

WHEN WE GATHER AT THE TABLE

A PC(USA) Snapshot

Figure 1: Frequently Occurring Words in Participants' Suggested Mantras



FAMILY PORTRAIT

Across the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), congregations, mid councils, and other interested groups are discerning together who we are as a church and who God is calling us to be. The Committee on the Office of the General Assembly (COGA) has also engaged in this discussion as it sought to understand the current nature of our ecclesiology, the theology of church. In the summer of 2015, COGA came to an understanding that it would be valuable to attempt to bring these many conversations and their insights together for the benefit of the whole church. COGA worked with the talented people of the Presbyterian Mission Agency Research Services and developed an instrument to gather these conversations. The key goals of the process were:

- Open to anyone who wished to participate
- Open-ended questions with no preset list of answers
- Open to wherever the data lead

This report is the results of the gathered data. The full report, “Final Report: The Church in the 21st Century,” can be found at <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/final-report-church-21st-century>. Another report, “Coding Instrument for PC(USA) Identity Survey Data” can be found at <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/coding-instrument-pcusa-identity-survey/>.

COGA offers it to the PC(USA) as a portrait of who we, the PC(USA), see ourselves to be.

COGA commentary of our findings is presented with “shaded” background. All other text in the report is provided by Research Services in their work in collecting and analyzing the data which COGA sought.

Study Design and Implementation

Areas of Investigation

This work originally sought to explore several general research questions, though the instrument that was used ultimately focused on these:

- What does it mean to be part of this denomination? How important is that to Presbyterians, and why?
- What is the church better equipped to do as a national denomination that it could not do as well as individual congregations and mid council offices?
- What is the church called to be and do in the context of 21st-century American culture?
- What is central to our shared identity, and how do we express it?
- On what things do we achieve a strong consensus, and on what things do we have a broad diversity of opinions?

Who Participated

Because this project invited the input of any and all people and entities of the PC(USA) (individuals, congregations, seminaries, mid councils, and various affiliated groups [e.g. New Worshiping Communities, immigrant fellowships]) within a short timeframe, creating a probability sample to ensure a representative group of Presbyterians was not feasible. Instead, a convenience sample (that is—a sample of volunteers) was used. As such, we cannot calculate a response rate.

Findings from the resulting convenience sample will not be as generalizable as findings would be if they had been taken from a (random) probability sample. However, an analysis of the demographics of those who participated in the study reveals that the sample somewhat matches the known demographics of Presbyterians as a whole.

Exceptions are noted in the Demographics section, which follows.

Demographics

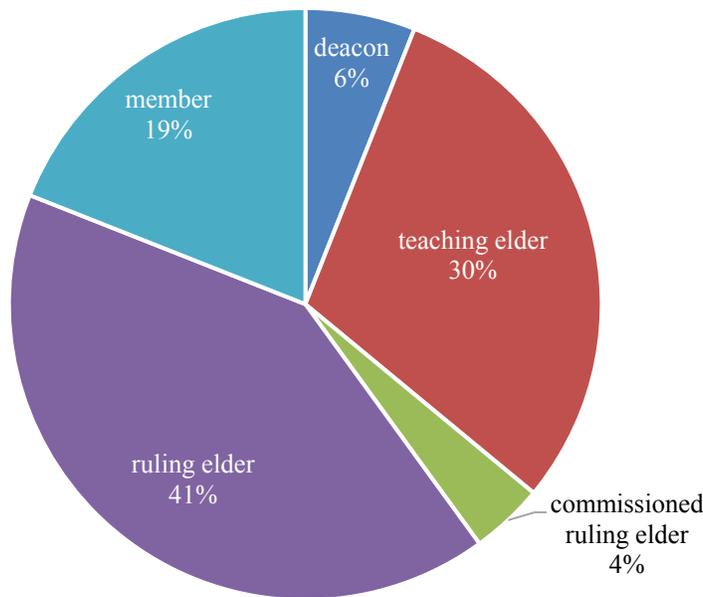
Length of Membership: Because we were specifically interested in hearing from PC(USA) members, we asked, “Are you a member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)?” Participants were presented with four different response options:

- Yes, I am a member of the PC(USA).
- Yes, I consider myself Presbyterian but don’t identify with any particular denomination.
- No, I belong to another Presbyterian denomination.
- No, I’m not Presbyterian.

If participants answered “no” to this question, they were sent to an exit screen where they were thanked for their participation and were asked no other questions. Of the 3,427 who answered this question affirmatively, 98 percent said they are members of the PC(USA) and 2 percent said they consider themselves Presbyterian but do not identify with any particular Presbyterian denomination. About half (55 percent) of the participants were raised in the denomination. Those who joined or converted to the PC(USA) average 24 years with the denomination, with a range of 1–71 years.

Role: Participants were asked which role(s) they have in the PC(USA) (see Figure 2). Though many participants hold more than one role, a hierarchy was used to show only one role for each.

Figure 2: Participants’ Roles within PC(USA)



More than a third (41 percent) of all participants are ruling elders (but not commissioned ruling elders), about a third (34 percent) are commissioned ruling elders or teaching elders, and one fourth (25 percent) are neither (members, 19 percent, and deacons, 6 percent). These proportions are consistent with our expectations for who would be most informed about the denomination and, therefore, more likely to participate in this process. Overall, 16 percent of the participants serve as a pastoral leader of one or more congregations, and 18 percent are commissioned ruling elders or teaching elders serving in some other capacity.

Those who checked “teaching elder” or “commissioned ruling elder” were asked to select from among fourteen categories to describe their current employment. They were able to check all that apply. Among the 34 percent of the participants who are either commissioned ruling elders or teaching elders:

- 61 percent of teaching elders and 14 percent of CREs serve as a pastoral leader of one or more congregations (16 percent overall)

- 10 percent of teaching elders and 3 percent of CREs serve as PC(USA) presbytery, synod, or national staff
- 3 percent of teaching elders and 21 percent of CREs serve in a non-pastoral position in one or more congregations
- 5 percent of teaching elders and 3 percent of CREs serve as faculty or staff at a seminary or theological school or other educational institution
- 6 percent of teaching elders and 2 percent of CREs serve as a chaplain in the military, a hospital or other health-care facility, or some other location
- 28 percent of teaching elders and 79 percent of CREs serve in some other way, have positions outside the church, are not currently employed, or are retired

Gender: More than half of the participants (54 percent) are female, and almost half (46 percent) are male. This compares to a 58 percent female/42 percent male PC(USA) ratio for members of PC(USA) congregations, according to the most recently available OGA data (2014).

Age: Three in five participants (61 percent) are over age 55. In comparison, the median age range of Presbyterian members is 56–65, according to 2014 OGA data, which tells us that more than half of Presbyterians are in this age range or older.

- 25 or under: 2 percent
- 26–45: 19 percent
- 46–55: 18 percent
- 56–65: 27 percent
- over 65: 34 percent

Race/Ethnicity: Ninety-five percent of participants self-identify as White or Caucasian; in addition, 2 percent identify as Hispanic, Latino/a, or Spanish origin, and 2 percent as Black or African American. Few participants identify with other racial ethnic groups (1 percent Asian, 1 percent multiracial, and less than 1 percent Middle Eastern or Native American). White or Caucasian participants are slightly overrepresented compared to 2014 OGA statistics; Hispanic, Latino/a, or Spanish Origin participants are similar in proportion to 2014 OGA statistics, as are Middle Eastern and Native American participants. Black or African American participants are slightly underrepresented, as are Asian or Pacific Islander participants.

Region: Teaching elders were then asked to which presbytery they belong; all others were asked the name, city, and state of their congregation. These data were used to identify the geographic regions in which participants belong (see Figure 3). When a congregation or presbytery name was not listed by participants, we used the location from which they logged in to fill in the instrument to map their state and region. A list of participants by state is also provided in Figure 4, with counts in each state. The darker the color, the more participants who were from that state.

Figure 3: Participants' Regional Locations

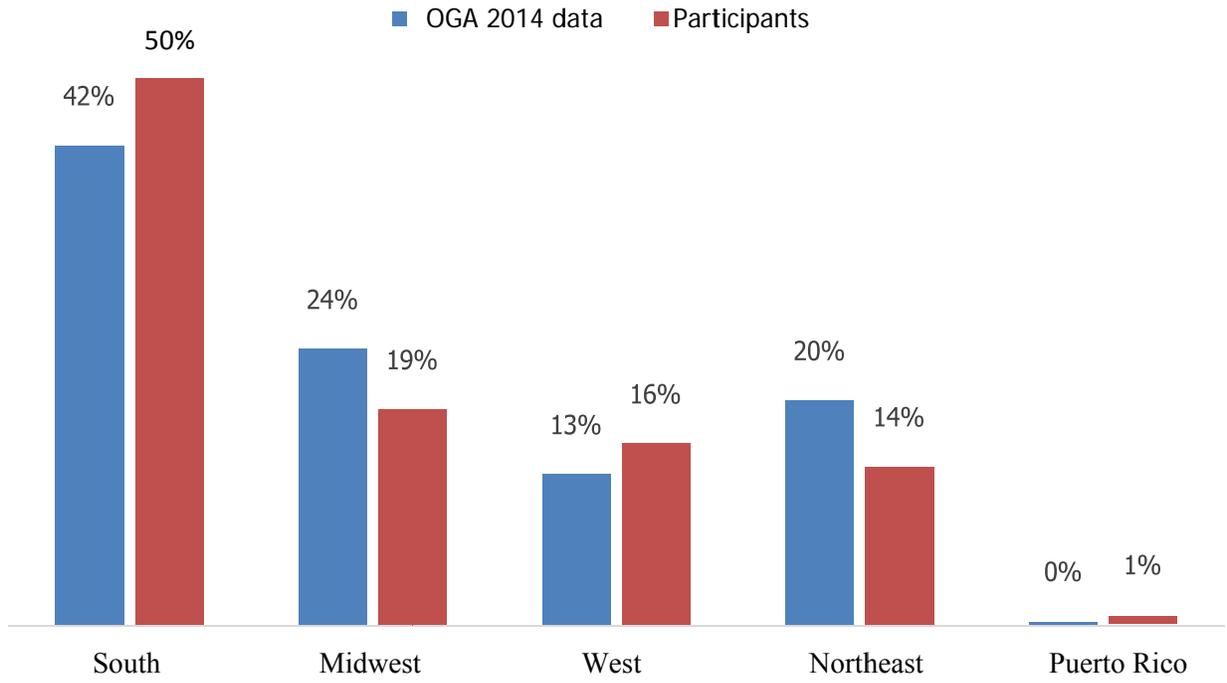
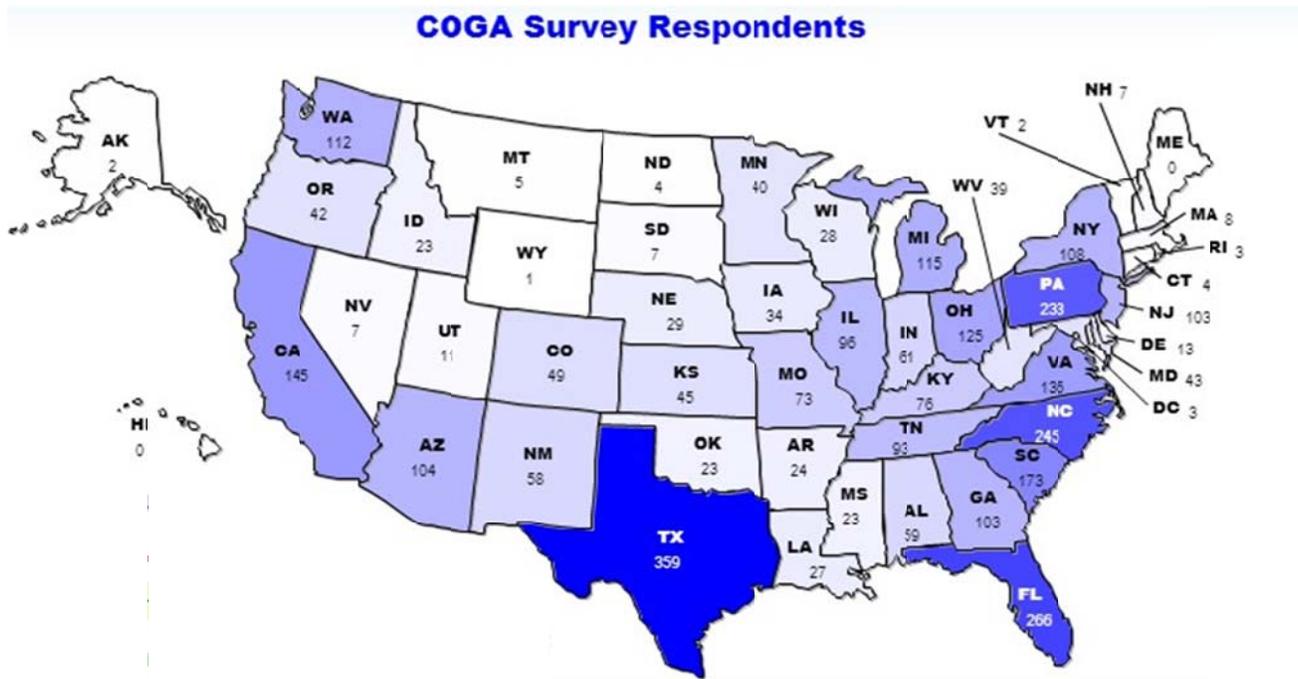


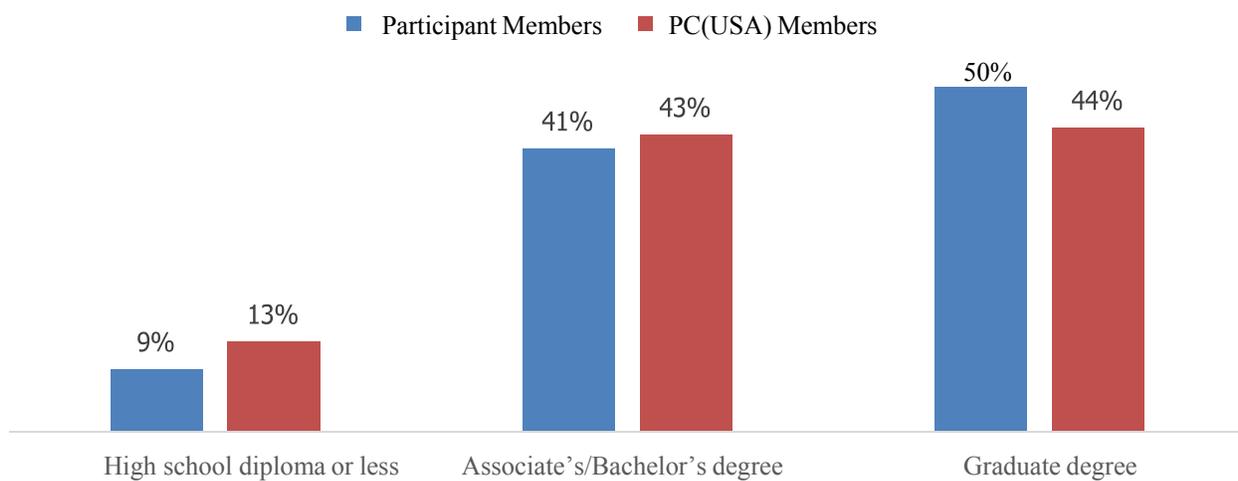
Figure 4: Participants' Location by State



Due to rounding, percentages do not add up to 100 percent

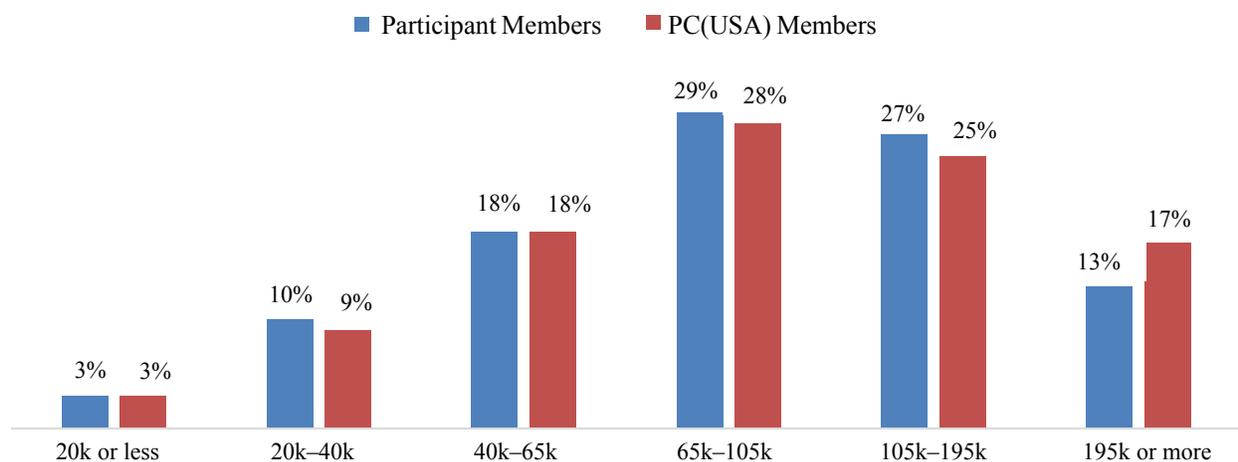
Educational Level: Compared to the general U.S. public, Presbyterians are more educated and have higher total household incomes. Teaching elders all have graduate degrees, so to compare education, only the participants who are not teaching elders are examined here. Member participants in this study are slightly more educated in comparison to Presbyterian members in general (Figure 5), based on data from the 2016 Presbyterian Panel demographic report.

Figure 5: Participants' Educational Levels



Household Income Level: Member participants in the COGA study are slightly less likely than the PC(USA) member population as a whole (again, compared to the profile of the Presbyterian Panel, recruited in 2015) to have a household income of \$195,000 or more (Figure 6). Since the income levels of members and teaching elders differ, the comparisons in Figure 5 are restricted to members.

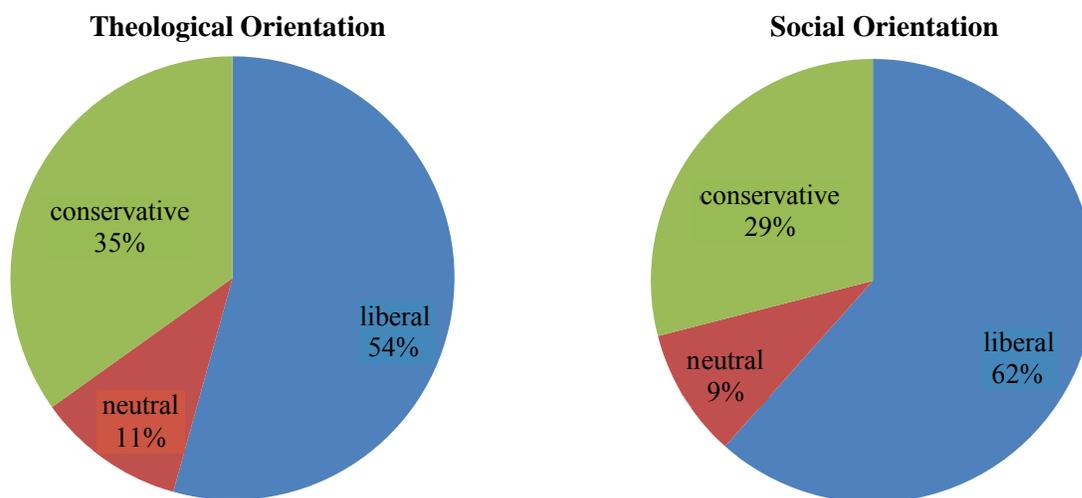
Figure 6: Participants' Household Incomes



Social and Theological Orientations: Participants were asked, “Would you say that you are more POLITICALLY liberal, conservative, or neutral?” (1–7 scale with 1 as “liberal” and 7 as “conservative”). Then they were asked a similarly worded question to place themselves on a THEOLOGICAL spectrum. See Figure 7.

Liberals and conservatives are *both* over-represented in this sample, by about the same amount. Social (political) and theological “moderates,” (shown in Figure 7 as “neutral”) on the other hand, are under-represented. This is understandable, as those with a political or theological leaning may have been more vested in providing their opinion on the state of the denomination.

Figure 7: Participants' Social and Theological Orientations



In comparison to participants in this study, PC(USA) members are 41 percent theologically liberal, 26 percent theologically conservative, and 32 percent neutral. Teaching elders are 45 percent theologically liberal, 20 percent theologically conservative, and 35 percent neutral.

The response to this COGA inquiry exceeded all our expectations. It seems evident that within the PC(USA) we are eager both to give expression to their interests and concerns and to participate in shaping the future of the church. While our sampling methodology allowed any who wished to participate to do so, the responses largely mirrored and are reflective of the known demographics of the church as a whole.

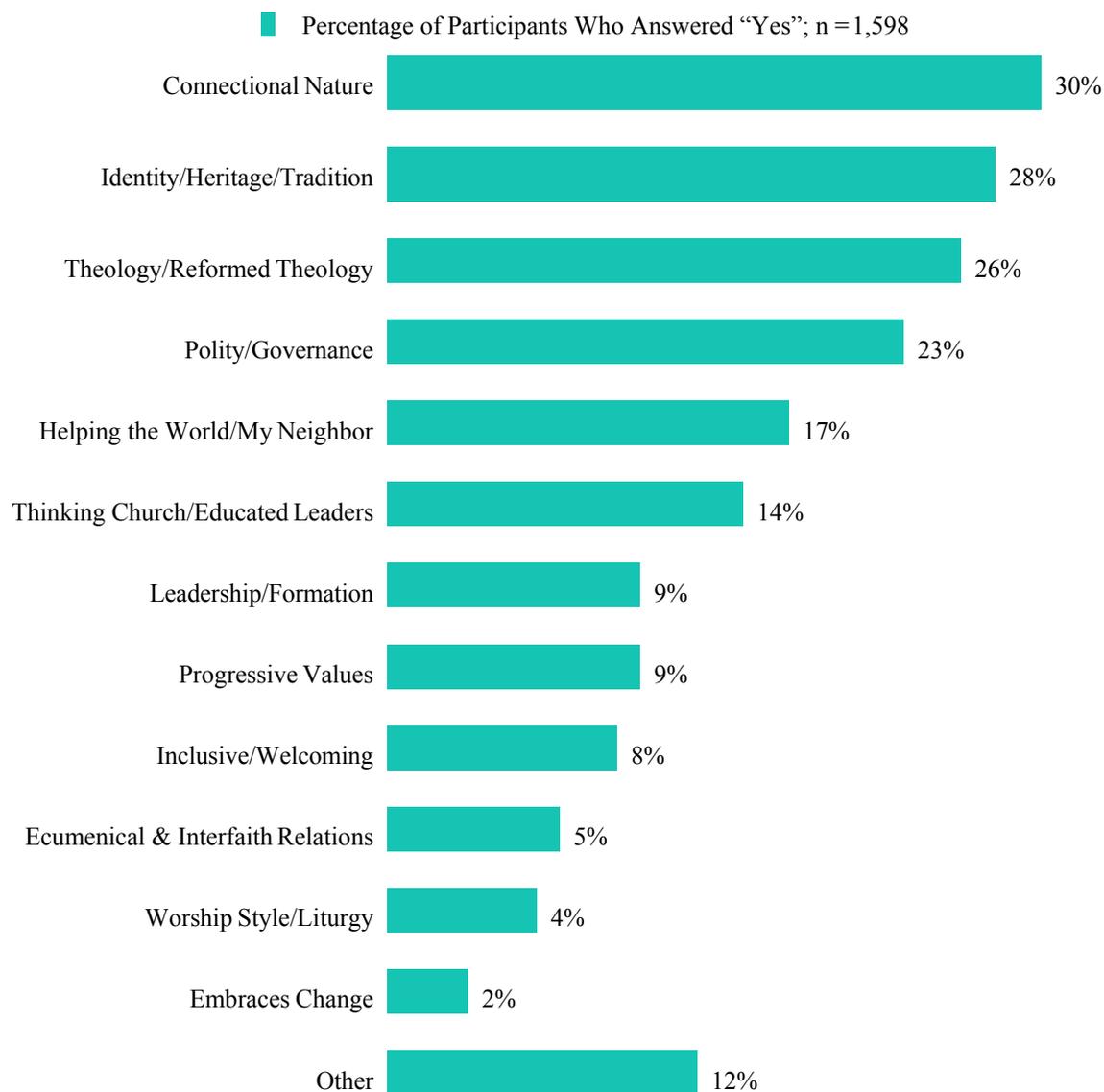
Is It Important to Be Part of the PC(USA)?

One of the first questions we asked was whether it is important to participants that any congregation to which they belong has a relationship with the PC(USA). Of the 2,871 participants answering this question, 56 percent said “yes” and 44 percent said “no” or “I don’t know.” Participants were also asked if they could explain further.

Yes

Among the 1,598 participants who said that it *is* important, the most frequently reported reason participants cited was the connectional nature of the church (Figure 8); particularly the sense of community and friendships that they enjoy, and the way that this connectionalism leads to pooled resources for more effective ministry (if they referred to the connectional nature in terms of accountability structures or discipline, we counted those as part of the polity/governance theme instead).

Figure 8: Why It's Important That My Congregation Is PC(USA)



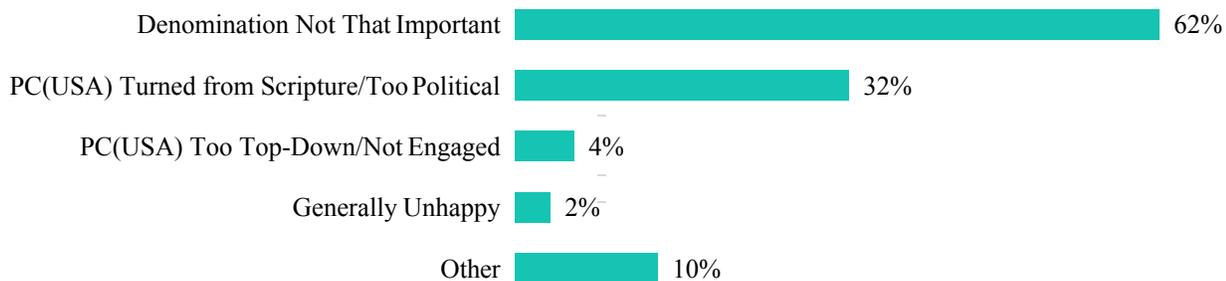
No/NotSure

It may be surprising that only 56 percent of the participants said yes (34 percent said no; 10 percent didn't know). It might lead one to wonder if fully a third of Presbyterians are unhappy.

However, we also asked these participants to explain their answers, and when we started analyzing the "No" and "I don't know/Can't decide" responses, it became clearer that for many, it's really the congregation that matters, not the denomination. (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Why It's *NOT* Important That My Congregation Is PC(USA)

■ Percentage of Participants Who Answered “No” or “I Don't Know”; n = 1,273



We could divide the 1,273 participants who said “No” or “I don’t know/Can’t decide” into two main groups. The larger group (62 percent of those who said “No” or “I don’t know/Can’t decide”) consists of those for whom it doesn’t really matter to which denomination they belong. Their comments suggest one of two things:

- First, that the denomination isn’t all that important, as long as it’s either
 - Mainline,
 - Reformed,
 - Open to the ordination of women,
 - Progressive,
 - Theologically aligned with their beliefs.
- Second, it wouldn’t matter which denomination they belong to as long as they like their congregation. They pointed to the health and vitality of the congregation as being more important than denominational affiliation.

The smaller group (38 percent) consists of those who seem genuinely unhappy to be part of the PC(USA), citing either that they feel that the denomination

- has lost its way (32 percent say the PC(USA) has turned its back on God, ignored scripture, is too political, or has caved to the secular culture);
- is too top-down and out of touch with congregations (4 percent);
- has changed or cannot be trusted, without being specific (2 percent).

This suggests that the percentage of participants who are unhappy with the denomination can be estimated at 17 percent (38 percent of the 1,273 who answered “no” or “don’t know” is equal to 17 percent of the 2,871 participants answering the question).

Importance of Belonging to PC(USA) by Social and Theological Orientation

There is a significant difference in how participants responded to this question by their social and theological orientation (Table 1). Whereas 74 percent of liberals in this sample (theological and social) say it is important that any congregation they belong to is in relationship with PC(USA), only 29 percent of social conservatives and 33 percent of theological conservatives say the same. Furthermore, more than half of conservatives (59 percent of social conservatives and 55 percent of theological conservatives) state that it is NOT important that they belong to a PC(USA) congregation.

Table 1: Orientation by Importance of Belonging to PC(USA)

	Social Orientation (n=2,911)		
	liberal	neutral	conservative
Yes	74%	44%	29%
No	19%	42%	59%
I don't know	8%	14%	12%
	Theological Orientation (n=2,888)		
	liberal	neutral	conservative
Yes	74%	55%	33%
No	18%	33%	55%
I don't know	9%	12%	11%

*Due to rounding, percentages may not add up to 100%

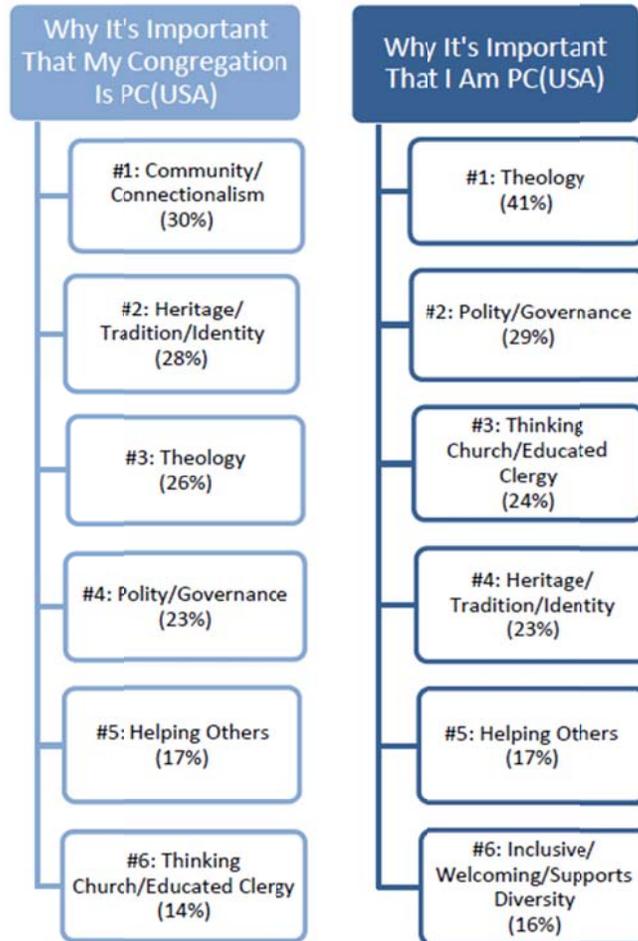
Liberals in this sample are more connected to the denomination; in general, it is more important to liberals that they belong to PC(USA). Conservatives in this sample, on the other hand, are not as likely to say their PC(USA) affiliation is important to them.

What Presbyterians Value about the PC(USA)

Why Presbyterian?

Participants were then asked, “If someone asked you why you are Presbyterian rather than belonging to some other denomination, what would you tell them?” Results are shown in the right-hand column in Figure 10; 3,052 participants answered this question.

Figure 10: What Presbyterians Value about the PC(USA)



Not surprisingly, the themes found in these responses closely mirror those of the previous question, which asked why it's important that their congregation be associated with the denomination. However, the relative importance of these themes (based on the number of people who gave similar responses) shifts as they move from thinking about their congregation to themselves (Figure 10 compares the rank ordering of the top themes from the previous question, shown on the left, with the ordering of the top themes from this question, shown on the right). It's important to note that many of the participants offered multiple reasons.

In the most frequently appearing theme from responses to this question (41 percent), participants said that the theology is the main reason (or one of the main reasons) they are Presbyterian.

About a third (29 percent) say that one of the reasons is polity. Participants especially value the ruling elder/teaching elder balance, the Presbyterian Constitution, and the clear processes for decision making.

About a fourth (24 percent) cited the fact that we are a thinking church: being intentional about thinking and praying through a discernment process when faced with difficult decisions, being open to listening to different voices, and valuing intelligence and education, especially when it comes to having highly educated clergy.

Another fourth (23 percent) mentioned something about personal or denominational identity, heritage, or tradition as a reason why they are Presbyterian. For many, it goes so far back in their family history they cannot imagine not being Presbyterian. For others who may be newer to the denomination, some personal exploration or research has led them to value the rich history of the Presbyterian tradition. And for a few others, it simply means that they were ordained as PC(USA) ministers and have made a historic commitment to the denomination.

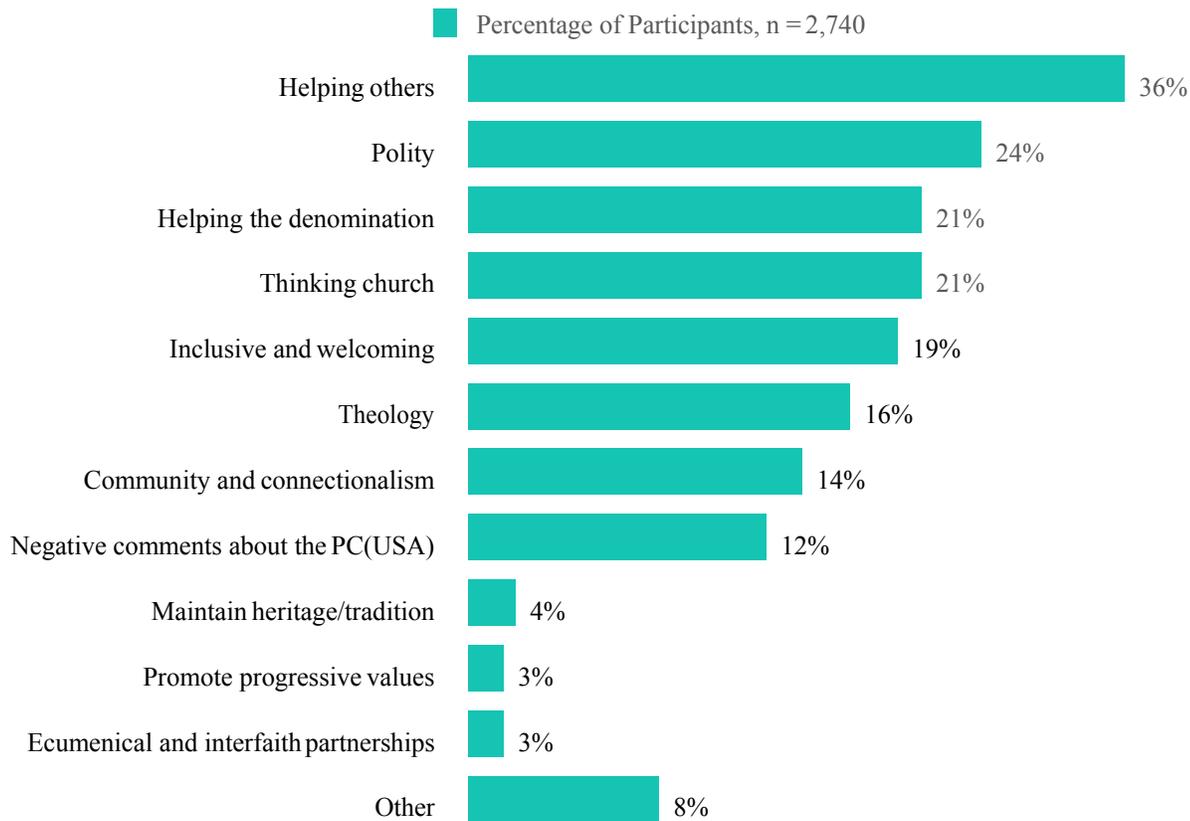
In the next largest category, 17 percent said they appreciate that the church helps others and/or provides opportunities for participants to help others, through advocacy, mission work, evangelism, and/or disaster relief/assistance.

These comments suggest that respondents, intellectually and emotionally, place a high value on our Reformed identity. Being part of a community that wrestles together to make decisions ranging from the essentials of our faith to the structure of a youth program is a tie that binds respondents to our denomination. Indeed, often the attachment is one that words cannot capture, but that is a defining part of the identity of those who responded.

What PC(USA) Does Well

We also asked participants to imagine the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in its ideal form, and then asked, "What does the church already have/do that fits your ideal?" as another way to understand what they value about the denomination (Figure 11).

Figure 11: What the Church Already Has/Does That Fits My Ideal



This way of thinking of the PC(USA) influenced participants to think more about actions than about heritage, polity, or theology (except when they mentioned how theology motivates action).

The number one theme, coming from responses provided by 36 percent of the participants, was helping others, and includes: mission, advocacy, disaster, evangelism, and having a strong national voice on issues important to the public. So, while helping others was only the fifth-highest value in the previous two questions (refer back to Figure 9), it receives the highest mention here.

The second most frequently appearing theme is polity, mentioned by 24 percent of the participants.

This is followed by two themes that are tied in importance, with 21 percent of the participants making a comment about either of these:

The first theme is the way we are able to help ourselves and each other as a denomination. Participants outline four key ways they believe we help the denomination:

- 43 percent of the comments about helping the congregation were regarding how we provide worshiping community support and resources (9 percent of the comments overall);
- 35 percent of the comments about how we help the overall church; (7 percent overall) were about how we support and develop seminaries, pastors and church workers;
- This tied closely with training, leadership development, and spiritual formation of members (34 percent of “helping the denomination” and 7 percent of overall comments);
- Finally, 15 percent of the comments about how we help the church’s members and teaching elders (3 percent overall) regard providing denominational leadership and direction.

The second theme, tied in importance with the way we help the church (21 percent) is the fact that we are a thinking church (i.e., intentional about dialogue and debate, collective discernment, and valuing education and educated pastors).

The belief that we are an inclusive, welcoming church that supports diversity in the church is mentioned by 19 percent of participants.

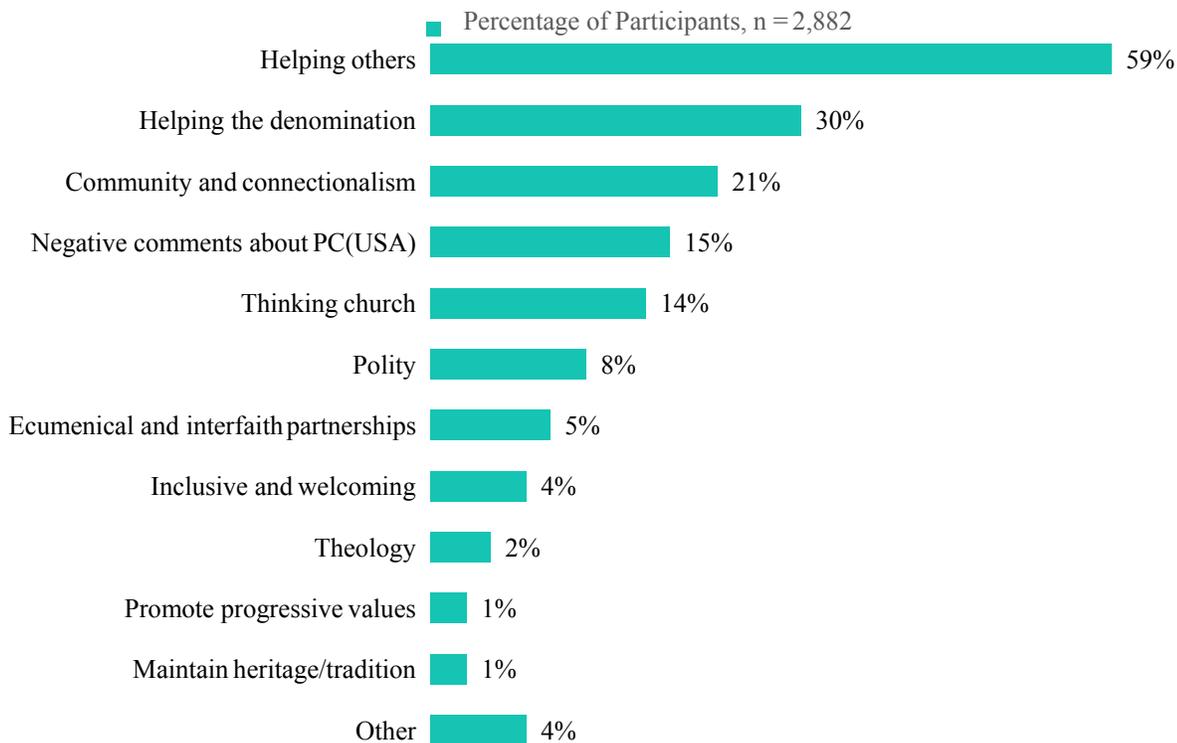
About 16 percent mention theology as something they value about being PC(USA). Many made mention specifically of the Reformed faith, the Confessions, or aspects of theology that were clearly Reformed; others did not, but gave vague references to theology or shared beliefs.

About Structure: What We Are Better Equipped to Do as a National Denomination than as Individual Congregations, Mid Councils, or Networks

We then asked participants, “What are we better equipped to do as a national denomination that we could not do (or do as well) on our own as congregations, mid councils, or networks?”

The themes that emerged from these responses also closely mirrored those from the previous questions that asked why participants would say they are Presbyterian, and what the church already has/does that fits their ideal, though they appear in a different order once again (Figure 12).

Figure 12: What We Are Better Equipped to Do as a National Denomination



By far, the most frequently occurring theme is “helping others” (59 percent of the participants mentioned this). Many of these responses were generically stated as helping others, helping people, helping a hurting world, and similar statements. We also included in this theme mentions of mission, both local and worldwide, as well as advocacy, being a strong voice for our society, disaster relief and assistance, outreach, and evangelism.

After helping others, the next most frequently occurring theme is “helping the denomination,” with 30 percent of the participants mentioning either denominational leadership, spiritual formation, leadership development, or pastor or worshiping community support.

Community was the third most-mentioned thing that we are better equipped to do as a national denomination, with 21 percent of the participants mentioning either its connectional nature, the people, or the fact that we can accomplish more by pooling resources.

Of course, as suggested earlier, not everyone feels that the national church model is the best way to accomplish the work of the church; 15 percent of participants gave answers that can best be summed up as “little or nothing.” The primary reasons appear to be a belief that the denomination has turned away from scripture/God; that denominational leaders present only the liberal views to the American public, while ignoring the conservative voices; that the organization is too bureaucratic/top down; or too political/involved in politics; and that our consciences are informed by public sentiment/worldly values, rather than by God’s Word.

For the next most-frequent theme: 14 percent of participants say that what we are better equipped to do at the national level is be a “thinking church”: engage in intentional dialogue, share expertise, and discern God’s will together; having these conversations at the national, not just congregational, level. One participant summed up the comments about this theme nicely:

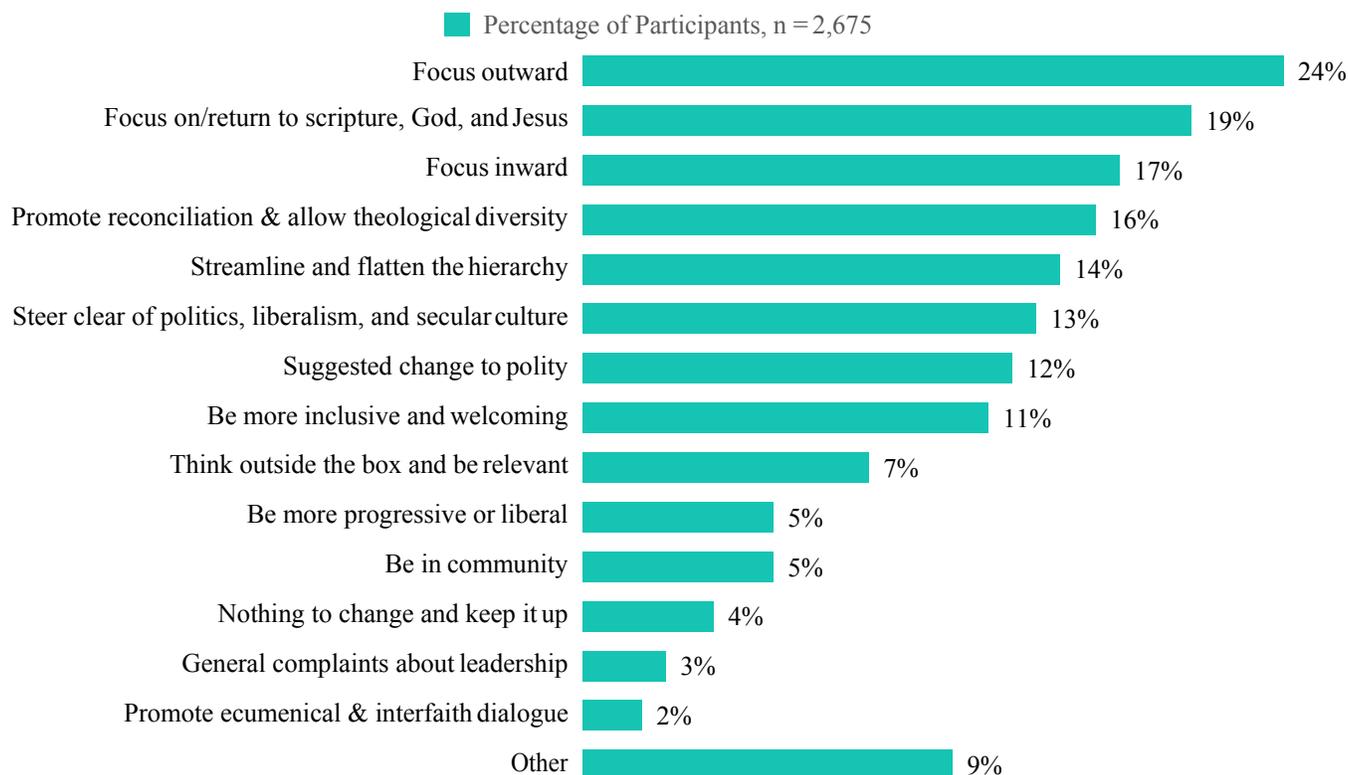
I think how we make decisions as a national denomination is important. Although we don’t always agree, I do always feel the spirit while watching General Assembly meetings moving us forward. I feel if these decisions were each made on [a] congregational level, [it] would leave the motion of the spirit leading the church based off of individual interpretation instead of interpreting as a larger community.

What Changes Are Recommended by Participants?

What the Church Needs to Change

After we asked, “What does the denomination already have/do that fits your ideal?” (results reported above), we followed it with this question: “What does the church need to change in order to reach this ideal?” (See Figure 13.)

Figure 13: What Participants Think the Church Needs to Change



Of the themes that emerged from comments on this question, an outward focus is the one that stood out the most, with 24 percent of participants mentioning mission, advocacy, disaster relief/assistance, evangelism, and/or being a strong voice to the public as things they’d like to see happening more in the church.

The second most common theme focuses on faithfulness: to God, to scripture, to Jesus, with 19 percent of the participants mentioning this as a needed change.

This is followed closely by a theme that is more inward in its focus, with 17 percent of participants saying that the church should focus more on spiritual formation, leadership development, pastor support, and worshipping community support.

The next most frequently occurring theme is about reconciliation, with 16 percent of participants asking the church to promote reconciliation within its walls, be more tolerant of theological diversity, discern together what the future should looklike, and/or educate one another about different views.

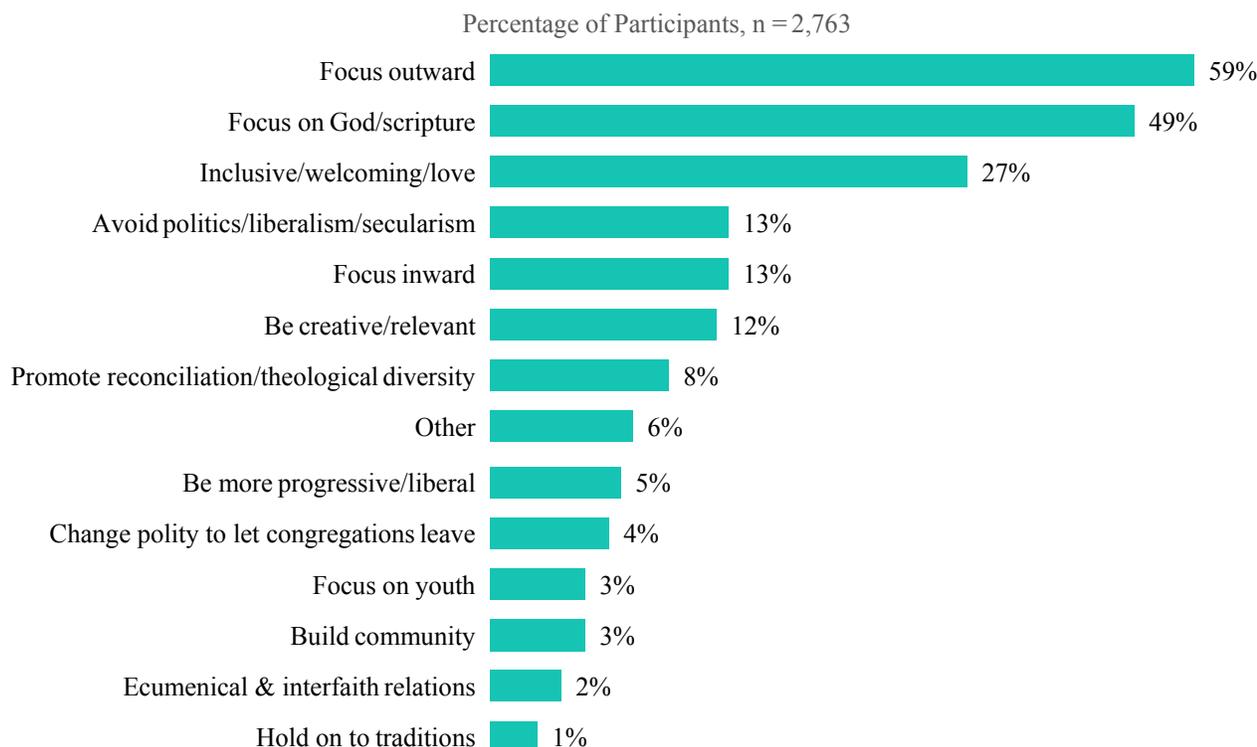
Some of the suggestions (14 percent of participants) concern streamlining what the national church was trying to accomplish, flattening the hierarchal structure, and listening more to congregations, who feel disconnected from the national offices and/or mid councils.

There is also a sizeable number of participants (13 percent) who wish that the PC(USA) would steer clear of politics, liberalism, and secular culture.

What the Church Is Called to Be and Do

We also asked, “What is the church called to be and do in the context of 21st-century American culture?” Although we had hoped that this question would give us some sense of our shared identity as a denomination, many of the 2,763 responses seem to be more prescriptive, somewhat reflecting the responses people gave to the previous question, above, about changes that they would recommend (Figure 14).

Figure 14: What Participants Think the Church Is Called to Be and Do in the 21st Century



Consequently, the two most frequently appearing themes are once again an outward focus, with 59 percent of the participants mentioning mission, advocacy, disaster, evangelism, and/or being a strong voice to the public as things they’d like to see happening more in the church (and with stronger resolve this time, as only 24 percent had mentioned it in the previous question), and a focus on God/scripture. This featured more prominently too: whereas 19 percent mentioned a focus on God and scripture in the previous question, 49 percent mentioned it here.

Of those who mention this theme, three-quarters (37 percent of all participants) emphasize the need to be biblical (without mentioning anything about the denomination having strayed from the Bible), while one in five contend that we need to get back to the Bible and one in ten say that we need to live Christ-like lives.

Likewise, loving others and being more inclusive and welcoming was lifted as being very important for the church to be and do; 27 percent of the participants mentioned one of these.

Once again, avoiding politics, liberalism, and bowing to the secular culture was mentioned (by 12 percent this time, which is about the same as the 13 percent who mentioned these themes in the previous question).

Mentioned by an equal number of participants is an inward focus, with 13 percent mentioning spiritual formation, leadership development, pastor support, and worshiping community support (though 17 percent had listed these as things to do more of in the previous question).

The Committee on the Office of the General Assembly notes that when the instrument transitioned from asking about change to asking respondents about call (what is the church called to be and do), the respondents spoke significantly about the place of scripture. Our identity as a scriptural church, called by scripture in this case to ministry outside the church and to welcoming love, is a significant affirmation about who we are and who we are summoned to be. The reliance and centrality of scripture is seen not only as a legacy from our past but an expressed hope for our future.

Our Shared Identity: Suggestions for a Guiding Statement

We asked participants the following question, hoping that we would get a long list of potential guiding statements for the denomination:

Some denominations have short guiding statements. For example, the United Church of Christ is guided by the statement: “God is still speaking.” The United Methodist Church also has a statement: “Open hearts, open minds, open doors.” Additionally the Church of the Brethren has “For the glory of God and my neighbors’ good.” More than a motto, these are their mantras. If you could imagine a mantra for the PC(USA) that could be used in a similar way to tell the world what sets us apart as a denomination, what might that look like?

We were not disappointed; after cleaning out the explanations of why people didn’t want to answer the question, whether they thought the word “mantra” was a good word choice, how difficult an exercise this was, or why they made the choices they gave; and after removing the ones that were clearly intended to be funny or snarky, or hurtful (which we saved and included as a separate document), there were still about 2,000 mottos! Some people offered two or three.

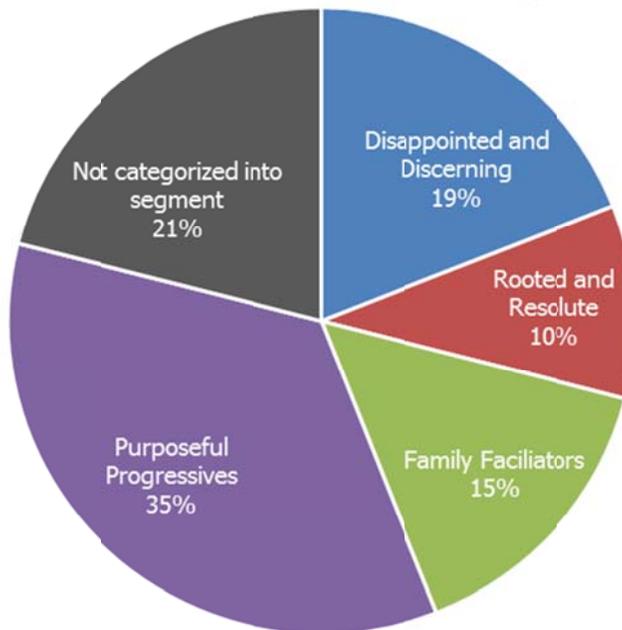
The response to the question about a phrase or mantra that might express our Presbyterian identity drew many creative and thoughtful responses—more than a thousand of them. These brief phrases variously capture the passion, energy, and outlooks among us. Many were similar. Throughout the General Assembly a number of the suggestions will be projected on the screen as a way of informally sharing our perspectives on how we wish to be known and understood.

Segments within the PC(USA) and What They Want

As we worked through the analyses of the participants’ comments, looking for the common threads that unite us as a denomination, we became aware of various clusters of individuals who share particular values distinct from other clusters of Presbyterians. While these “clusters” are informal and fluid, their identification may aid us in viewing the diversity within the PC(USA). We refer to them as the four segments within the PC(USA), and ran statistical analyses to identify the relative size of each of these segments (Figure 15).

Fully 79 percent of the participants clearly fit into one of these four segments, based on a combination of their comments on the open-ended questions, and their responses to the demographic questions; 21 percent did not give us enough information to be categorized. Keep in mind that, while these participants are somewhat representative of Presbyterians overall, exceptions are noted in the demographics section of this report, and caution should be exercised when making broad comparisons of the sizes of each of these segments to the overall Presbyterian membership.

Figure 15. Segments within the PC(USA)



Purposeful Progressives (35 percent)

The largest segment among the participants consists of those who are mostly pleased with the denomination and would prefer that we narrow our focus to claim a more progressive identity both for theological reasons and to gain cultural relevance and our own societal niche. Many in this group feel we need to get more involved in politics and in social action. They are less tolerant of conservative theologies within the denomination. Some remain hopeful that conservatives who are upset with the 221st General Assembly (2014) decisions on marriage will see that there are different ways to interpret scripture, and will choose to stay and accept the changes, over time. Others would simply be happy if the conservatives left the PC(USA), and a few offered suggestions for helping dissenting congregations to leave the denomination with grace and dignity. About a third of this segment are teaching elders (32 percent); most of this segment are female (63 percent).

I would like to see PC(USA) be more clear and strong in what it believes. Sometimes I feel it makes decisions almost apologetically. I don't want to have a schism but I think having a clear identity (even if it will change again sometime in the future), own that identity, and be proud of that identity. Name it and claim it!

Disappointed and Discerning (19 Percent)

Though the name given to this segment might appear to be strong, it truly reflects how they feel: forsaken, abandoned, and for some, held hostage by their denomination. They are the most displeased. This group includes those who either (1) do not like their PC(USA) affiliation but are stuck in the denomination for various reasons, or (2) are conflicted and thinking about leaving the denomination. This segment is mostly conservative, and feels betrayed by recent decisions made at General Assembly, by stands taken by the Office of the General Assembly (OGA) and the Presbyterian Mission Agency (PMA) on social issues, and by their perception that the denomination is hostile toward conservatives in general. They tend to feel that there is little room left for them at the table; that the liberals in the denomination treat them disparagingly. They argue that the denomination is too involved in politics. About one-fifth of this segment are teaching elders (17 percent); most of this segment are male (64 percent).

Family Facilitators (15 Percent)

These are peacemakers; those who value our theological diversity and would prefer reconciliation between liberals and conservatives. They are generally pleased with the denomination but worry about their brothers and sisters in Christ who are distressed by recent changes. They look to national staff for leadership in resourcing an ongoing dialogue that would help everyone stay in the “family,” while also promoting theological diversity and

unity within the denomination. Some are frustrated or angry with their sister and brother congregations who have chosen to leave, seeing it as an “easy way out” or placing undue importance on what they perceive to be secondary issues. This group consists mostly of those who are liberal/progressive. A little fewer than half (42 percent) of this segment are teaching elders; many of this segment are female (53 percent).

Rooted and Resolute (10 Percent)

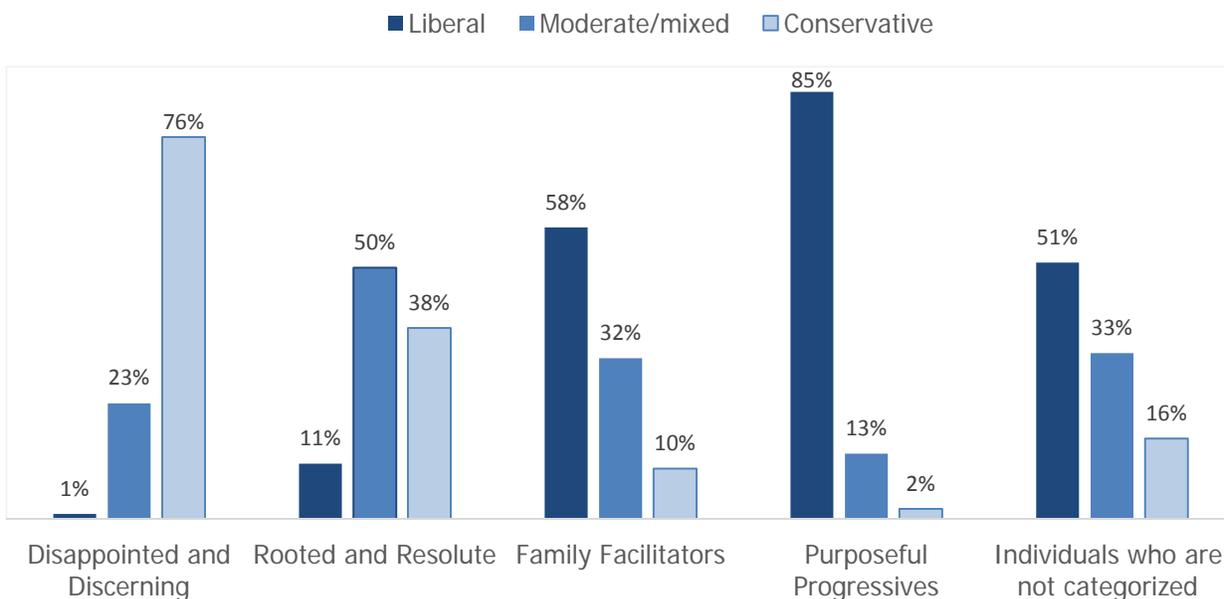
This group considers their PC(USA) identity to be very important, but feel the denomination has strayed from the Bible and/or gotten too involved in liberal politics. Though unhappy with recent trends, they appear to have no current plans to leave the denomination, preferring to stay and fight for the denomination they believe in. Some believe liberals are merely a vocal minority with disproportionate control of the denomination, and believe that they can convince the denomination to repent and return to the Bible. They tend to prefer a literal reading of scripture and feel that liberals/progressive Presbyterians will see their error and repent, when they are reminded that they’ve turned their backs on God. They tend to think that the denomination should not have diverse theologies, though this group is theologically conservative but socially moderate/mixed. They tend to want to return to an earlier time in which they felt that things were better. About a third of this segment (30 percent) are teaching elders; most of this segment are male (60 percent).

The Unsegmented (21 Percent)

These are the people who do not easily fit in any of the above categories, based on the answers they gave. A little under a third (29 percent) of this segment are teaching elders; most of this segment are female (59 percent).

Figure 16 shows the analyses of the four segments and those we could not fit into one of the four segments, comparing three groups: (1) those who are both socially and theologically liberal, (2) those who are both socially and theologically conservative, and those who are both socially and theologically moderate or are mixed on the social and theological scales. Those who did not provide information on their orientation are omitted from this analysis.

Figure 16: Segment by Combined Social and Theological Orientations



It is clear here that when combining the social and theological orientation scales, the Disappointed and Discerning segment is the most prominently conservative (76 percent), and the Energized and Hopeful seekers of the Common Good segment is the most prominently liberal (85 percent). The Rooted and Resolute segment is more moderate/mixed and conservative (50 percent and 38 percent, respectively), though they are more theologically conservative than socially conservative. The Seekers of the Common Good and Unsegmented are mostly liberal (58 percent and 52 percent, respectively) and moderate/mixed (32 percent and 33 percent, respectively). There does not appear to be much difference between the Unsegmented and the Reconcilers when

combining social and theological orientation; both are a little over one-half liberal, but with large minorities of moderate/mixed members as well.

Both are more liberal socially than theologically, though they are still more liberal theologically than neutral or conservative theologically.

The Common Denominator: On What We *DO* Agree

Though the four segments identified among the study participants don't seem to agree on much, we did some additional analyses to determine where they do come to some agreement. We also did some additional analysis to see if answers to each of the questions differ based on liberal/conservative orientation. These analyses compare three groups: (1) those who are both socially and theologically liberal, (2) those who are both socially and theologically conservative, and (3) those who are both socially and theologically moderate OR who are mixed.

Liberals, conservatives, and moderates all agree that community, theology, and polity are key reasons why they are Presbyterian, and why they specifically value their PC(USA) affiliation. However, there is a difference among those for whom belonging to PC(USA) is *not* important. Liberals are more likely to say that denominational affiliation in general is simply not important to them, whereas conservatives are more likely to say that they have specific issues with the PC(USA).

There was a general agreement that “helping our neighbor” is something that we as a denomination do well, and that this outward focus is what we should be focusing on as a church, along with being biblical, nurturing and supporting the church and its leaders, and being a beacon of light and love in the world.

The disagreement tends to lie in what these goals and actions actually mean. Whereas liberals tend to think of “helping our neighbor” in terms of social action and advocacy, conservatives tend to think of it in terms of mission and evangelism. Also, whereas when liberals talk of being a beacon of light and love, they tend to frame it as a form of radical welcome and inclusion (and are more likely to specify certain marginalized groups such as LGBTQ), conservatives tend to focus on more general welcome, or a more specific goal of welcoming conservative theologies.

These four “clusters” are not meant to divide us into theological or ecclesiological camps. Instead, they are meant to give us a deeper understanding idea of what our PC(USA) family portrait looks like. It is COGA's hope that the identification of these groups will assist us in seeing anew the breadth of our diversity and the unique witness we share in our denomination.

Summary Comments

This project sought to provide information for use by commissioners at the 222nd General Assembly (2016) to consider as they weigh matters of purpose, function, mission and ministry, and to provide opportunities for individuals and groups within the PC(USA) to discern some consensus on what we are called to be and do as a denomination in the 21st century. It is our hope that we have accomplished both of these tasks. We were very pleased at the overwhelming number of responses to a call for a churchwide conversation: about 3,427 people responded to this instrument, and many thanked us for opening the conversation to the whole church. After analyzing more than 18,000 comments, we believe that voices of Presbyterians from nearly every state and region were heard; voices of the contented and the discontented; voices of new Presbyterians and lifelong Presbyterians. And we want them to know that we appreciate their honesty, their creativity, and their willingness to share their wonderful ideas and even their frustrations.

Although we didn't enter into this project intending to categorize Presbyterians into segments, it seemed a natural path to follow when we were coding the data and began to realize that people meant different things when they talked about what it means to be biblical, to be inclusive, or to follow Jesus. We began to see patterns and came to understand that these different groups within the church have very different worldviews, different understandings of scriptural interpretation, and different sets of values.

The General Assembly has before itself a monumental task: not only to think about the structure for a national church that best suits us moving forward, but also what our identity should be going forward.

The Committee on the Office of the General Assembly wants to thank everyone who gave thought, prayer, and insight to Research Services. It was clear in all responses that all people care about their Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). If our church was only fueled by passion there is enough to carry us well into the future.

We are a blessed and fortunate people who have a heritage that still inspires us to be hearers and doers of the Word; to treasure the role of laity and clergy together; that privileges thoughtful discernment and compels us to act for justice. There is a widespread appreciation for Reformed Theology and how it has shaped us a church.

There is an urgent sense that our efforts must now address the needs of congregations, mid councils, and agencies of the church—venerable and emerging, as an expression of faithfulness to the Lordship of Christ. COGA notes a healthy restiveness to reform our structures and perhaps even our Presbyterian culture in service to a renewed vitality of witness in our nation and around the world. There is a common desire to find ways to support healthy congregations and our commitment to helping others.

We are not satisfied with our hospitality to all God's children both inside and outside the church and recognize the need of the Spirit's work that we may become a more diverse people who feel empowered and treasured.

We know the limits of this self-portrait and know, too, the ever-changing nature of our church and the world. Though we know that we presently "see dimly," we find contained within the responses the hope and conviction that we have a future that can grow out of the strengths of the past and be chastened by its errors. We hold a high and confident view of God's abiding Grace toward the PC(USA).

COGA again wants to express its thanks for partnership with Dr. Deborah Coe, Dr. Angie Andriot, and Dr. Perry Chang from PMA Research Services and for additional insights from Dr. John Brueggemann.