



The Presbyterian Panel

Listening to Presbyterians



REPORT

END-OF-LIFE ISSUES The November 2002 Survey

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RESEARCH SERVICES
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HIGHLIGHTS

- ✓ Only minorities of panelists believe a person has the “right to end his or her own life” in each of four situations, with greatest support for suicide when the person *has an incurable disease* (members, 39%; pastors, 31%). (p. 1)
- ✓ Small majorities of laity and large minorities of ministers believe “the law should allow doctors to comply with the wishes of a dying patient in severe distress who asks to have his or her life ended.” (p. 1)
- ✓ More than one in four panelists would *consider committing suicide* if they “had a disease that could not be cured and were living in severe pain.” (p. 1)
- ✓ Very few panelists are *afraid to die* or are *very fearful* or *somewhat fearful* of “not knowing what will happen to you after you die.” (p. 2)
- ✓ Only around one in ten laity and one in five ministers “think about death” *very often* or *often*. (p. 2)
- ✓ From a list of 19 considerations “as you think about your own death,” majorities in every Panel group labeled these as *very important*: “coming to peace with God”; “having financial affairs in order”; “having someone to make decisions in the event that you cannot make them for yourself”; “not being a burden to your family”; “trusting your doctor”; “having a chance to say goodbye to important people in your life”; “knowing what to expect about your physical condition”; and “praying.” (p. 3)
- ✓ Eight in ten panelists *have a will*, but much smaller majorities *have a living will*. (p. 4)
- ✓ More panelists want *cremation* than *earth burial or entombment above ground* for the disposition of their body after death. Many fewer want their body *donated to medical research*. For those who want cremation, more want their ashes *scattered* than *buried in the ground*. (p. 4)
- ✓ More panelists, including a majority of elders and ministers, want a *funeral service (body/ashes present)* than a *memorial service (body ashes not present)*. (p. 4)
- ✓ Large majorities want their funeral or memorial service to take place *at your home church*, and large majorities of laity want *my pastor* to preside. (p. 5)
- ✓ In every sample, majorities want *Bible readings* at their service, with Psalm 23 the most frequently cited passage. Large majorities also want *traditional hymns*, with “Amazing Grace” most frequently mentioned by laity and “For All the Saints” by ministers. (p. 5)
- ✓ Majorities want *a eulogy* at their funeral or memorial service, but a majority only of ministers wants *a sermon*. (p. 6)
- ✓ Most prefer a funeral or memorial service that is *traditional/mostly traditional*. (p. 6)
- ✓ More older than younger members *have a will* and *have a living will*, but more younger than older members *have signed an organ donation card*. (p. 6)
- ✓ Around eight in ten members and elders and almost all pastors believe they will *exist in some form after death*. (p. 7)
- ✓ Around nine in ten in every sample believe *in the existence of heaven*, while around six in ten believe *in the existence of hell*. (p. 7)
- ✓ More panelists view life after death as *a life like the one here only better* than as *a life without many things which make our present life enjoyable*. (p. 8)

OVERVIEW

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, ministers are 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 thirteenth (and last) survey completed by the 2000-2002 Panel. The first half uses text and graphics to highlight important and useful findings. An appendix follows with comparative tables that display the percentage distribution of responses to every question for each of the four Panel groups.

Questionnaires were mailed November 18, 2002. Non-responders were sent a postcard reminder on December 6. Returns were accepted through January 2003. Response rates for this survey are: members, 54%; elders, 56%; ministers, 60%. Results are subject to sampling and other errors. As a general rule, differences of less than 8% are not statistically meaningful.

Panelists had the option to complete the survey on the Web, and 6% of members and ministers, and 5% of elders, did so.

In this report, the term *median* refers to the middle number in an ordered distribution. For example, the median age for a group of people aged 12, 21, 28, 35, and 64 years would be 28 years. The term *mean* refers to the mathematical average of values in a distribution; in the example, the mean age would be calculated as: $(12+21+28+35+64)/5$, or 32 years.

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- Author Note:** John P. Marcum, Administrator of the Presbyterian Panel, wrote this report and was assisted in this study by the other staff members of the office of Research Services.
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- Sponsor:** The questions were developed by the staff of the Panel in cooperation with Charles A. Wiley, Associate for Theology, Office of Theology and Worship, Congregational Ministries Division, General Assembly Council. For more information on this office, contact Charles Wiley (888-728-7228 ext. 5734; cwiley@ctr.pcusa.org).
- Additional Copies:** Additional copies of this *Report* may be purchased for \$6 from PDS—call 800-524-2612 and request item number 65100-02275. Copies of a four-page *Summary* of results are available for \$2 each directly from Research Services. Call for information on quantity discounts (888-728-7228 ext. 2040).
- Panel on the Web:** A catalogue of Panel topics, *Summaries* of surveys since 1994, and *Reports* of surveys since 2002, are available on-line at the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Web site: <<http://www.pcusa.org/research/panel/index>>.
- Sampling Details:** For more information on methods used to draw the samples, see *Background Report for the 2000-2002 Presbyterian Panel*: <<http://www.pcusa.org/research/panel/03to05rprt.pdf>>. It may also be purchased from PDS (# 65100-99263); the cost is \$10.

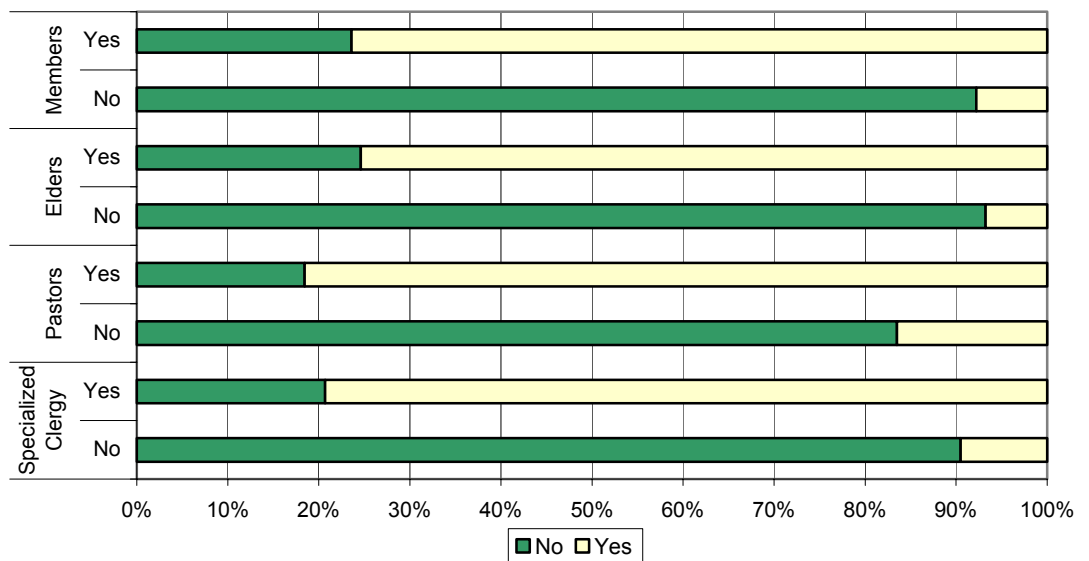
EUTHANASIA AND ASSISTED SUICIDE

Right to Die

- ✓ Only minorities of panelists believe a person has the “right to end his or her own life” in each of four situations. Support is greatest when the person *has an incurable disease* (among members, 39% support a right to end one’s own life in this circumstance; elders, 37%; pastors, 31%; specialized clergy, 49%).
- ✓ Many fewer would support the right to end one’s life when the person *has dishonored his or her family* (elders, 3%; specialized clergy, 8%) or when the person *has gone bankrupt* (2%; 8%). A few more would support this right when the person *is tired of living and ready to die* (elders, 8%; specialized clergy, 19%).
- ✓ Panelists who in the past five years have experienced the death of a “family member or close friend” due to “a terminal illness, such as cancer or AIDS” have opinions similar to other panelists on the issue of whether a “person has the right to end his or her own life” because the person has “an incurable illness.”

Figure 1. Opinions on Assisted Suicide by Willingness to Consider Suicide as a Personal Option for an Incurable Disease

Question: If you personally had a disease that could not be cured and were living in severe pain, would you consider suicide, or not?



Question: Do you think a person has the right to end his or her own life if this person has an incurable disease?

Assisted Suicide

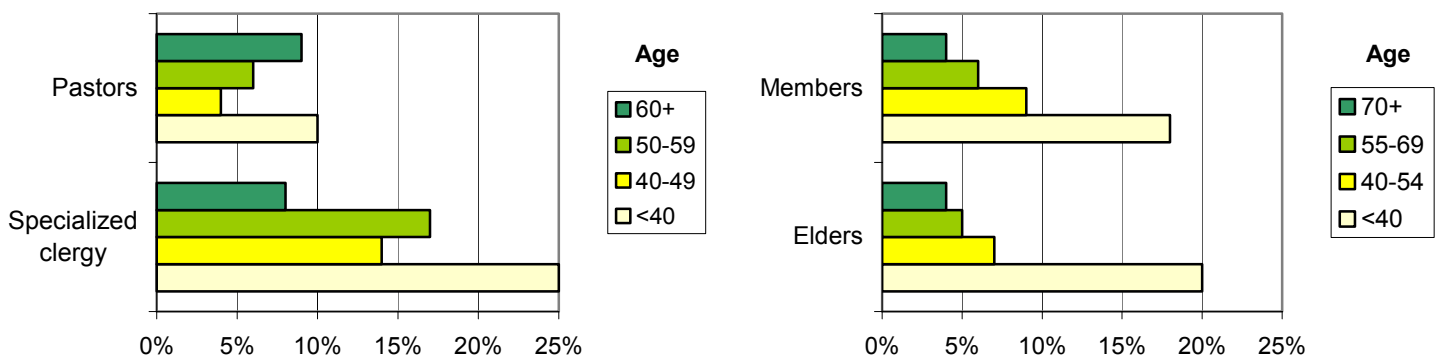
- ✓ Panelists are divided on whether “the law should allow doctors to comply with the wishes of a dying patient in severe distress who asks to have his or her life ended.” A majority of members (51%) and specialized clergy (55%) respond *yes*, but only a minority of elders (46%) and pastors (40%) respond *yes*. While most others in every group respond *no*, (members, 31%; pastors, 43%), in every sample around one in five respond *not sure*.
- ✓ “If a member of your family were terminally ill and wanted to die” around one in five members (21%), elders (18%), and pastors (22%), and somewhat more specialized clergy (30%) would *be willing to help him/her*. In a 1999 Fox News/Opinion Dynamics survey, about twice as many U.S. adults—40%—would be willing to help a terminally-ill family member commit suicide.
- ✓ Somewhat fewer panelists (members, 28%; elders, 25%; pastors, 30%; and specialized clergy, 40%) would *consider committing suicide* if they, personally, “had a disease that could not be cured and were living in severe pain.” When the same question was asked of the U.S. adult population in 1999 on a Gallup Poll, 40% would consider committing suicide under these circumstances.

THOUGHTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Fear of Death

- ✓ Only a relatively small number of panelists are *afraid to die*: members, 7%; elders, 6%; pastors, 6%; and specialized clergy, 14%. Some others respond *not sure*, so overall the percentages *not afraid to die* are, respectively, 74%, 76%, 82%, and 70%. In a 1999 Gallup Poll, 14% of U.S. adults reported being afraid to die.
- ✓ Similarly small percentages in each group report being *very fearful* or *somewhat fearful* about “not knowing what will happen to you after you die” (members, 11%; elders, 8%; pastors, 4%; specialized clergy, 8%).
- ✓ Somewhat more panelists in each group, however, report being *very fearful* or *somewhat fearful* of each of three “specific concerns people have about their own death”:
 - Dying in pain (64% of members, 67% of specialized clergy *very fearful* or *somewhat fearful*)
 - Dying alone (35% and 36%, respectfully, *very fearful* or *somewhat fearful*)
 - Leaving your loved ones behind (56%; 48%)
- ✓ In all Panel groups, the highest percentage who are “afraid to die” is found in the youngest age category, and in three of the four (pastors the exception), the lowest is found in the oldest age category. (Different age categories are used for laity and ministers because ministers are concentrated in a narrower age range.)

Figure 2. Percentage “Afraid to Die” by Age and Panel Group



Thoughts about Death

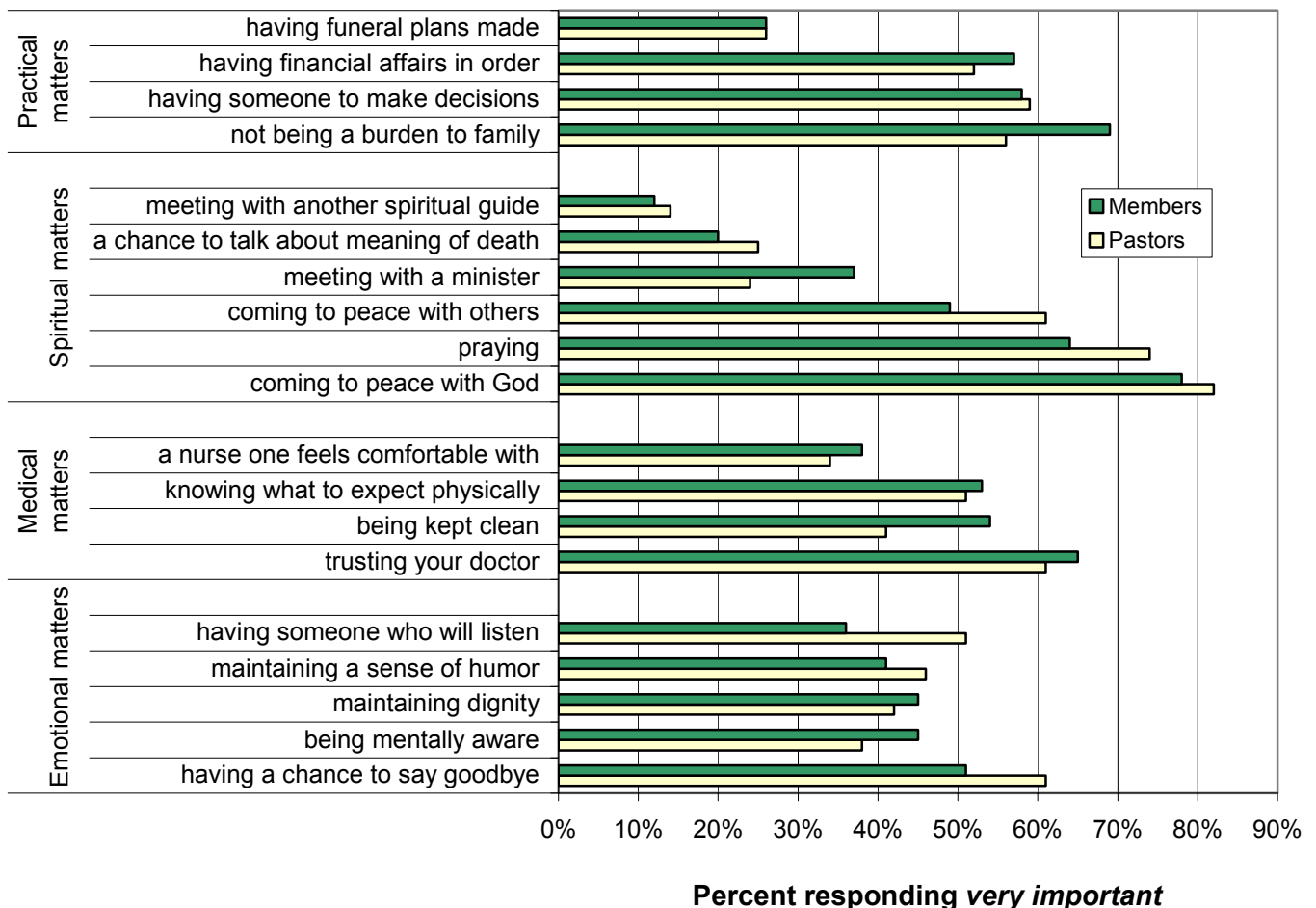
- ✓ Among laity, a majority think about death either *fairly seldom* (members, 39%; elders, 38%) or *very seldom* (27%; 28%). Among ministers, about half report thinking about death either *fairly seldom* (pastors, 37%; specialized clergy, 31%) or *very seldom* (13%; 18%). Most of the rest think about death *fairly often* (elders, 25%; pastors, 32%), with relatively few thinking about it *very often* (elders, 2%; pastors, 5%) or *often* (6%; 14%).
- ✓ Among U.S. adults in a 1999 *Los Angeles Times* Poll, the *very often* (9%) and *fairly often* (11%) responses totaled 20%, compared to a combined total of 10% for Panel members.
- ✓ Around a quarter of panelists in every group believe their own death will occur *at home* (members, 27%; elders, pastors, and specialized clergy, 26%). Another one in six believe it will occur *in a hospital* (members, 16%; specialized clergy, 16%). Few believe it will occur *in a nursing home* (members, 6%; specialized clergy, 8%) or *in a hospice* (4%; 9%). The largest response in all groups is *not sure* (members, 43%; specialized clergy, 35%).
- ✓ Frequency of thoughts about death is unrelated to age, gender, marital status, educational level, or theological stance (self-identified as *conservative*, *moderate*, or *liberal*) in all four Panel groups.

THOUGHTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Considerations for One's Own Dying

- ✓ Panelists were asked to rate how important each of 19 considerations are “as you think about your own death.” Several considerations were labeled *very important* by half or more in every Panel group, including “coming to peace with God,” “having financial affairs in order,” “having someone to make decisions in the event that you cannot make them for yourself,” “not being a burden to your family,” “trusting your doctor,” “having a chance to say goodbye to important people in your life,” “knowing what to expect about your physical condition,” and “praying.” The largest *very important* response in every group is for “coming to peace with God” (members, 78%; elders, 82%; pastors, 82%; and specialized clergy, 71%).
- ✓ All of the remaining considerations were rated as either *very important* or *important* by a majority, with the exception of “meeting with another spiritual guide,” and, for laity, “having a chance to talk about the meaning of death.”
- ✓ In general, the pattern of response regarding considerations “as you think about your own death” are similar for laity and ministers, as Figure 3 shows for members and pastors. Among the larger differences are those for “having someone who will listen” (*very important* for only 36% of members, but for 51% of pastors), “being kept clean” (54% and 41%, respectively), “meeting with a minister” (37%; 24%), and “coming to peace with other persons” (49%; 61%).

Figure 3. Opinions on the Importance of Selected Factors at the Time of One's Own Death



WILLS, FUNERALS, AND MEMORIAL SERVICES

Wills

- ✓ Eight in ten in every Panel group *have a will* (members, 83%; elders, 86%; pastors, 80%; specialized clergy, 84%). This contrasts with 46% of adults nationwide in a 1999 *Los Angeles Times* Poll.
- ✓ Among panelists with a will, most had had it prepared or revised relatively recently. For example, among elders and specialized clergy with a will, 63% and 67%, respectively, wrote or revised their will since 1994.
- ✓ Of the minority of panelists without a will, large majorities (elders, 86%; specialized clergy, 86%) are *planning to write a will*.

Living Wills and Organ Donation

- ✓ Majorities in every group, ranging from 51% of pastors to 61% of specialized clergy, *have a living will or a written document that you have given to your doctors or family members expressing your wishes about whether you want heroic measures to be taken on your behalf if you should become critically ill and could not make decisions on your own*. According to a 1999 *Los Angeles Times* Poll, only 34% of adults nationally report having a living will.
- ✓ More than half of laity (members, 54%; elders, 54%) and two-thirds of ministers (pastors, 73%; specialized clergy, 68%) *have signed an organ donation card or otherwise indicated in writing your willingness to let your organs be taken after your death to transplant into others*.

Disposition of One's Body after Death

- ✓ More panelists want *cremation* (members, 40%; pastors, 53%) than *earth burial* (32%; 17%) or *entombment above ground* (2%; <0.5%) for the "disposition of your body after death." Another small segment (members, 7%; pastors, 11%) favors having their body *donated to medical research*. The remainder, about one in five, are either *not sure* or express *no preference*.
- ✓ For the subset that prefers cremation, more want their ashes scattered (members, 34%; pastors, 34%) than *buried in the ground* (30%; 25%). Another sizable group would like their ashes *placed in a columbarium (memorial vault)* (13%; 13%). Very few (4%; 1%) would like their ashes *kept by a family member or friend*. However, one in five members (19%) and one in four pastors (27%) have *no preference* or are *not sure*.
- ✓ Among panelists who prefer cremation and want their ashes *scattered*, most list a specific location (members, 61%; pastors, 59%), while the rest list a general category of place (e.g., mountains; ocean; woods).

Type of Service after Death

- ✓ More panelists, especially among ministers, want a *memorial service (body/ashes not present)* (elders, 52%; specialized clergy, 72%) than a *funeral service (body/ashes present)* (34%; 18%). Most of the rest respond *not sure* or have *no preference*; no more than 2% in any Panel group *don't want any sort of service*.
- ✓ Among the majority of panelists wanting a *committal (e.g., graveside) ceremony of your body/ashes*, a majority among laity (members, 56%; elders, 54%) and a large minority among ministers (pastors, 41%; specialized clergy, 42%) want the committal ceremony *after a funeral/memorial service*. Few laity want a committal service *before a funeral/memorial service* (14%; 17%), while a third of pastors (32%) and a quarter of specialized clergy do (24%). (The rest in each group are *not sure* or have *no preference*.)

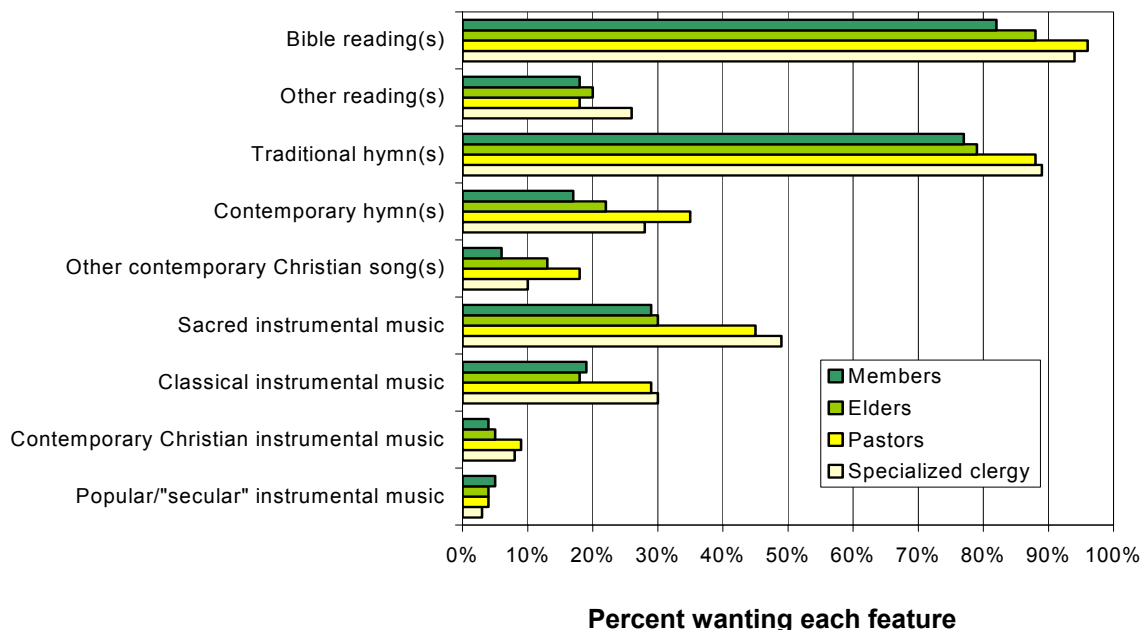
WILLS, FUNERALS, AND MEMORIAL SERVICES

Funeral/Memorial Service Preferences

- ✓ **Location:** Eight in ten members and pastors, 87% of elders, and 69% of specialized clergy want their funeral or memorial service to be held *at your home church*. Only 8% of members, 5% of elders, and 1% of both minister groups want their service *at a funeral home*.
- ✓ **Presider:** Eight in ten members (78%) and elders (85%) and three in ten pastors (27%) and specialized clergy (32%) want *my pastor* to preside at their own funeral or memorial service. Another 8%, 6%, 45%, and 39% indicate a preference for *another minister*. Most of the rest have *no preference* or are *not sure*.
- ✓ **Bible Readings:** Large majorities want *Bible reading(s)* (members, 82%; pastors, 96%), but only a quarter of laity and around one-half of ministers listed a specific passage. Of those who did specify a chapter, the most frequently listed are:
 - Psalm 23 (members, 52%; pastors, 24%)
 - Isaiah 40 (5%; 4%)
 - John 14 (5%; 15%)
 - Romans 8 (3%; 14%)
 - Psalm 139 (3%; 6%)
 - First Corinthians 15 (3%; 5%)
- ✓ **Hymns and Other Music:** Large majorities want hymns (members, 81%; pastors, 92%), with more preferring *traditional hymn(s)* (77%; 88%) than *contemporary hymn(s)* (17%; 35%) (these numbers include the 13% and 31%, respectively, who want both types). Of the minority who listed specific hymns, the most frequently named are:

<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Members</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Amazing Grace” (29%) • “How Great Thou Art” (13%) • “In the Garden” (11%) • “The Old Rugged Cross” (5%) 	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Pastors</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “For All the Saints” (24%) • “Amazing Grace” (10%) • “Be Thou My Vision” (8%) • “A Mighty Fortress” (7%)
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- ✓ **Other Music:** Only 6% of members and 18% of pastors want *other contemporary Christian song(s)*. A total of 43% and 60%, respectively, want instrumental music, with the largest (and overlapping) shares wanting *sacred instrumental music* (29%; 45%) and *classical instrumental music* (19%; 29%).

Figure 4. Preferences for One’s Funeral/Memorial Service



WILLS, FUNERALS, AND MEMORIAL SERVICES

- ✓ **Eulogy:** Large majorities want a *eulogy* (members, 80%; pastors, 64%), with more wanting a *eulogy delivered by a friend or pastor* (77%; 58%) than a *eulogy delivered by a family member* (34%; 33%) (a sizeable number want both). In addition, large minorities of members (33%), elders (38%), and pastors (43%), and a majority of specialized clergy (61%) want *time for impromptu remarks by attenders*.
- ✓ **Sermon and Sacrament:** A quarter of laity but majorities of pastors (66%) and specialized clergy (52%) want a *sermon* at their funeral or memorial service. Few in any sample want a *celebration of the Lord's Supper* (members, 9%; pastors, 13%).
- ✓ **Contemporary/Traditional Emphasis:** Majorities of members (66%), elders (61%), and pastors (59%), and half of specialized clergy, want a funeral or memorial service that is *traditional/mostly traditional*. Very few—no more than 6% in any group—want a *contemporary/mostly contemporary service*. However, 18%, 23%, 26%, and 34%, respectively, want a service that is *split evenly between traditional/contemporary*.
- ✓ **Closed or Open Casket:** For the subset who prefer earth burial or entombment above ground, majorities (members, 59%; elders, 62%; pastors, 88%; specialized clergy, 83%) want a *closed casket* at their service. Most of the rest are *not sure* or have *no preference*; only 16%, 13%, 5%, and 3%, respectively, want an *open casket*. Of the subset who want a *closed casket*, around a third want *nothing over it*, while 17%, 20%, 43%, and 45% want a *pall or drape*.

Influences of Age and Education on Members' Responses

Wills. Older panelists are much more likely than others to have a will: 94% of members in both the 55-69 and 70 and older age categories report having a will, compared to 45% of those less than 40 years of age and 75% of those aged 40-54. Education also matters: 86% of those with a college degree report having a will, compared to 79% of those with a high school diploma or less, and 73% of those with some college.

Living wills. The same pattern holds true for a living will: three-fourths of members aged 70 or older report having one (78%), compared to 60% of those aged 55-69 years, 39% of those 40-54, and 35% of those less than 40 years of age. More educated members, especially those with a graduate degree, are more likely to report having a living will. Two-thirds of those with a graduate degree (67%) report a living will, compared to 56% of those with a college degree, 52% of those with some college, and 50% of those with a high school diploma or less.

Organ donation card. The reverse pattern for age is found, however, for signing an organ donation card: two-thirds of members aged less than 40 years (68%) and aged 40-54 (65%) have signed such a card, compared to 56% of those aged 55-69 and 38% of those 70+. Among those with a college degree, 58% have signed an organ donation card, but only a minority of those with a high school diploma or less (43%) or some college (48%) have done so.

Burial or cremation. Earth burial after death is preferred in similar proportions among members aged less than 40 (37%), 55-69 (36%), and 70 or older (40%), but is preferred by a lower proportion among those aged 40-54 (25%). Cremation is preferred by similar proportions of members aged 40-54 (43%), 55-69 (45%), and 70+ (41%), but is preferred by a lower proportion of the youngest group (28%). Few in any age group, ranging from 9% among the youngest to 4% among those aged 40-54, want to donate their bodies to medical research. Finally, more in the two youngest groups (26%; 28%) than in the two oldest groups (12%; 13%) respond *not sure* or *no preference*.

Type of service. A majority of the youngest (<40 years) members (51%) would like a *funeral service (body/ashes present)* after death, while a majority of those aged 55-69 (52%) and 70 or older (57%) want a *memorial service (body/ashes not present)*. Among members aged 40-54, preferences are more divided, with 43% wanting a *memorial service*, 30% wanting a *funeral*, and 28% *not sure* or have *no preference*. The *not sure* and *no preference* total is also relatively high among the youngest members (25%).

LIFE AFTER DEATH

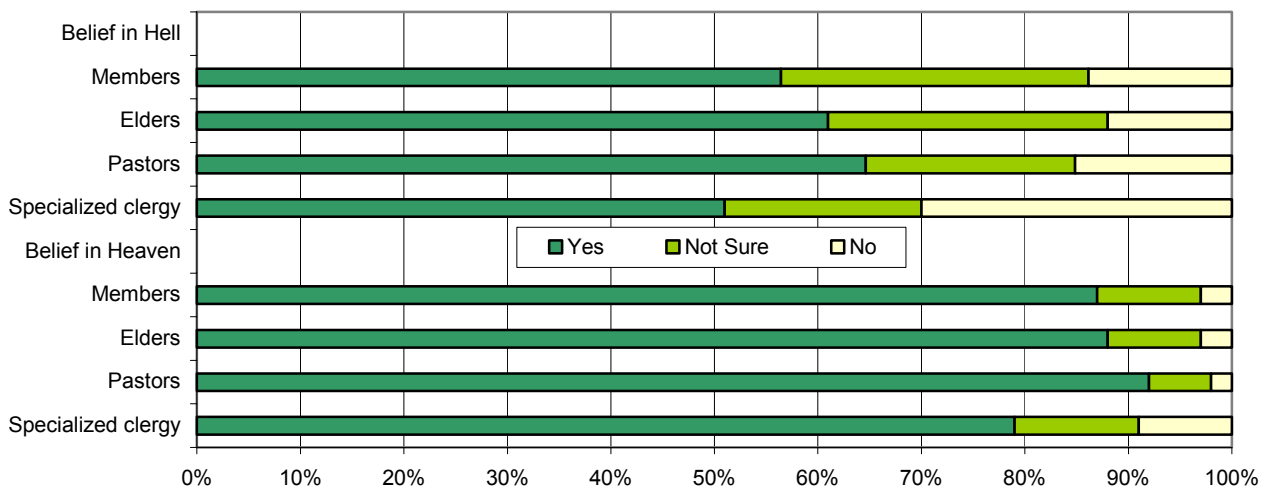
Belief in Life after Death

- ✓ Large majorities of panelists believe they will *exist in some form after death*: members, 79%; elders, 84%; pastors, 97%; and specialized clergy, 90%. Most of the rest (14%; 11%; 2%; 6%, respectively) respond *not sure*; only 8%, 5%, 1%, and 3% respond *no*. In a 1997 Gallup Organization survey, only 67% of U.S. adults believed they would *exist in some form after death*; 25% responded *no*; and 8%, *don't know/no answer*.

Heaven and Hell

- ✓ Around nine in ten members (87%), elders (88%), and pastors (92%), and eight in ten specialized clergy (79%), believe *in the existence of heaven*. Somewhat fewer panelists believe *in the existence of hell* (57%; 61%; 64%; and 51%, respectively).
- ✓ Among members, belief in heaven does not vary significantly by age, gender, marital status, or educational level, but does vary by several other beliefs. For example:
 - 96% of those who *strongly agree* or *agree* but 73% of those who *strongly disagree* or *disagree* that “only followers of Jesus Christ can be saved” also believe *in the existence of heaven*.
 - 96% of those who *strongly agree/agree* but 66% of those who *strongly disagree/disagree* that “Jesus will return to earth some day” also believe *in the existence of heaven*.
 - 93% of those who *strongly agree/agree* but 62% of those who *strongly disagree/disagree* that “the only absolute Truth for humankind is in Jesus” also believe *in the existence of heaven*.
 However, there is no significant difference in belief in heaven between those who *agree/strongly agree* (82%) and those who *disagree/strongly disagree* (90%) that “all the world’s different religions are equally good ways of helping a person find ultimate truth.”
- ✓ Among members, belief in hell is not related to age, but does vary by:
 - Gender (56% of both genders believe in hell, but more women, 34%, than men, 25%, are *not sure*, and more men, 20%, than women, 10%, do *not* believe in hell)
 - Marital status (more of the married, 59%, than of the single, 47%, believe in hell)
 - Education (more of those with a high school diploma or less, 74%, than those with some college, 66%, or a college degree, 51%, believe in hell)
- ✓ Belief in hell varies by other beliefs in similar (but more marked) fashion to the pattern of association just described for belief in heaven. For example, 79% of members who *strongly agree/agree* but 35% of those who *strongly disagree/disagree* that “only followers of Jesus Christ can be saved” also believe in heaven.

Figure 5. Belief in Heaven and Hell

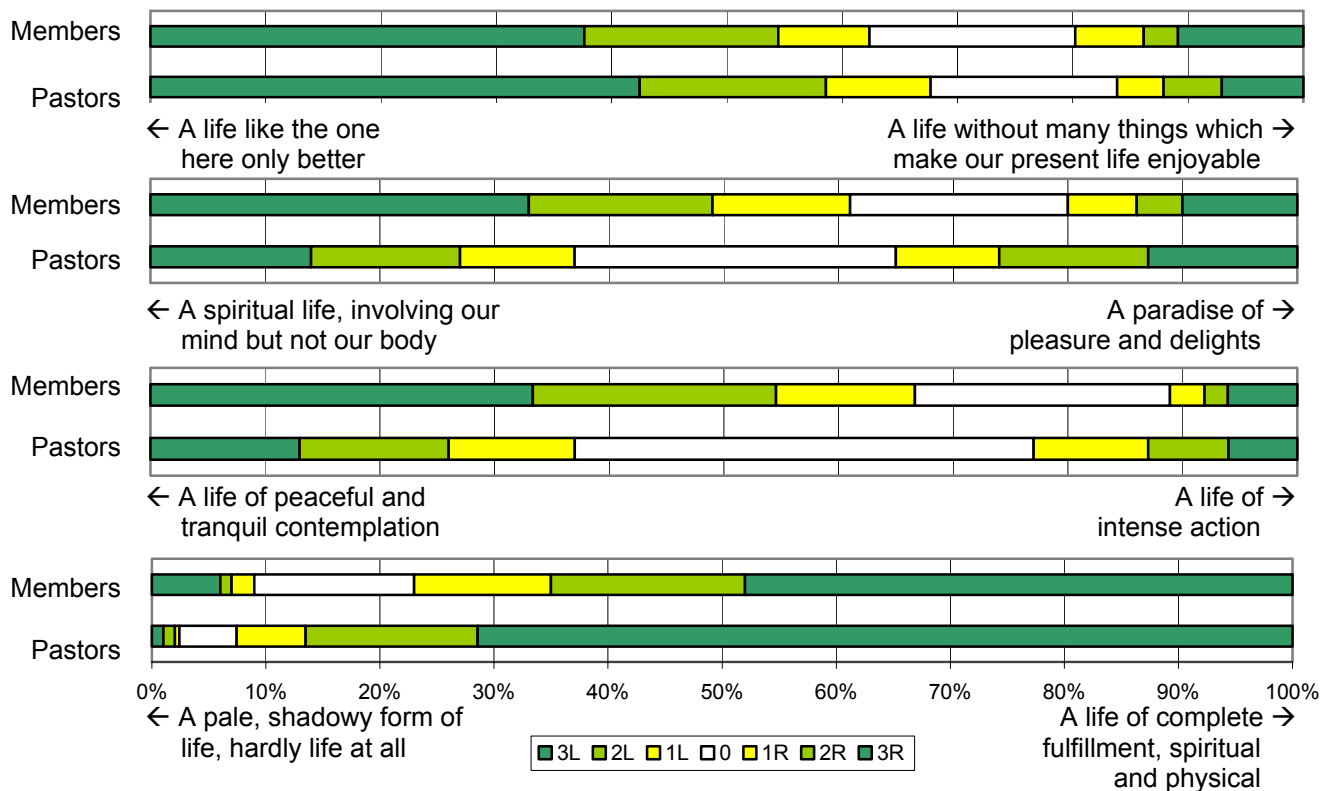


LIFE AFTER DEATH

Picturing the Afterlife

- ✓ When presented four pairs of alternative descriptions of life after death and asked to choose one or some gradation in-between for each:
 - More panelists in every group choose *a life like the one here only better* or an option closer to it than *a life without many things which make our present life enjoyable* or an option closer to it.
 - Many more laity choose *a spiritual life, involving our mind but not our body* or one closer to it than *a paradise of pleasure and delights* or one closer to it. But ministers, especially pastors, are more split, with 37% selecting the former option or one closer to it, 35% selecting the latter option or one closer to it, and 28% selecting the middle (neutral) option.
 - Many more in every group choose *a life of peaceful and tranquil contemplation* or an option closer to it than *a life of intense action* or an option closer to it (e.g., 66% of members select the former option or one closer to it).
 - More panelists in every group choose *a life of complete fulfillment, spiritual and physical* or an option closer to it than *a pale, shadowy form of life, hardly life at all* or an option closer to it, but among ministers, a large proportion selected the middle option (pastors, 40%; specialized clergy, 45%).

Figure 6. Images of Life after Death*



***KEY TO FIGURE 6**

- 3L = Chose image on the left
- 2L = Chose option close to image on the left
- 1L = Chose option slightly toward image on the left
- 0 = Chose option midway between both images
- 1R = Chose option slightly toward image on the right
- 2R = Chose option close to image on the right
- 3R = Chose image on the right