



The Presbyterian Panel



Listening to Presbyterians

SUMMARY

THE PUBLIC ROLE OF PRESBYTERIANS The August 1999 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 analysis, split into two groups based on current call: *pastors*, serving in a congregation, and *specialized clergy*, serving elsewhere). New samples are drawn every three years. These pages summarize major findings from the twelfth survey completed by the 1997-1999 Panel.

PUBLIC POLICY AND THE NATIONAL CHURCH

General Assembly Policy

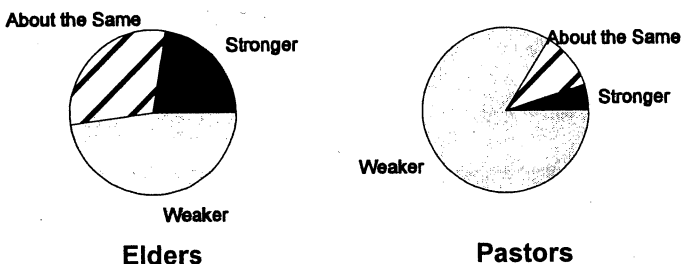
- ✓ Large majorities of all panelists report being aware that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has issued “formal statements” regarding such social issues as *gay and lesbian issues, hunger and malnutrition, family issues, race relations, and discrimination.*
- ✓ A large minority of both lay groups and a majority of both clergy groups express agreement with *most* General Assembly policy statements they are aware of, and another quarter indicate that they *agree with about half* of them.
- ✓ When asked about the public influence of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) compared to the 1960s and 1970s, more panelists in every sample rate the church’s influence today as *weaker* rather than *stronger*. The perception of declining influence is particularly great among the clergy, as Figure 1 shows for pastors.

- ✓ By large majorities in all samples (members, 72%; pastors, 85%), panelists indicate that Presbyterians exert a *large amount* or a *fair amount* of public influence through “members playing responsible roles in their communities.”

Washington Office

- ✓ Few panelists consider themselves *very well informed* about the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s Washington (D.C.) office. In fact, large majorities (ranging from 67% of specialized clergy to 96% of members) report that they are either *not very well informed* or *not at all informed* about the PC(USA)’s Washington Office.
- ✓ Few panelists report having had *a lot* of contact with the Washington Office. In fact, 98% of members and 95% of elders report *none*, as do two-thirds of pastors (66%) and specialized clergy (65%).
- ✓ Among the subset of panelists indicating some contact with the Washington Office, the most common type is “read[ing] something put out by the Washington Office” and “reading something about the Washington Office,” both reported by majorities.
- ✓ Majorities in every sample, ranging from 87% of members to 54% of pastors, respond *don’t know* when asked whether or not the PC(USA) “is spending too much money on the Washington Office.”
- ✓ Favorable opinions about the Washington Office are more common among panelists who report greater familiarity with the office.

Figure 1
Perceptions of Change in the Public Influence of the PC(USA) Since the 1960s/1970s



Sermons on Social Issues

- ✓ In all samples, there is wide variation in which social issues are reported as having been the topic of a sermon over the last year. The only issue that comes close to being universal is the broad one of “family issues,” although majorities of both elders and pastors also report sermons on “hunger and malnutrition” and on “discrimination.”
- ✓ At the other extreme, few panelists in any sample report sermons in the last year on such topics as “sustainable development,” “immigration,” “Social Security,” or “campaign finance reform.”

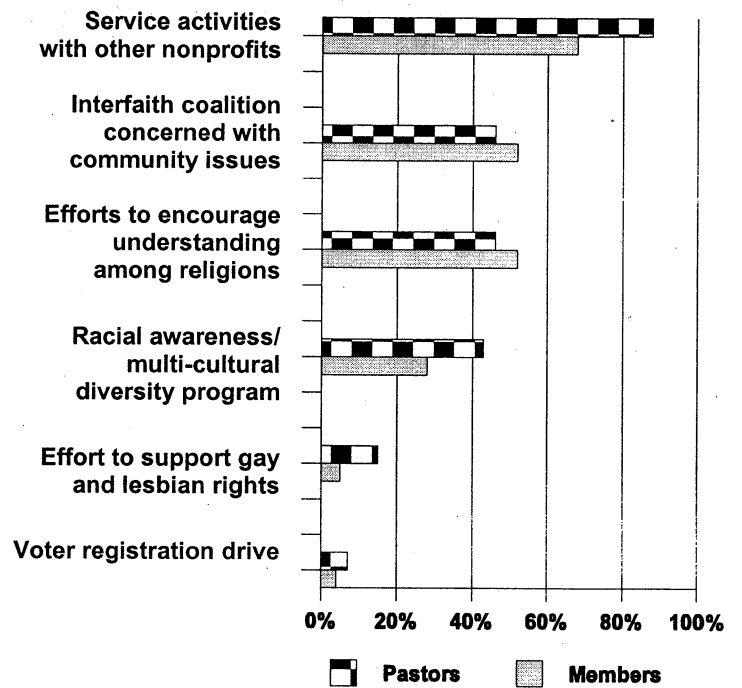
Influencing State Government Policy

- ✓ A large minority of pastors (39%), but relatively few members (11%) or elders (12%), are aware of any efforts by their “congregation or presbytery . . . to influence public policy at the level of state government.”
- ✓ Almost one-half of pastors (47%) but only 10% of elders report that they have *personally* taken steps through either their congregation or presbytery—or both—“to influence public policy at the level of state government.”
- ✓ The minority of panelists who have attempted to influence their state’s public policy through their congregation or presbytery have mainly done so by various means of personal communication—letters, e-mail, phone calls, and personal visits.

Community Involvement in Social Issues

- ✓ According to a majority of pastors, in the last year their congregations have participated in “service activities involving other nonprofit organizations” or “an interfaith coalition that is concerned with community issues.” Few congregations have participated in a “voter registration drive” or “an effort to support gay and lesbian rights.”
- ✓ Majorities of pastors (65%) and specialized clergy (62%), and around one-third of members (32%) and elders (37%), report being “active member[s] of one or more groups *outside* your congregation that are concerned with Christian responsibility and social action.”

Figure 2
Congregational Participation in the Community



Percent reporting each activity in their congregation

Racial Justice in the Church

- ✓ Only 8% of pastors and 6% of specialized clergy *agree* or *strongly agree* that “racial issues within the church have largely been resolved.” In all samples, majorities—ranging from 54% of members to 92% of specialized clergy—*disagree* or *strongly disagree* with this statement.
- ✓ More than two-thirds of members (69%) and elders (70%) *agree* that “there are more important issues [than racism] facing the church today. The clergy are less sure, with fewer than half of pastors and other clergy *agreeing*.”
- ✓ Relatively few panelists believe “the quality of leadership in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) would be improved or diminished if [the PC(USA)] had more African-American elders, pastors, clergy, and professional staff.” Of those who do, more, especially among the clergy groups, anticipate benefits than losses.

Most Important Social Issues

- ✓ Of 19 social issues, panelists express the most concern for:
 - family issues
 - youth violence
 - hunger and malnutrition
 - health care
 - education
 - the environment
 - criminal justice
 - discrimination

- ✓ Least concern is reported for:
 - immigration
 - affirmative action
 - sustainable development

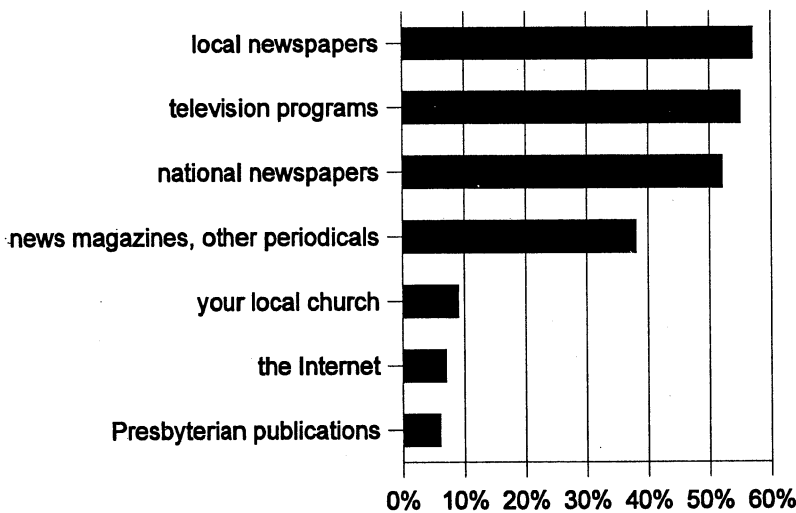
- ✓ The level of concern for most social issues is very similar among both laity and clergy, with the exceptions of race relations, affirmative action, gay and lesbian issues, peace/disarmament, sustainable development, and women’s issues. In these cases, at least 12% more pastors than elders express concern.

Information Sources

- ✓ In all samples, the sources most often tapped for information on social issues are newspapers (both national and local), television, and news magazines (see Figure 3). Least likely to be relied up for such information are “Presbyterian publications” and “your local church,” as well as “the Internet.”

Figure 3

Members’ Information Sources on Public Issues



Social Welfare

- ✓ Few panelists report having given a *great deal* of attention “to the changes in welfare law that took place in 1996.” More common is the response of *some* attention, made by a majority of pastors (52%) and at least four in ten in the other samples.

- ✓ Around one-half of members and elders but less than one-fourth of pastors and other clergy believe the new welfare law to be *fair* when it places a five-year cap on receiving benefits.

- ✓ Church-state partnerships to provide for the needs of the poor, a possibility under the welfare reform law, receive broad, if generally tepid, support from all Panel samples.

The Environment

- ✓ Two-thirds of members (67%), elders (70%), and pastors (67%), and 56% of specialized clergy, *agree* or *strongly agree* that “the Church should be more involved in environmental problems that impact humans directly”

- ✓ From a list of 15 “possible ways that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) can be involved in environmental issues,” members and elders show the most support for
 - providing educational materials to congregations and members
 - gathering the opinions of church members and making those known to government
 - training clergy to be more aware of and involved in environmental concerns

Racial Justice in Society

- ✓ Large majorities in all samples, ranging from 81% of members to 96% of both clergy groups, *disagree* or *strongly disagree* that “racial issues within society at large have largely been resolved.”

- ✓ At the same time, large majorities of members and elders, 46% of pastors, and a third of specialized clergy *oppose slightly* or *oppose strongly* “giving preference in hiring and promotion” to African Americans as a way to deal with past discrimination.

FAMILY MINISTRIES

Family Ministry Activities

- ✓ Majorities of pastors report that their congregations have each of the following family-related ministries:
 - Sunday school for children (98% so report)
 - pre-marital counseling (92%)
 - youth ministry (91%)
 - ministry for elderly/shut-ins (85%)
 - marital counseling or support groups (64%)

- ✓ Less common family ministries include:
 - parenting classes (reported by 49% of pastors)
 - daycare or after-school programs for children (43%)
 - singles ministry (24%)
 - ministry for divorced or blended families (24%)
 - ministry on balancing work and family (21%)
 - ministry for victims of domestic violence (18%)

- ✓ Panelists are split on whether or not “my congregation does a good job ministering to singles, the divorced, and blended/step families.” A few more pastors *disagree* (49%) than *agree* (43%), while the reverse is true among members (*agree*, 39%; *disagree*, 33%).

- ✓ Only minorities of members (30%) and elders (34%) would “like to get more guidance from my church on marriage or parenting.”

Evaluating Family Ministries

- ✓ Large majorities in all samples *agree* that their “congregation is doing a good job supporting families.”

Opinions on Family Issues

- ✓ Panelists come close to a consensus on only one item: “it is best for children to grow up in an intact two-parent family.” More than nine in ten members, elders, and pastors *agree*.

- ✓ Small majorities in every sample *agree* that “it’s more important that children are raised by adults with good parenting skills than by their biological parents” (e.g., members, 53%; pastors, 55%).

- ✓ Majorities of panelists oppose premarital cohabitation.

- ✓ Large majorities *agree* that “the church should be tolerant of family changes (divorce, remarriage, same-sex couples) now taking place.”

	Members	Elders	Ordained Ministers
Number of surveys mailed	904	1,008	1,567
Number returned	470	585	1,009*
Response rate	51%	58%	64%

*Of the 1,009 returned surveys, 671 came from pastors and 338 from specialized clergy.

This survey was initially mailed in August 1999, and returns were accepted through October 1999. Results are subject to sampling and other errors. Small differences should be interpreted cautiously. As a general rule, differences of less than 6% between samples are not statistically meaningful.

For more numbers and interpretation of the August 1999 Presbyterian Panel results, a longer report with additional charts and graphs is available for \$5. Contact PDS (1-800-524-2612) and order PDS#65100-99261. Included is a data appendix that presents the percentage responses to each survey question separately for members, elders, pastors, and specialized clergy.

For more information on the public involvement of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) contact Peter Sulyok, Coordinator, Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (1-888-728-7228 ext. 5814).

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