



The Presbyterian Panel

Listening to Presbyterians



SUMMARY

End-of-Life Issues The November 2002 Survey

The Presbyterian Panel consists of three nationally representative samples of groups affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): members, elders (lay leaders), and ordained ministers. For most analyses, ministers are split into two groups based on current call: *pastors*, serving congregations, and *specialized clergy*, serving elsewhere. New samples are drawn every three years. These pages summarize major findings from the thirteenth (and last) survey completed by the 2000-2002 Panel, initially sampled in the fall of 1999.

IN THIS SUMMARY

- ✓ *Opinions on Assisted Suicide* . p. 1
- ✓ *Thoughts about Death* p. 2
- ✓ *Wills and Funerals* p. 3
- ✓ *Life after Death* p. 4

EUTHANASIA AND ASSISTED SUICIDE

The Right to Die

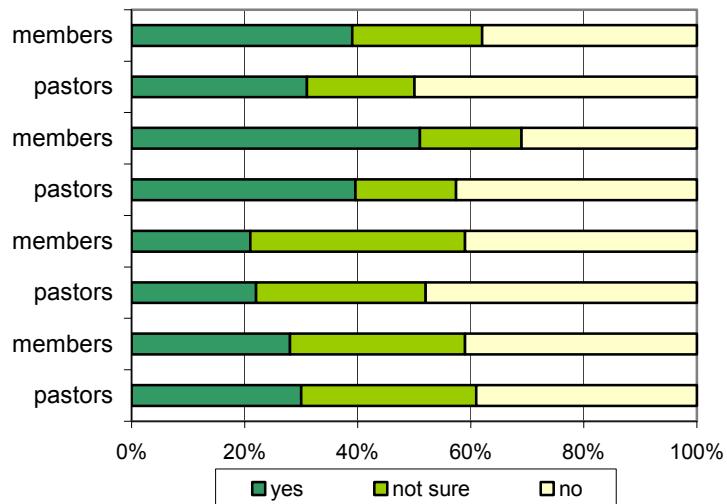
- ✓ Only a minority of panelists believes a person has the “right to end his or her own life” in each of four situations. Support is greatest when the person *has an incurable disease* (among members, 39% support a right to end one’s own life in this circumstance; elders, 37%; pastors, 31%; specialized clergy, 49%).
- ✓ Many fewer would support the right to end one’s life when the person *has dishonored his or her family* (elders, 3%; specialized clergy, 8%) or when the person *has gone bankrupt* (2%; 8%). A few more would support this right when the person *is tired of living and ready to die* (elders, 8%; specialized clergy, 19%).

Assisted Suicide

- ✓ Most members (51%) and specialized clergy (55%) but fewer elders (46%) and pastors (40%) believe *the law should allow doctors to comply with the wishes of a dying patient in severe distress who asks to have his or her life ended*.
- ✓ “If a member of your family were terminally ill and wanted to die,” 21% of members, 18% of elders, and 22% of pastors would *be willing to help him/her*.
- ✓ Fewer (members, 28%; elders, 25%; pastors, 30%; and specialized clergy, 40%) would *consider committing suicide* if they “had a disease that could not be cured and were living in severe pain.”

Figure 1. Opinions on Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide

- Do you think a person has the right to end his or her own life if this person has an incurable illness?
- Do you think the law should allow doctors to comply with the wishes of a dying patient in severe distress to have his or her life ended?
- If a member of your family were terminally ill and wanted to die, would you be willing to help?
- If you personally had a disease that could not be cured and were living in severe pain, would you consider committing suicide?



THOUGHTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Fear of Death

- ✓ Relatively few panelists are *afraid to die*: members, 7%; elders, 6%; pastors, 6%; and specialized clergy, 14%. Some others respond *not sure*, so overall the percentages *not afraid to die* are, respectively, 74%, 76%, 82%, and 70%. In a 1999 Gallup Poll, 14% of U.S. adults reported being afraid to die.
- ✓ Similar percentages report being *very fearful* or *somewhat fearful* about “not knowing what will happen to you after you die” (members, 11%; elders, 8%; pastors, 4%; specialized clergy, 8%).
- ✓ Somewhat more panelists in each group report being *very fearful* or *somewhat fearful* of each of three “specific concerns people have about their own death”:
 - Dying in pain (64% of members and pastors are *very fearful* or *somewhat fearful*)
 - Dying alone (35%; 36%)
 - Leaving your loved ones behind (56%; 48%)
- ✓ The highest percentage “afraid to die” is in the youngest age category. (See Figure 2.) In three of the four samples (pastors the exception), the lowest is found in the oldest age category. (Different age categories are used for laity and ministers because ministers are concentrated in a narrower age range.)

Thoughts about Death

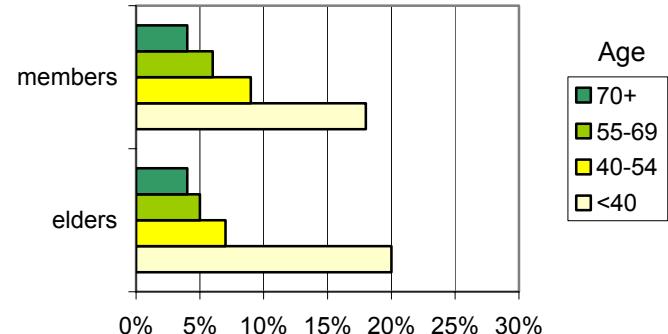
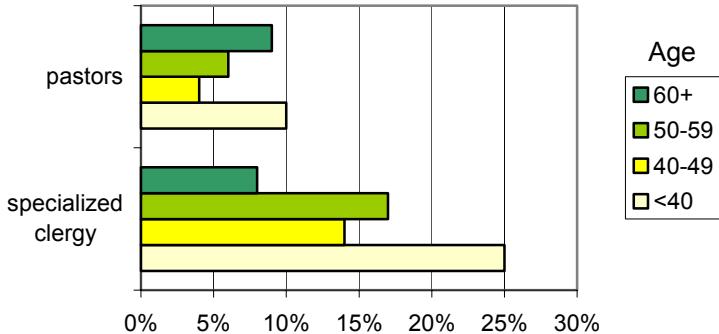
- ✓ Among laity, a majority think about death either *fairly seldom* (members, 39%; elders, 38%) or *very seldom* (27%; 28%). Among ministers, about half report thinking about death either *fairly seldom* (pastors, 37%; specialized clergy, 31%) or *very seldom* (13%; 18%). Most of the rest think about death *fairly often* (elders, 25%; pastors, 32%).

- ✓ Among U.S. adults in a 1999 *Los Angeles Times* Poll, the *very often* (9%) and *fairly often* (11%) responses totaled 20%, compared to a combined 10% for Panel members.
- ✓ A quarter of panelists believe their own death will occur *at home* (members, 27%; specialized clergy, 26%). Another one in six believe it will occur *in a hospital* (members, 16%; specialized clergy, 16%). Few believe it will occur *in a nursing home* (6%; 8%) or *in a hospice* (4%; 9%).
- ✓ Frequency of thoughts about death is unrelated to age, gender, marital status, or educational level.

Considerations for One’s Own Dying

- ✓ Panelists were asked to rate how important each of 19 considerations are “as you think about your own death.” These considerations were labeled *very important* by half or more in every Panel group:
 - coming to peace with God
 - having financial affairs in order
 - having someone to make decisions in the event that you cannot make them for yourself
 - not being a burden to your family
 - trusting your doctor
 - having a chance to say goodbye to important people in your life
 - knowing what to expect about your physical condition
 - praying
- ✓ All of the remaining considerations were rated as either *very important* or *important* by a majority, with the exception of “meeting with another spiritual guide,” and, for laity, “having a chance to talk about the meaning of death.”

Figure 2. Percentage “Afraid to Die” by Age and Panel Group



WILLS, FUNERALS, AND MEMORIAL SERVICES

Wills, Living Wills, and Organ Donation Cards

- ✓ Eight in ten in every Panel group *have a will* (members, 83%; elders, 86%; pastors, 80%; specialized clergy, 84%).
- ✓ Of those without a will, large majorities (72%; 86%; 87%; 86%) *plan to write a will*.
- ✓ Majorities, ranging from 51% of pastors to 61% of specialized clergy, *have a living will or a written document that you have given to your doctors or family members expressing your wishes about whether you want heroic measures to be taken on your behalf if you should become critically ill and could not make decisions on your own*.
- ✓ More than half of laity (members, 54%; elders, 54%) and two-thirds of ministers (pastors, 73%; specialized clergy, 68%) *have signed an organ donation card or otherwise indicated in writing your willingness to let your organs be taken after your death to transplant into others*.

Disposition of One's Body after Death

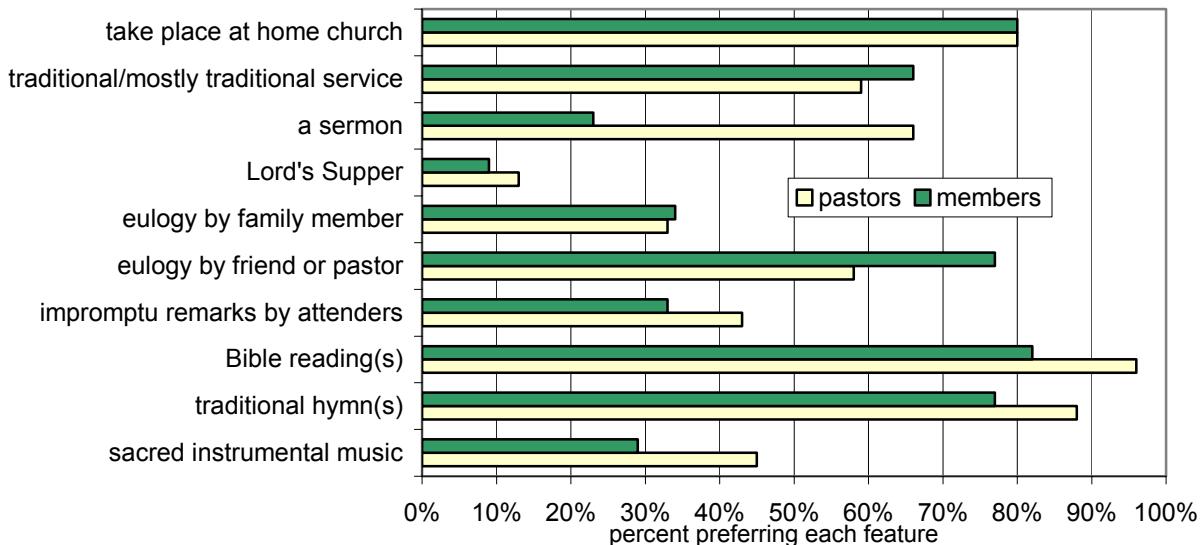
- ✓ More panelists want *cremation* (members, 40%; pastors, 53%) than *earth burial* (32%; 17%) or *entombment above ground* (2%; <0.5%) for the “disposition of your body after death.” Another small segment (members, 7%; pastors, 11%) favors having their body *donated to medical research*. The remainder, about one in five, are either *not sure* or express *no preference*.
- ✓ For the subset that prefers cremation, more want their ashes *scattered* (members, 34%; pastors, 34%) than *buried in the ground* (30%; 25%).

- ✓ More panelists, especially among ministers, want a *memorial service (body/ashes not present)* (elders, 52%; specialized clergy, 72%) than a *funeral service (body/ashes present)* (34%; 18%). Most of the rest respond *not sure* or have *no preference*. No more than 2% in any Panel group *don't want any sort of service*.

Funeral/Memorial Service Preferences

- ✓ Majorities in every Panel group would like their service at their *home church* (members, 87%; pastors, 80%) and for it to be *traditional/mostly traditional* (66%; 59%).
- ✓ Large majorities want *Bible reading(s)* (members, 82%; pastors, 96%) and *traditional hymn(s)* (81%; 92%) at their service.
- ✓ Most ministers and four in ten laity want some form of instrumental music at their service, with most preferring *sacred instrumental music* (members, 29%; pastors, 45%).
- ✓ Most want *a eulogy* (members, 80%; pastors, 64%), especially *a eulogy delivered by a friend or pastor* (77%; 58%). A majority of specialized clergy (51%) and a third or more of other groups also want *time for impromptu remarks by attenders*.
- ✓ Two-thirds of pastors (66%) but only a quarter of laity want *a sermon* at their service.
- ✓ Among those choosing *earth burial* or *entombment above ground*, majorities (members, 59%; pastors, 88%) want *a closed casket*. Of these, around a third want *nothing over it*, while 17% and 43%, respectively, want *a pall or drape*.

Figure 3. Preferences for One's Own Funeral or Memorial Service



LIFE AFTER DEATH

Belief in Life after Death

- ✓ Most panelists believe they will exist in some form after death: members, 79%; elders, 84%; pastors, 97%; and specialized clergy, 90%. Of the rest, 14%, 11%, 2%, and 6% are not sure; 8%, 5%, 1%, and 3% respond no.

Heaven and Hell

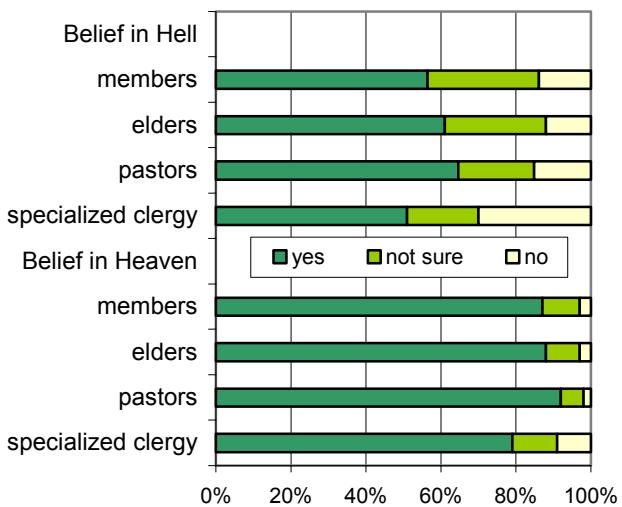
- ✓ Around nine in ten members (87%), elders (88%), and pastors (92%), and eight in ten specialized clergy (79%), believe in the existence of heaven.
- ✓ Somewhat fewer panelists believe in the existence of hell (57%, 61%, 64%, and 51%, respectively).

Contrasting Images of the Afterlife

- ✓ When presented four pairs of alternative descriptions of life after death and asked to choose one or some gradation in between for each:
 - More in every group choose a life like the one here only better or an option closer to it than a life without many things which make our present life enjoyable or an option closer to it.
 - Many more in every group choose a life of peaceful and tranquil contemplation or an option closer to it than a life of intense action or an option closer to it (e.g., 66% of members choose the former option or one closer to it).

- Many more laity choose a spiritual life, involving our mind but not our body or an option closer to it than a paradise of pleasure and delights or one closer to it. Ministers are more split, with 37% selecting the former option or one closer to it, 35% selecting the latter option or one closer to it, and 28% selecting the middle (neutral) option.
- More panelists in every group choose a life of complete fulfillment, spiritual and physical or an option closer to it than a pale, shadowy form of life, hardly life at all or an option closer to it.

Figure 4
Belief in Heaven and Hell



	Members	Elders	Ordained Ministers
Number of surveys mailed	852	898	1,290
Number returned	463	511	776‡
Response rate	54%	56%	60%

‡Of the 776 returned surveys, 597 came from pastors and 179 from specialized clergy.

This survey was initially mailed in mid-November 2002, and returns were accepted through January 2003. Results are subject to sampling and other errors. Small differences should be interpreted cautiously. As a general rule, differences of less than 8% between samples are not statistically meaningful.

For more numbers and interpretation of the November 2002 Presbyterian Panel results, a longer report with additional charts is available for \$6. Contact PDS (1-800-524-2612) and order PDS# 65100-02275. It includes an appendix with percentage responses to each survey question separately for members, elders, pastors, and specialized clergy.

LISTENING TO PRESBYTERIANS SINCE 1973

The Presbyterian Panel
A Ministry of the General Assembly Council
Research Services
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
100 Witherspoon Street
Louisville KY 40202-1396
<http://www.pcusa.org/research>