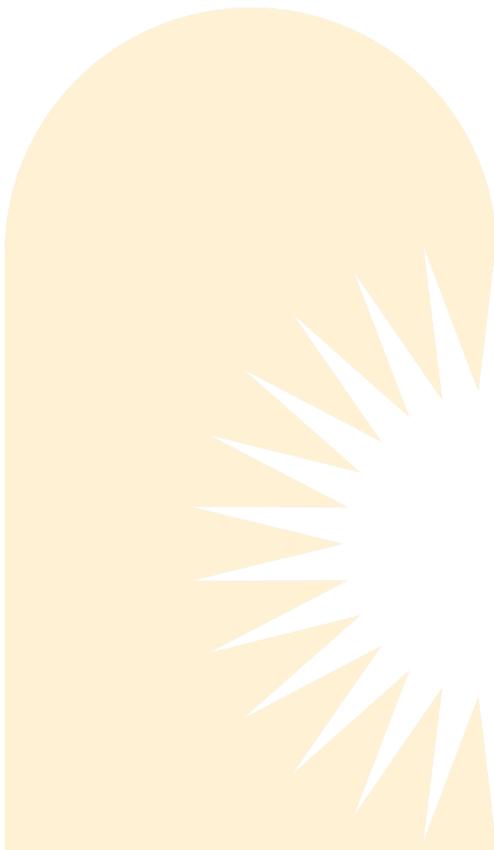




**Faith Communities Today:**  
Exploring the Pandemic Impact on  
Congregations

Unitarian Universalist trends, 2021



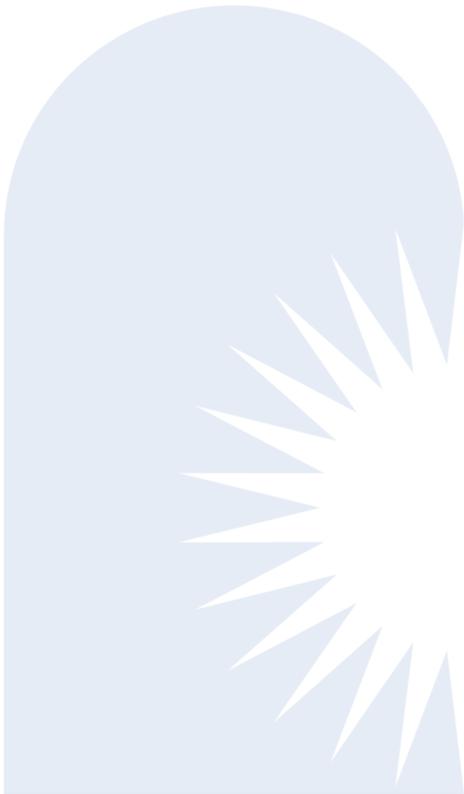
## Introduction

The Unitarian Universalist Association has been a part of Faith Communities Today, an interfaith research consortium for over 20 years. Every 5 years research departments of faith traditions survey their congregations using a common instrument and compile the findings. We periodically conduct a common survey that looks at a [specific aspect of congregational life](#). Annually we gather and share our reports and trends in our individual denominations.

In 2021, the Lilly Endowment generously agreed to fund a 5-year study led by Hartford Institute for Religion Research into how COVID-19 is affecting congregations across the country. Many Faith Communities Today partners are participating in this study, including the UUA. This study is called [Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations](#) and the data presented here is from the first survey of this study that went out to all UU congregations between June and August 2021.

The overall, combined data and summary report can be found here:

<https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/research-resources-religion-during-covid-19/>



## Method

Hold the data from this survey lightly. Impressions and opinions of the reporter's experience of the congregation always makes for soft data. The timing was not ideal for congregational leaders. We had a much lower return than we usually experience from such surveys.

The survey was the exact same as other denominations except for three questions that were UU specific on conflict. The FACT staff collected the data and made the raw data available to Tandi Rogers (project manager.) In early fall groups gathered to discuss trends they saw in the raw data. Those groups included: Rev. Charlotte Cowtan (previous author of UUA FACT reports), Rev. Melissa Carville Ziemer (UUMA), Dr. Elias Ortega (MLTS) and UUA staff members Amanda Radak, Lisa Presley, Renee Ruchotzke, Melissa James, and Tandi Rogers.

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# Findings

178 people from 173 congregations submitted the survey. 162 people *mostly* completed the survey, and they are represented here. The UUA is an association of 1048 congregations.

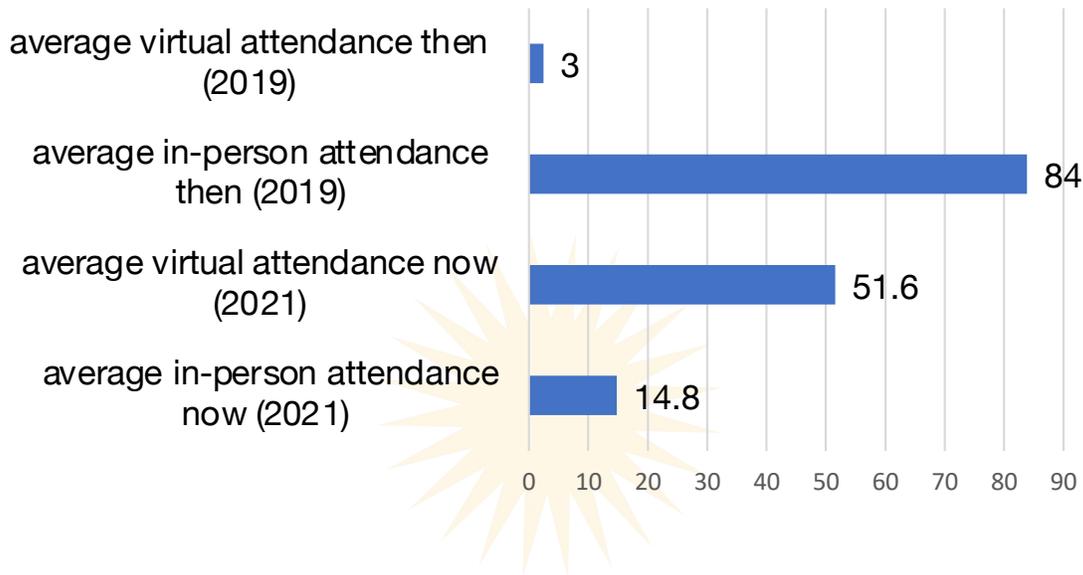
Getting into the numbers, you'd find that a significant number of congregations changed categories from "Pre-COVID" to "Mid-COVID."

	Reported Average Sunday Attendance January 2020 (UUA Certification)	Reported Average Sunday Attendance "Pre-COVID" (FACT EPIC)	Reported Average Sunday Attendance January 2021 (UUA Certificaton)	Reported Average Sunday Attendance "Mid-COVID" (FACT EPIC)
Fellowship (1-60)	33.02%	41.9%	59.2%	50.0%
Small Pastoral (61-160)	35.29%	41.3%	27.6%	38.9%
Midsized Pastoral (161-300)	19.30%	13.1%	9.3%	9.9%
Transition (301-400)	5.99%	1.9%	1.2%	0.6%
Program (401-600)	3.72%	0.6%	2.7%	0.6%
Large Program (601-800)	1.55%	1.3%		
Very Large (>801)	1.14%			

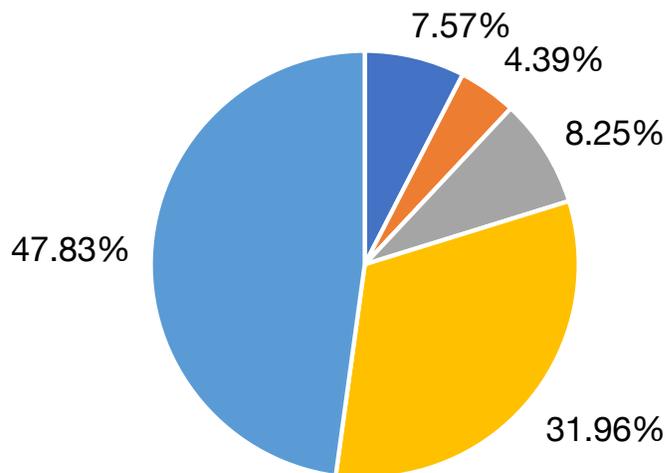
The **Change in Attendance** is not scientific. People reported having a difficult time figuring out how to count virtual attendance. [The instructions on our UUA annual certification](#) are detailed and easier to follow. If you are looking for more reliable data for Unitarian Universalist congregations, we recommend using data gleaned for our annual certification.

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### Average Attendance: then and now

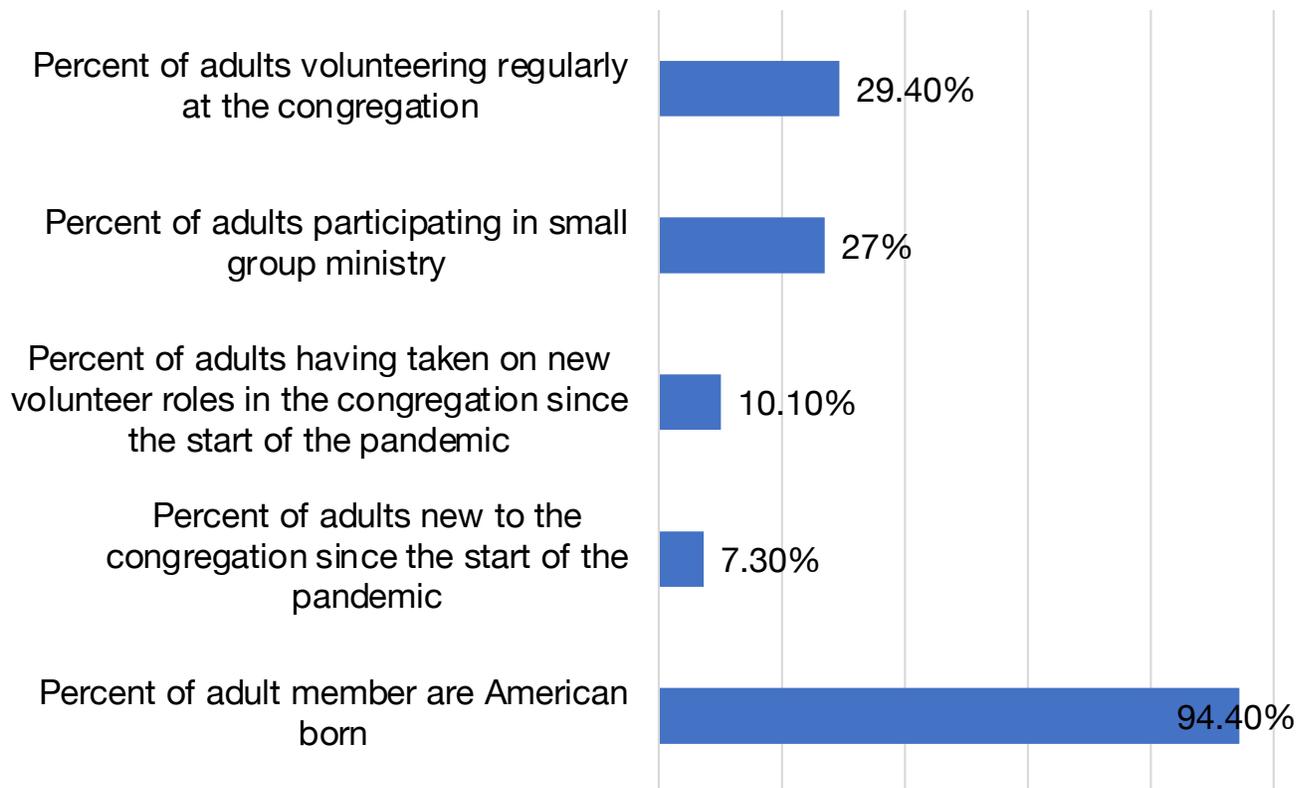
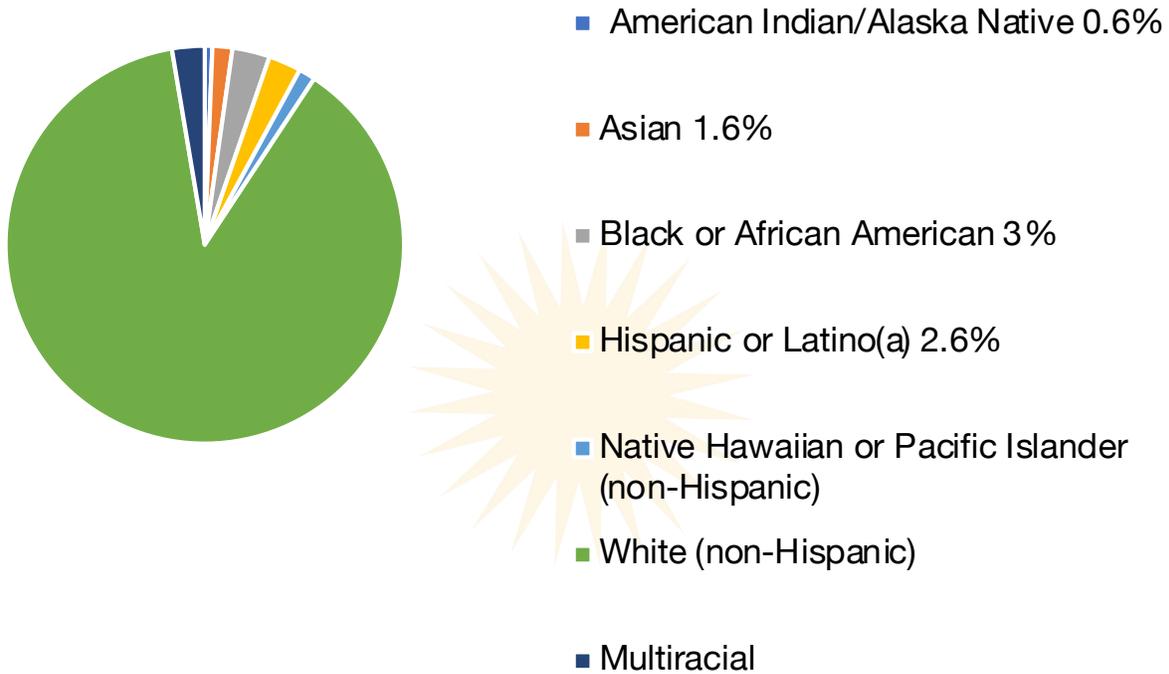


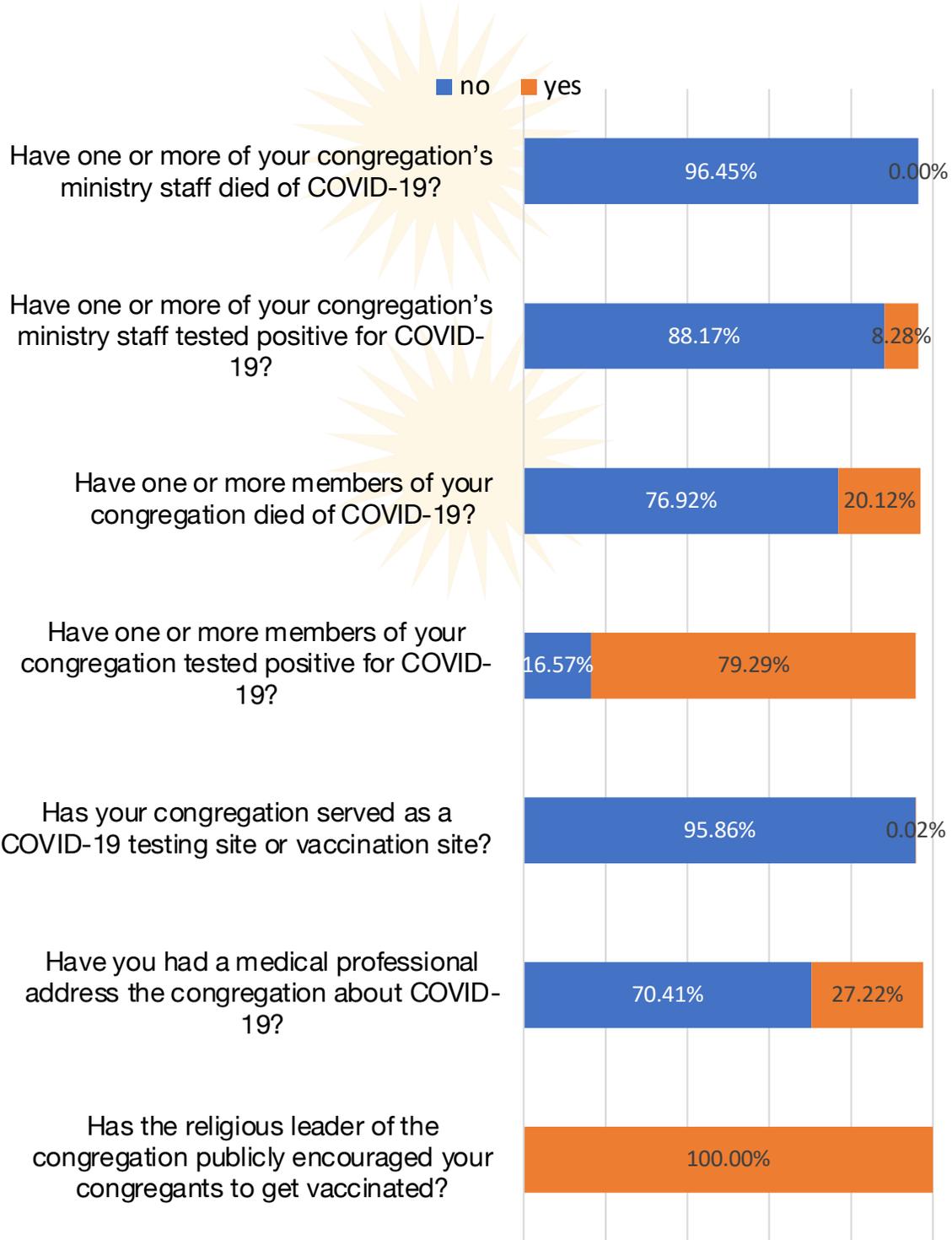
### Age of those in Attendance



- Children (ages 0-12)
- Youth (ages 13-17)
- Young adults (ages 18-34)
- Middle adults (ages 35-64)
- Senior adults (ages 65 and older)

## Racial Make Up of Membership

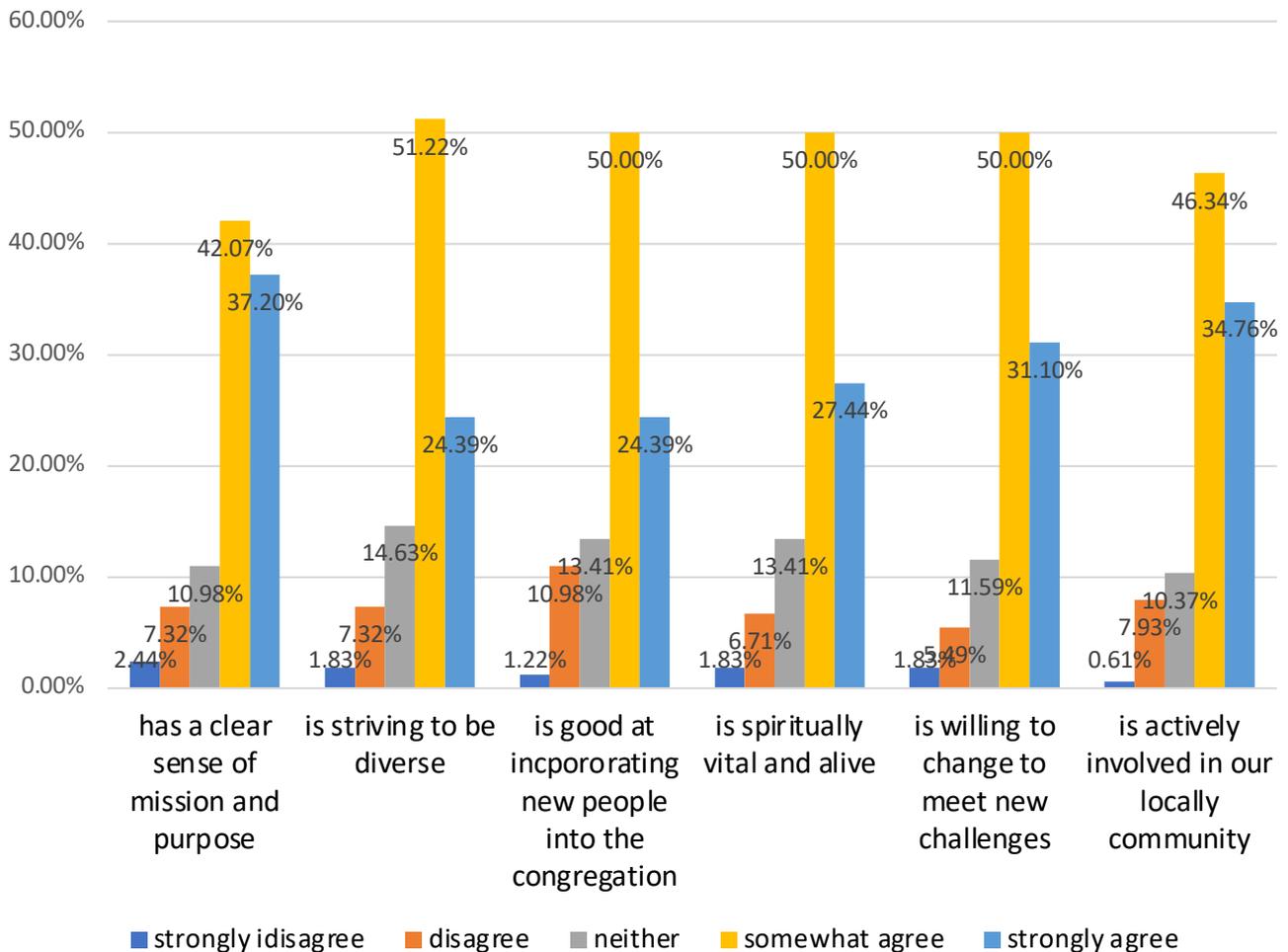




**Vitality Markers** are questions developed by the Faith Communities Today team, which measure health and vitality of a congregation. We've been asking these questions for years and therefore can compare over time.

We asked congregation to rate their level of agreement with each of the following statements.

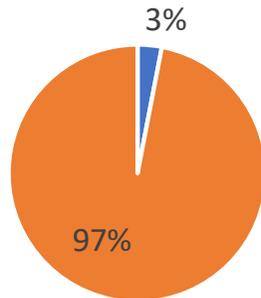
Our Congregation...



These are very optimistic numbers. Consider that this survey was completed at the summer of 2021 when we were experimenting with (presumably) safer outdoor gatherings, and we had so much hope in vaccines that were newly available.

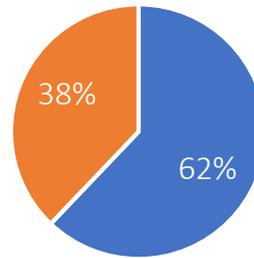
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Did your congregation stop worshipping in person in your building due to COVID-19?



■ no ■ yes

Have you resumed worshipping in person in your building? (June 2021)



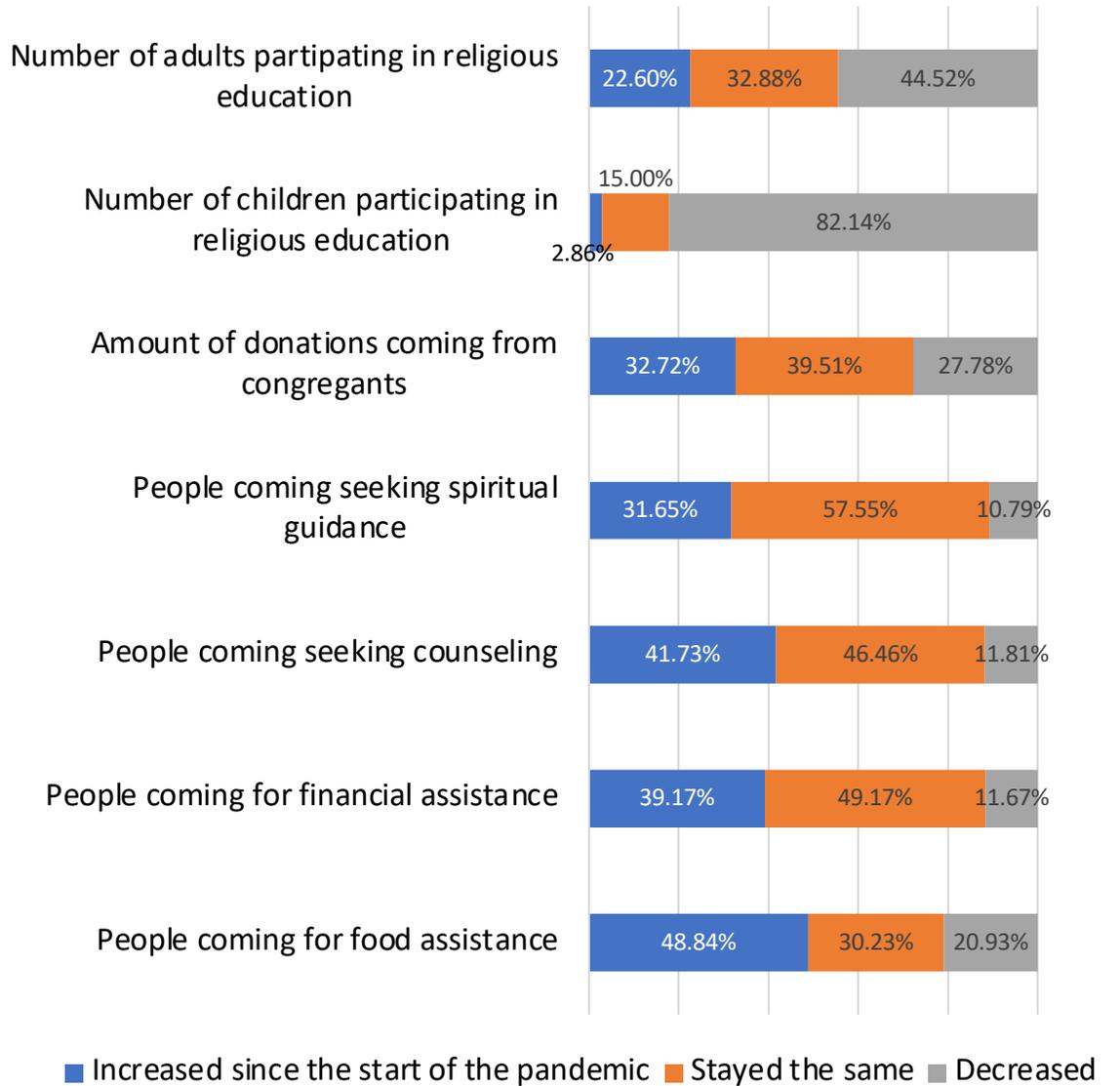
■ no ■ yes

### Covid Illness and Deaths

107 congregations reported 912 members tested positive for COVID-19 and 44 members died from COVID-19.

107 congregations reported 19 staff members tested positive for COVID-19 and no staff members died from COVID-19.

How have the following activities changed since the start of the pandemic?

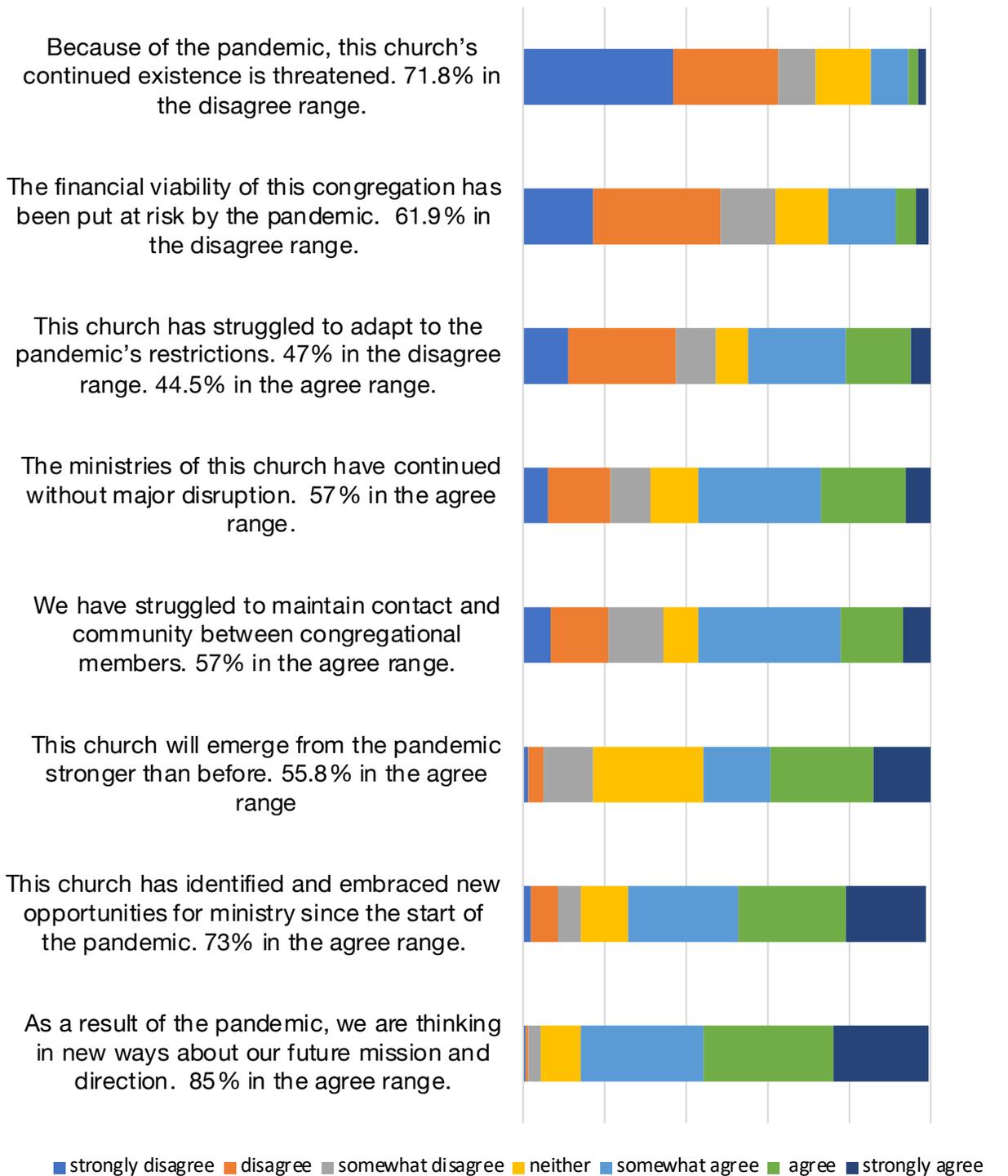


We asked about the effects on regular activities of the congregation. Each faith tradition in the FACT consortium were asked the same question. Below the UU data is sorted twice: first by “discontinued since the start of the pandemic” and “offered online since the start of the pandemic.”

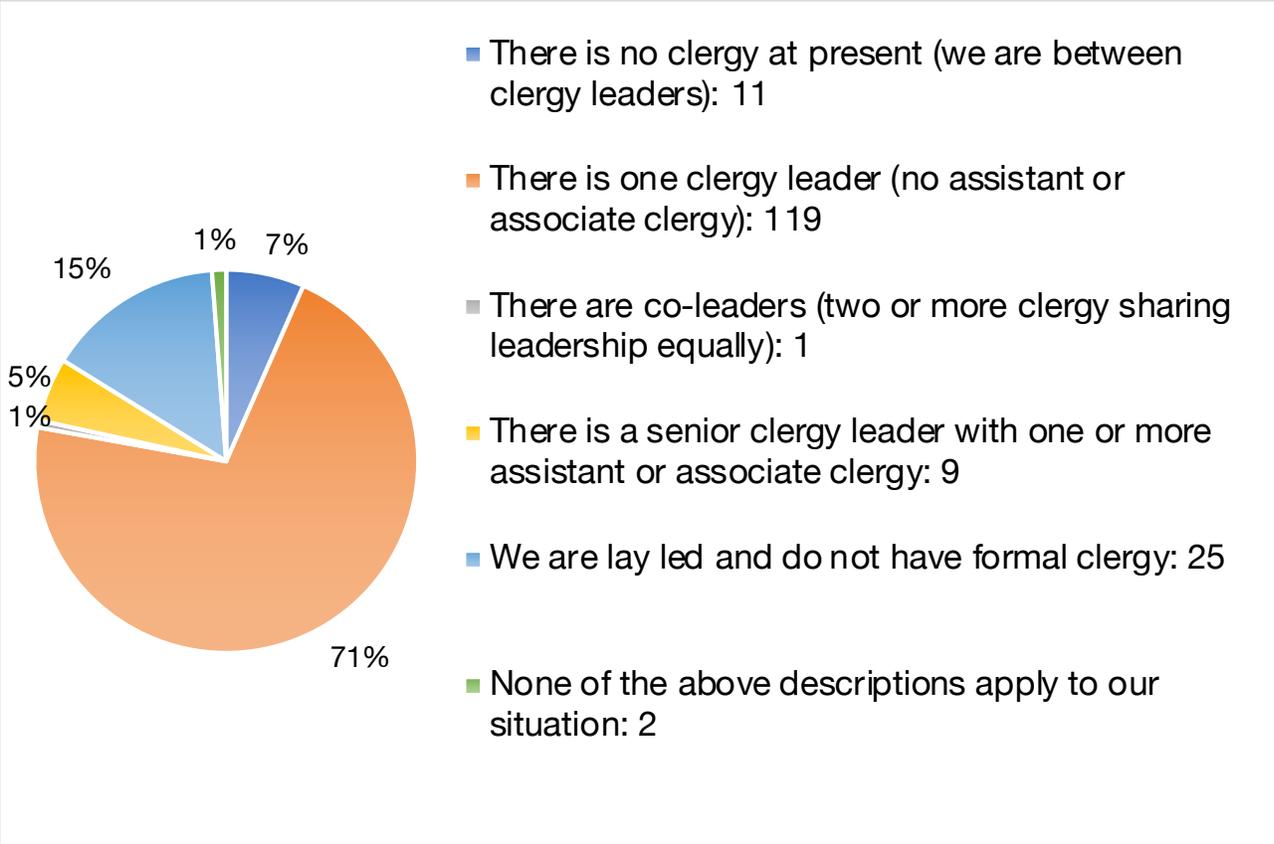
	Not offered before or since the start of the pandemic	Discontinued since the start of the pandemic	Offered in-person only since the start of the pandemic	Offered online only since the start of the pandemic	Offered both in- person and online since the start of the pandemic
Committee and board meetings	7.87%	39.89%	0.00%	16.85%	26.97%
Small groups (for fellowship and spiritual nourishment)	11.24%	25.28%	2.81%	35.96%	16.29%
Religious education for adults (e.g., scripture studies)	12.36%	22.47%	1.12%	43.26%	11.80%
Prayer or meditation groups	20.79%	17.42%	20.22%	7.87%	24.16%
Religious education for children	25.84%	14.61%	2.25%	30.90%	16.85%
Music program (e.g., choir, worship team, orchestra, band, etc.)	37.08%	10.11%	0.56%	28.65%	14.61%
Social justice/advocacy groups	26.40%	9.55%	0.56%	46.07%	8.43%
Children (under 13) activities or programs	15.73%	7.30%	1.69%	58.43%	7.87%
Senior (65+) activities or programs	43.26%	7.30%	2.25%	30.34%	7.30%
Youth (13-17) activities or programs	58.43%	7.30%	0.00%	19.66%	6.18%
Young adults (18-34) activities or programs	79.21%	6.74%	0.56%	1.12%	2.25%
Fellowship events (e.g., church suppers, picnics, etc.)	9.55%	6.18%	1.69%	34.83%	38.76%
Community service activities (e.g., food pantry, housing assistance)	8.99%	5.06%	1.69%	58.43%	16.85%
Global ministry activities	76.97%	3.37%	4.49%	0.00%	4.49%
Preschool and/or daycare center	0.00%	0.00%	2.25%	66.85%	23.03%

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Global ministry activities	76.97%	3.37%	4.49%	0.00%	4.49%

This next graph is difficult to read due to multiple colors. To summarize, very few UU congregations feel that the viability of their congregation has been threatened and that core ministries of the congregation have continued. Please remember, this survey was completed in the Summer of 2021 when “the light was at the end of tunnel.” We believe this anticipated relief effected people’s responses.

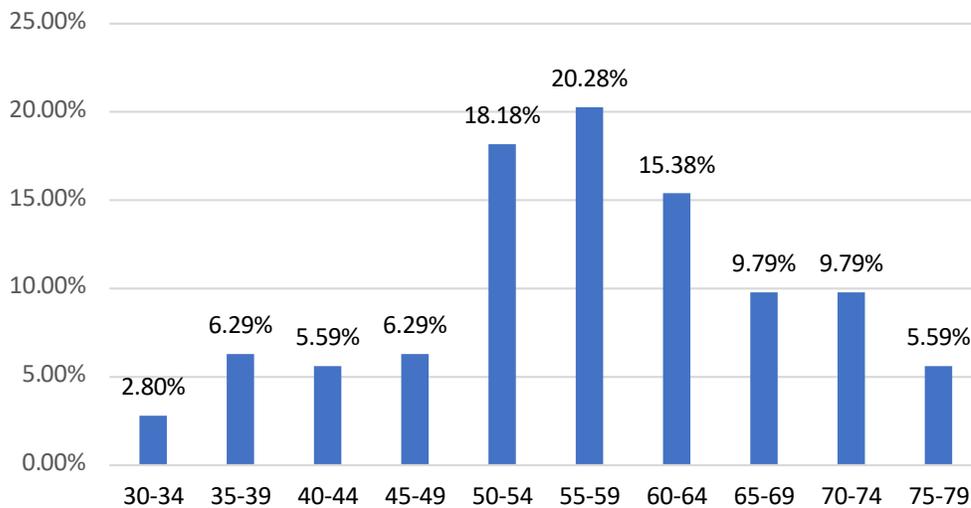


Which statement best describes the (religious) leadership of this congregation?

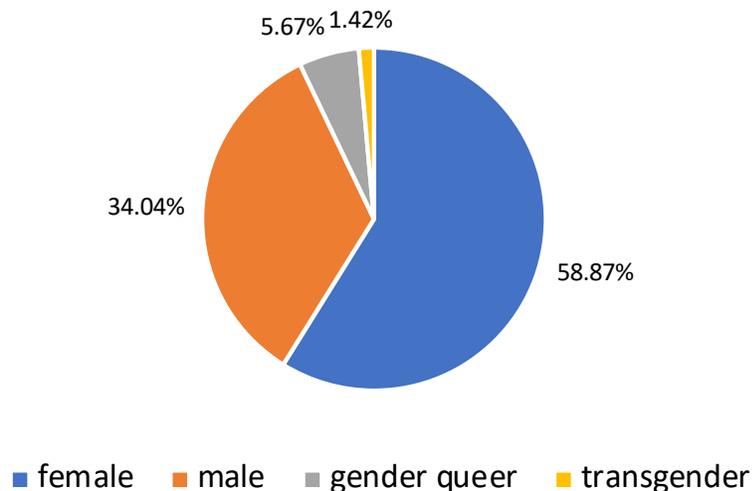


**Lead Ministers.** The following section explores lead ministers (when a congregation had a minister) specifically. This was the decision of the FACT team. Based on these findings and concerns for the real people these numbers represent, the UUA is conducting a survey in January 2022 of all religious professionals along with the presidents to find out “*how are people really doing?*” Until then, this is what we found about how the ministers of our faith tradition are doing and have been impacted by the effects of COVID-19.

Age of Ministers



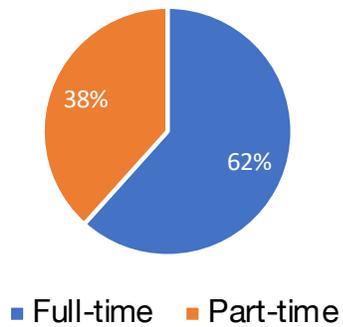
Gender of Ministers



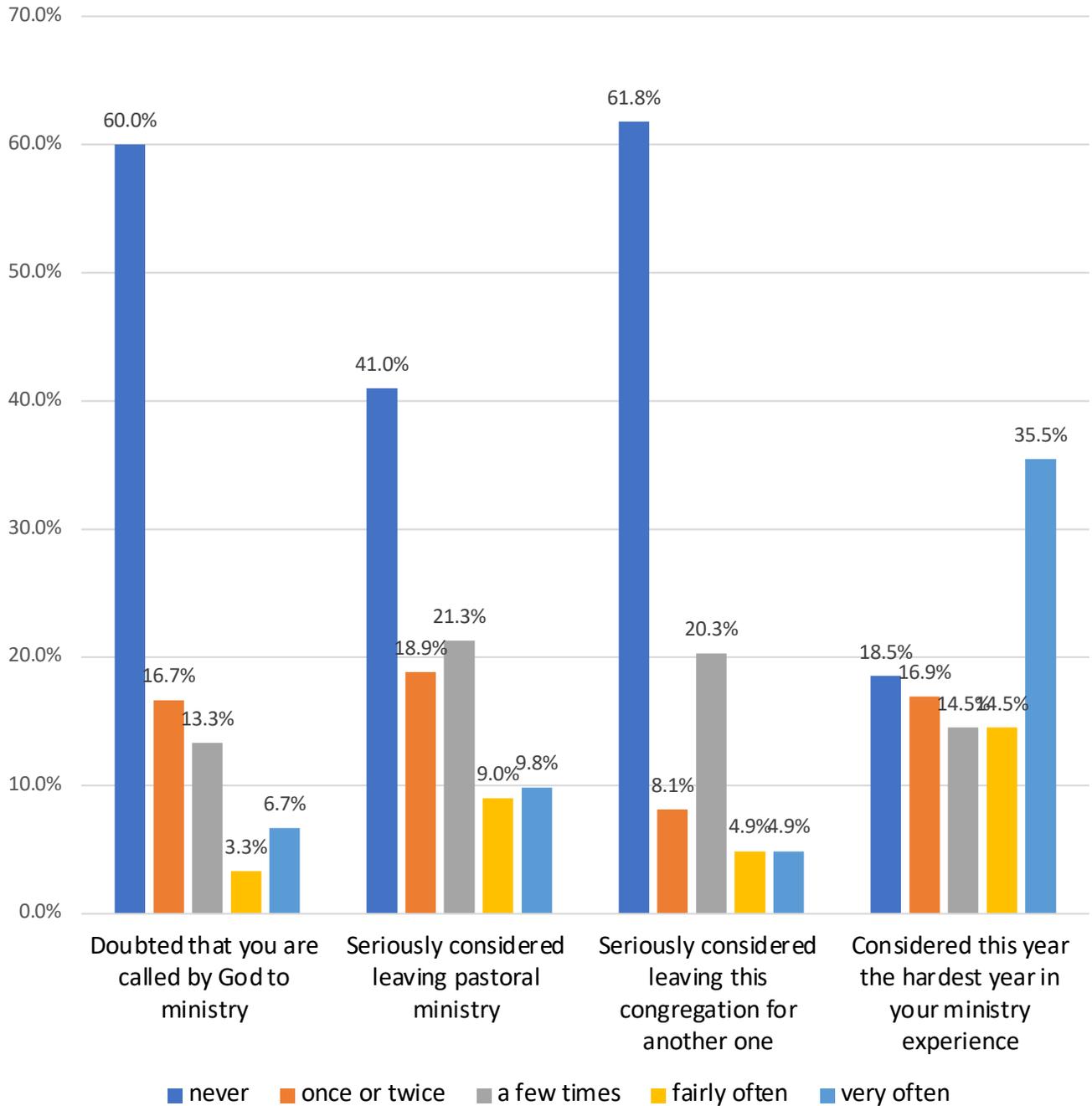
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<b>Race</b>	
Hispanic or Latino(a)	0
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (non-Hispanic)	0
Asian (non-Hispanic)	0.68%
Jewish - Ashkenazi	0.68%
American Indian/Alaska Native (non-Hispanic)	1.37%
Multiracial	1.37%
Black or African American (non-Hispanic)	2.74%
White (non-Hispanic)	93.15%

### Congregational employment

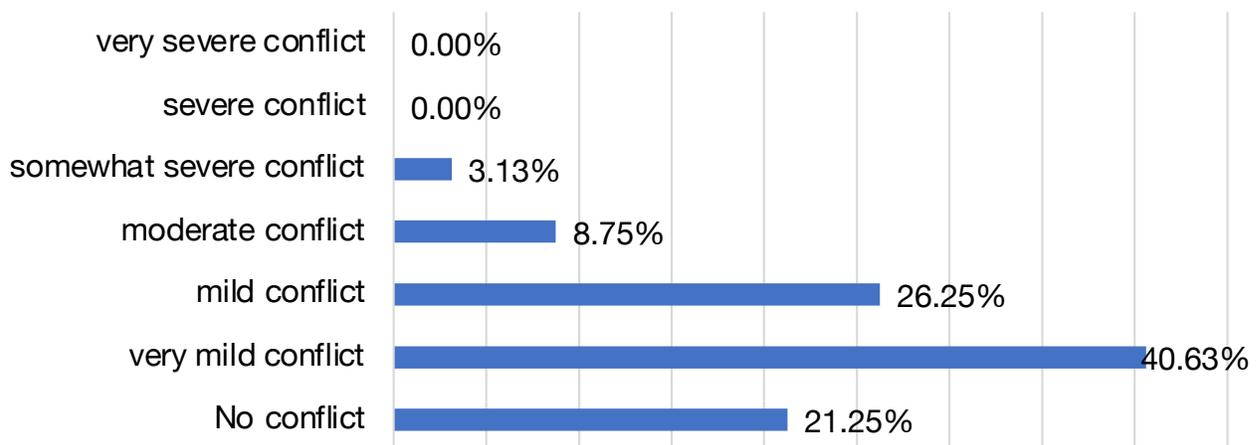


Asking the ministers in the Summer of 2021... In the past year, how often have you...



**This section covers Conflict in Congregations.** These are the only questions that were added for UU congregations only. That is because *The Widening the Circle Report* from the Commission on Institutional Change named conflict as a significant concern. Research teams from other denominations did point out that the level of conflict in the UUA is significantly below the national picture.

How would you describe the level of dissent and/or conflict within the congregation regarding the COVID response (e.g. mask-wearing, vaccine distribution, closing/opening of congregational facility)?

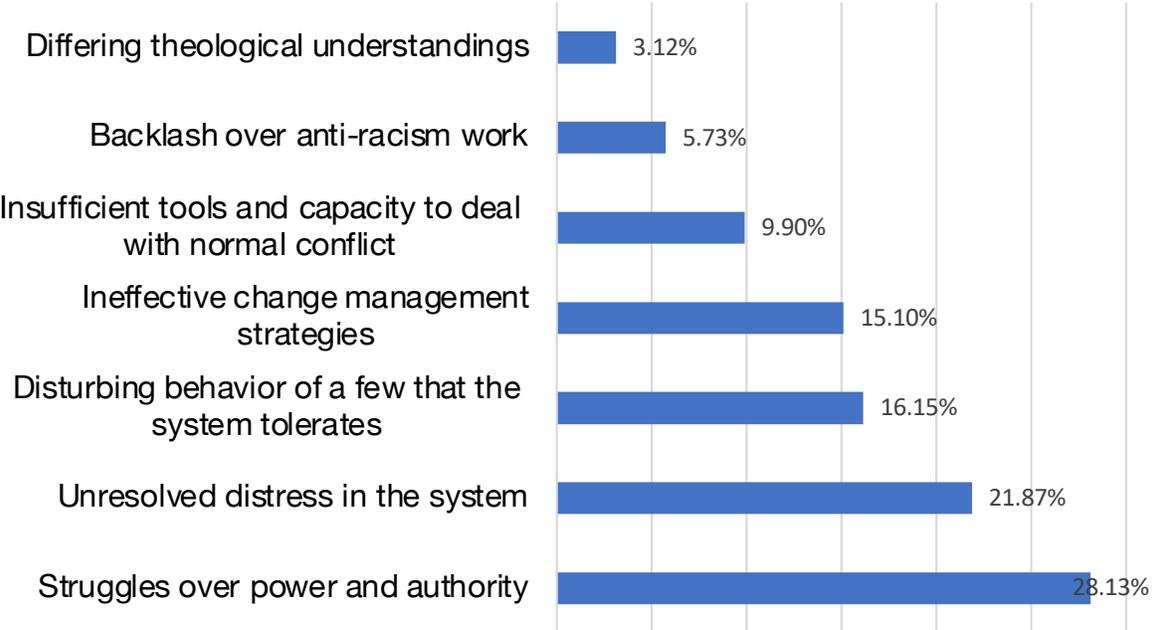


Has your religious community experienced conflict within the last 2 years? Check all that apply.



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What were the causes of conflict?



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## Qualitative Data: the stories

We asked, “What has been the most successful adaptation you made in response to the pandemic?” and “Reflecting on the past year, what would you say the congregation is most proud of as you have responded to the pandemic?” And the stories poured forth. Here are some of the highlights.

Over and over congregations reported their pride in pivoting to online worship and meetings and small group ministry. We heard many versions of:

- “We got clear about our purpose.”
- “For the first time we have whole families worshipping together (on line) and we want to figure out how to continue that when we’re back under one roof.”
- “We are attracting younger, more diverse people.”
- “Members who moved away came back virtually.”
- “This has forced us to design creative forms of spiritual practices.”
- “We didn’t know how diverse our congregation was until accessibility barriers were addressed through technology.”

Paycheck Protection Program loans allowed congregations to keep staff employed and many gave stories as to how staff job descriptions morphed to meet new needs. A Sunday morning nursery teacher volunteered to change their duties to running errands for young families sheltering in place.

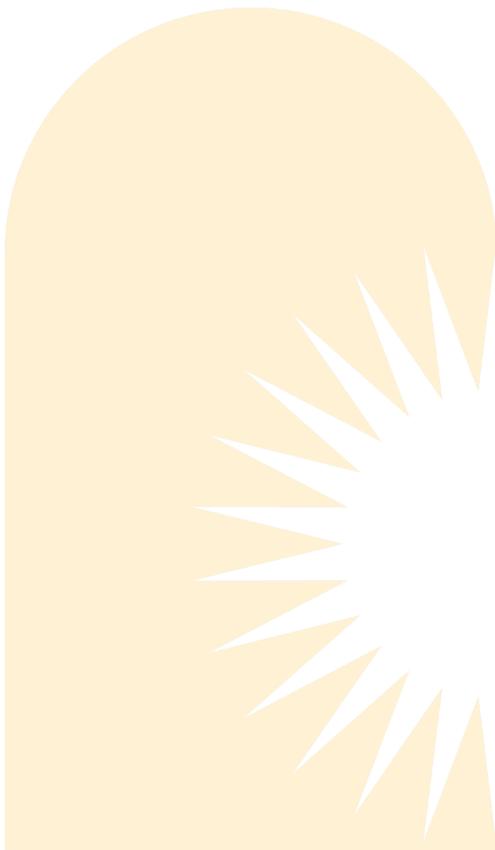
Pastoral Care Teams mobilized and expanded. Some created check-in pods. Many reached out to local agencies for training in order to responsibly serve emerging needs. A couple congregations told us about “drive through” and “take-out” community suppers. Pastoral Care Teams explicitly became family ministry and created support groups and mentoring pods to meet the evolving needs.

Congregational collaboration was high. Some started sharing staff across clusters. Some ministers rotated preaching. The Puget Sound of Washington cluster of religious educators created one big virtual faith formation program.

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Reported conflict was lower than our HOPE for Us conflict engagement team thought it usually is. They thought this could be due to people not physically being together. This survey was completed in summer when anticipatory hope was high, and that tends to tamp down conflict. Other reasons may be the focus on purpose and/or the state of constant learning. As one reporter said, “the influx of humility from constantly learning decentered toxic certainty.”

People reported that online worship offered a greater intimacy and inclusivity. Virtual worship allowed for a new relationship to music through videos. Congregations had access to preachers from all over the country, or even the world, and they took advantage of that opportunity.



## Next Steps

1. Another, very specific survey will be sent to professional staff and the president of each congregation during the “Certification season,” which is January 2022. The Summer 2021 EPIC survey invited the minister (or senior minister) to fill out the survey in order to capture their state of wellness. Shared ministry is a cherished value of Unitarian Universalists. We would like to fine-tune the wellness portion of the survey and invite all ministers serving congregations, professional religious educators, musicians, membership professionals, administrators, and the presidents to tell us anonymously how they are really doing. We have buy-in from the UUMA, LREDA and UUAMP.
2. Faith Communities Today is inviting congregations from each tradition to go deeper over the next five years. Congregations that agree to participate will be paid for their efforts to survey their members on a regular schedule. The FACT staff are managing that process and the UUA will have access to that data. You can learn more at the [“Get Involved” page](#) through which congregations can volunteer to participate