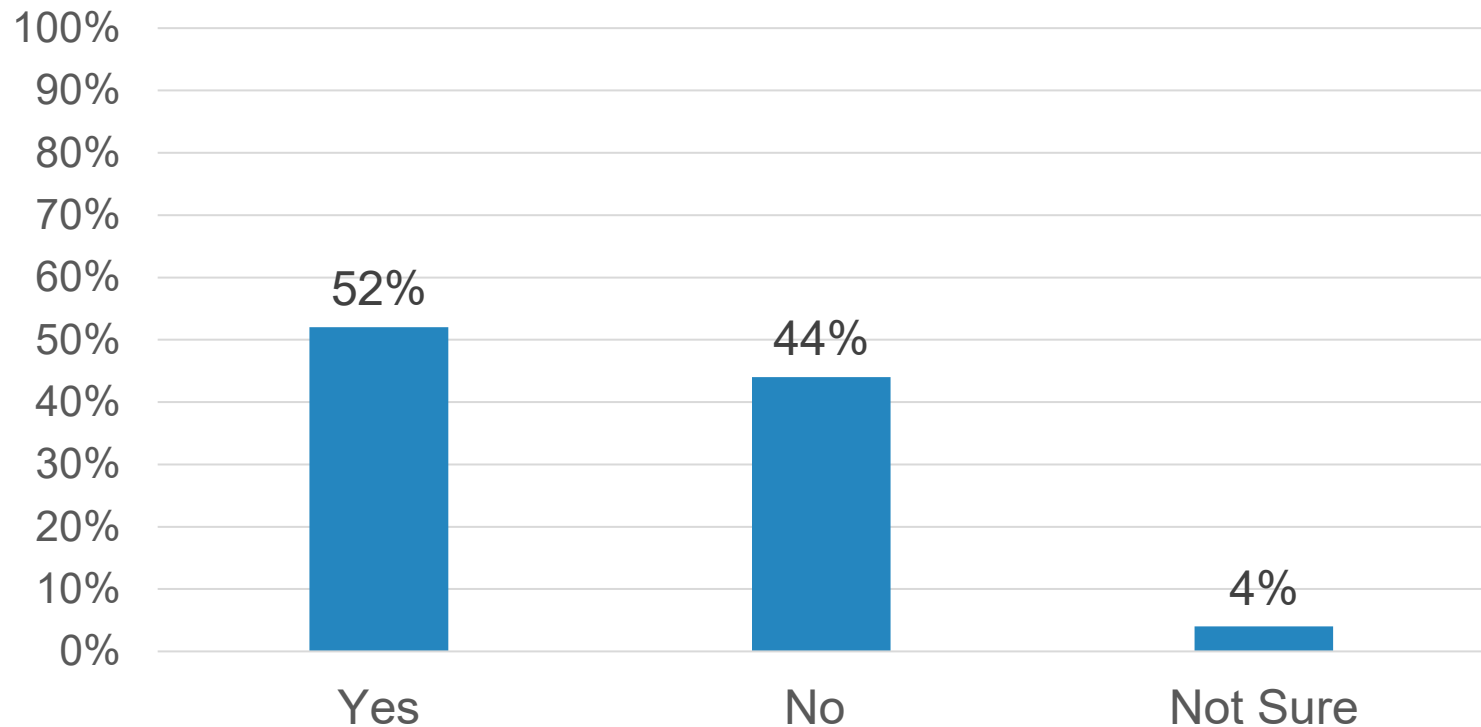


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Q20: "My church has specific methods for measuring discipleship in our congregation." n=2,620

52% have an intentional plan for discipling individuals in their congregation and encouraging their spiritual growth

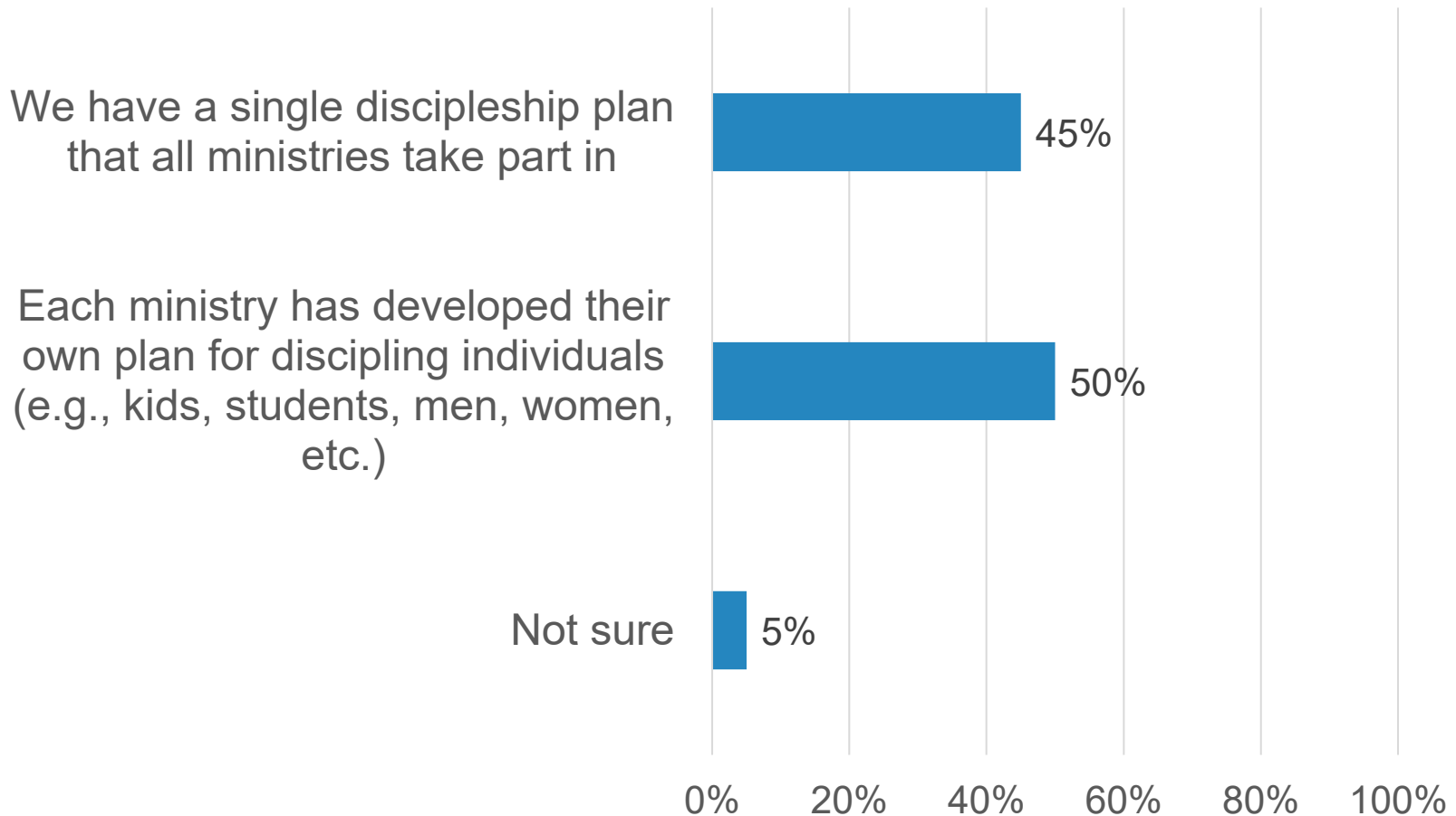
Among Protestant Pastors



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Churches are split between having a single discipleship plan and ministries developing their own plan

Among Pastors With An Intentional Discipleship Plan

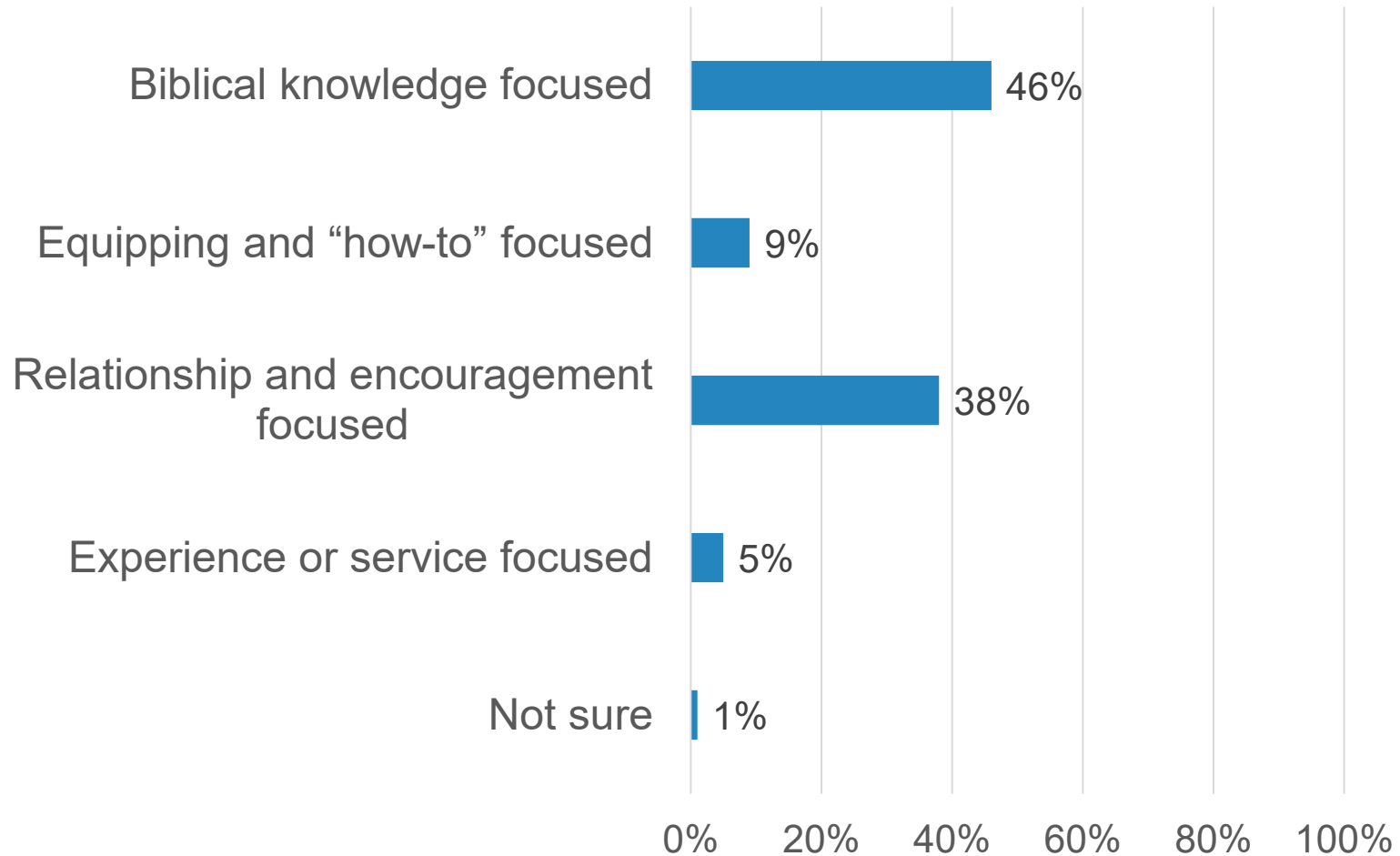


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Q22: "Which of the following describes your plan for discipling individuals in your congregation." n=1,467

“Biblical knowledge focused” is the first priority of the most churches’ discipleship plans

Among Pastors With An Intentional Discipleship Plan

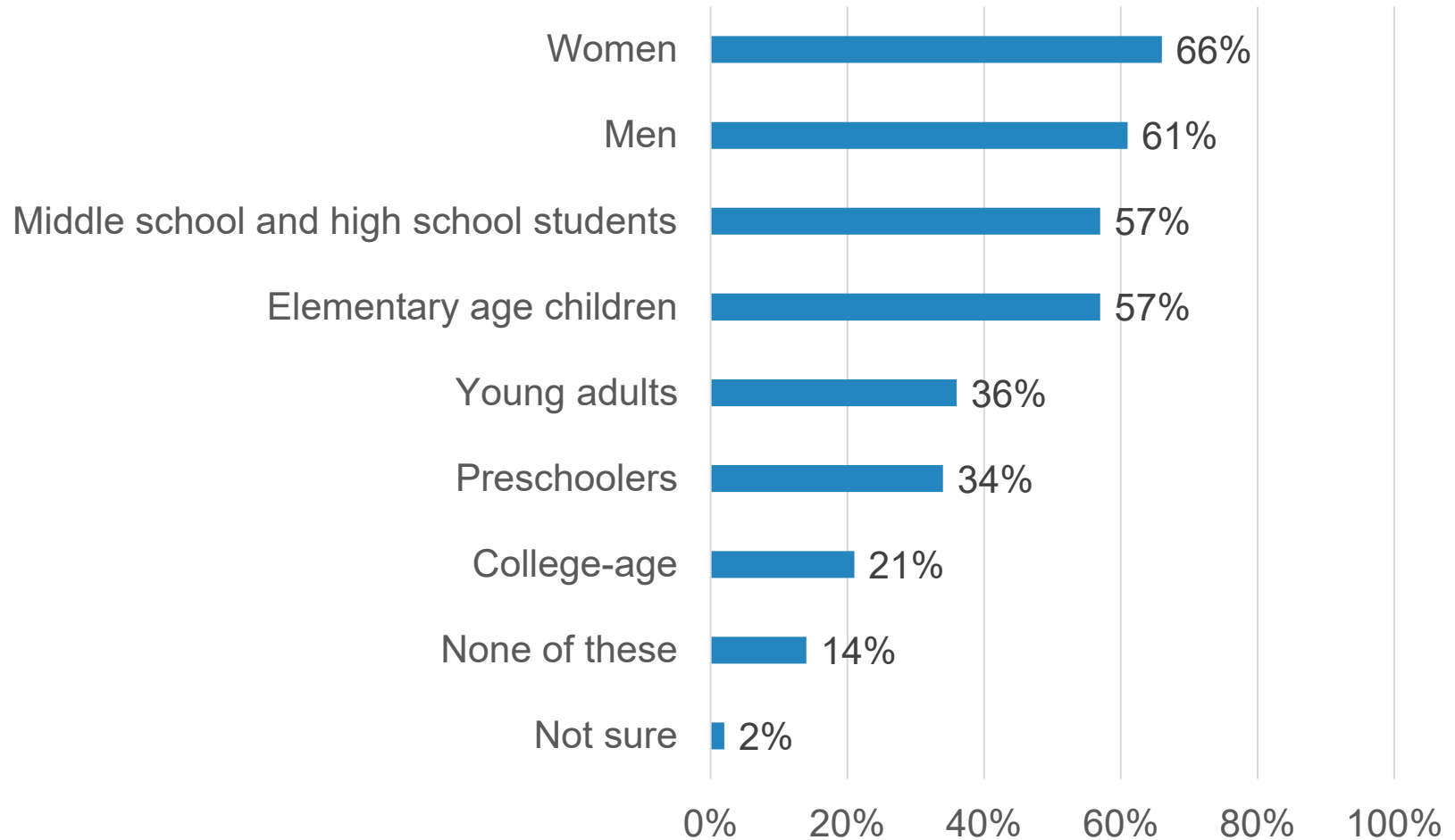


Lifewayresearch

Q23: “Which of the following best describes the first priority of the activities included in your church’s plan for discipling individuals and encouraging spiritual growth? (Select One)” n=1,467

“For which of the following groups does your church have targeted discipleship programs?”

Among Protestant Pastors

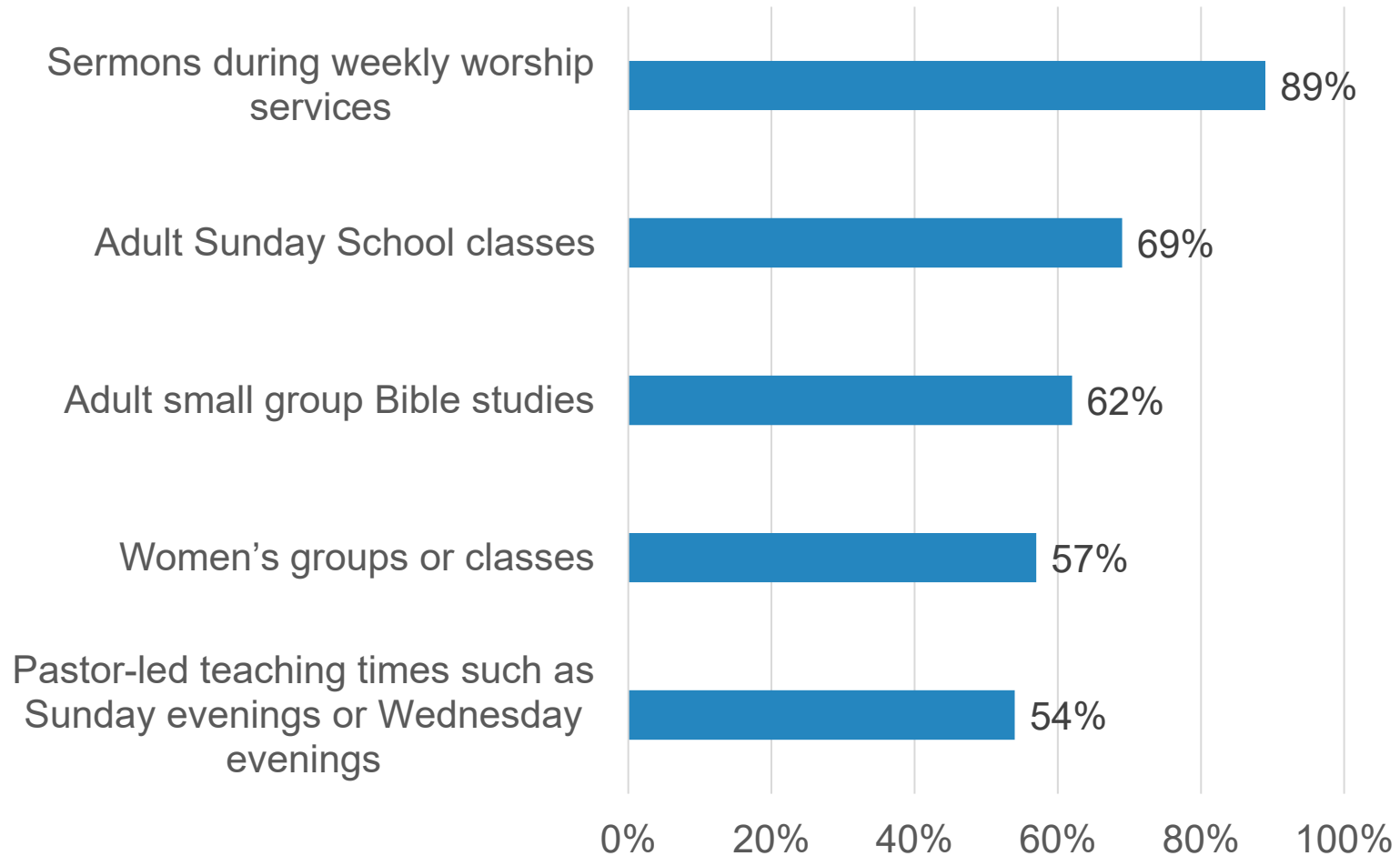


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Q24: “For which of the following groups does your church have targeted discipleship programs? (Select all that apply).” n=2,620

“What approaches does your church specifically use to disciple and encourage the spiritual development of adults in your congregation?”

Among Protestant Pastors

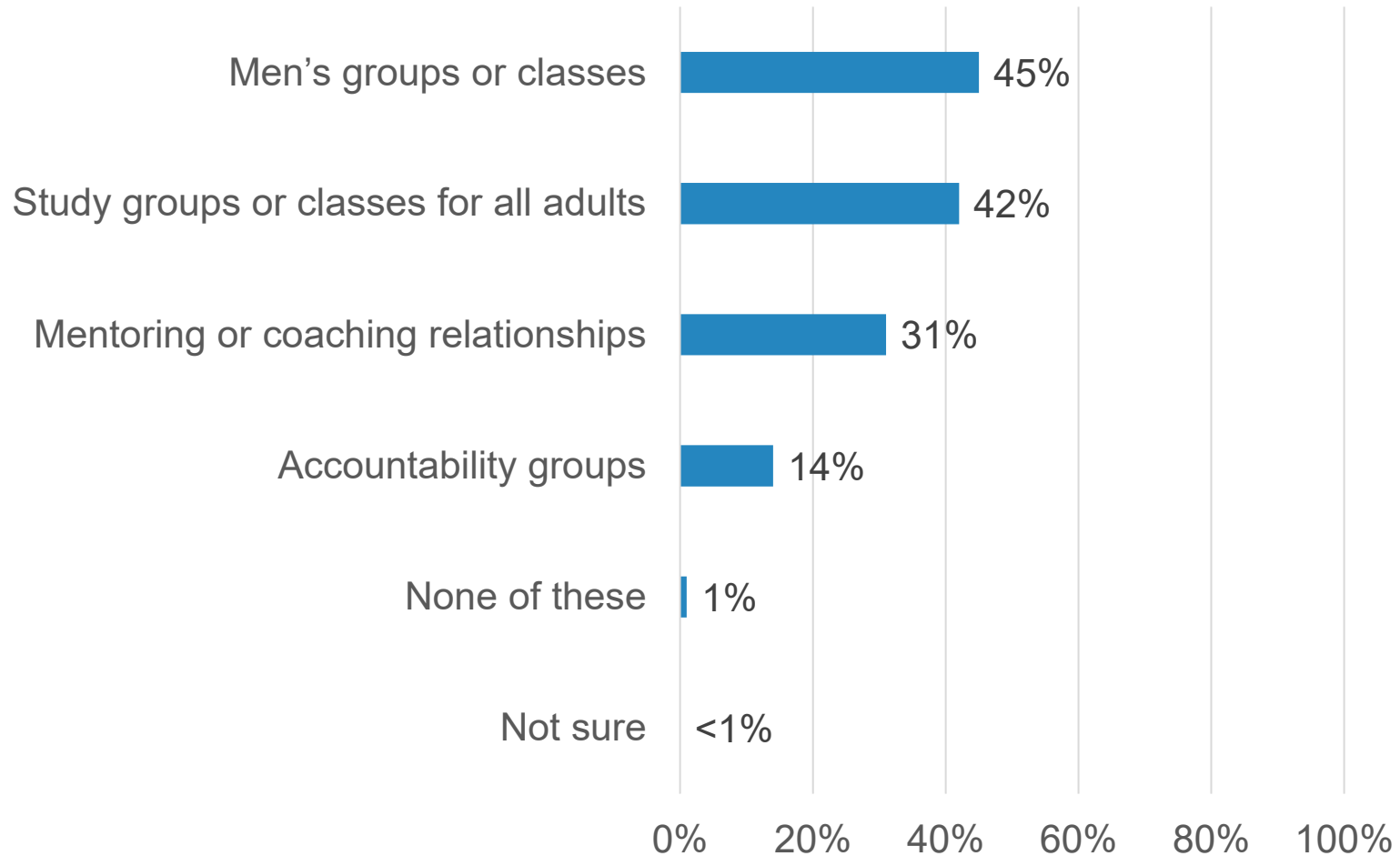


Lifewayresearch

Q25: “What approaches does your church specifically use to disciple and encourage the spiritual development of adults in your congregation? (Select all that apply).” n=2,620

“What approaches does your church specifically use to disciple and encourage the spiritual development of adults in your congregation?” *continued*

Among Protestant Pastors

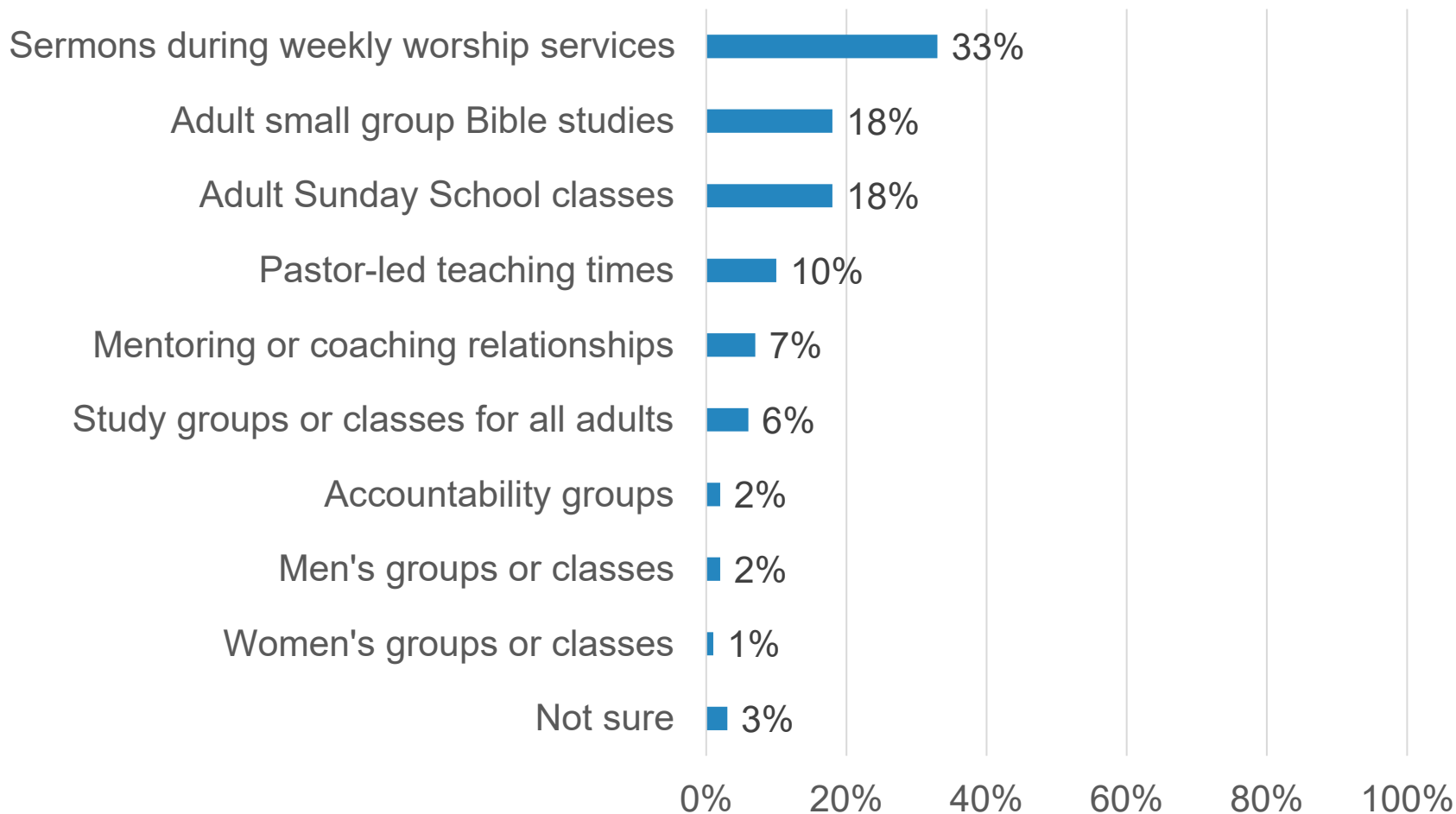


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Q25: “What approaches does your church specifically use to disciple and encourage the spiritual development of adults in your congregation? (Select all that apply).” n=2,620

Sermons and Bible study/ Sunday School classes are the top discipling ministries for adults

Among Protestant Pastors

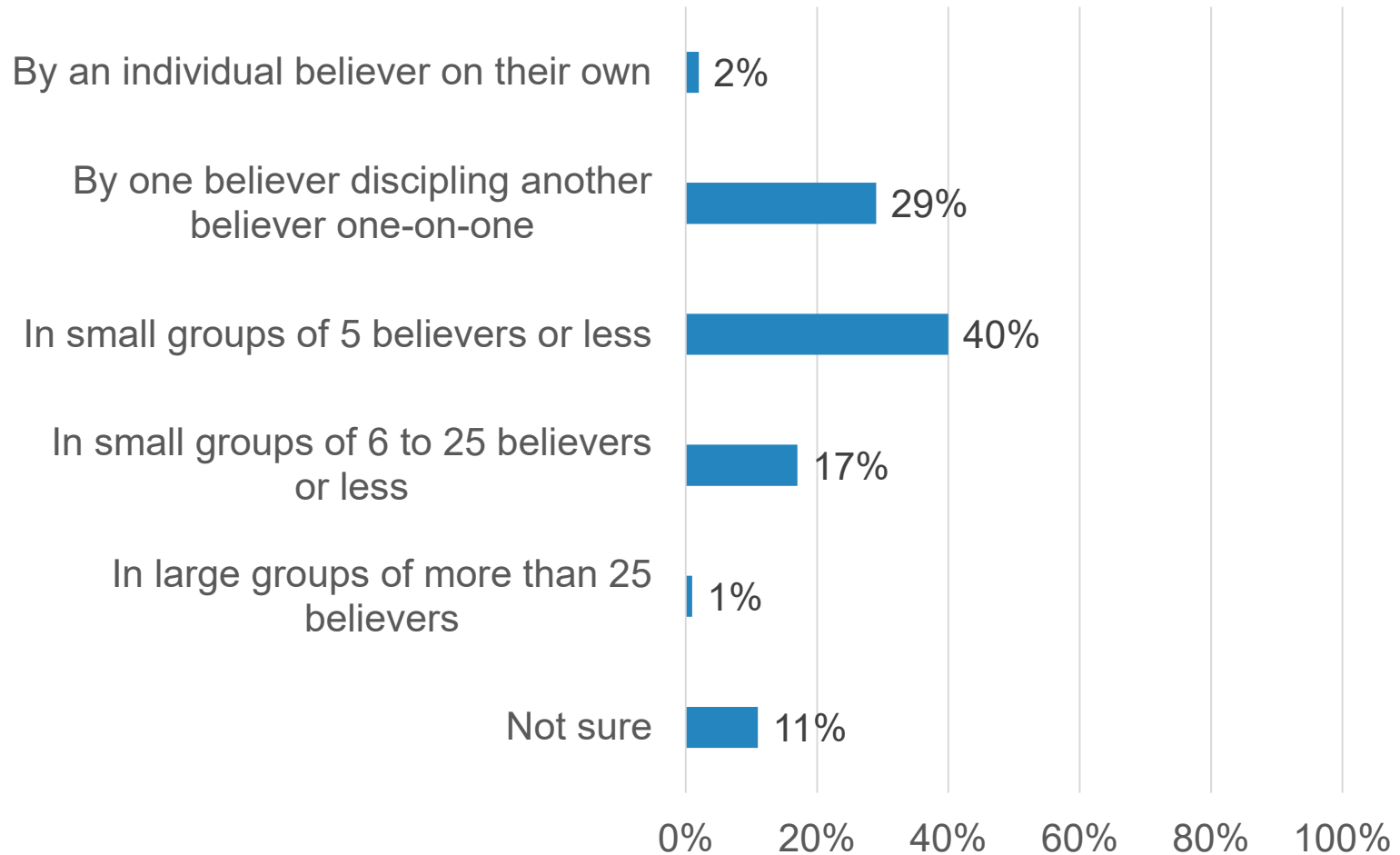


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Q26: "Which of these is the most important discipling ministry for adults in your church? (Select One)" n=2,600

69% believe discipleship is best accomplished in a group of 2-5 believers

Among Protestant Pastors



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Q32: "Discipleship is best accomplished... (Select One)" n=2,620

Significant Differences

Pastor

Ethnicity

Age

Education Level

Church

Region

Average Attendance

Year Church Established

Significant Differences

Comparisons were made to determine if there are any significant statistical differences among the pastor's age, ethnicity, and education.

AGE	ETHNICITY	EDUCATION
18-34	White	No College Degree
35-49	African American	Bachelor's Degree
50-64	Hispanic	Graduate Degree
65+	Other Ethnicities	

Significant Statistical Differences

Comparisons were made to determine if there are any significant statistical differences among the church's region, attendance, and year established.

REGION	ATTENDANCE	YEAR ESTABLISHED
Northeast	0-49	Before 1900
South	50-99	1900-1949
Midwest	100-249	1950-1999
West	250+	2000-2024

Note: Region is defined by the US Census locations

“I am satisfied with the state of discipleship and spiritual formation in our local church.”

- Pastors age 50-64 (53%) and 65+ (56%) are more likely to Agree than pastors age 18-34 (44%)
- Hispanic pastors (60%) and pastors of Other Ethnicities (62%) are more likely to Agree than African American pastors (42%)
- Pastors in the South (57%) and West (57%) are more likely to Agree than those in the Northeast (45%) and Midwest (42%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 250+ are the most likely to Agree (65%)
- Pastors at churches established 2000-2024 are the most likely to Agree (71%)

“Discipleship is not completed inside a program but in a relationship.”

- White (96%) and African American pastors (99%) are more likely to Agree than pastors of Other Ethnicities (88%)

“Discipleship can be as effective virtually as in-person.”

- Pastors age 65+ are the most likely to Agree (29%)
- Pastors age 18-34 are the most likely to Disagree (87%)
- White pastors are the most likely to Disagree (77%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 0-49 are the most likely to Agree (34%)

“There are methods for measuring discipleship in a congregation.”

- Pastors age 65+ are the least likely to Agree (65%)
- Pastors with a Graduate Degree are the most likely to Disagree (27%)
- Pastors at churches established 1950-1999 (73%) and 2000-2024 (77%) are more likely to Agree than those at churches established before 1900 (67%) and 1900-1949 (67%)

“My church has specific methods for measuring discipleship in our congregation.”

- Pastors age 65+ (68%) are more likely to Disagree than pastors age 18-34 (58%)
- Pastors of Other Ethnicities (49%) are more likely to Agree than White pastors (28%) and African American pastors (32%)
- Pastors with a Graduate Degree are the most likely to Disagree (69%)
- Pastors in the Midwest are the most likely to Disagree (73%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 250+ are the most likely to Agree (48%)
- Pastors at churches established 2000-2024 are the most likely to Agree (46%)

“Does your church have an intentional plan for discipling individuals in your congregation and encouraging their spiritual growth?”

- Pastors age 65+ are the most likely to select “No” (56%)
- Pastors of Other Ethnicities are the most likely to select “Yes” (77%)
- Pastors with no college degree (59%) or a Bachelor’s Degree (57%) are more likely to select “Yes” than those with a Graduate Degree (49%)
- Pastors in the South (56%) and West (54%) are more likely to select “Yes” than those in the Midwest (44%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 250+ are the most likely to select “Yes” (71%) followed by 100-249 (56%), 50-99 (50%), and 0-49 (40%)
- Pastors at churches established 2000-2024 are the most likely to select “Yes” (74%)

“Which of the following describes your plan for discipling individuals in your congregation.” (Among pastors with an intentional discipleship plan)

- Pastors age 18-34 (57%), 35-49 (49%), and 50-64 (44%) are more likely to select “We have a single discipleship plan that all ministries take part in” than pastors age 65+ (34%)
- White pastors (51%) and African American pastors (62%) are more likely to select “Each ministry has developed their own plan for discipling individuals” than pastors of Other Ethnicities (36%)
- Pastors with no college degree are the most likely to select “We have a single discipleship plan that all ministries take part in” (54%)
- Pastors in the Midwest are the least likely to select “Each ministry has developed their own plan for discipling individuals” (40%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 0-49 are the most likely to select “We have a single discipleship plan that all ministries take part in” (55%)
- Pastors at churches established 2000-2024 are the most likely to select “We have a single discipleship plan that all ministries take part in” (53%)

“Which of the following best describes the first priority of the activities included in your church’s plan for discipling individuals and encouraging spiritual growth?”

- Pastors age 18-34 (60%) and 65+ (56%) are more likely to select “Biblical knowledge focused” than pastors age 35-49 (45%) and 50-64 (42%)
- White pastors (47%) and pastors of Other Ethnicities (49%) are the least likely to select “Biblical knowledge” than African American (23%)
- Hispanic pastors are the most likely to select “Equipping and ‘how-to’ focused” (24%)
- White (38%) and African American pastors (54%) are more likely to select “Relationship and encouragement focused” than Hispanic pastors (23%)
- Pastors with no college degree are the most likely to select “Biblical knowledge focused” (62%)
- Pastors in the Northeast (54%) and Midwest (51%) are more likely to select “Biblical knowledge focused” than those in the South (43%)

“Which of the following best describes the first priority of the activities included in your church’s plan for discipling individuals and encouraging spiritual growth?” Continued

- Pastors at churches with attendance of 0-49 (51%) and 100-249 (47%) are more likely to select “Biblical knowledge focused” than those at churches with attendance of 250+ (39%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 250+ are the most likely to select “Relationship and encouragement focused” (52%)
- Pastors at churches established before 1900 (51%) and 1950-1999 (52%) are more likely to select “Biblical knowledge focused” than those at churches established 2000-2024 (40%)

“For which of the following groups does your church have targeted discipleship programs?”

Men

- Pastors of Other Ethnicities (76%) are more likely to select than White pastors (60%) and African American pastors (50%)
- Pastors with a Graduate Degree are the least likely to select (59%)
- Pastors in the Northeast (65%) and South (66%) are more likely to select than those in the Midwest (51%) and West (56%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 100-249 (70%) and 250+ (71%) are more likely to select than those at churches with attendance of 0-49 (45%) and 50-99 (62%)
- Pastors at churches established 2000-2024 are the most likely to select (73%)

“For which of the following groups does your church have targeted discipleship programs?”

Women

- Pastors age 50-64 (71%) are more likely to select than pastors age 35-49 (64%) and 65+ (61%)
- Hispanic pastors (76%) and pastors of Other Ethnicities (77%) are more likely to select than White pastors (65%) and African American pastors (58%)
- Pastors in the Northeast (71%) and South (72%) are more likely to select than those in the Midwest (59%) and West (56%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 250+ are the most likely to select (81%) followed by 100-249 (75%), 50-99 (69%), and 0-49 (46%)

“For which of the following groups does your church have targeted discipleship programs?”

Young adults

- Pastors age 65+ are the least likely to select (29%)
- African American pastors (51%) and Hispanic pastors (58%) are more likely to select than White pastors (34%)
- Pastors with no college degree are the most likely to select (45%)
- Pastors in the South (40%) and West (36%) are more likely to select than those in the Midwest (30%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 250+ are the most likely to select (57%) followed by 100-249 (48%), 50-99 (32%), and 0-49 (19%)
- Pastors at churches established 2000-2024 are more likely to select (44%)

College-age

- Pastors age 65+ are the least likely to select (10%)
- African American pastors are the least likely to select (10%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 250+ are the most likely to select (45%)

“For which of the following groups does your church have targeted discipleship programs?”

Middle school and high school students

- Pastors age 35-49 are the most likely to select (68%)
- White pastors (59%) and pastors of Other Ethnicities (54%) are more likely to select than African American pastors (39%) and Hispanic pastors (41%)
- Pastors with a Graduate Degree (59%) are more likely to select than those with no college degree (49%)
- Pastors in the South (61%) are more likely to select than those in the Northeast (51%) and West (53%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 250+ are the most likely to select (89%) followed by 100-249 (77%), 50-99 (54%), and 0-49 (26%)

“For which of the following groups does your church have targeted discipleship programs?”

Elementary age children

- Pastors age 65+ are the least likely to select (41%)
- African American pastors are the least likely to select (33%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 250+ are the most likely to select (79%) followed by 100-249 (70%), 50-99 (58%), and 0-49 (33%)

Preschoolers

- Pastors age 65+ are the least likely to select (17%)
- White pastors (35%) and Hispanic pastors (33%) are more likely to select than pastors of Other Ethnicities (19%)
- Pastors with a Bachelor's Degree are the least likely to select (28%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 250+ are the most likely to select (58%) followed by 100-249 (46%), 50-99 (31%), and 0-49 (15%)

“What approaches does your church specifically use to disciple and encourage the spiritual development of adults in your congregation?”

Adult Sunday School classes

- Pastors age 18-34 are the least likely to select (56%)
- Pastors of Other Ethnicities are the least likely to select (47%)
- Pastors in the South are the most likely to select (75%)
- Pastors in the Northeast are the least likely to select (50%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 50-99 (73%) and 100-249 (71%) are more likely to select than those at churches with attendance of 0-49 (61%) and 250+ (67%)
- Pastors at churches established 2000-2024 are the least likely to select (38%)

“What approaches does your church specifically use to disciple and encourage the spiritual development of adults in your congregation?”

Adult small group Bible studies

- Pastors age 65+ are the least likely to select (48%)
- Pastors with no college degree are the least likely to select (54%)
- Pastors in the Northeast (71%) are more likely to select than those in the Midwest (63%) and South (59%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 250+ are the most likely to select (82%) followed by 100-249 (71%), 50-99 (61%), and 0-49 (47%)
- Pastors at churches established 2000-2024 are the most likely to select (72%)

“What approaches does your church specifically use to disciple and encourage the spiritual development of adults in your congregation?”

Study groups or classes for all adults

- Pastors age 35-49 (45%) are more likely to select than pastors 18-34 (37%) and 65+ (35%)
- Pastors of Other Ethnicities are the most likely to select (56%)
- Pastors with a Graduate Degree (44%) are more likely to select than those with a Bachelor's Degree (33%)
- Pastors in the Northeast are the least likely to select (33%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 250+ are the most likely to select (61%) followed by 100-249 (49%), 50-99 (44%), and 0-49 (22%)
- Pastors at churches established 1950-1999 (48%) and 2000-2024 (44%) are more likely to select than those at churches established before 1900 (37%) and 1900-1949 (35%)

“What approaches does your church specifically use to disciple and encourage the spiritual development of adults in your congregation?”

Men’s groups or classes

- Pastors age 65+ are the least likely to select (31%)
- Pastors of Other Ethnicities are the most likely to select (59%)
- Pastors with a Bachelor’s Degree are the most likely to select (54%)
- Pastors in the South (49%) are more likely to select than those in the Midwest (42%) and West (38%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 250+ are the most likely to select (73%) followed by 100-249 (63%), 50-99 (40%), and 0-49 (20%)
- Pastors at churches established 1950-1999 (51%) and 2000-2024 (55%) are more likely to select than those at churches established before 1900 (35%) and 1900-1949 (39%)

“What approaches does your church specifically use to disciple and encourage the spiritual development of adults in your congregation?”

Women’s groups or classes

- Pastors age 35-49 (60%) and 50-64 (59%) are more likely to select than pastors age 65+ (50%)
- Pastors in the West are the least likely to select (49%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 0-49 are the least likely to select (33%)
- Pastors at churches established 1950-1999 are the most likely to select (63%)

“What approaches does your church specifically use to disciple and encourage the spiritual development of adults in your congregation?”

Accountability groups

- Pastors age 35-49 (16%) and 50-64 (17%) are more likely to select than pastors age 18-34 (4%) and 65+ (9%)
- African American pastors are the least likely to select (3%)
- Pastors in the West are the most likely to select (22%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 250+ are the most likely to select (32%) followed by 100-249 (17%), 50-99 (10%), and 0-49 (8%)
- Pastors at churches established 2000-2024 are the most likely to select (25%)

“What approaches does your church specifically use to disciple and encourage the spiritual development of adults in your congregation?”

Mentoring or coaching relationships

- Pastors age 35-49 (35%) and 50-64 (33%) are more likely to select than pastors age 65+ (22%)
- Pastors of Other Ethnicities are the most likely to select (51%)
- Pastors in the West are the most likely to select (43%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 250+ are the most likely to select (46%)
- Pastors at churches established 2000-2024 are the most likely to select (52%) followed by 1950-1999 (33%), 1900-1949 (25%), and before 1900 (19%)

“What approaches does your church specifically use to disciple and encourage the spiritual development of adults in your congregation?”

Pastor-led teaching times such as Sunday evenings or Wednesday evenings

- African American pastors are the most likely to select (67%)
- Pastors with a Graduate Degree are the least likely to select (58%)
- Pastors with no college degree are the most likely to select (71%)
- Pastors in the South are the most likely to select (63%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 100-249 are the most likely to select (63%)
- Pastors at churches established 1900-1949 are the most likely to select (62%)

Sermons during weekly worship services

- Pastors age 18-34 (94%) and 35-49 (92%) are more likely to select than pastors age 50-64 (88%) and 65+ (82%)
- White pastors are the most likely to select (90%)

“Which of these is the most important discipling ministry for adults in your church?”

- Pastors age 18-34 (42%) and 65+ (37%) are more likely to select “Sermons during weekly worship services” 35-49 (32%) and 50-64 (30%)
- African American pastors are the most likely to select “Pastor-led teaching times such as Sunday evenings or Wednesday evenings” (32%)
- Pastors with no college degree are the most likely to select “Pastor-led teaching times such as Sunday evenings or Wednesday evenings” (22%)
- Pastors in the South are the most likely to select “Adult Sunday School classes” (23%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 250+ are the most likely to select “Adult small group Bible studies” (36%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 0-49 are the most likely to select “Sermons during weekly worship services” (39%)
- Pastors at churches established 2000-2024 are the most likely to select “Adult small group Bible studies” (28%)

“Discipleship is best accomplished...”

- White pastors (42%) are more likely to select “In small groups of 5 believers or less” than African American pastors (29%) and pastors of Other Ethnicities (31%)
- African American pastors (39%) are more likely to select “By one believer discipling another believer one-on-one” than White pastors (28%)
- Pastors with a Graduate Degree are the least likely to select “By one believer discipling another believer one-on-one” (27%)
- Pastors at churches with attendance of 50-99 are the least likely to select “In small groups of 5 believers or less” (35%)

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