

# PRESBYTERIAN PANEL SUMMARY

— Listening to Presbyterians —



## CURRENT ISSUES IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.) FEBRUARY 1996

	Members	Elders	Pastors	Specialized Clergy
Number of Panelists . . . . .	1,053	1,058	1,124	597
Number of questionnaires mailed . . . . .	666	674	835	449
Percent returned . . . . .	63%	64%	74%	75%

*The February 1996 survey was undertaken primarily for the General Assembly Council, to provide recent Presbyterian opinion on issues of disagreement within the denomination. The following action of the 1995 (207th) General Assembly prompted the study: "Direct the General Assembly Council to make it a matter of urgent priority to discuss fully issues about which Presbyterians are in disagreement, and to do everything possible to comment and encourage this discussion in the larger church." In addition, the survey included several questions to assess opinions on, and possible use of, the new Presbyterian Investment and Loan Program.*

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Panelists generally agree that there are many issues causing disagreement among Presbyterians, with the most consensus on these issues: living out our faith, our mission in the world, and our theology. Also, large majorities view the question of homosexuality and ordination as an important source of disagreement.
- Over the last five years, most panelists see little change in the amount of agreement or disagreement on many of these same issues, but where they do see change, it is almost always in the direction of less agreement.
- Majorities in all samples oppose ordination to the ministry of sexually-active homosexual persons, and many hold this view with intensity.
- Comparison with a differently-worded question from a 1990 Panel survey seems to indicate that the proportions in every sample who oppose the ordination of sexually-active homosexual persons has declined by 10% to 15%.
- Majorities of pastors believe that national staff and other leaders of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are out of touch with congregational life, need to be more accountable on the money they spend, and should not have the freedom to speak out against church policy.
- About three-fourths of lay panelists and two-thirds of minister panelists agree that the first step toward societal change must be "converting people to Christ."
- Large majorities of members and elders support the general idea of union with other denominations, but clergy are divided on this issue.
- From a list of 11 items, large majorities of members and pastors want more attention given to "membership growth and decline" and to "Christian education."
- A third of members and just under one-fourth of pastors have "no opinion" on the concept of an investment and loan program, although a majority of pastors and specialized clergy do support it.
- Larger proportions of ministers than members and elders indicate some likelihood of investing in the new Presbyterian Investment and Loan Program (PILP).
- Likely investors tend to prefer relatively shorter investment periods (six months or one year).
- Majorities of all panelists believe it is important that time deposits in PILP be insured and have competitive rates.

**PANELISTS SEE MANY DIVISIVE ISSUES AMONG PRESBYTERIANS**

The questionnaire listed 21 issues that we had reason to think were the basis of some disagreement across the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and asked panelists to indicate how important each issue was as a “*source of current conflict or disagreement* among Presbyterians.” Panelists generally concurred with our selections; almost all issues were rated by majorities in every sample as either “very important” or “important” sources of current conflict. The highest proportion of combined important responses among members is found for these questions: “what to emphasize as the mission of the church” (81%); “how to live out our faith in the world” (79%); and “what to do about membership loss over the last 30 years” (79%). These same three issues are also rated as important by many pastors (respectively, 88%, 93%, and 75%). However, other issues are also as (or more) highly rated by pastors, among them “what we believe about Scripture” (93% “important” or “very important” responses); “the issue of homosexuality and ordination” (91%); and “what we believe about Jesus Christ” (86%).

**PANELISTS TEND TO BELIEVE DISAGREEMENT HAS INCREASED ON MANY ISSUES**

We also asked panelists whether or not they had perceived any change in agreement or disagreement among Presbyterians on each of these same 21 issues over the previous five years. At least one-half of panelists in every sample responded “no significant change” for many of these issues, including “what we believe (that is, our theology), in general”; “what we believe about God”; “what we believe about Jesus Christ”; “what we believe about the Confessions of the Church”; “how we govern ourselves”; and “how best to communicate the Gospel to those outside the church.”

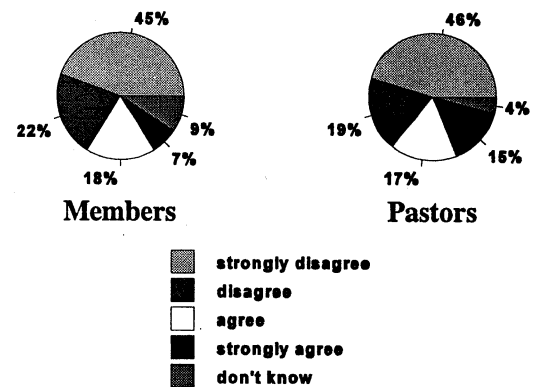
Where “no significant change” failed to receive the most responses, the other option selected most frequently was “in less agreement now.” This outcome was especially evident among both samples of clergy. “In less agreement now” was, in fact, chosen by a majority of pastors and specialized clergy (but not members) for these five issues: “how we allocate resources among congregations, presbyteries, synods, and the national church”; “the issue of homosexuality and ordination”; “differing perspectives between the Presbyterian Lay Committee and the national church, in particular”; “tolerance versus strictness in what one can believe and be a Presbyterian”; and “tolerance versus strictness in the behavior permitted for Presbyterians.” On only one

issue was “in less agreement now” the most common response in *all* samples: “homosexuality and ordination.” That response was chosen by 48% of members, 61% of elders, and 66% of both clergy samples. On *no* issues were Presbyterians viewed to be “in more agreement now” by a majority, or even a near-majority, of any of the Panel samples.

**MAJORITIES OPPOSE ORDAINING ACTIVE HOMOSEXUAL PERSONS TO THE MINISTRY . . .**

The matter of whether or not to permit ordination to the ministry of homosexual persons who fail to remain chaste continues to divide the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Nevertheless, in all samples majorities indicated disapproval of ordaining such individuals (ranging from 74% of elders to 53% of specialized clergy) by disagreeing to some extent with this statement: “the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) should permit ordination to the ministry of the Word and Sacrament of persons of homosexual orientation even if they indicate no intention to abstain from homosexual activities after their ordination.”

**The PCUSA Should Permit Ordination to the Ministry of Sexually-Active Homosexual Persons**



**. . . AND MANY WHO HOLD SUCH VIEWS HOLD THEM WITH INTENSITY**

The most frequent “disagree” response in all samples was “strongly disagree”; indeed, it was the majority response among elders (51%). Such clustering of opinion on an extreme choice is unusual in the experience of the Panel and indicates the intensity with which many panelists hold their views on this issue. Such clustering is also found at the other extreme among pastors and specialized clergy; while many fewer panelists agreed with ordaining actively-homosexual persons, many pastors and other clergy who do hold this view are found in the “strongly agree” category.

## **TREND MAY BE MORE ACCEPTANCE OF ORDAINING HOMOSEXUAL PERSONS**

There *may* be some shift in recent years toward acceptance of the ordination of sexually-active homosexual persons by larger proportions of Presbyterians. When this issue was last addressed by the Panel (April 1990)—using a differently-worded question—opposition to such ordination was somewhat greater in every sample (the differences are approximately 10% to 15%).

## **MANY PANELISTS AVERSE TO NATIONAL CHURCH STAFF, LEADERS**

Among members in particular, the high proportions of “don’t know” responses to questions on national-level staff and leadership seem to indicate that many Presbyterians are out of touch with what is going on at that remove from their congregations. In the other samples, however, more panelists view national PCUSA leaders and staff unfavorably than view them favorably—especially among pastors. For pastors, majorities indicate that national staff and/or leaders (questions differ in their wordings) are out of touch with congregational life (64%), need to be more accountable on how they spend money (74%), and deserve a reprimand when they contradict official church policy in public (77%).

## **MOST MEMBERS, ELDERS SUPPORT DESIGNATED FUNDS, WHILE PASTORS, OTHER CLERGY DO NOT**

On other matters, however, pastors are more supportive of the national church. While over two-thirds of members and six in ten elders believe that most of the money their congregations forward to the national church should be designated for specific programs, equally large majorities of both pastors (70%) and specialized clergy (72%) believe just the opposite. Similarly, majorities of both clergy samples agree that “congregations should take steps to generate more money for programs of the national church,” while most members and elders disagree. Consistently, majorities of members (64%) and elders (66%) view the principal purpose of any “denomination-wide organization” to be “to meet the needs of local congregations,” but so do a slim majority of pastors (53%) (although a slim majority of specialized clergy—52%—do *not*).

## **SALVATION A FAITH ISSUE FOR CLERGY, WHILE MANY MEMBERS, ELDERS INCLUDE *BOTH* FAITH AND WORKS**

Sizable majorities in all Panel samples agree that “converting people to Christ must be the first step in creating a better society” (e.g., 71% of members and 65% of pastors so responded), suggesting that the social gospel must play second fiddle to personal salvation. Nevertheless, large minorities of members (46%) and elders (44%) agree with another survey statement, “to receive salvation, a person must do good for others,” suggesting that for some, “faith” and “works” are both part of God’s plan for personal redemption. Most pastors (82%) and specialized clergy (78%) disagree that “works” are necessary for salvation.

## **MOST MEMBERS, ELDERS SUPPORT IDEA OF ONE CHURCH, BUT PASTORS MORE DIVIDED**

Lay Presbyterians overwhelmingly support movement toward one Christian Church. To the statement, “denominations should set aside their differences and work together for the visible, structural reunion of the Church,” large majorities responded in agreement (members, 80%; elders, 82%). Pastors and specialized clergy, however, are more divided; while 43% of the former and 55% of the latter agreed with the statement, 55% of pastors and 45% of specialized clergy disagreed.

## **LARGE MAJORITIES WANT MORE ATTENTION ON MEMBERSHIP CHANGE, CHRISTIAN EDUCATION**

When presented with a list of 11 items and asked to indicate whether or not the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) should give more or less attention, or should not change the amount of attention given to each, in all samples the largest proportions of combined “more attention” and “much more attention” responses were found for “membership growth and decline” (ranging from 76% of specialized clergy to 86% of elders). The matter deserving more attention according to the second-largest proportion of members (68%) is “Christian education” (at 71%, this item was third in the pastors’ ranking; pastors gave their second-highest proportion of more-attention responses to “starting new congregations,” 76%).

## **MANY HAVE “NO OPINION” ON AN INVESTMENT AND LOAN PROGRAM . . .**

The PCUSA’s new investment and loan program was approved in July 1995 by the 207th General Assembly, but was still undergoing organization as the February

1996 Panel survey was being mailed. Hence, it is no surprise that 33% of members, 28% of elders, 23% of pastors, and 22% of specialized clergy responded “no opinion” when asked, “In general, what is your opinion of the idea of a church-sponsored investment and loan program.” Others may have responded based solely on the brief description in the survey’s cover letter: “. . . [the investment and loan program provides] an investment opportunity for individuals and congregations, and a source of loan funds for such capital-intensive projects as starting new congregations and improving the facilities of existing ones.”

#### . . . BUT MOST MINISTERS SUPPORT IT

Even with “no opinion” responses included, a majority of pastors (62%) and specialized clergy (61%) believe that the investment and loan program is either an “excellent idea” or a “good idea,” as do a third of members (33%) and four in ten elders (41%). However, a similar proportion of members (34%) and almost as many elders (31%) responded either “mediocre idea” or “not a good idea.”

#### HIGHER PROPORTIONS OF MINISTERS THAN LAITY LIKELY TO INVEST

Consistently, relatively more pastors and specialized clergy reported they are likely to invest individually in the program (41% of pastors and 45% of specialized clergy responded “likely” or “very likely”) than did members (20%) or elders (22%).

Most members, 52%, “don’t know” whether or not their congregations would invest funds in the new program, and over one-third of elders gave the same response. Even among pastors, one-fourth (24%) responded “don’t know,” and only 33% indicated that their congregations were either “likely” or “very likely” to invest.

#### PROBABLE INVESTMENT AMOUNTS GENERALLY UNKNOWN, BUT SHORT TERMS PREFERRED

Even among the subset of panelists who indicated that they were either “very likely” or “likely” to invest personally in the investment and loan program, majorities in all samples left blank a follow-up question on the probable investment amount.

Panelists were more forthcoming about the time period they would prefer for invested funds. In general, the “very interested” responses were the greatest for investment periods of six months or one year (in all samples, around—or just under—one-third of panelists so responded). For the “four years or more option,” the proportions of “very interested” responses were especially low among members (8%) and elders (12%) and were not much higher among either pastors (17%) or specialized clergy (20%).

#### PANELISTS WANT COMPETITIVE RATES, SECURITY

Overall, majorities of panelists in every sample believe that it is “very important” that “interest rates are competitive with those of [a] local financial institution,” and that “the time deposits are insured up to a certain value by the federal government as would be the case with most banks.”

#### ONE QUESTION NOT WELL WORDED

One multi-part question asked panelists “How important are each of the [eight] following issues to *you*, *personally*, *in your role* as a member, elder, or minister within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).” The list included items on the Church of Christ Uniting (COCU), ordination of sexually-active homosexual persons (both to the ministry and as elders), and affirmative action. Our intent was to obtain information on the intensity, not the content, of opinions on these eight issues, but feedback from panelists indicated confusion in wording failed to make our intent clear. Hence, none of these responses are discussed here.

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The *Panel* is administered by the Office of Research Services of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). A copy of the *Report of the February 1996 Presbyterian Panel* can be ordered from PDS (Call 1-800-524-2612 and order PDS #70-360-96-208). Or, send a check for \$5 payable to the Presbyterian Panel (no cash, please) to this address:

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