

DM Presbytery Survey 2024 - Summary

The Congregations and Members

Who responded to the survey?

The survey was sent primarily to church leadership – Pastors, Ruling Elders, and Deacons. However, there were no restrictions placed on who could contribute to the anonymous survey. Only 105 out of 241 responses (62%) identified which church they attended. The typical respondent was a female between the ages of 41-70 from a small church (attendance fewer than 75) which is consistent with the PC(USA)s annual statistical analysis of a church in the Des Moines Presbytery.

What does the typical church look like? (health, energy, spirituality, relevance)

Respondents overwhelmingly think their church is a positive influence on their community of context (82%) and that their church has a clear purpose, and they live into it (58%). When it comes to the spiritual life of the survey takers, most admitted the only time they read scripture is when they attend church, but a healthy number also cracked their Bibles open on a weekly and even daily basis.

Key suggestions for increased spirituality include increasing personal devotional and prayer time, engaging in more Bible study, and fostering a sense of community within the church. Many respondents emphasized the importance of having a pastor who is actively engaged and positive. There is also a strong desire for more small group Bible studies, adult education classes, and opportunities for fellowship outside of Sunday services. Additionally, some individuals expressed the need for more young families and children in the congregation, as well as a larger congregation to connect with.

Another significant theme is the desire for consistency and commitment in spiritual practices, such as daily devotions, meditation, and prayer. Respondents also highlighted the need for more vibrant worship services, including upbeat music and current messaging in sermons. There is a call for more leaders to help teach the word in small groups, and for materials that blend progressive theology with contemplative sensibilities. Some individuals also mentioned the importance of having trusted conversation partners for serious theological discussions and the need for mutual support groups. Overall, the survey reflects a collective yearning for deeper spiritual engagement, stronger community bonds, and more dynamic church leadership.

What are the financial realities of our churches?

As Presbyterians, our finances seem to be in good shape. A majority of survey takers reported that weekly offerings cover the budgeted expenses and that they rarely need to spend savings or foundation monies to makeup shortfalls. The churches are able to maintain a full or part-time pastor (211 out of 241) however, it should be noted that the majority of churches in the Des Moines Presbytery have part-time leadership (27 out of 50) and only 11 of 50 that are capable of a full-time pastor. According to the responses, more than half of the ministries feel they will run out of people before they run out of money. Perhaps, coincidentally, only 1 in 4 (27%) have included the church in their estate planning.

Is there a need or willingness to change the way we do ministry?

With church attendance trending lower and average membership age increasing, there is a sense that community relevance and even survival of the local institution are at risk. Almost half of the respondents fear that their church will not be open in 10 years. Predictably, that fear increases as the size of the church declines.

When asked about their willingness to change, although those polled voiced an openness to some types of change – even drastic changes – they viscerally rejected others. Presbyterians were willing to work with other Presbyterians while remaining tepidly optimistic about the idea of merging with other denominations and worshiping in a building other than their own. However, when asked if they were willing to sell their current building or use their current funds to start a new ministry elsewhere in the presbytery, 80% said “No”. Even changing their current worship time and day was rejected by more than half.

There is much to celebrate regarding congregations

This survey highlights the vibrant and diverse activities of the churches within the Des Moines Presbytery, showcasing their commitment to community service, inclusivity, and mission work. Many of these churches have a rich history, with some celebrating significant milestones such as centennials and anniversaries. Despite challenges like aging congregations and small memberships, these churches remain active and dedicated to their missions.

A key theme is the strong sense of community and family within these congregations. Members are described as friendly, welcoming, and supportive of one another. This sense of belonging is reinforced through various activities, including regular fellowship events, potlucks, and community outreach programs. The churches also emphasize inclusivity, with several explicitly stating their commitment to being open and affirming to the LGBTQ community.

Mission work is a cornerstone of these churches' activities. They engage in numerous local and global missions, such as supporting food pantries, providing meals for the hungry, and participating in international missions in places like Africa and El Salvador. Many churches also host community events like fall festivals, trunk or treat, and summer day camps, which help to foster a sense of community and outreach.

Additionally, the churches support various social causes, provide space for community groups, and offer programs for youth and families. Despite facing challenges like declining memberships and the need for new members, these churches continue to find ways to serve their communities and remain relevant in today's changing social and economic landscape.

The Presbytery

How has the Presbytery Helped Your Congregation?

A significant number of responses highlight the Presbytery's role in pastoral transitions, including helping with the search for new ministers, providing interim pastors, and offering guidance to Pastor Nominating Committees (PNCs). This support is crucial for congregations during times of leadership change, ensuring continuity and stability.

Another key area of assistance is in conflict resolution and guidance during challenging situations. Several congregations mentioned receiving help with internal conflicts, personnel problems, and navigating difficult experiences, such as dealing with harassment from members.

The Presbytery's involvement in these matters helps maintain harmony and effective governance within the church.

The Presbytery also plays a vital role in providing educational resources and training. This includes offering training for church officers, ruling elders, and PNC members, as well as organizing retreats, summer camps, and mission trips. These educational opportunities help church members grow in their roles and enhance their ability to serve their congregations and communities effectively.

Additionally, the Presbytery supports congregations through financial assistance and grants. This support has been particularly valuable in times of crisis, such as tornado relief efforts, and in funding local missions and outreach programs. The financial backing from the Presbytery enables churches to extend their reach and impact within their communities.

How has the Presbytery Hurt Your Congregation?

A recurring theme is the perceived lack of support during transitional periods, particularly when the congregation was without pastoral leadership. Members felt that the Presbytery could have done more to assist them in finding a transitional pastor, and there was a general sense of abandonment during these critical times.

Another significant point of contention is the financial management and priorities of the Presbytery. Congregants expressed frustration over the mandatory per capita payments and the use of funds from the sale of church properties to balance the Presbytery's budget. There is a sentiment that the Presbytery focuses more on its own financial stability and supporting pastors rather than addressing the needs of local churches. This financial strain is compounded by the perception that the Presbytery does not provide adequate returns or tangible support for the money from the congregations.

Additionally, there is a feeling of disconnect and lack of recognition, especially for lay pastors who are seen as not receiving the same respect and support as seminary-trained pastors. The document also highlights a perceived imbalance in the Presbytery's focus, with more attention given to urban and suburban churches at the expense of rural congregations. This has led to feelings of isolation and neglect among members of smaller or more remote churches.

Those who answered this question conveyed a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the Presbytery's actions and priorities, with some members even suggesting that their church should break away from the Presbytery. The criticisms range from lack of support to a general sense of being undervalued and ignored.

How should the presbytery support its ministries? (1st Arabic, Cross, Our Sister Parish)

When the question was posed about the support of historically presbytery-related ministries, most respondents were in favor of supporting the ministries – but only if funding was available and if that funding was limited. Statistically, these questions were answered with the most parity among all those in the survey.

How can the Presbytery Improve?

The survey responses provided a comprehensive list of suggestions for improving the Des Moines Presbytery, reflecting a wide range of concerns and ideas from various contributors. One of the primary themes is the need for better communication and active involvement. Many respondents emphasized the importance of improving communication

channels, both within the Presbytery and between the Presbytery and local congregations. This includes quicker responses to inquiries, more frequent visits to local churches, and better dissemination of information about the Presbytery's activities and mission.

Another significant point is the call for fiscal responsibility and modernization. Contributors highlighted the need to address outdated policies and practices, streamline administrative processes, and ensure that the Presbytery operates within its budget. Suggestions included reducing the number of executive directors, eliminating unnecessary staff positions, and avoiding deficit spending. There is also a strong emphasis on supporting struggling churches, with recommendations to provide practical programs, offer more lay services, and ensure fair asset distribution when churches close.

Additionally, the survey takers underscore the importance of fostering a sense of community and support among congregations. This includes enhancing worship and fellowship at Presbytery meetings, coordinating presbytery-wide community outreach efforts, and developing programs tailored to the unique needs of different churches. Respondents also called for more support for youth ministry and greater efforts to help small churches feel valued and included. Overall, the suggestions reflect a desire for a more responsive, efficient, and supportive presbytery that can adapt to changing times and better serve its member congregations.

Summary Conclusions

1. **Demographic Trends:** The typical survey respondent is a female aged 41-70 from a small church with fewer than 75 attendees. This demographic is consistent with the broader trends observed in the PC(USA) annual statistical analysis.
2. **Spiritual Engagement:** There is a strong desire among respondents for increased spiritual engagement. This includes more personal devotional and prayer time, Bible studies, vibrant worship services, and opportunities for fellowship outside of Sunday services. Respondents also emphasize the need for more dynamic church leadership and community-building activities.
3. **Financial Stability and Concerns:** While most churches report financial stability with weekly offerings covering expenses, there is a significant concern about declining memberships and the potential closure of churches within the next decade. Many churches rely on part-time pastoral leadership, and there is a fear of running out of people before running out of money.
4. **Resistance to Change:** Despite recognizing the need for change due to declining attendance and aging memberships, there is resistance to certain types of changes. For example, respondents are generally unwilling to leave their church buildings, change worship times, or use funds to start new ministries elsewhere.
5. **Presbytery Support and Criticism:** The Presbytery is praised for its role in pastoral transitions, conflict resolution, and providing educational resources and financial assistance. However, there are criticisms regarding its financial management, perceived lack of support during pastoral vacancies, and a disconnect with smaller or rural churches. Some members feel undervalued and suggest that the Presbytery focuses more on its own stability than on the needs of local congregations.
6. **Suggestions for Improvement:** Respondents suggest that the Presbytery improve communication, fiscal responsibility, and modernization of policies. They call for more support for struggling churches, and tailored programs for different congregations. There is also a desire for more pastor support and efforts to make small churches feel included and valued.