

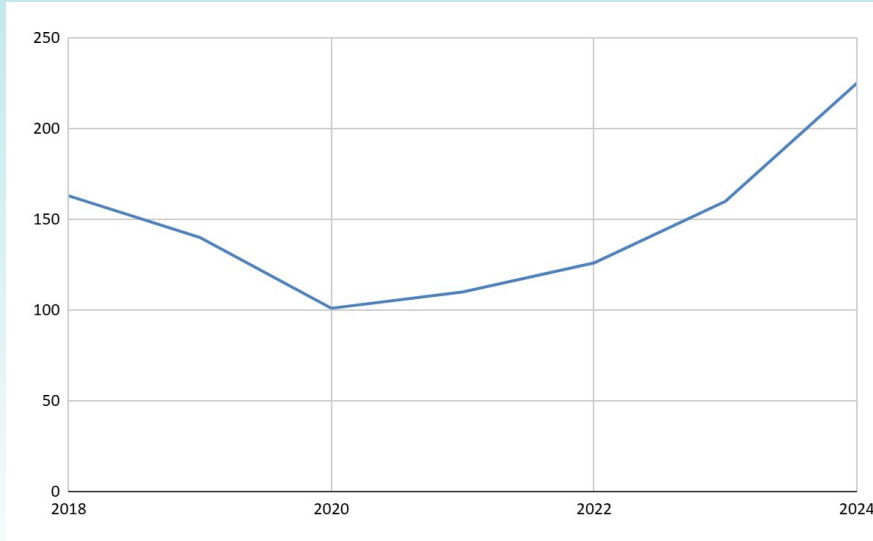


Congregational Vitality Assessment Report

First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

BY THE NUMBERS

- About 960 individuals participate or support in some way
- 200 average worship attendance f2f, 25 online - attendance dipped during the pandemic but has rebounded higher than 2018-2019 at this point

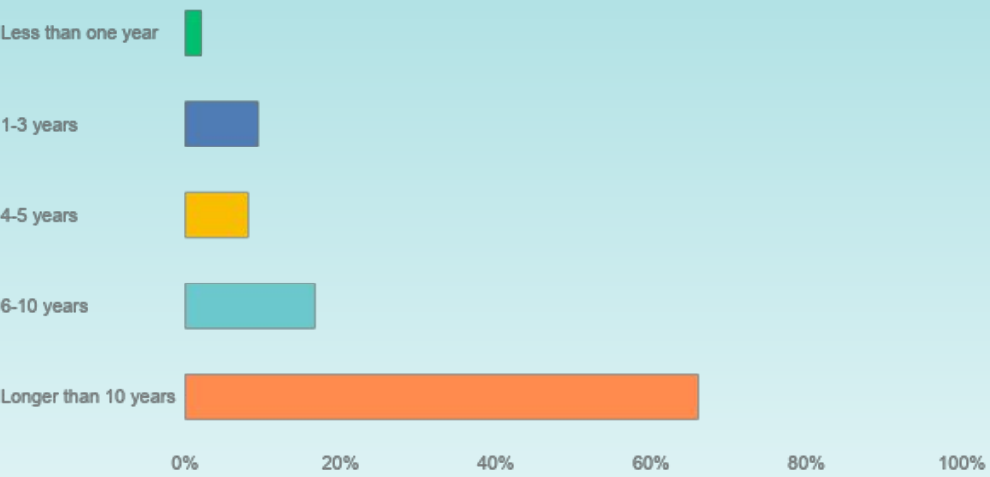


- 240 responses to congregational survey.

- 45-50 non-worship activities per month - about 200 attend these as well
 - AA - 8x/month
 - Yoga Group - 8x/month
 - Bible Study - 4x/month
 - Bible Study Offsite - 4x/month
 - Food Pantry - 4x/month
 - Diaper Bank - 1x/month
 - Ladies Who Stitch - 4x/month
 - Ladies Benev Society Lunch - 1x/month
 - LBS Board - 1x/month
 - Bd of Trustees - 1x/month
 - Senior Choir - 4x/month
 - Red Cross Blood Drive - 1x/month
 - Memorial Services - 2x/month
 - Musical Masterworks Concert - 2x/month
 - Board of Stewardship - 1x/month
 - Writers at the Well - 1x/month
 - Newsletter mailing group - 1x/month
 - Senior Center events - 3x/month
 - Youth Breakfast run to NYC - 1x/month
 - Organ Concert - 1x/month
 - Grief Group - 1x/month

Q1: How long have you attended worship, gatherings, or other events (online or face to face) with this congregation?

Answered: 236 Skipped: 4



Most respondents (66%) have participated for longer than 10 years. Only 12% (28 people) have participated for 3 years or less.

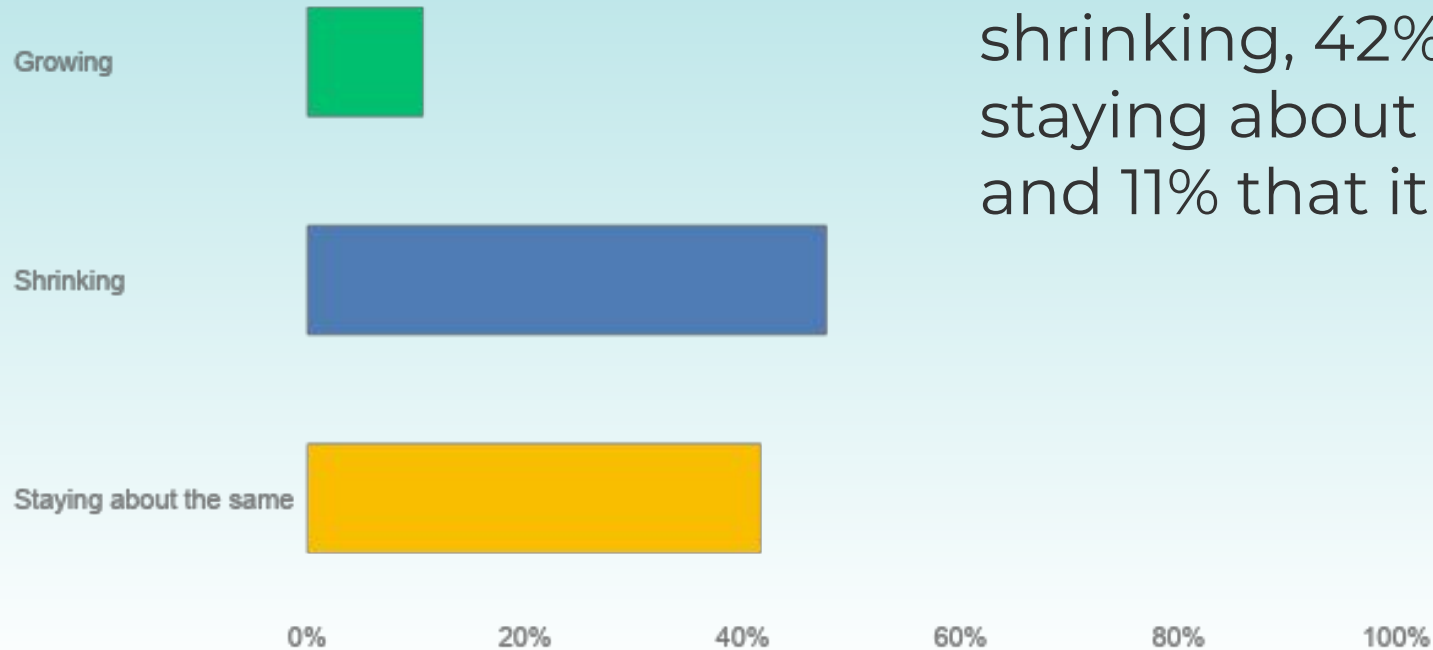
From the Leader Survey

In 2023, 14 people joined/began participation in your congregation.

In past years, new members (not counting confirmands) have ranged from 17-35 per year. The number of new members per year has decreased year over year. Confirmands have also decreased year over year.

Q14: Do you think your congregation is:

Answered: 219 Skipped: 21

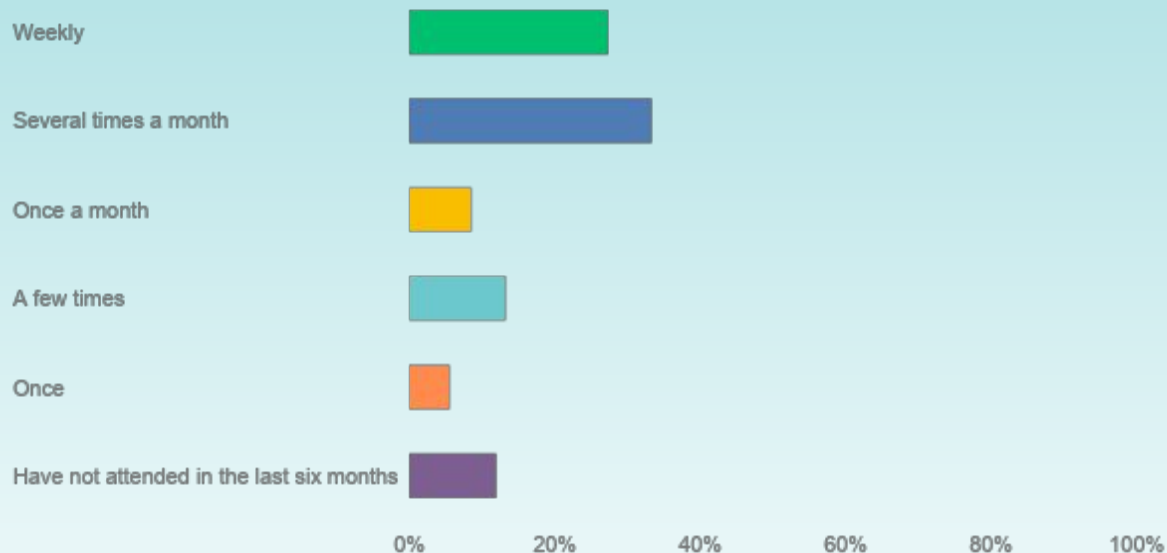


47% of respondents feel your congregation is shrinking, 42% that it is staying about the same, and 11% that it is growing.

Q2: How often have you attended your congregation's gatherings/worship, programming and/or events (face to face or online) in the last six months?

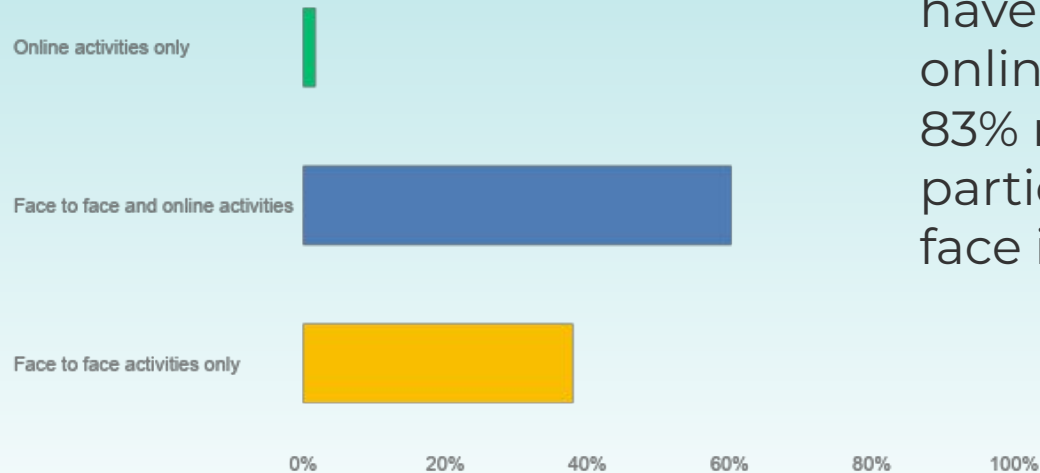
Answered: 236 Skipped: 4

The majority of survey respondents (61%) are attending at least several times a month. However, 12% (28 people) have not attended in the last six months, and another 19% (45 people) have only attended once or a few times. This is a significant portion of people who care enough to fill out a survey but no longer participate.



Q6: During my time as a part of this congregation, I have participated in:

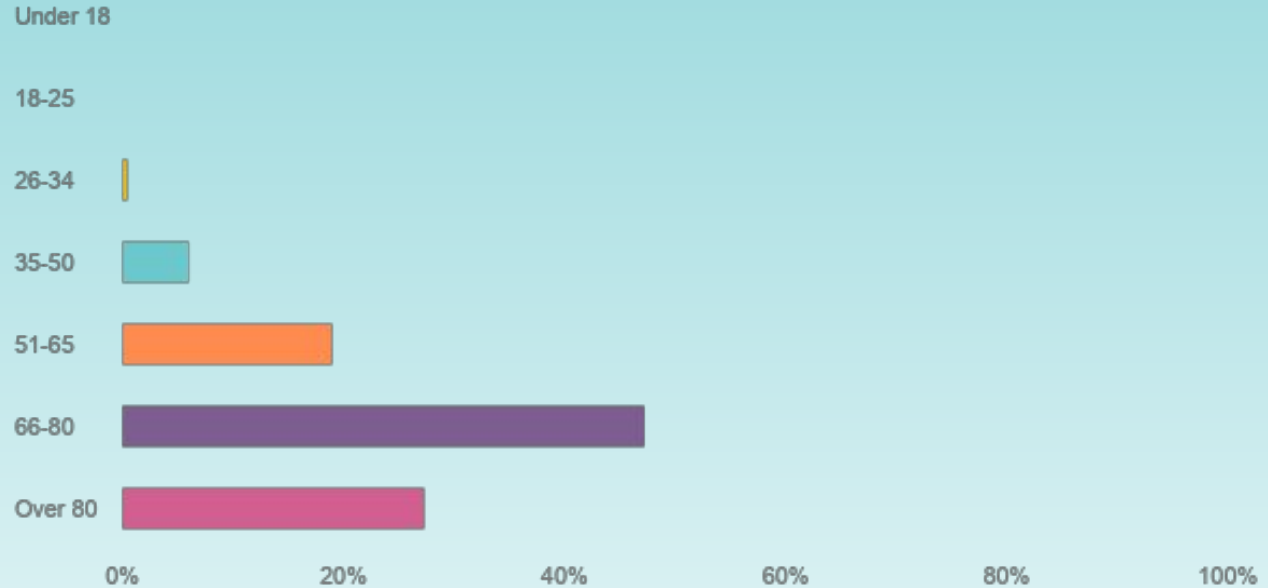
Answered: 231 Skipped: 9



You are a primarily face to face congregation, but the majority (60%) have participated online at some point. 83% most often participated face to face in recent months.

Q39: How old are you?

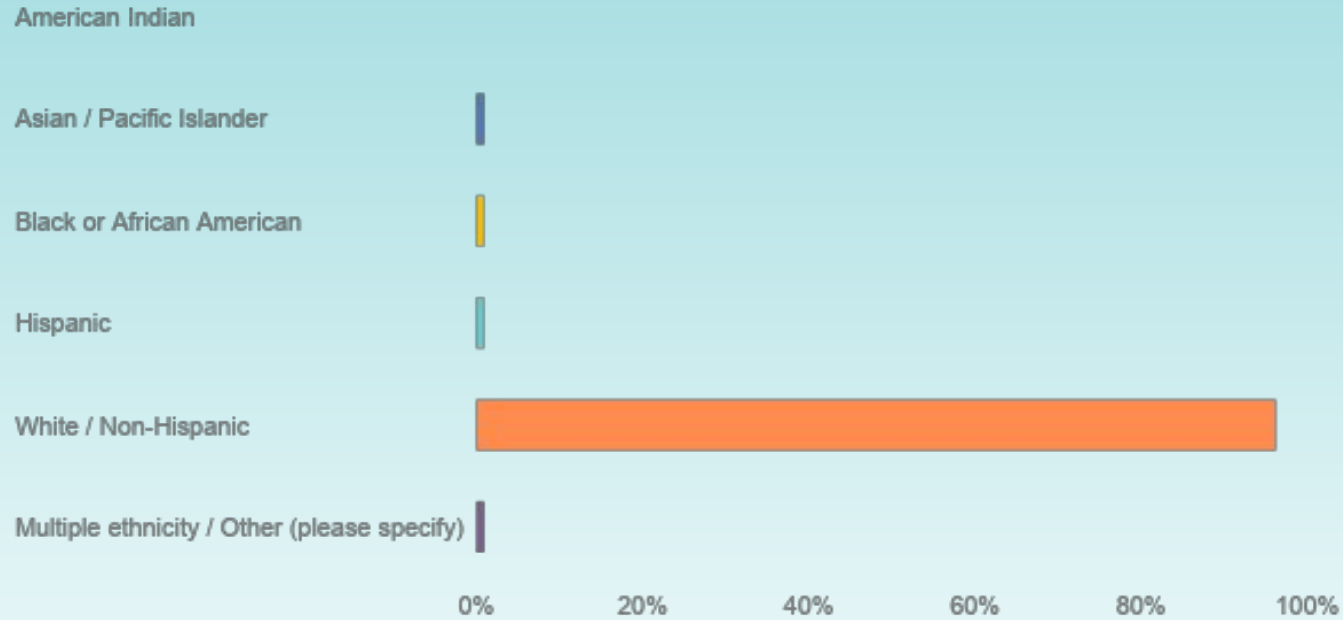
Answered: 219 Skipped: 21



While many people skip demographic questions on surveys, 219 of your respondents did share at least some demographic information. Your respondents were largely over 65 (74%) which is likely similar to your congregation as a whole. If there are under-represented age groups, we can help you discern how to gain their perspectives in this process.

Q40: Which race/ethnicity best describes you? (Please choose only one.)

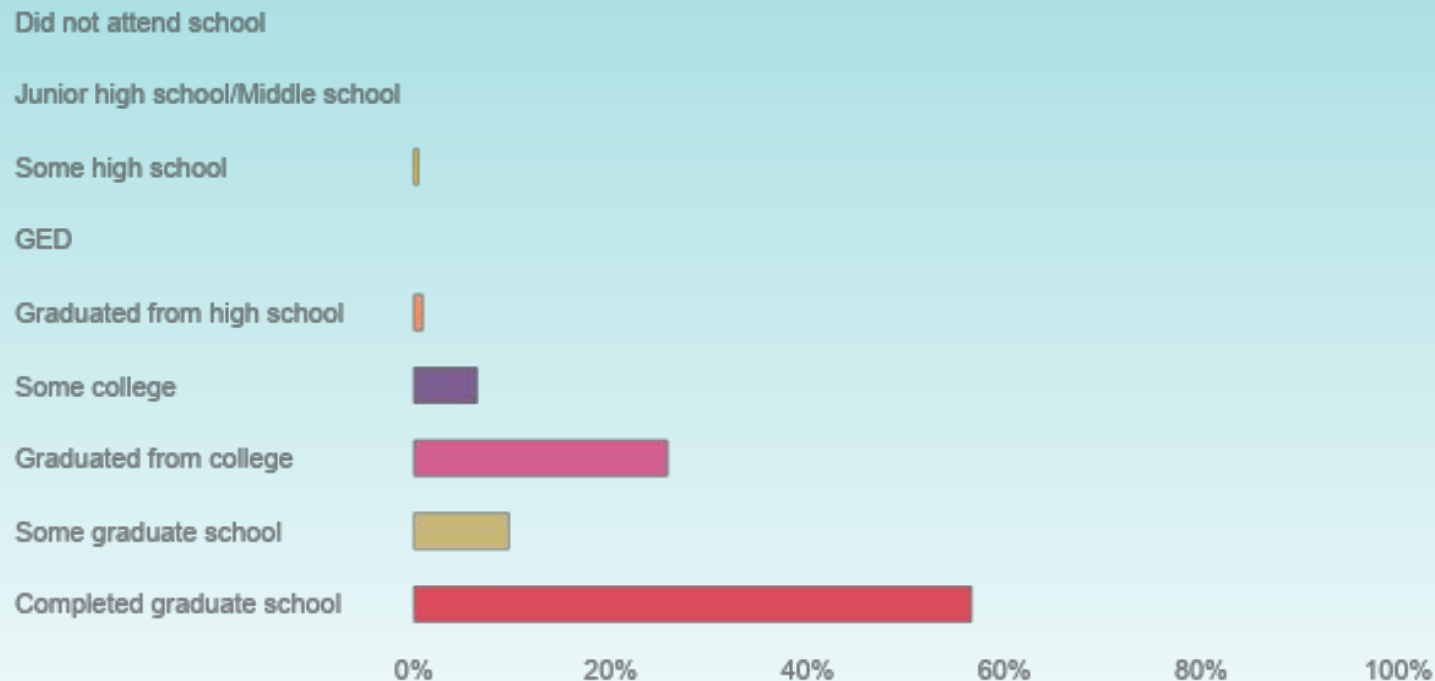
Answered: 215 Skipped: 25



Your respondents were predominantly White/Non-Hispanic (96%) which is likely similar to your congregation as a whole. If there are underrepresented groups, we can help you discern how to gain their perspectives as well.

Q41: What is the highest level of education you have completed?

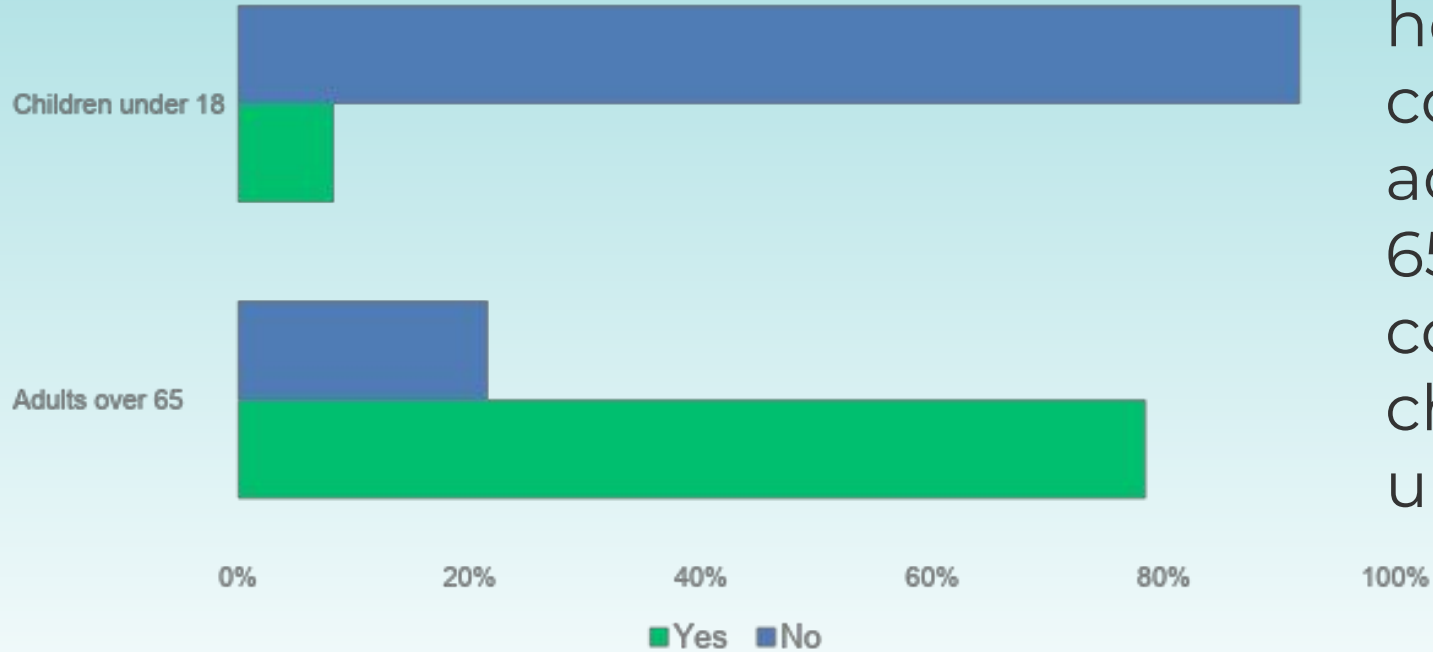
Answered: 220 Skipped: 20



Your respondents were highly educated, with 99% completing at least some college. The majority (66%) had completed at least some graduate school.

Q42: Does your household contain?

Answered: 214 Skipped: 26

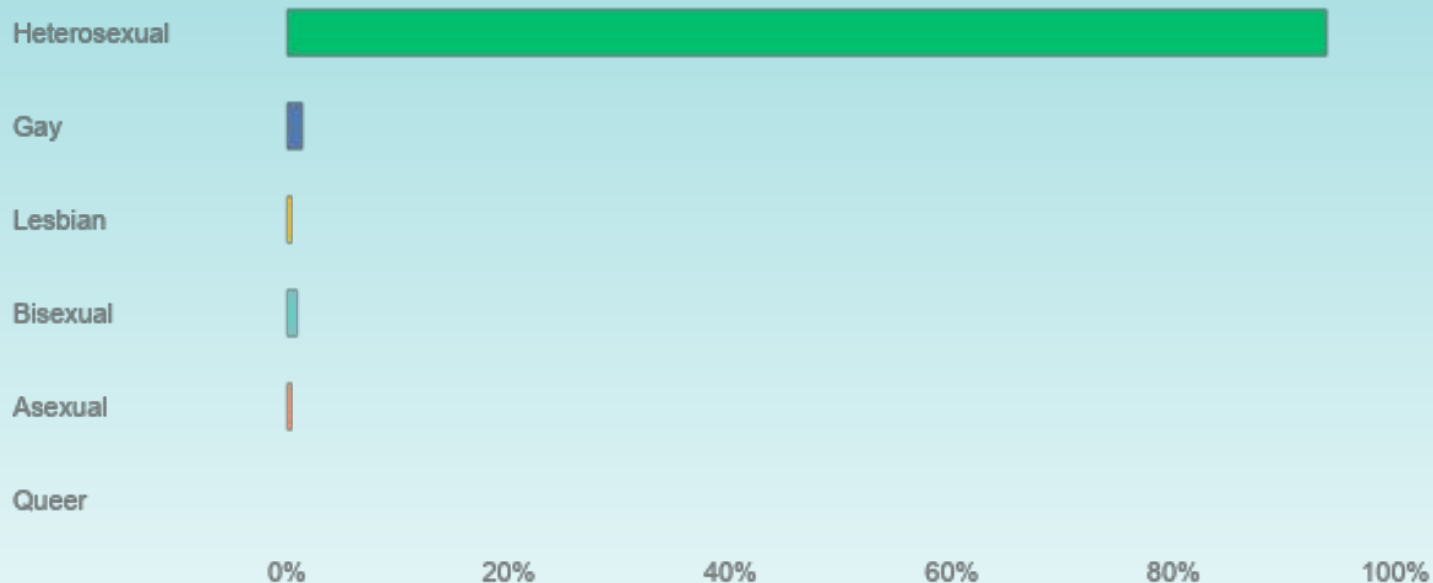


78% of respondent households contained adults over 65, and 9% contained children under 18.

Q43: Would you identify yourself as:

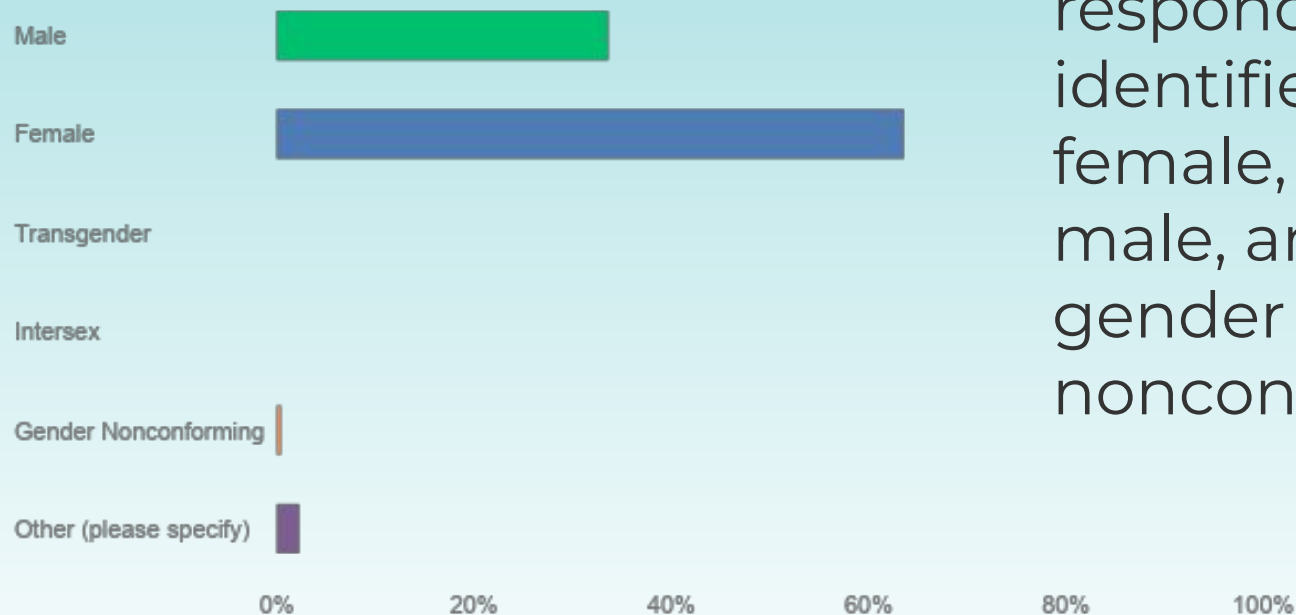
Answered: 214 Skipped: 26

94% of your respondents identified as heterosexual and 3% as LGBTQIA.



Q44: Would you identify yourself as:

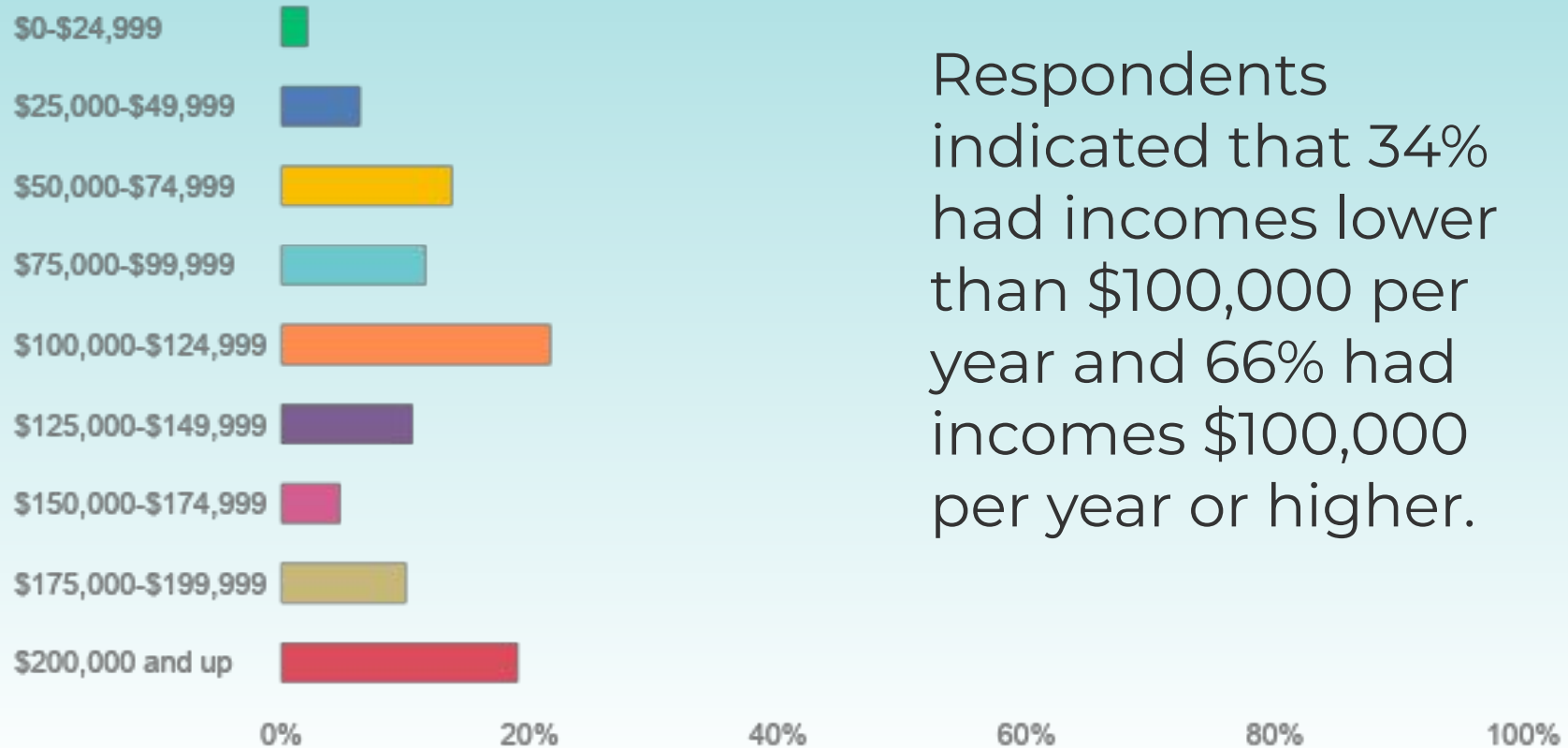
Answered: 220 Skipped: 20



63% of your respondents identified as female, 34% as male, and 3% as gender nonconforming.

Q46: What is your approximate average household income?

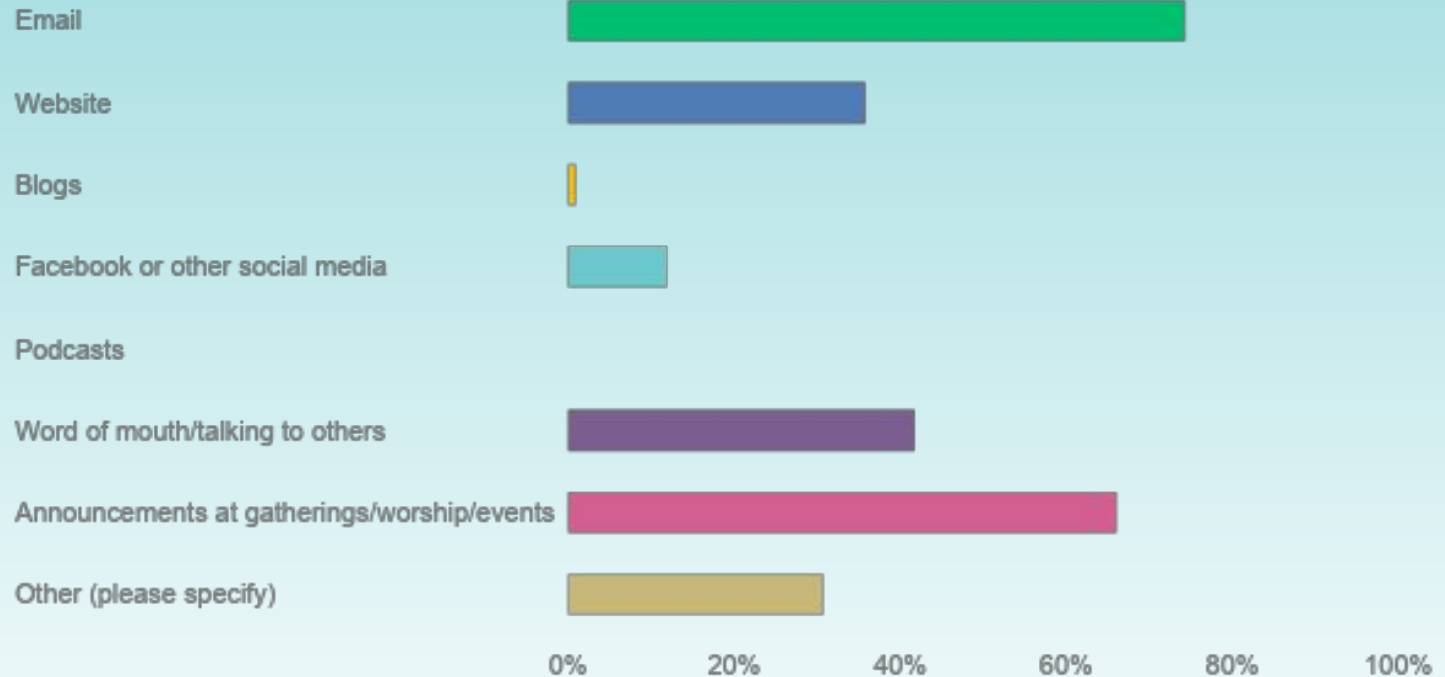
Answered: 190 Skipped: 50



Respondents indicated that 34% had incomes lower than \$100,000 per year and 66% had incomes \$100,000 per year or higher.

Q33: How do you most often hear about congregational announcements and events? (Check all that apply)

Answered: 221 Skipped: 19



The top ways respondents hear about church news and events are email (74%), announcements (66%), and word of mouth/talking to others (41%). The 31% other category was primarily mentions of the mailed newsletter.

DREAMS FOR THE FUTURE

Your respondents dream of a future for your congregation that is growing and:

- Making an impact on the world and individual lives (36 responses)
- Building social justice (20)
- Deepening spiritual lives (19)
- Engaging younger people (16)
- Deepening connections between participants (15)
- Growing more diverse (12)



A segment of approximately 22 respondents feel that the congregation should move away from a focus on social justice, but only 8 of these people are currently participating regularly (once a month or more). Additionally, 18 of the 20 respondents who dream of a continued focus on social justice participate regularly. **These differing segments point to some potential alignment issues for your congregation.**

YOUR COMMUNITY

- 06371 Zip Code has approximately 10,000 residents and 3973 households.
- The median household income is \$122,000 per year, higher than CT as a whole.
- 55% of residents have a bachelor's degree or higher
- Only 60% of residents are employed, and there are many retirees in the area.
- The median age is 49 years old, older than CT as a whole.
- The median home value is over \$500,000.
- 06371 is 94% White, 2% Hispanic, 2% Asian, 0.5% Black, and 1% two or more races.

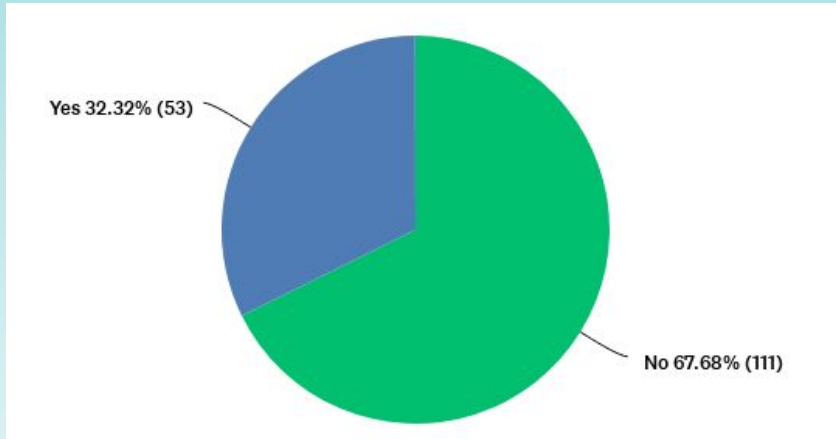
Themes from Community Interviews

Ideas for addressing local issues were:

- Advocates/carers/transporters for older adults
- Continue church's work with immigrants and refugees
- Help with meals at Meal Center
- Participate in Shoreline Basic Needs Network
- Partnering with other churches on youth programming
- Zoning changes for more affordable housing
- Help for those navigating systems of assistance
- Continue/increase assisting SSKP with addressing food insecurity
- Convening conversations across political differences - reduce polarization
- Bible studies/groups at local nursing/assisted living homes
- Spread the word on library events
- Continue support for addiction/recovery programs
- Open church grounds and advertise as place of meditation and retreat
- Increase interfaith collaboration
- Collaborate with existing groups, decreasing disconnection between programs

Conflict/Polarization

Q35: During the past 2 years, has your congregation experienced any disagreements or conflicts?



Q38: How much training have you received on healthy engagement with differences or conflict within the past 5 years?

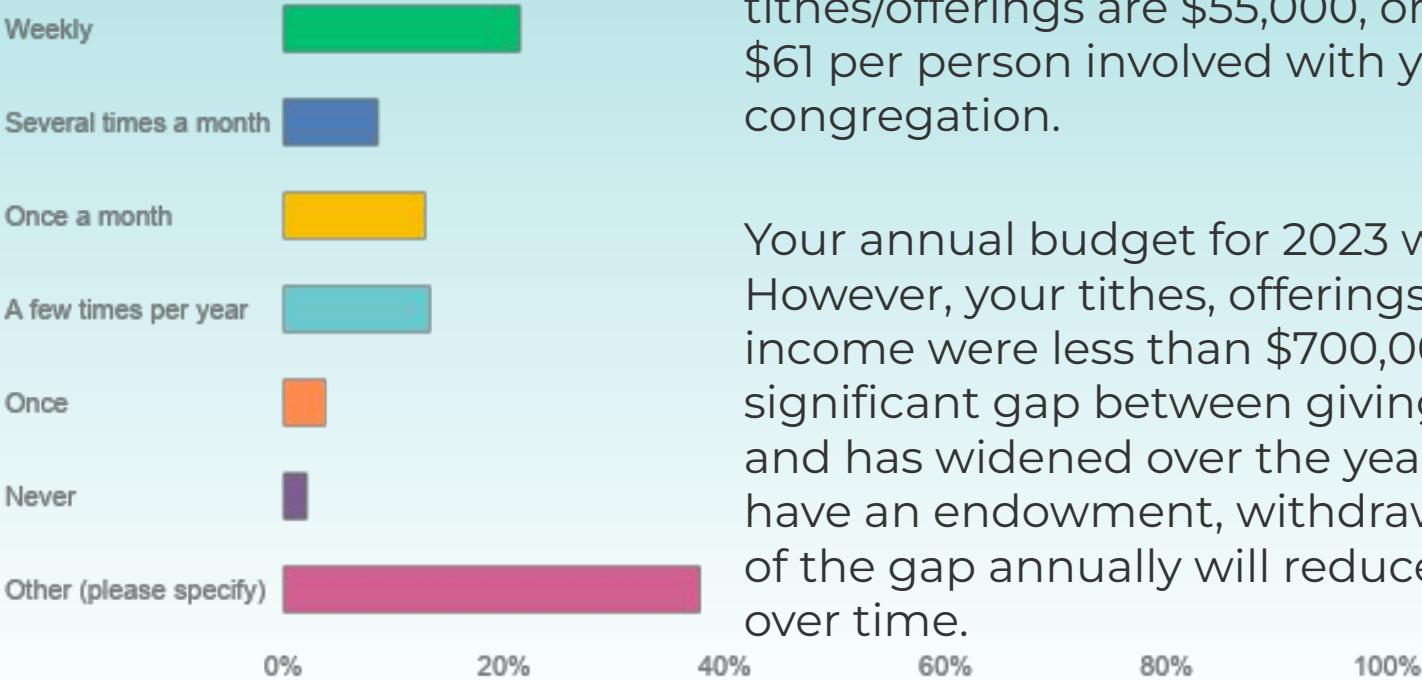


While conflict is not currently flaring up in your congregation, there are indicators in the data of some unhealed past conflict and unhealthy communications patterns around political differences. Healthy communications training is always useful during times of congregational change.

FINANCIAL HEALTH

Q3: How often have you donated financially to this congregation in the last year?

Answered: 236 Skipped: 4

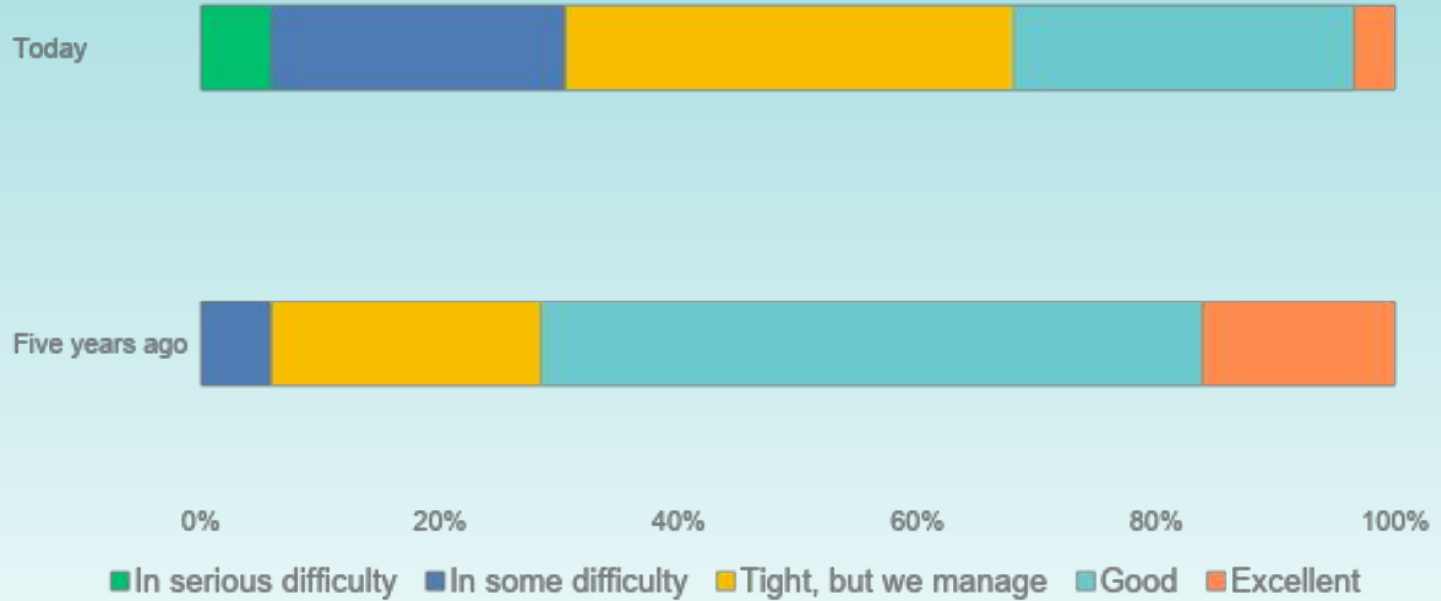


98% of respondents are giving regularly. The large other category was primarily mentions of annual pledge fulfillments. Average monthly tithes/offerings are \$55,000, or approximately \$61 per person involved with your congregation.

Your annual budget for 2023 was over \$917,000. However, your tithes, offerings, and other income were less than \$700,000. This is a significant gap between giving and budget and has widened over the years. While you have an endowment, withdrawing the amount of the gap annually will reduce its principal over time.

Q34: Overall, how would you describe your congregation's financial health?

Answered: 205 Skipped: 32



Most respondents (68%) described the church finances as tight or in difficult condition. Only 29% would have described them as tight or difficult 5 years ago.

GENERATIONS - OLDER can be BOLDER!

- **A key concern among your folks is the aging of your congregation. Your current members will age, that is a fact of life. Yet you wish for more young participants at this time.**
 - However, you must consider why you want more young people.
 - Are you simply seeking people to take on the workload and fund your congregation? That is not a very enticing invitation.
 - Young people are different than you and have their own needs. If you truly have a heart for young people and young families, asking how you can meet them where they are and help them with their needs is a good place to start.
- **Older congregations can be vital too!**
 - There are several keys:
 - Right-sizing for your current participation levels
 - Unifying around 2-3 focus areas per year
 - Streamlining and pruning all programs that don't support that focus.
 - An older congregation with a compelling mission is more likely to attract new participants of all ages, when compared with one that only has the mission of finding new members to replace the old on boards/committees and budgets.

Participation/Connections

- **A concern of your respondents is your current number of members and active participants.**
- Smaller numbers than in 1950 or 1990 are only a problem for vitality if you are trying to do too much for your size.
- What programs, activities and structures belong to a bygone era and are not a good fit for what God is calling you toward today?
- We all have individual callings but only some of that will be our collective calling. What are you all called to work on together to bring God's love to life in our world?
- All of those other programs, activities and structures will need to be paused, ended, or handed off to those most passionate about them to do as a non-congregational program. You can still pray for them and bring them casseroles when they are busy living out their calling!
- The collective calling you all have will need to be focused on 2-3 areas at most, with specific goals you are working toward in the near, medium, and long term.
- This will be hard, but you will find more enthusiastic participation with a clear focus, and new people will be more likely to join a group of people with a focused mission rather than a vague idea.

CHANGE SKILLS

- Another key concern among your folks is attitudes toward change.
- **Good news: You (and any congregation) can build change readiness!**
 - Change is going to happen whether we like it or not.
 - God is in the change just as God is in the stillness.
 - While we may be weary of change, we can't try to hold our churches as places where no change happens to soothe our weary souls. If we do, we will cause congregational decline which is a change most of us don't want to see!
 - You will need to intentionally develop your change skills. There is no way to truly listen to what God is calling your church to do and be without being open to doing things in new ways.
 - The best way to build your change skills is to practice change. Change something or try something new every week in worship. Be explicit about why you are doing this - change is built into any spiritual journey, and finding God in change is something we all need to practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Be bold - focus your mission and identity so you can communicate it clearly and enthusiastically.
- Increase participation - align everything around your collective mission and invite others to either join or benefit from it
- Build change skills - practice change intentionally and systematically
- Sustainability - work on planned giving, communications around giving, and strategic asset/property approaches.

Be Bold

To be bold, you will need to focus your mission and identity so that you can communicate it clearly and enthusiastically. The aim is following God's calling and gathering others into this work, not preserving an institution.

It might be time to let go of some legacy programs to allow for a new focus of volunteer energy and resources. There is an opportunity with the Church website and social media to clearly state your progressive values and radical welcome. Implement new ministry opportunities in spiritual development and ministry to reflect the regional nature of your church community.

The election results may bring many new people to explore your church, but you have little space to accommodate them at 10:00. Could for instance the church make South Lyme Chapel a satellite location where the service is streamed with a host minister present to coordinate? Or could something similar be done with a few of the area senior care centers? Now may be the time to consider a second worship service. This could be a copy of Sunday morning at 11:30 and/or there is an opportunity to explore an alternative informal service at another time and space.

Now would also be a good time to review and update your by-laws and your mission and vision statements to reflect who you are today and how you will operate as a church into the future.

Increase Participation

What are you all called to work on together to bring God's love to life in our world? All of those other programs, activities and structures will need to be paused, ended, or handed off to those most passionate about them to do as a non-congregational program. You can still pray for them and bring them casseroles when they are busy living out their calling!

The collective calling you all have will need to be focused on 2-3 areas at most, with specific goals you are working toward in the near, medium, and long term. This will be hard, but you will find more enthusiastic participation with a clear focus, and new people will be more likely to join a group of people with a focused mission rather than a vague idea. Get started by:

- Right-sizing for your current participation levels
- Unifying around 2-3 focus areas per year
- Streamlining and pruning all programs that don't support that focus.

Participation will be more enthusiastic and engaged when you have a clear and simple ask for folks to participate in something that truly makes a difference in the world.

Change Skills

Change is going to happen whether we like it or not. God is in the change just as God is in the stillness. While we may be weary of change, we can't try to hold our churches as places where no change happens to soothe our weary souls. If we do, we will cause congregational decline which is a change most of us don't want to see! You will need to intentionally develop your change skills. There is no way to truly listen to what God is calling your church to do and be without being open to doing things in new ways.

The best way to build your change skills is to practice change. Change something or try something new every week in worship. Be explicit about why you are doing this - change is built into any spiritual journey, and finding God in change is something we all need to practice.

Sustainability

You will need to give some attention to financial sustainability, but your instincts in these areas may not be helpful for a vital church. Annual giving is declining and there is a growing temptation to cut the expenses. Staffing expenses are at 64% of the budget (within expectations for a church without debt). Cutting these areas will stop your current momentum toward growth and energy.

We have several recommendations that will not stop your momentum and growth but will build additional sustainability.

- Re-invigorate the Spire Society to increase planned giving. You have financial professionals within the congregation that can assist.
- Promote tax advantages of donor directed giving from retirement funds,
- Promote stewardship monthly with stories in the church communications.
- Consider doing some community fund raising for property maintenance, and see what grants might be available for historic property maintenance.
- Do a cost-benefit analysis on the three auxiliary properties (parsonage, little house and South Lyme Chapel) to determine best steps moving forward



THANK YOU