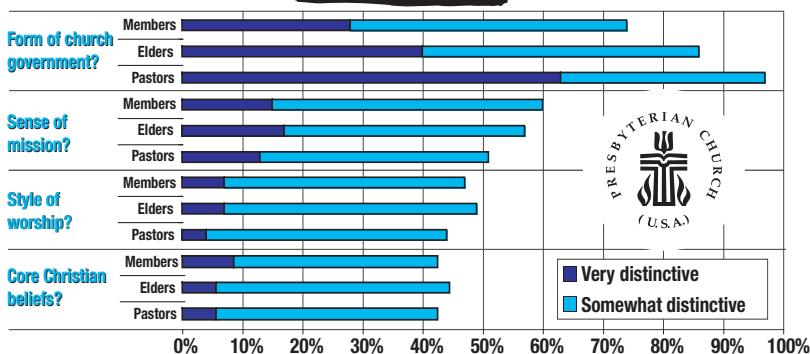


Presbyterian churches: how distinctive?



What sets Presbyterians apart

What makes the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) distinctive from other Protestant denominations? A 2001 Presbyterian Panel survey provides some answers, at least from the perspective of those already in the fold. Questions asked members, elders and pastors how they perceive the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) on eight different items.

- **The most distinctive Presbyterian attribute**, according to the respondents, was “form of church government.” Majorities of pastors (63 percent) viewed this feature as “very distinctive,” as did 40 percent of elders and 28 percent of members. Combined “somewhat distinctive” and “very distinctive” responses total three-fourths or more in all three groups (see the chart above).
- **“Tolerance for individual freedom of thought”** (not shown on chart) followed “form of government,” but at a considerable distance in the results (members, 61 percent combined “very distinctive” and “somewhat distinctive”; elders, 63 percent; and pastors, 73 percent).
- **“Sense of mission”** (60, 57, and 51 percent, respectively); **“concern for social justice”** (52, 53, and 68 percent); and **“use of the confessions”** (44, 53, and 79 percent) followed in that order.
- **“Focus on ecumenism”** was the only remaining item receiving a “very distinctive” and “somewhat distinctive” total of 50 percent or more in any of the three groups (members, 40 percent; elders, 42 percent; and pastors, 66 percent).
- **“Style of worship”** and **“core Christian beliefs”** were cited by less than 50 percent as distinctive.
- **The PCUSA “has a clearer understanding of the church’s mission** in the world today than do most other denominations” was affirmed by only 21 percent of members, 23 percent of elders, and 25 percent of pastors in the Panel survey.

GO FIGURE

JACK MARCUM

What the research shows

With the exception of governance, relatively few Presbyterians view their church as all that different from many others.

Many Presbyterians could be just as happy worshipping elsewhere. Asked if there are “several other denominations where I could belong/serve and be just as satisfied,” 60 percent of members, 58 percent of elders, and 50 percent of pastors agreed.

This reveals both challenges and possibilities for the church. On the one hand, the perceived distinctives are subtle and sufficiently unimportant that a majority of respondents would be just as happy elsewhere. On the other hand, however understated, these same distinctives—a representative form of government, foremost, but also a tolerance for independent thinking, a concern for social justice, a focus on mission and a willingness to revisit Scripture anew for our own time and place—might well appeal to seekers in a pluralistic, educated society.

Presbyterians can and do preach the gospel: in 2005, the most recent year with statistics, PCUSA congregations recorded 74,000 professions of faith. But we need to do more if we are to reverse 40 straight years of net membership losses. Emphasizing what makes Presbyterians distinctive may help the PCUSA stand out in the vast and varied religious marketplace that is the United States. □

GRAPHIC BY KATE ANYAN