

Looking into the Future:

Results and Analyses of the Third
Biennial Survey Conducted of Credentialed
Assemblies of God Ministers in the U.S.
Regarding their Projections of what Ministry
will be like in Ten Years.

July 2021

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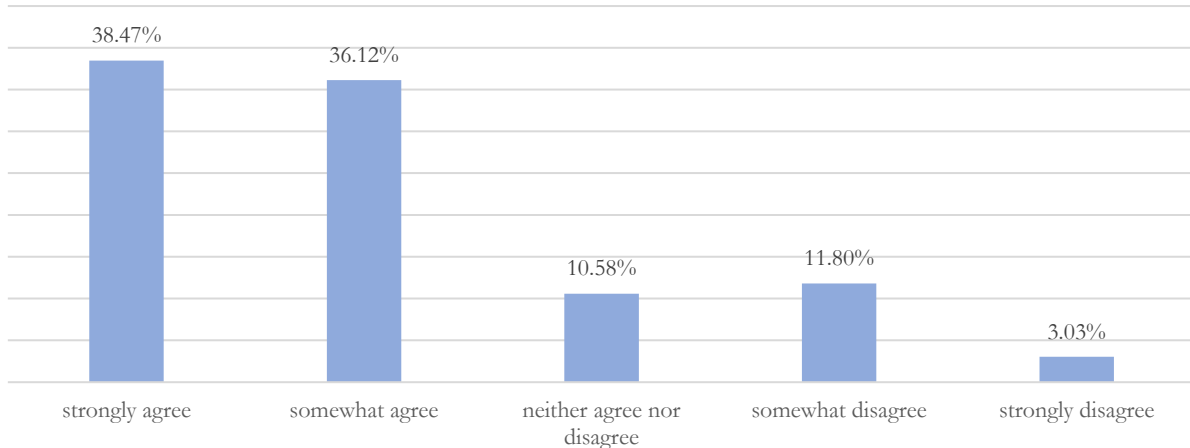
The following report is based on a series of surveys of Assemblies of God ministers. This is the third installment of our biennial study. An explanation of our methodology is presented at the end of this report. All of the reports remain available at www.futureofministry.com.

Our purpose is to continue an examination into what AG ministers across the United States believe the Holy Spirit shows them regarding this society and how to effectively minister in and to it in the next ten years. This valuable information affects training, preparation, and planning for future ministry. The Church will find safety in making plans based on the foresight of a multitude of counselors.

“If you were to project what ministry in the U.S.
will look like 10 years from now,
what would you predict?”

Survey responses:

1. Ministry will have a strong emphasis on being Spirit-led and Spirit-empowered. There will be less emphasis on formal programming.



<u>Answer options</u>	Response percent	Response count
Strongly agree	38.47%	1411
Somewhat agree	36.12%	1325
Neither agree nor disagree	10.58%	388
Somewhat disagree	11.80%	433
Strongly disagree	3.03%	111

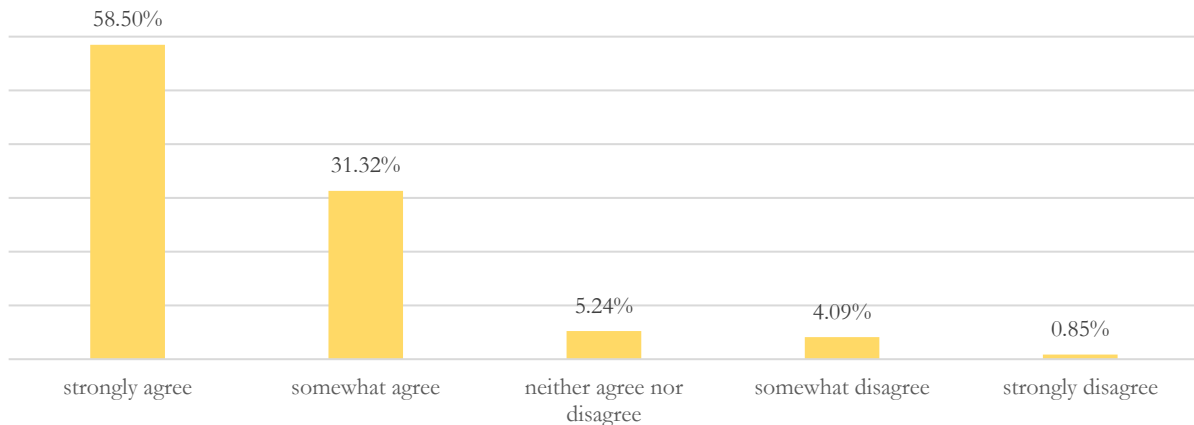
Total agreement level: 75%

Analysis

All three cycles of our surveys have included the theme of the Holy Spirit doing a greater work in the future. In each occurrence one third or more of the respondents strongly agreed and another third somewhat agreed.

In the current survey 5 ministers agreed with this prediction for every 1 that disagreed. Urban and rural ministers tended to have a slightly higher level of agreement. Female respondents agreed at a slightly higher level as well.

2. Ministry will revolve more around personal relations. It will be authentic, organic, and incarnational.



<u>Answer options</u>	Response percent	Response count
Strongly agree	58.50%	2144
Somewhat agree	31.32%	1148
Neither agree nor disagree	5.24%	192
Somewhat disagree	4.09%	150
Strongly disagree	0.85%	31

Total agreement level: 90%

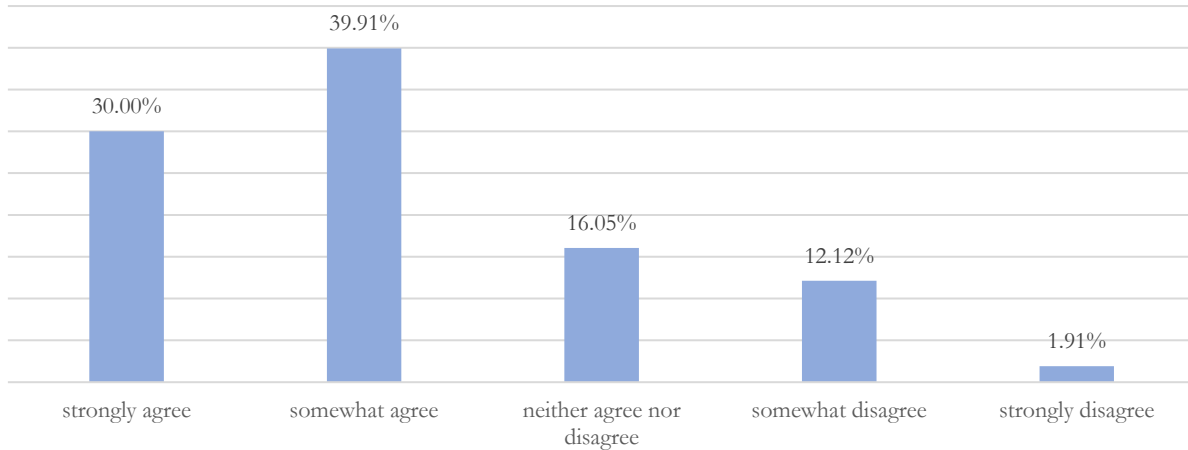
Analysis

The theme of relationship has appeared in each study; the current question wording is identical to 2019 and somewhat different from 2017. Total agreement has trended upward, and the strength of agreement has doubled:

	2017	2019	2021	Change
Total agreement	74.3%	86.6%	89.8%	up 20.9%
Strongly agree	29.3%	47.8%	58.5%	up 99.7%

The theme of authenticity appears both here and in Question 4 dealing with integrity and transparency. Both questions have very strongly-correlated responses. Taken together, these responses would indicate that ministers expect effective ministry to be both increasingly relational and that it will demand more open, genuine interaction.

3. I expect that ministry will focus almost entirely on raising up the next generation of believers.



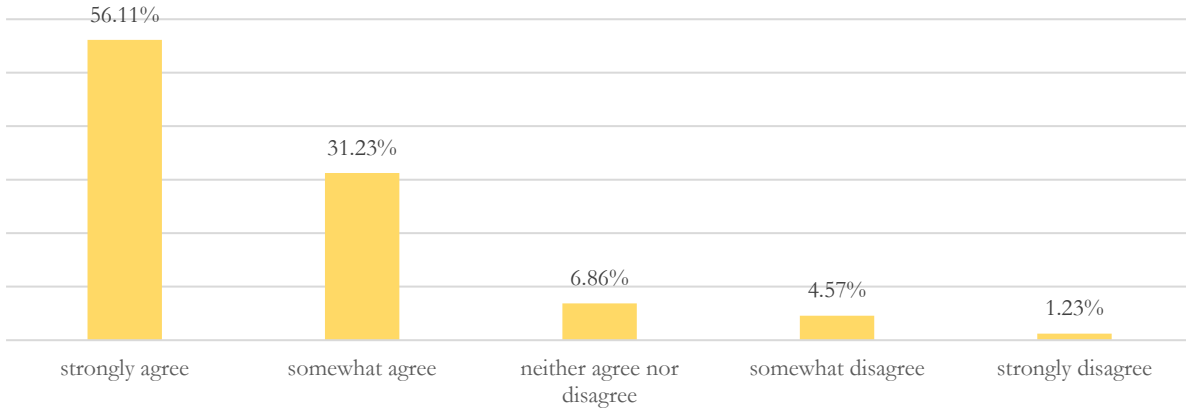
<u>Answer options</u>	Response percent	Response count
Strongly agree	30.00%	1099
Somewhat agree	39.91%	1462
Neither agree nor disagree	16.05%	588
Somewhat disagree	12.12%	444
Strongly disagree	1.91%	70

Total agreement level: 70%

Analysis

The theme of generational development and succession emerged in 2019. The emphasis then was primarily on raising up the next generation of ministers. This year, the emphasis was much broader, expanding to address the spiritual development of the rising generations of both clergy and laity. The expansion of this theme beyond merely church leadership reflects the growing concern within the church arising from the widely-reported secular decline of profession of faith and church attendance in younger generations. The Narrative Survey included a substantial increase in references to children’s ministry, youth ministry, Chi Alpha, and other evangelistic and discipleship tools focused on these age cohorts.

4. Ministry will demand strong integrity, transparency, and authenticity. Many current typical ministry practices will be seen as disingenuous and manipulative.



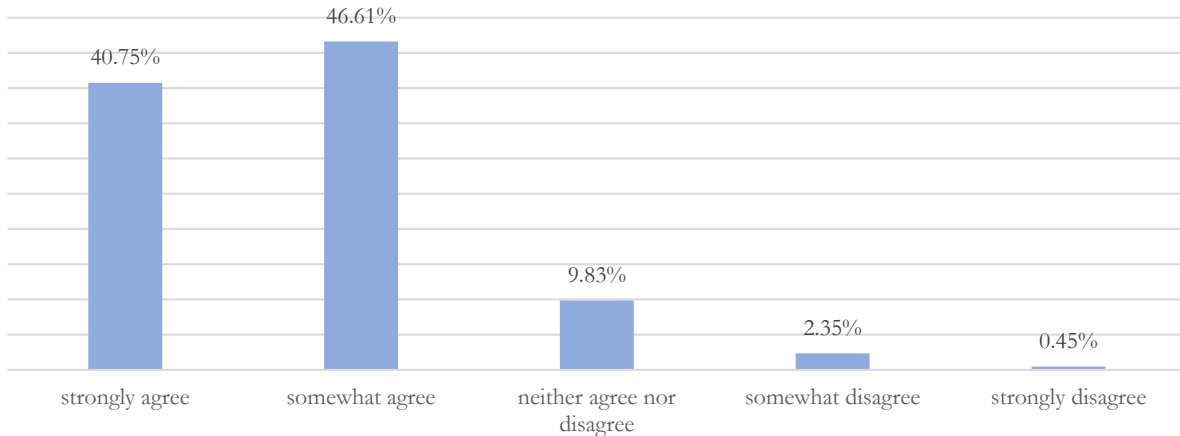
<u>Answer options</u>	Response percent	Response count
Strongly agree	56.11%	2052
Somewhat agree	31.23%	1142
Neither agree nor disagree	6.86%	251
Somewhat disagree	4.57%	167
Strongly disagree	1.23%	45

Total agreement level: 87%

Analysis

This question connects thematically with the Question 2 regarding relationship and authenticity. In Q2, the focus is primarily on the mode of ministry. Here, the focus is on both the character of the minister and the integrity of ministry praxis. The idea that specific ministry practices can be seen as disingenuous or manipulative is a new theme in the 2021 study.

5. Ministry will encompass greater opportunities for lay ministers including key leadership positions.



<u>Answer options</u>	Response percent	Response count
Strongly agree	40.75%	1438
Somewhat agree	46.61%	1645
Neither agree nor disagree	9.83%	347
Somewhat disagree	2.35%	83
Strongly disagree	0.45%	16

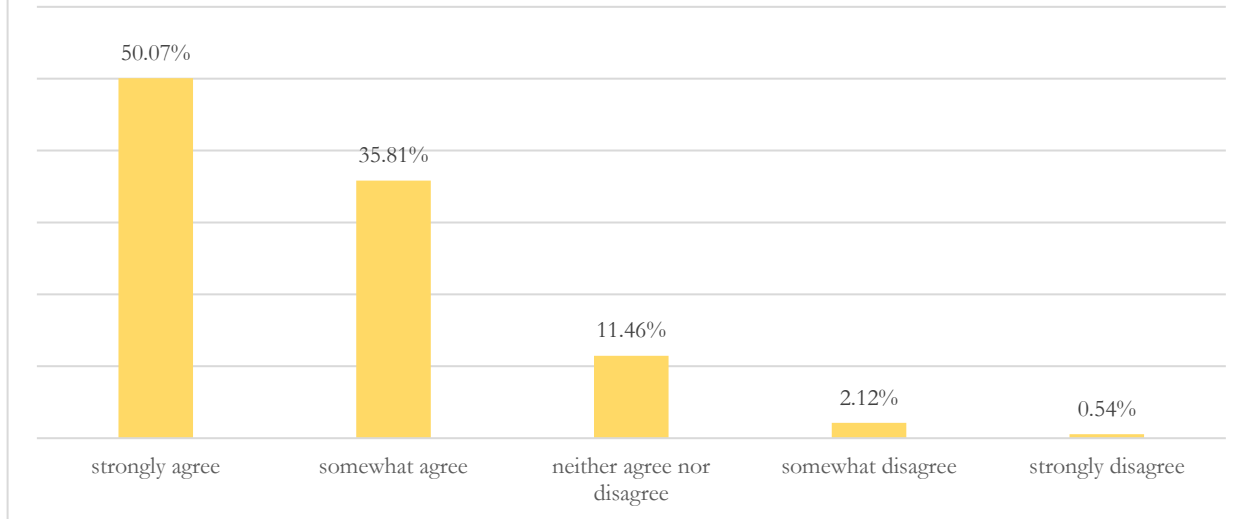
Total agreement level: 87%

Analysis

A comparable prediction in 2019 bore similar results. Total agreement level this year grew to more than 87%. Respondents believe in an increase of lay involvement by a ratio of 32 to 1. Urban ministers agreed at a slightly higher rate.

At least four out of every five respondents believe there will be more lay ministry opportunities ten years from now. This ratio held true for every demographic group that we analyzed including minister's gender, environs, and age. It is not clear if this means that more traditional "lay ministers" will be given these opportunities or if more of those called to minister will choose to serve without formal credentialing.

6. Women will have greater opportunities in ministry including key leadership positions.



<u>Answer options</u>	Response percent	Response count
Strongly agree	50.07%	1770
Somewhat agree	35.81%	1266
Neither agree nor disagree	11.46%	405
Somewhat disagree	2.12%	75
Strongly disagree	0.54%	19

Total agreement level: 86%

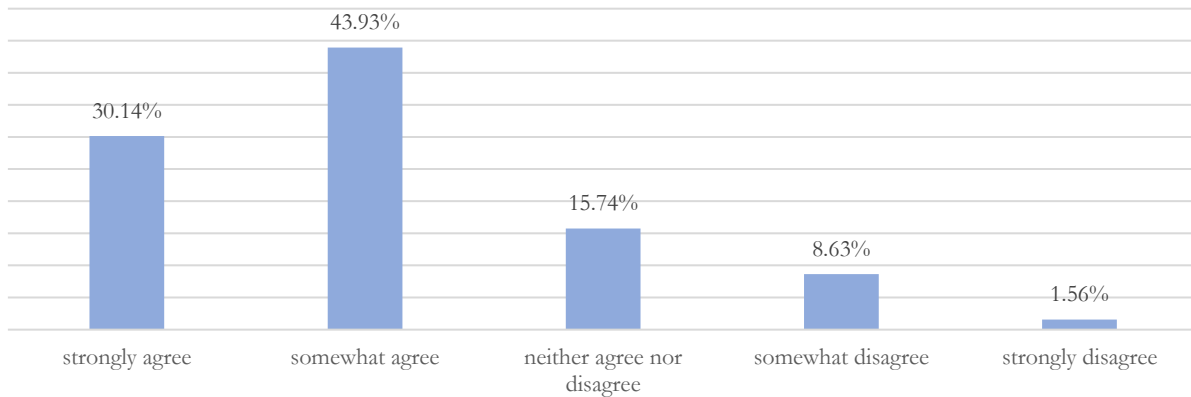
Analysis

This is a newly emerged theme for the current survey cycle. Respondents predict greater opportunities for women ministers by a ratio of 32 to 1. Overall, rural ministers agreed slightly less while women and younger ministers expressed slightly greater agreement. This prediction is supported by a more than 5-year continuous increase in the number of credentialed AG female ministers.

	Female Ministers ¹	Male Ministers
2016	9,142	28,477
2017	9,510	28,492
2018	9,857	28,342
2019	10,081	28,116
2020	10,208	27,505

¹ Selected from "AG USA Female Ministers, 1977-2019," Assemblies of God General Secretary's Office

7. Financial challenges will require most churches to restructure their economic model. This will require many more pastors to be bi/co-vocational.



<u>Answer options</u>	Response percent	Response count
Strongly agree	30.14%	1065
Somewhat agree	43.93%	1552
Neither agree nor disagree	15.74%	556
Somewhat disagree	8.63%	305
Strongly disagree	1.56%	55

Total agreement level: 74%

Analysis

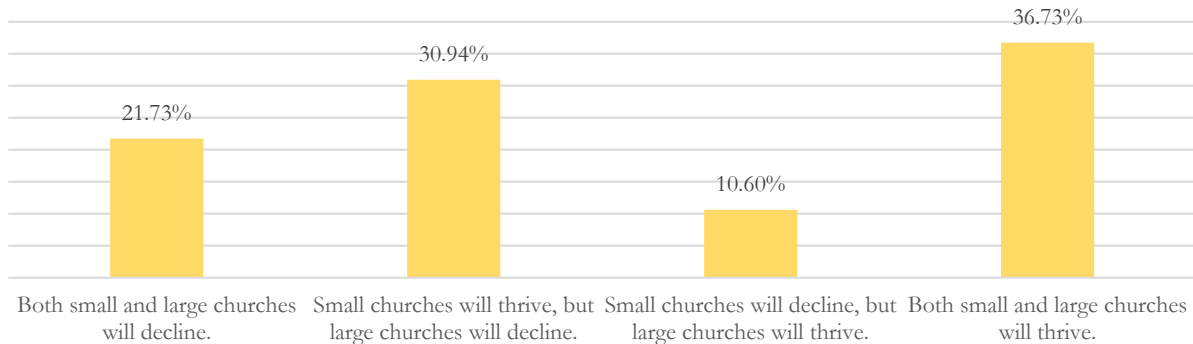
The prediction for more bi/co-vocational pastors has been present in all three surveys. The actual questions have been phrased slightly differently. Overall, total agreement has increased by nearly one fourth and strong agreement has more than doubled.

Year	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Total agreement
2017	14.6%	38.3%	52.9%
2019	17.1%	42.1%	59.2%
2021	30.1%	44.0%	74.1%

In 2016, 35% of senior AG pastors and 45% of church staff worked an additional job.² Other ministers reported additional income but did not identify as being “bi-vocational.”

² Based on self-reported data (AG Ministers and Finances Report 2016, Office of the General Treasurer)

8. Which of the following best describes your expectation for churches ten years from now:



Answer options

Responses

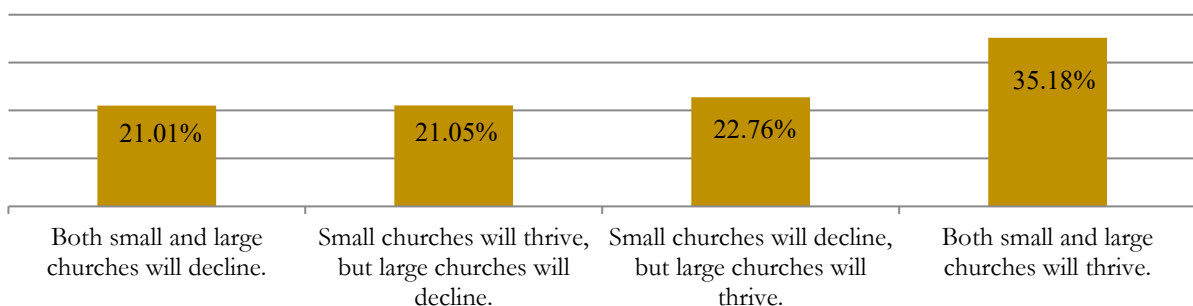
Both small and large churches will decline.	21.73%	769
Small churches will thrive, but large churches will decline.	30.94%	1095
Small churches will decline, but large churches will thrive.	10.60%	375
Both small and large churches will thrive.	36.73%	1300

Analysis

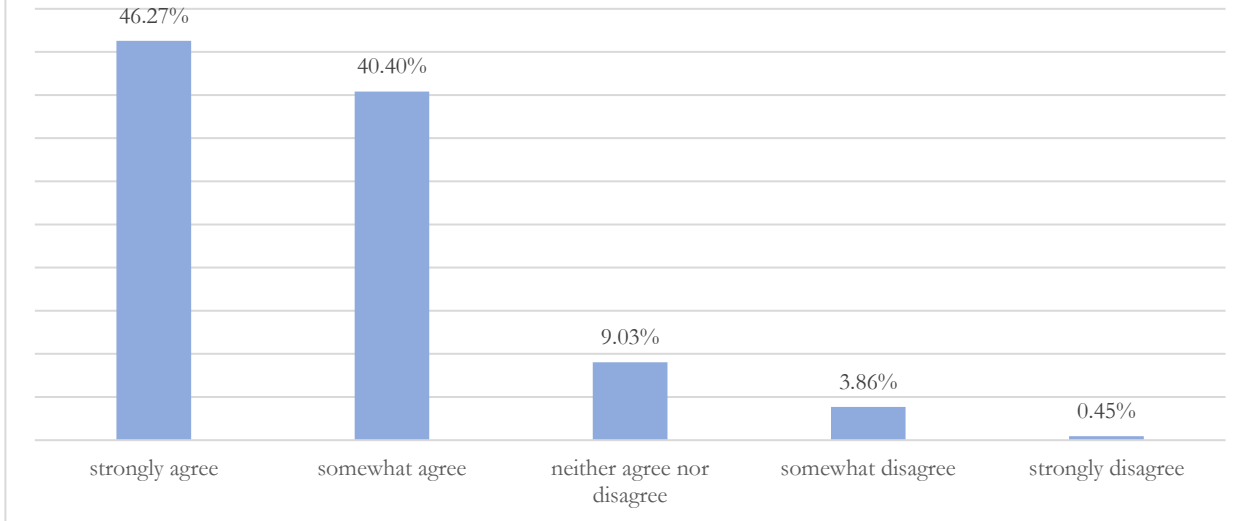
Compared to 2019 results, those who thought that large churches only would thrive declined by half, while those who thought that small churches only would thrive increased by half. The percentage of respondents who believe that both small and large churches will decline, or that both small and large churches will thrive, remained relatively unchanged. The predictions remained similar for all environs.

AG ministers expressed more optimism for the future of small versus large churches. Combined responses demonstrated that two thirds of AG ministers believe that smaller churches will thrive, while less than half expect large churches to thrive. Some of this may be attributed to the recent pandemic. However, observers might just as well expect that large churches, with their better virtual product, have greater expectations of thriving.

(2019) Which of the following best describes your expectation for churches ten years from now:



9. I expect that ministry will see a great increase in small groups.



<u>Answer options</u>	Response percent	Response count
Strongly agree	46.27%	1655
Somewhat agree	40.40%	1445
Neither agree nor disagree	9.03%	323
Somewhat disagree	3.86%	138
Strongly disagree	0.45%	16

Total agreement level: 87%

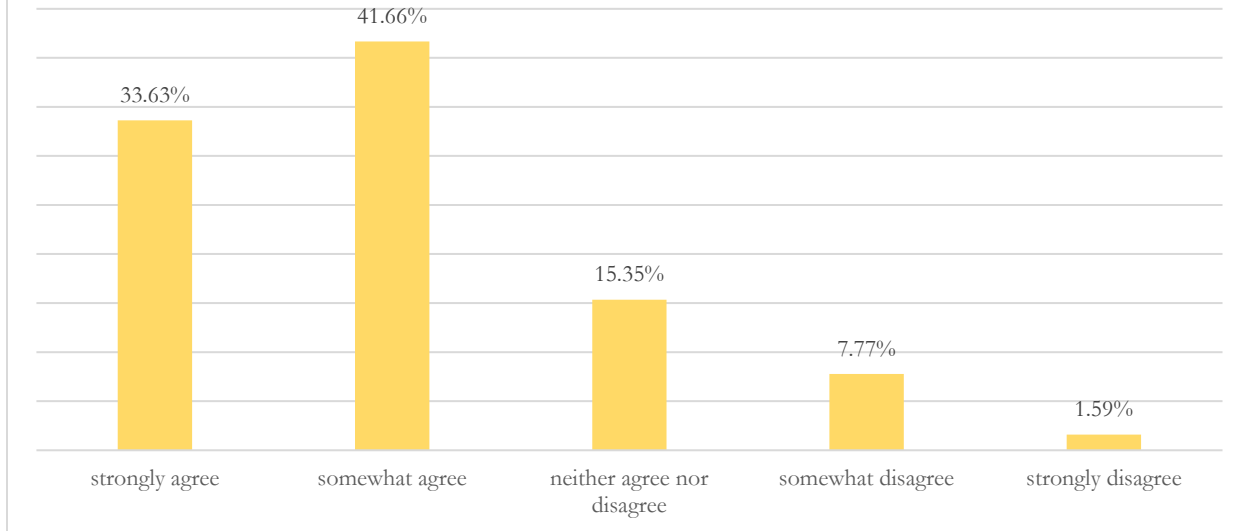
Analysis

The small groups theme has been included in each edition of the study with some variation in the phrasing of the question. The trend in agreement is quite significant:

	2017	2019	2021	Change
Total agreement	35.1%	78.0%	86.7%	up 147.0%
Strongly agree	7.0%	31.8%	46.3%	up 561.4%

Overall, those who agree with this prediction outnumber those who disagree by a ratio of 20 to 1. This question reflects just one component of a larger meta-theme of Declining Big vs. Emerging Small. General sentiment appears to be moving from big to small in a number of ministry areas, including congregation size, meeting formats, evangelism, and discipleship.

10. I expect that ministry will see a great increase of house churches.



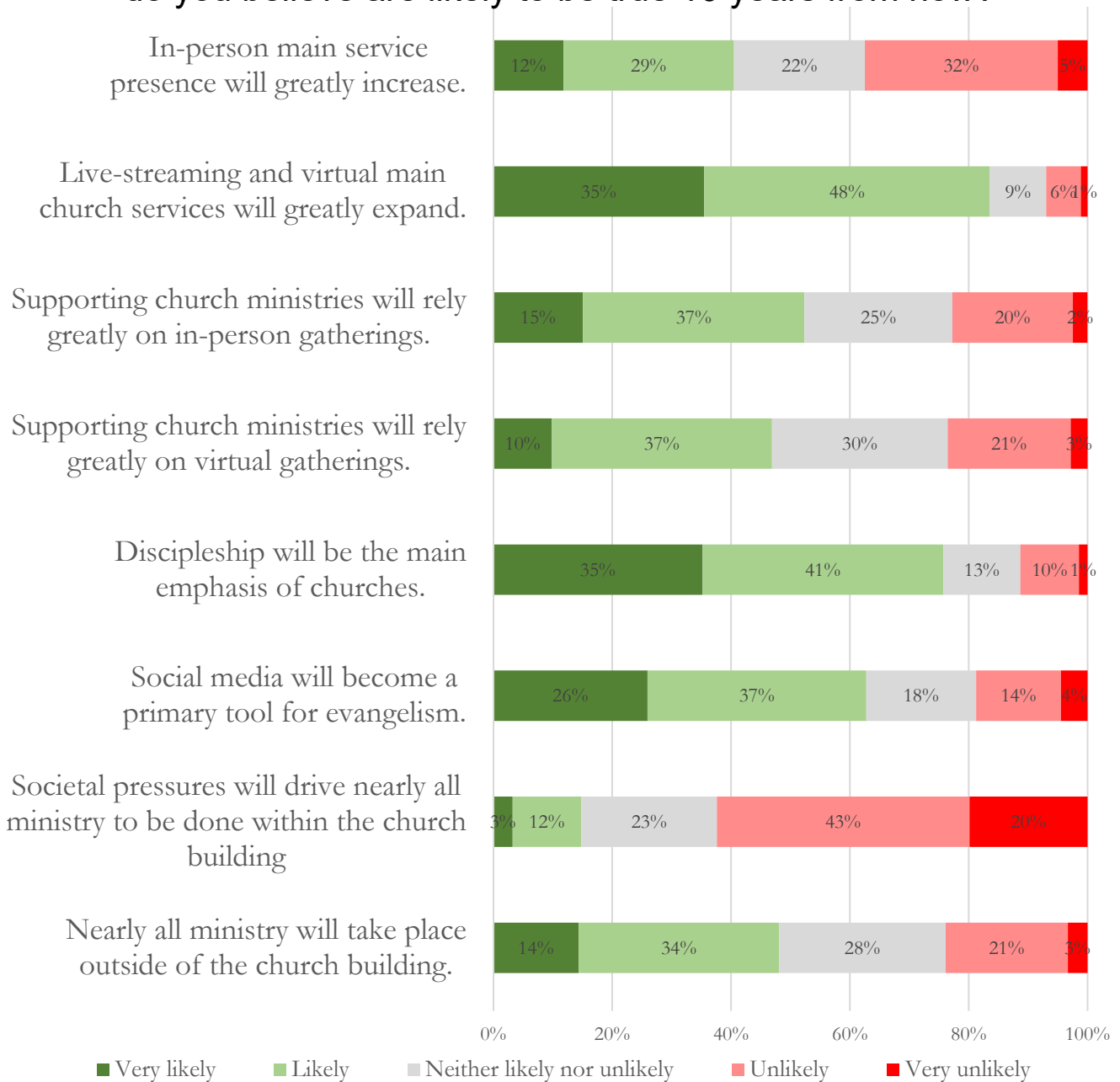
<u>Answer options</u>	Response percent	Response count
Strongly agree	33.63%	1203
Somewhat agree	41.66%	1490
Neither agree nor disagree	15.35%	549
Somewhat disagree	7.77%	278
Strongly disagree	1.59%	57

Total agreement level: 75%

Analysis

The theme of house churches first appeared in 2019. Its presence was significant enough to be referenced in tandem with small groups in that study. In the 2021 Narrative Survey, the house church theme was present with such frequency and in such a variety of contexts that we concluded that it should be broken out and assessed on its own. In the Narrative Survey, the expectations of house churches expanding in the future were based on an array of reasons. Some expressed concern that growing societal and legal pressures such as persecution or the loss of tax-exempt status could drive churches into homes. Some viewed house churches as a response to attendee reservations about the safety of meeting in large groups. One noted the role of house churches in the development and growth of the church outside the United States and suggested that the international model could be a potential future strategy in the US.

11. Regarding church and ministry, which of the following statements do you believe are likely to be true 10 years from now?

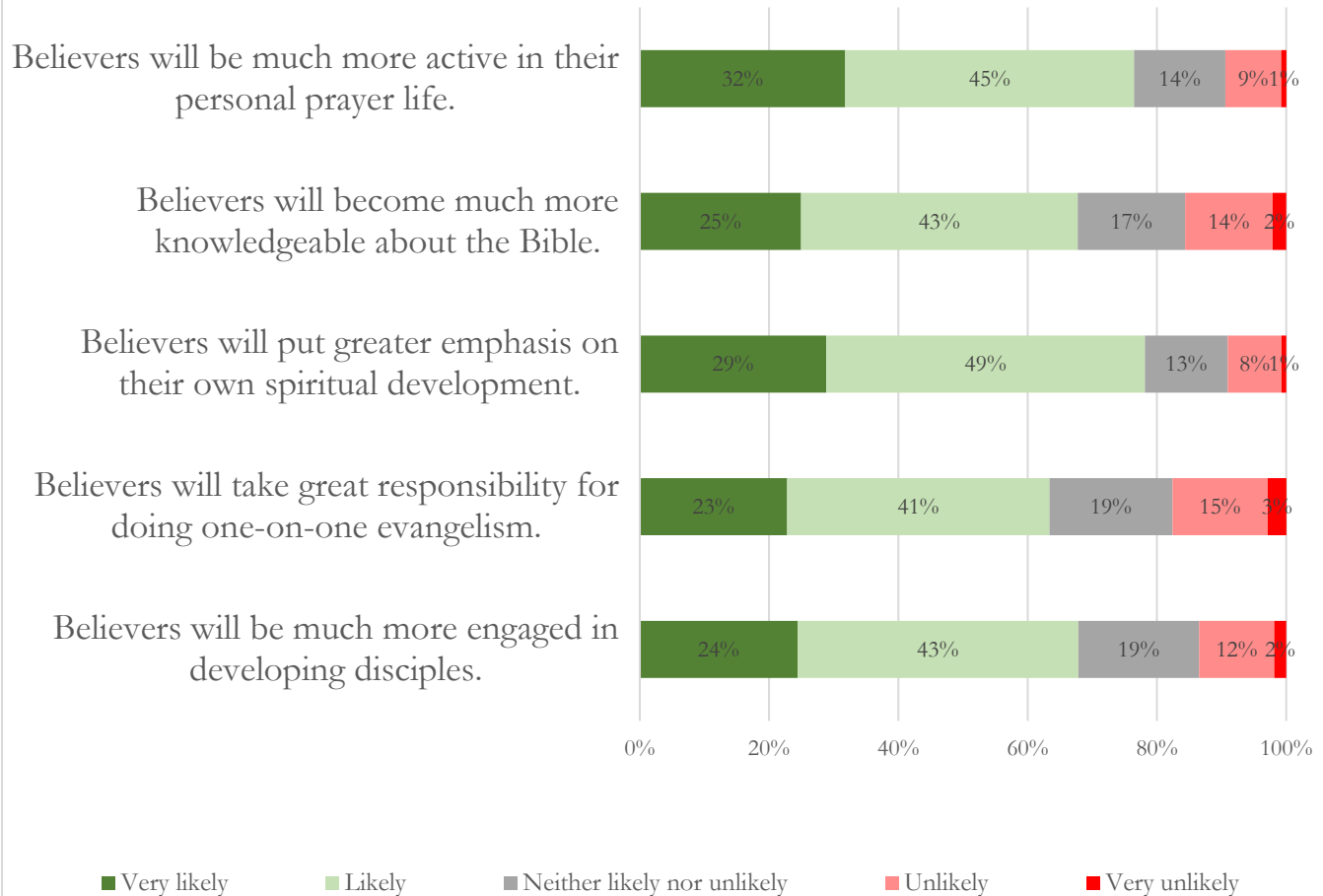


Analysis

The topic of increased discipleship efforts emerged in this survey cycle. This theme, barely mentioned in the previous two surveys, surfaced as a major prediction in the current study. Both open ended questions (Q17 and Q18) included discipleship as a top prediction.

Another notable change in predictions is the number of ministers who foresee more ministry being done outside of the church building. Total agreement saw a slight decline. More ministers are unsure of how much ministry would take place beyond the walls of the church. The “not sure” category increased a full 10 percentage points in two years.

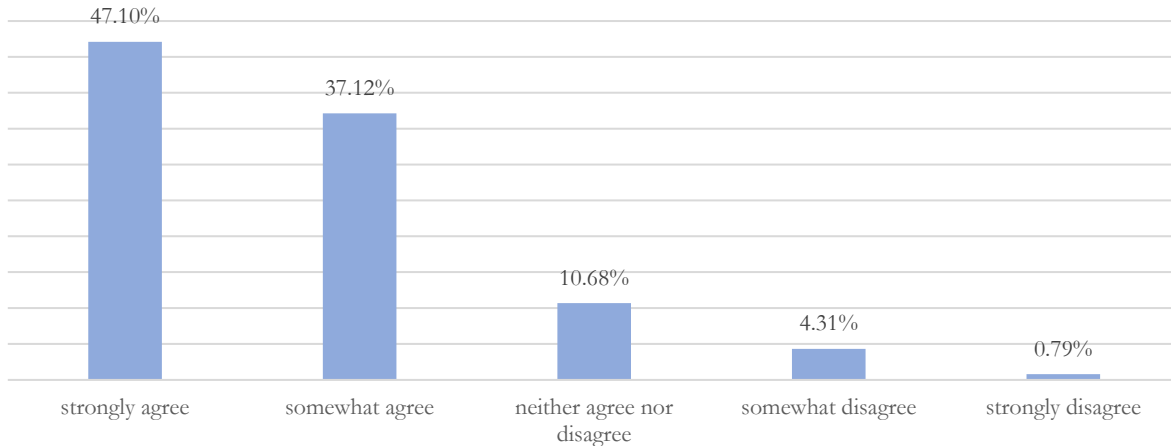
12. Regarding individual spirituality, which of the following statements do you believe are likely to be true 10 years from now?



Analysis

Overall respondents have a positive outlook on future individual spirituality. This positivity, however, is moderated. Only one third or less of the ministers are very confident about the prediction. Furthermore, a closer look reveals less expectation that believers will rise to the task of reaching others. Fewer respondents expect one-on-one evangelism and discipleship of others to become more prevalent. (See also analysis on Q15 #4)

13. I expect significant ethnic and cultural diversity to be the new normal in ministry.



<u>Answer options</u>	Response percent	Response count
Strongly agree	47.10%	1662
Somewhat agree	37.12%	1310
Neither agree nor disagree	10.68%	377
Somewhat disagree	4.31%	152
Strongly disagree	0.79%	28

Total agreement level: 84%

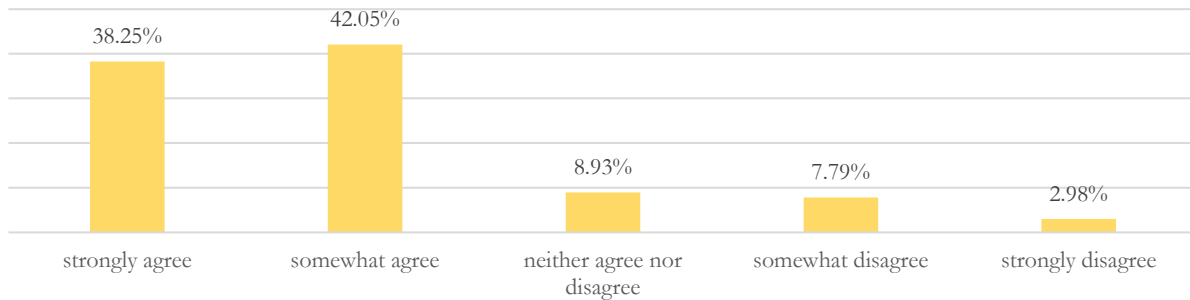
Analysis

The theme of ethnic and cultural diversity in ministry has been a consistent theme in each study. Agreement levels have ranged from 84% to 89%. In the current survey urban ministers, female ministers, and younger ministers have responded with a higher level of agreement. The chart below shows the diversity trend over the last ten years.

10 Year Comparison of AG USA Ministers by Race³							
	Asian/Pacific Islander	Black	Hispanic	Native American	White	Other/Mixed	Unknown
2011	2.4%	1.6%	10.7%	1.6%	64.7%	2.2%	16.9%
2020	3.5%	2.9%	14.6%	1.4%	68.3%	2.6%	6.8%

³Assemblies of God General Secretary's Office. (Note: Hispanics may be of any race. The White race includes multiple ethnic groups in addition to Anglos. The sum of non-White ministers understates ethnic minority/immigrant ministers due to the ethnic minorities/immigrants included in the White race total.)

14. I suspect that there will be a significantly increasing disconnect between believers and non-believers in society. This will lead to rejection of Christian principles leading to persecution and severe governmental restrictions on churches.



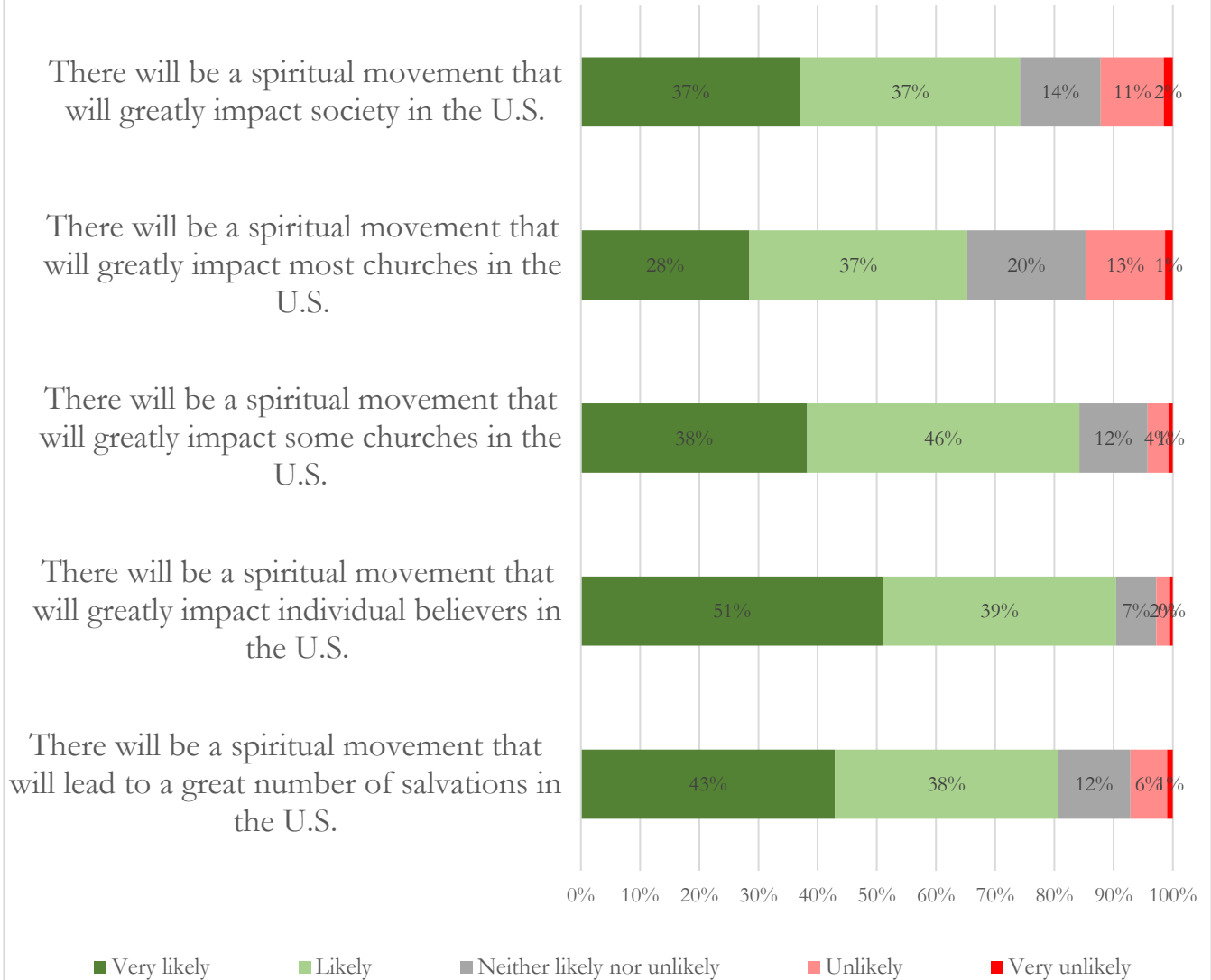
<u>Answer options</u>	Response percent	Response count
Strongly agree	38.25%	1350
Somewhat agree	42.05%	1484
Neither agree nor disagree	8.93%	315
Somewhat disagree	7.79%	275
Strongly disagree	2.98%	105

Total agreement level: 80%

Analysis

The issue of polarization between believers and non-believers has been a recurring theme. The current version of our survey combined this disconnect with persecution. Total agreement increased from 57% in 2019 to 80% in the current study. Overall, rural ministers had the highest agreement rate and urban ministers the lowest. Male ministers agree with this prediction more than female ministers. Ministers between the ages of 30 and 39 expressed less agreement.

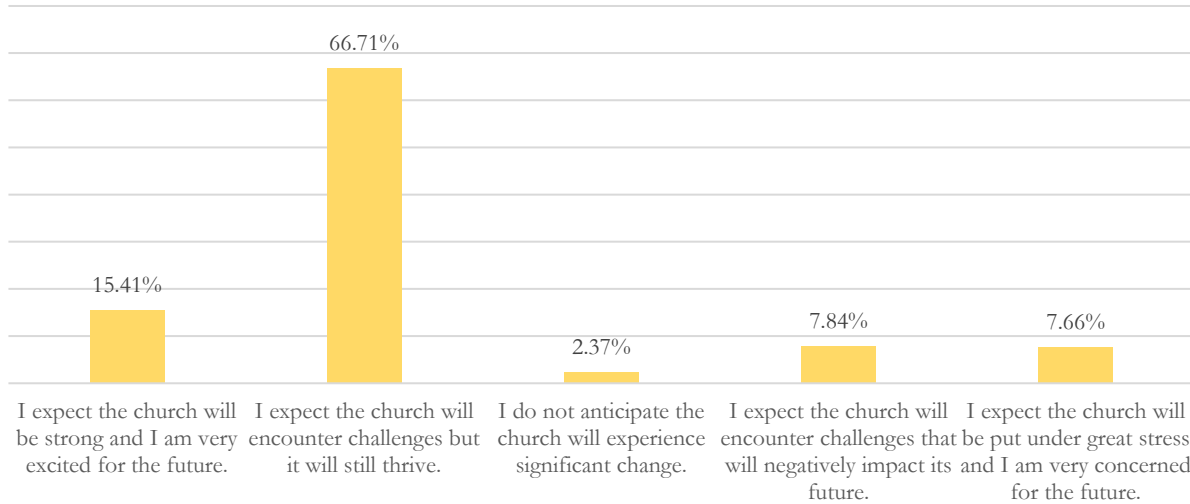
15. Regarding a possible spiritual movement, which of the following statements do you believe are likely to be true 10 years from now?



Analysis

Overall ministers foresee a future spiritual movement that will have an impact on the nation. More than 8 in 10 respondents think such a movement will likely lead to “a great number of salvations”. Nine in ten believe that such a movement will likely take place and have a significant impact on individual believers. Yet, when compared to previous predictions, how this individual effect will manifest remains uncertain. None of the predictions in Q12 rise to the level of 90% agreement. The two queries combined demonstrate that 3 in 10 respondents anticipate a coming spiritual movement that will impact individuals without leading to greater personal evangelistic efforts. The expected impact on society and churches is also significantly lower.

16. Overall, as I think about what ministry will be like in 10 years,



Answer options

Responses

I expect the church will be strong and I am very excited for the future.	15.41%	533
I expect the church will encounter challenges, but it will still thrive.	66.71%	2307
I do not anticipate the church will experience significant change.	2.37%	82
I expect the church will encounter challenges that will negatively impact its future.	7.84%	271
I expect the church will be put under great stress and I am very concerned for the future.	7.66%	265

Analysis

Overall respondents answered with more cautious optimism than in 2019. The wording of the possible responses is somewhat different from the previous survey, but a comparison can still be made. Fewer ministers are apprehensive or concerned for the future of the church. Slightly less are very excited in their prediction. A significantly higher number predict a thriving church even as it faces challenges. These rates held true regardless of environ, gender, or age.

17. Ten years from now ministry will best be described as:

Home grassroots Holy hope disciples Lifestyle Spirit-led interpersonal Hard Outreach
Spiritual sacrificial Jesus virtual Revival Serving Incarnational innovative
Loving Truth Persecuted Biblically based Digital needed leadership
Missional Outside Powerful Struggling Different decentralized
Small Spiritually driven intimate focused Necessary
Community filled empowered Evangelism Real
Strong Relationship practical Personal cultural
Authentic Acts Relational Essential Spirit
Making Discipleship changing led Christ organic
Power Challenging others church Supernatural Difficult
Counter Genuine Relationally Intentional New Less Dynamic
centered Mentoring people Social Underground Building God
connections Life inclusive one Authenticity Transparent persecution Relevant
work Biblical Pentecostal Transformational Testament Ministry Unconventional
Fluid Servant groups Reaching House oriented

Top ten responses:

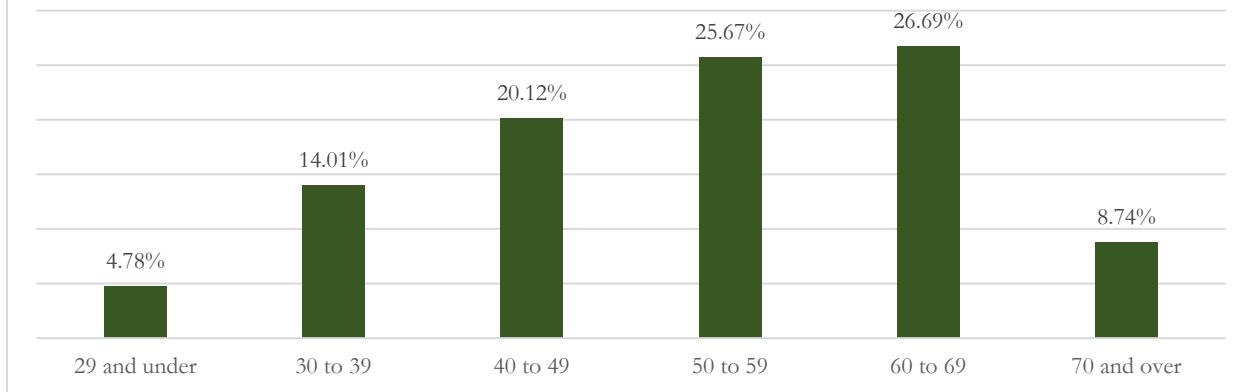
1. Relational
2. Authentic
3. Spirit
4. Personal
5. Discipleship
6. Relationship
7. Led
8. Real
9. Organic
10. Empowered

18. Ten years from now the biggest difference in ministry will be:



- Top ten responses:**
1. Personal
 2. Discipleship
 3. Less
 4. Persecution
 5. Church
 6. Small
 7. Relationships
 8. Relational
 9. Spirit
 10. Evangelism

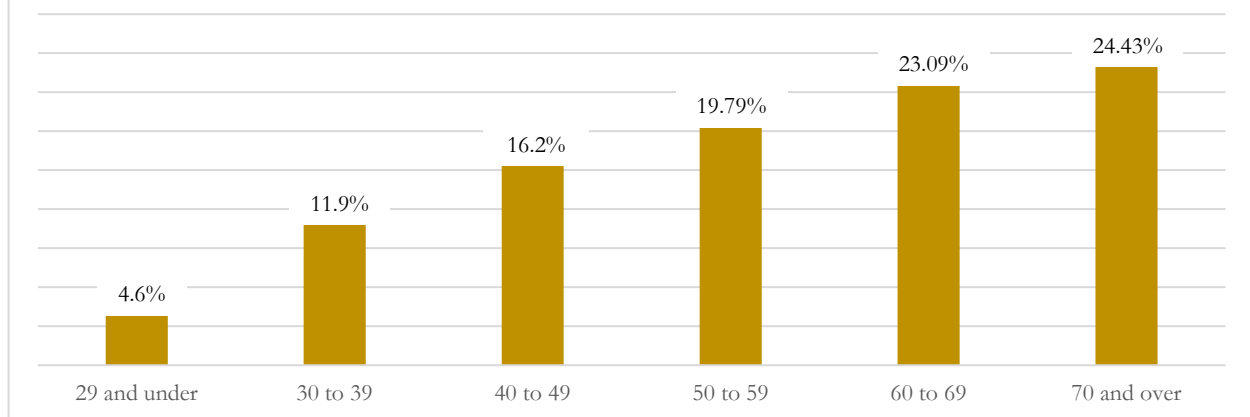
What is your current age group?



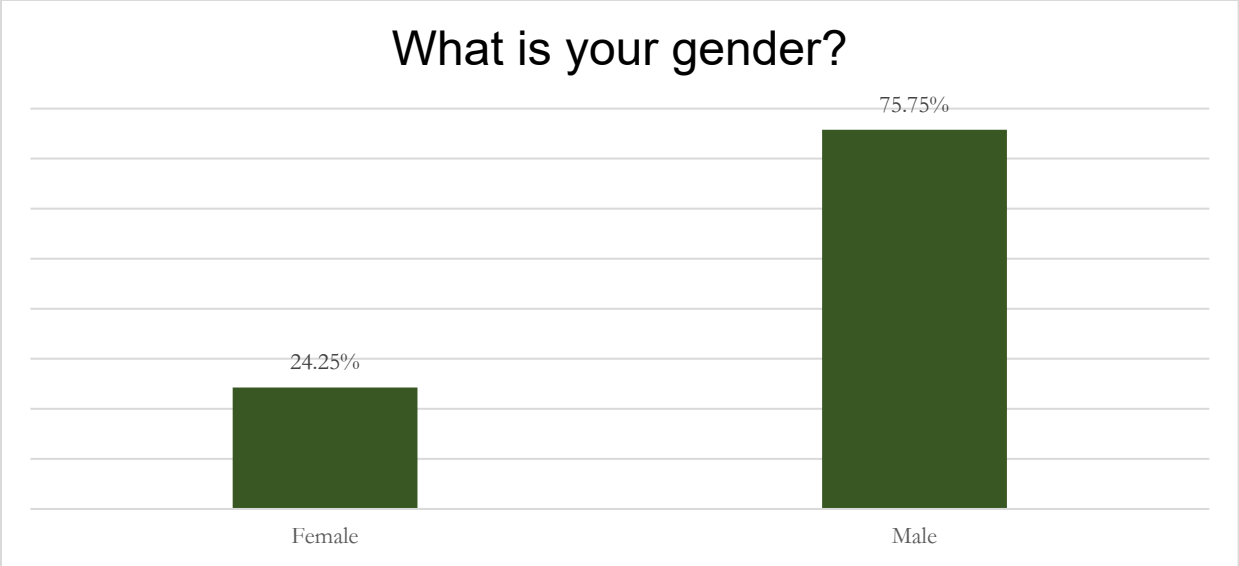
<u>Answer options</u>	Response percent	Response count
29 and under	4.78%	165
30 to 39	14.01%	484
40 to 49	20.12%	695
50 to 59	25.67%	887
60 to 69	26.69%	922
70 and over	8.74%	302

All age groups were fairly represented with the exception of the 70 and over category.

AG Licensed and Ordained Ministers by Age Group 2020 ⁴



⁴ Assemblies of God General Secretary's Office



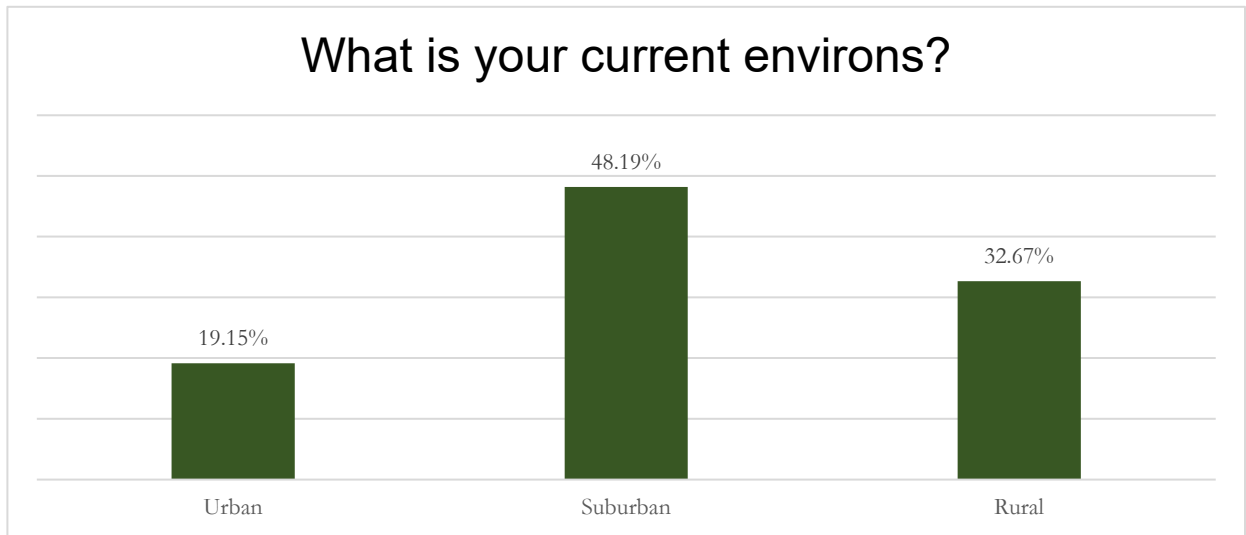
<u>Answer options</u>	Responses	
Female	24.25%	838
Male	75.75%	2618

Analysis

Female ministers’ response rate was very representative at 24.25% of respondents compared to 24.97% of the licensed and ordained ministers’ total. When including certified ministers, female ministers make up 27% of Assemblies of God US total credentialed ministers (2020).⁵

⁵ Assemblies of God General Secretary’s Office, Statistics. “Minister’s Marital Status.” January 2021.

What is your current environs?



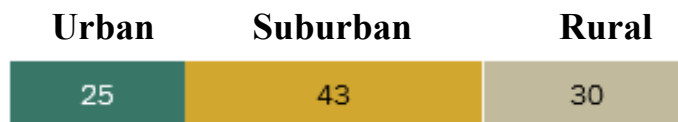
<u>Answer options</u>	Response percent	Response count
Urban	19.15%	660
Suburban	48.19%	1661
Rural	32.67%	1126

Analysis

The results are based on the self-identification of the respondents. Environs data is not available for AG ministers. If the respondent rate is representative of AG ministers as a whole, the percentage of ministers in urban areas occurs slightly lower than the overall U.S. population while suburban and rural ministers stands slightly higher than that of the general population.

Where Americans say they live ⁶

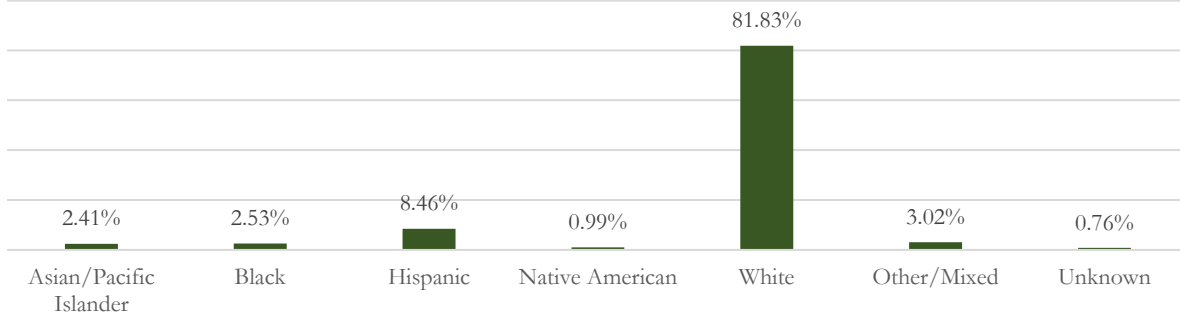
% of adults who would describe the community where they currently live as...



Pew Research

⁶ Wieder, Ruth Igielnik. "Evaluating What Makes a U.S. Community Urban, Suburban or Rural." Medium, October 22, 2020. <https://medium.com/pew-research-center-decoded/evaluating-what-makes-a-u-s-community-urban-suburban-or-rural-159f9d082842>.

What is your ethnicity?

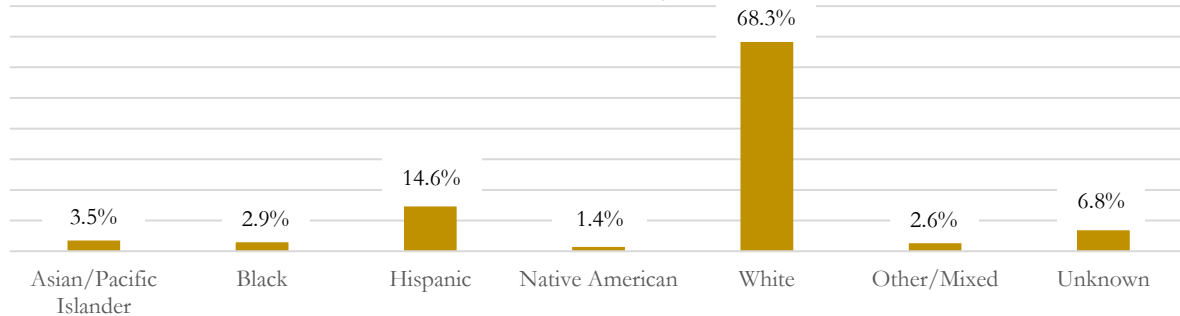


Answer options

Responses

Answer options	Responses	Count
Asian/Pacific Islander	2.41%	83
Black	2.53%	87
Hispanic	8.46%	291
Native American	0.99%	34
White	81.83%	2814
Other/Mixed	3.02%	104
Unknown	0.76%	26

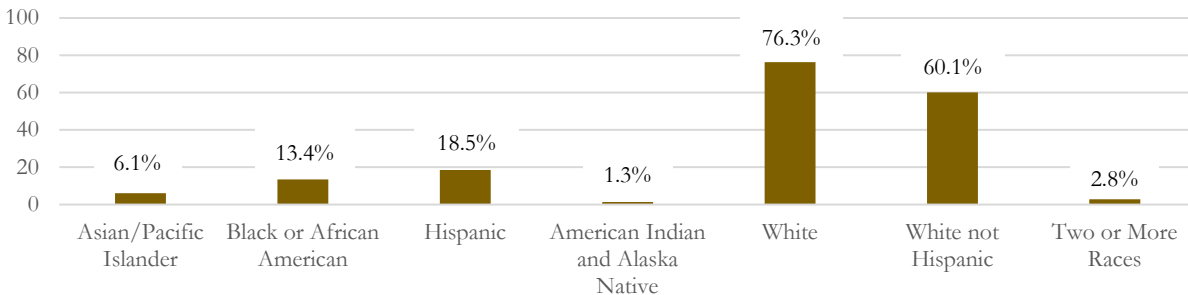
AG USA Ministers by Race 2020



Note: Hispanics may be of any race. The White race includes multiple ethnic groups in addition to Anglos. The sum of non-White ministers understates ethnic minority/immigrant ministers due to the ethnic minorities/immigrants included in the White race total.

Source: Assemblies of God General Secretary's Office, Statistics. "AG USA Ministers by Race 2001 to 2020." February, 2021.

United States Census Population Estimates 2019



Note: Hispanics may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: United States <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219#qf-headnote-a>

The Purpose of this Study
(From the 2017 inaugural report, with minor revisions)

Every decade or two brings monumental changes to society. As such, the way people respond to ministry changes. Ministry then responds in kind in order to continue its effectiveness. Sometimes the cultural changes catch churches unaware and ministry opportunities are missed. When this happens the church occasionally follows the lead of the secular society and at best is limited in its effectiveness. At worst heresy arises. The purpose of this study is to look ahead with the intention to understand these times, the times coming, and to know what the Church ought to do.

The book of Ecclesiastes states that there really is not anything truly new (1:9). Yet, the more things remain the same the more they change. Human-created culture will continue to be corrupted due to the Fall. How this corruption is revealed will change. People will still sin and fall short of God's glory. How these sins are manifested may be different. Souls will continue to be reached with the Gospel message and believers will still need to be disciplined in the ways of Christ. How to best communicate the unchanging Message and how to demonstrate the eternal love of God will need adjustments.

Most ministers are fairly good at learning their environment. Pastors especially look at their communities and recognize the needs (real and felt), have a vision for what God wants to see happen, and can institute a process to minister to those God gives them. To identify broader national movements, however, requires categorizing as many of these local developments as possible, connecting the dots, and then recognizing the trends. What the Holy Spirit is doing in a church or in a community may be an individualized case. When the Holy Spirit is showing something repeatedly to many ministers across the nation it is proper to say that a trend is emerging.

The purpose of this report is to begin an examination into what Assemblies of God ministers across the United States believe the Holy Spirit is showing them regarding this society and how to effectively minister in and to it in the next ten years. This information will be valuable as training, preparation, and planning takes place. The Church will find safety in making plans based on the foresight of a multitude of counselors.

History of the Study

This is now the third cycle of the “Future of Ministry” survey. This project began in 2013, shortly before my (Mario) 50th birthday. I knew that God was changing my missionary assignment towards the work of preparing others for the work of the ministry. As I started looking ahead a question occupied my thoughts, “what future are we going to prepare ministers for?” I began asking every minister I spoke with “what do you think ministry will be like in 10 years’ time?” This continues as the single query of this project.

A few years later I started a doctoral program at AGTS. I asked one of my professors to look into the future and tell me what he saw. He in turn asked about my interest in the subject and what predictions I was acquiring. He encouraged me to develop this research further. I formed a more formal survey made from the responses that I heard most, received permission to have it sent to AG credentialed ministers, and produced the first report.

Based on the uniqueness of this research and the uses that other ministers and educators found in the report, I realized that I needed help. I posted an ad for a co-researcher and David W. Barnett responded. This type of study fit in with the ministry role that God was directing him towards. It soon became evident that our differing backgrounds and perspectives complemented each other well. We received permission to conduct a second survey and wrote the second report.

We have now been provided the opportunity for a third installment of this study. The actionable uses of the research have become a major impetus for permission to continue this research. It is our desire to gather together what the Spirit is saying to AG US ministers and present it in an understandable way: forward-looking, thought-provoking, and useable in the fellowship’s quest of preparing people for the work of the ministry.

Methodology

The research presented in this report results from a two-part mixed methods study comprising two surveys, with the first survey establishing range (Narrative Survey) and the second survey establishing frequency (Choice Survey).

The Narrative Survey included a single open-ended question: *Based on your current ministry and observations, what will ministry in the U.S. be like 10 years from now?* An email invitation to take the survey was sent to 1,000 ordained and 500 licensed active Assemblies of God ministers.⁷ There were 159 unique respondents. The survey format allowed the respondent to enter a narrative response. Response lengths ranged from one or two words to over 1,200 words, with an average response length of 94 words and median of 45 words. We implemented the qualitative research coding method proposed by Gioia et al⁸ to code this narrative data, looking for key words, phrases, and concepts. We also ran the narrative responses through Hermetic Systems Word Frequency software to generate lists with counts of common words and common phrases to aid in this process. Ultimately, we identified four major dimensions regarding the future of ministry: the nature and focus of ministry; the minister; ministry in the church; and ministry in culture and society. Within each of these major dimensions, we then identified associated themes that were the basis of the questions for our Choice Survey.

⁷ Assemblies of God World Missionaries were not included in either survey

⁸ Gioia, D. A., Corley, K. G., & Hamilton, A. L. (2012). Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research: Notes on the Gioia methodology. *Organizational Research Methods*, 16, 1, 15-31.

The Choice Survey consisted of 18 thematic questions plus a series of demographic questions. Demographic data sets collected include credential level, age group, gender, environs, ethnicity, and AG District. When available data for demographics are considered, the respondents are representative of the Assemblies of God in the U.S. with two exceptions: ministers over 70 and language-specific ethnic groups are both under-represented.

The Choice Survey was sent to approximately 21,000 licensed and ordained AG ministers in the United States. Ministers who received the Narrative Survey, ministers assigned to AG World Missions, and inactive retired ministers were excluded. There were 3,677 unique respondents. Although there was some attrition from those who started the survey to those who completed it, more than 94% of those who responded to any part of the survey completed it. This response rate gives the Choice Survey a margin of error of 2% at a 95% confidence level. The survey did not require a response for each question, therefore total responses by question may vary, but all responses were within the confidence margin.

Eleven questions offered a factual statement predicated on one of the identified themes. Responses for these questions were limited to a 5-point Likert scale range, from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Three questions offered a series of predictive statements with responses on a 5-point Likert scale from Very Likely to Very Unlikely. One question relating to the theme of church growth potential by size (small or large) offered four choices: +/+, +/-, -/+, and -/-. We included one question to measure overall outlook with five answers representing emotional statements about the future. We also included two open-ended short-answer questions. The average response for each of these two questions was two words in length.

In the preceding pages the reader finds graphs and tables showing the raw data, accompanied by a brief analysis of the data. In our analyses, we generally condensed the responses into three groupings: “strongly agree” and “somewhat agree” were combined as “total agreement”, “strongly disagree” and “somewhat disagree” as “disagreement”, and “neither agree nor disagree” as “neutral”. However, in those instances when strength of agreement/disagreement was significant, we made note of it. We also note data points of particular interest and uniqueness, as well as provide comparison to similar themes in previous surveys that may suggest emerging trends. The sum of percentages may not always total 100.0% due to rounding.

Observations, Discussion, Limitations, and Areas for Further Research

The primary goal in conducting this research is to provide relevant data to the U.S. Assemblies of God leaders, ministers, and academicians that inform forward-thinking and planning for the future. Therefore, we must state from the outset that it is not our goal to draw conclusions about the data or advocate for specific actions or strategies in response to them. Rather, through the process of these studies we seek to hear the collective voices of AG ministers and harmonize them in ways that allow the various themes to resonate more distinctly with those who read this report.

As we analyzed the open-ended responses from the Narrative Survey, we observed that within a given theme, the opinions expressed could be quite divergent. For example, a significant number of respondents discussed the role of social media in ministry. Some expressed positive views, some expressed negative views, and others expressed complex views. However, regardless the sentiment, “social media in ministry” was the collective theme. When we formulated statements to represent these themes in the Choice Survey, our intent was to craft factual, specific statements that would elicit strong responses while also keeping the statements neutral in terms of not favoring or disfavoring specific sentiments about the themes.

This report represents the findings from our third biennial study. We now have three data sets (2017, 2019, and 2021) over four years that allow for comparison. It is our hope to continue conducting this study every two years and build a more substantial longitudinal data set. One advantage of a longitudinal study is that it reveals trends as they develop over time. Having a third data set affords us the opportunity with this year’s report to begin identifying potential trends; we have noted a few of these emerging trends in the question-by-question analysis. However, because of our approach of identifying distinct themes for each survey iteration, we must note that comparisons from 2017 to 2019 to 2021 are imperfect, since some themes were not present in all three studies, and themes that were present in all three may have morphed or modified in a way that the questions were not identical from year to year. We realize that this methodology complicates the ability to make direct comparisons. Since change observation is a central tenet of longitudinal studies, we conclude that it is more useful in these studies to dynamically identify and query the themes in each iteration rather than fixing on a static set of themes and statements that may not age well from one study to the next. The advantage of our dynamic method is that it reveals the changes between iterations and allows for themes to emerge, persist, and/or dissipate organically.

As we consider change over time, we must acknowledge that change can be suddenly accelerated, decelerated, or disrupted by a variety of factors. Without question, the 2021 study represented significant disruptive change due to national and global concerns such as shifting social/political dynamics and the COVID-19 pandemic. A prime example is the sudden emergence of multiple technology themes such as social media, virtual worship services, and virtual small groups. Although these themes were present and growing in previous studies, in 2021 they exploded in significance and multiplied in variety, which we believe directly correlates to the disruptive effect of the pandemic that necessitated churches to rapidly deploy technology as a ministry tool.

We collected several levels of demographic data as noted in our methodology. It is beyond the scope of this report to break down responses demographically to look for correlations and differences within demographic subgroups. We have noted a few interesting demographic trends in the question-by-question analysis. Further demographic analysis on the data sets could

be very significant, and we welcome inquiries from other researchers who would be interested in pursuing further inquiry utilizing the data.

This study has a significant limitation in that it is bounded by the ideas and opinions of the AG US ministers who responded. This limitation begs the question: to what extent is their collective view about the future of ministry meaningfully predictive? In other words, are ministers perceiving the potentials of the future correctly? As researchers, we often look at the themes in our study and ask these two questions: are these themes truly significant or are we overemphasizing their significance? and, what emerging themes should be getting our attention but are being overlooked? Thinking about the future is a dual process of responding to current realities and creatively envisioning the future. A view of the future that is too reactionary on one hand, or too visionary on the other, may not be helpful for evaluating and setting a course for the future of the Assemblies of God. Ultimately, we find both reactionary and visionary themes in the data and believe that both are useful and necessary to effectively see our way forward.

Author's comments: Mario M. Duque

In his letter to the Ephesians the apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, stated that God provided different types of ministers “to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.” This declaration coincides well with Christ’s great commission that He assigned to His followers. In this year’s survey I believe most ministers have expressed their descriptive and prescriptive projection for a future ministry that will endeavor to fulfill both of these tasks. My single word summation for this current cycle of our report is “discipleship.”

Very early in the coding of the Narrative Survey it became evident that the theme of discipleship was emerging. Previous surveys barely touched on this subject. In our main survey and throughout this report the topic of discipleship occurs specifically where it is identified and also as the underlying theme in many responses.

The response with the highest agreement level states that future ministry will transpire as personal, authentic, organic, and incarnational (Q2). This is required for the making of disciples. The second most agreed upon response claims that a spiritual movement will occur and will greatly impact individuals (Q15). This is a precursor for willingness to become a disciple.

If we join the making of disciples with preparing people for service, then all the top predictions fit into this category. An increase in women ministers, diversity in ministry, more lay workers, co-vocational ministers, small groups, house churches, these all require that we make disciples who are prepared for the work of the ministry. This is why we do this study, to help ministers recognize what future we should prepare for.

Author's comments: David W. Barnett

In his book Leading Continuous Change, Bill Pasmore⁹ explains complex, continuous change as a dynamic process in which large-scale change, rather than happening in a linear sequence, happens through a non-linear, iterative process that is subject to all sorts of minor and major disruptions. It seems that 2020 was the year that complex, continuous change was forced on the American Church. We suspected from the outset that this year’s study was going to be very interesting in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and a variety of other major cultural and societal circumstances. The responses from the Narrative Survey proved this out.

One overarching dynamic present in this year’s responses that was very different from prior years was the notable absence of an inclination to perpetuate the status quo. Or, said another way, there seemed to be a near-universal expectation that ministry in the future would be significantly different than it has been in the past, albeit with the same eternal purpose.

When we consider the effect of disruptions on the future, we must consider if the disruption is temporary (ultimately returning to the previous norms in some degree) or permanent (shifting the paradigm going forward). The themes impacted by the pandemic need to be evaluated through this rubric. For example, in 2019 our question about growth of virtual church services received 24% strong agreement and 70% overall agreement. This year (Q11 #2), strong agreement was 35% (up by half) and overall agreement was 83% (up by one-fifth). This is a disruptive shift. But beyond the immediate disruption, it also appears that the expectation paradigm has completely flipped, as evidenced in many of the comments in the Narrative

⁹ William A. Pasmore, *Leading Continuous Change: Navigating Churn in the Real World* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., A BK Business book, 2015).

Survey. Two years ago, a church offering virtual ministries was “the future”. Today, a church lacking virtual ministries is “the past”.

In this context, I mention the most-expressed meta-theme for 2021: Declining Big vs. Emerging Small. The number of mentions of this theme in the Narrative Survey was remarkable. Some respondents embraced the trend, some lamented it, but an overwhelming number expressed the sentiment that Small is waxing and Big is waning. The sentiment can be observed in specific themes such as small groups, discipleship, house church, church size, church finances, and more emphasis on personal/relational connections. Is this trend temporary or is it the result of a permanent disruption? The implications are profound, and I believe it is a question the fellowship needs to explore in depth to gain insight and develop effective strategies going forward.

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A free copy of this and previous reports can be downloaded at www.futureofministry.com. For questions regarding the report, or access to the raw data for further study, please contact Mario M. Duque at revmmd@gmail.com.

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But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and *he will tell you what is yet to come.*

John 16:13 NIV