



*This body of research focuses on learning that can inform messaging to leaders, members and seekers.*

*Research informs the work we all do and helps define where we go next. We regularly evaluate our products & services, listen to our constituents and plan our strategy through a variety of research methodologies.*

*The Research Team at United Methodist Communications works to strengthen our understanding of the needs and experiences of our various audiences — Leaders, Members and Spiritual Seekers. People are complex, and research can help us understand how to best serve our diverse constituents.*

## **Studies Included**

- UMC FACT Report
- UMCom Brand Tracking Study
- UMNNow Newsletter Evaluation
- Spiritual Seeker Study
- Seeker to Member Journey
- Denominational Branding Study
- Theological Perspectives Study
- Impact of COVID-19 on UMC Local Churches
- Member Perspectives Study

\*Full reports of completed studies are available upon request.

# Connection

- Churches generally consider having and retaining a connection to The United Methodist Church as very or somewhat important; however, few churches feel strongly connected with their Annual Conference or with the denomination.
- The denomination has work to do in improving the perception of what the connection provides congregations.
- This represents a potential threat to the health of the church in any upcoming split.

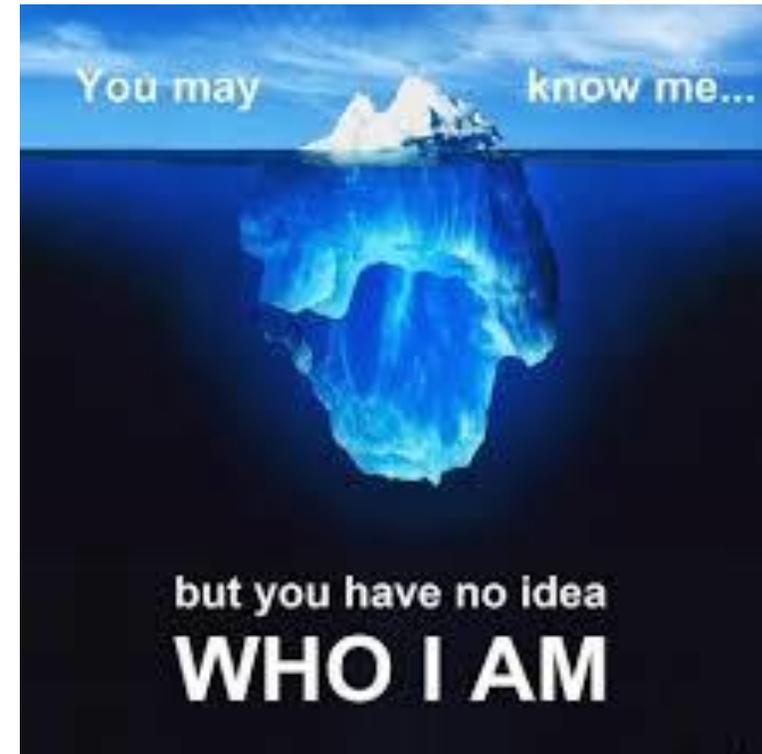
In a recent Latino Leader online discussion we asked panelists: Is the church your family?

They responded: “Sometimes. Local yes...maybe. The denomination – not so much.”

# Connection

- Our Branding Tracking Study collects pastor and leader assessments on agency impact at the local church level to adjust marketing programs and message targeting.
- Respondents express doubts about UMCom knowledge of local church needs.
- Levels of agreement that United Methodist Communications understands the needs of local churches dropped from 69% in 2017 to 62% in 2019.
- Respondents think much of the messaging from boards and agencies misses the mark. Only 1/3 of pastors (34%) agree that “Communications from UM boards and agencies are focused on my church’s interests and needs”. Compared to 42% who disagree.

Source: UMCom Brand Tracking Study (2019).



# Member Interests

- Members want information that helps them grow in their faith.
- They are confused by all the newsletters they receive.
- They want a newsletter that is different; stands apart from all the others.

“I receive so many emails from the Conference. I DO like and use them all, but I couldn't tell you the names of each. For example, I can't remember what UM Now looks like.”

“I get too many newsletters from UM Communications and News. It's hard to pay attention to which ones offer which content.”

**UNITED**  
*Methodist*  
**NOW**

**INSPIRATION**  
FOR DAILY LIVING



Goal is to help members grow in their faith.

Topics	% Very Interested
What United Methodists Believe	69
What it Means to be a United Methodist	65
Christian Living/Your Daily Journey	63
Inspiring Stories about United Methodists	59
History of The United Methodist Church	56

# What Motivates Spiritual Seekers?

## SEEKERS **CONSIDER VISITING A SPECIFIC CHURCH** BECAUSE:

**47%** it seemed like they would fit in

**46%** they heard good things about it

## SEEKERS **CONSIDER ATTENDING A CHRISTIAN CHURCH** BECAUSE THEY WANT:

**34%** to develop spiritually

**31%** to reconnect with Christian roots

**28%** their children to learn good values

## SEEKERS ARE **MORE LIKELY TO ATTEND A LOCAL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH** WHEN THEY:

**80%** have heard the music is good

**70%** are personally invited

# What is Important to Spiritual Seekers?

## WHY DO SEEKERS **CONTINUE TO ATTEND?**

First impressions matter! Seekers continue to attend a church because they feel:

**58%** accepted

**52%** welcomed during their first visit



SEEKER AWARENESS OF OUR TAGLINE  
**"OPEN HEARTS. OPEN MINDS. OPEN DOORS."**  
HAS GROWN FROM 43% IN 2017 TO 52% IN 2019

**77%** find it personally relevant

**89%** find it appealing



WHAT IS **MEANINGFUL**  
TO SEEKERS?

**50%** daily/weekly prayer

**48%** quiet reflection

**46%** time in nature



The path to finding a UMC is part of a bigger journey of finding oneself: pursuing personal growth, defining beliefs, and living an authentic life.

The value the UMC delivers is recognizing and including all; creating a safe space to ask questions and form personal beliefs without answers being dictated or opinions being judged, and; its commitment to community outreach.

Seekers are not as likely to be looking for a certain denomination as they are for a like-minded community; a place they feel they are seen.

# Seeker's say The United Methodist Church....

Meets me in my journey  
Is a safe place to ask questions  
Is a place to explore the questions  
Is where everything is coming together  
Is where it's OK to be me  
Is a place to grow  
Is a place that brings me joy  
Completes the circle  
Helps me accept myself  
Is a faith space where I am able to ask questions  
Is where something exploded in me  
Is a beautiful mess  
Is where no one hides anything  
Is where nothing is off limits  
Is where it OK to say I Don't Know  
Is where we have real conversations  
Is where I am on the right path  
Is where they accept the good, the bad and the ugly



# UMC Brand: Common Themes



**Accepts me:** The UMC turns no one away nor judges anyone seeking Christ.

**Enables me to help others:** The UMC engages the outside world and transforms it for the better, through local, regional, and global mission work, allowing me to help people physically, financially, spiritually and correct social injustices.

**Makes me feel at home; like I belong:** The UMC offers a friendly, family-like as well as socially, emotionally and spiritually supportive atmosphere comprised of genuine and meaningful experiences through individual relationships, and small and large groups.

**Makes me feel a part of something larger:** The UMC provides connection to other United Methodist Churches and Members worldwide and the ability to make a larger global impact through even more resources and people working together.

**Is relevant to my life today:** The UMC remains meaningful and relevant because of its ability to adapt and evolve over time in an ever-changing world.

**Is not too strict:** The UMC strikes a balance between structure and freedom from stifling rules, regulations and requirements, common in other Christian religions, churches and religious organizations.

**Fosters what I personally believe in:** The UMC is rooted in strong scriptural values and beliefs and is also a "thinking" person's Church.

Source: Denominational Branding Study (2018).

# Theological Perspectives Among Members

## OVERARCHING THEME

- This study data supports who we are – a VERY diverse denomination. This is our strength.
- The data can help us better understand our constituents and the environment we are operating in.
- Leader views and voices that get attention may be very different from member views.

**thē-ōl'ə-jē**

**theology:** n., pl. - *gies*. 1. The study of the nature of God and religious truth; rational inquiry into religious questions, esp. those truths posed by an organized religious community. 2. An organized, often formalized, body of opinions concerning God and man's relationship to God. 3. A course of specialized religious study.

noun usage:

*Theology is the science of living blessedly forever.*

*(William Perkins)*

*Theology is doctrine or teaching of living to God.*

*(William Ames)*

# Members Tell Us Where The UMC Should Focus



70% believe the primary focus of The United Methodist Church should be saving souls for Jesus Christ.



30% primary focus of The United Methodist Church should be advocating for social justice to transform this world.



63% believe the primary focus of mission work of The United Methodist Church should be in my local community.



37% believe the primary focus of mission work of The United Methodist Church should be global.



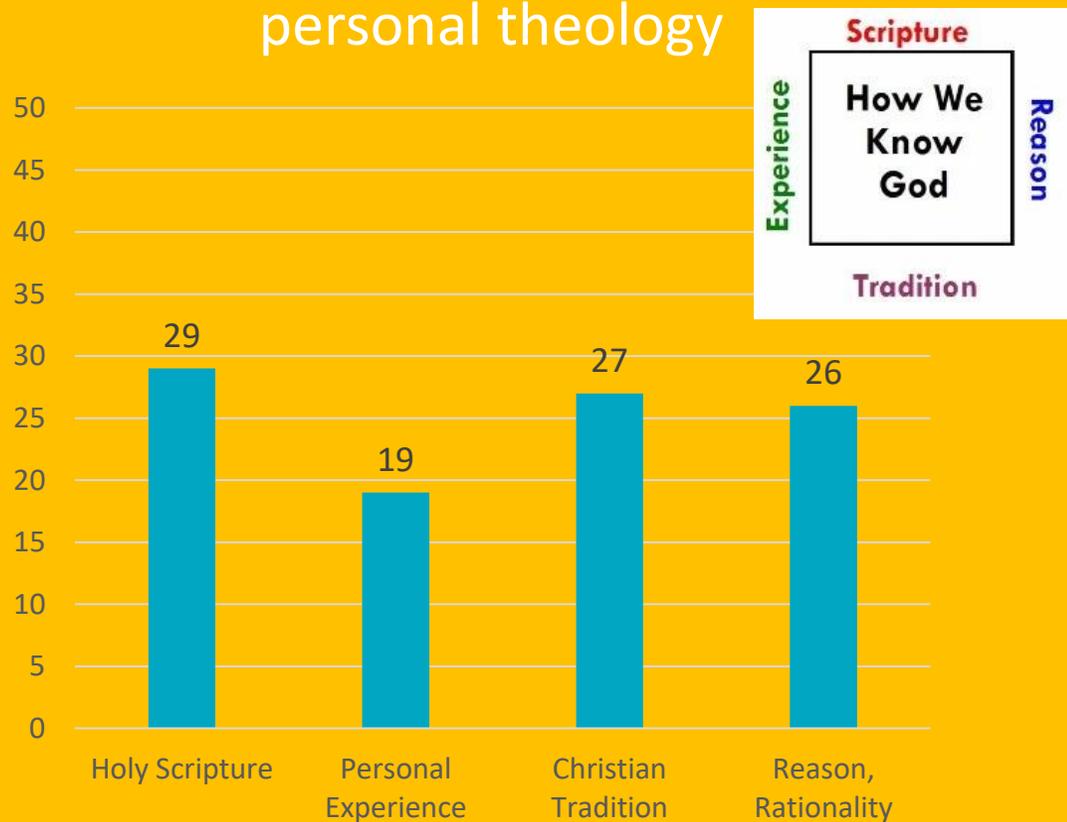
37% believe the primary focus of The United Methodist Church should be developing the faith of existing members of the church.



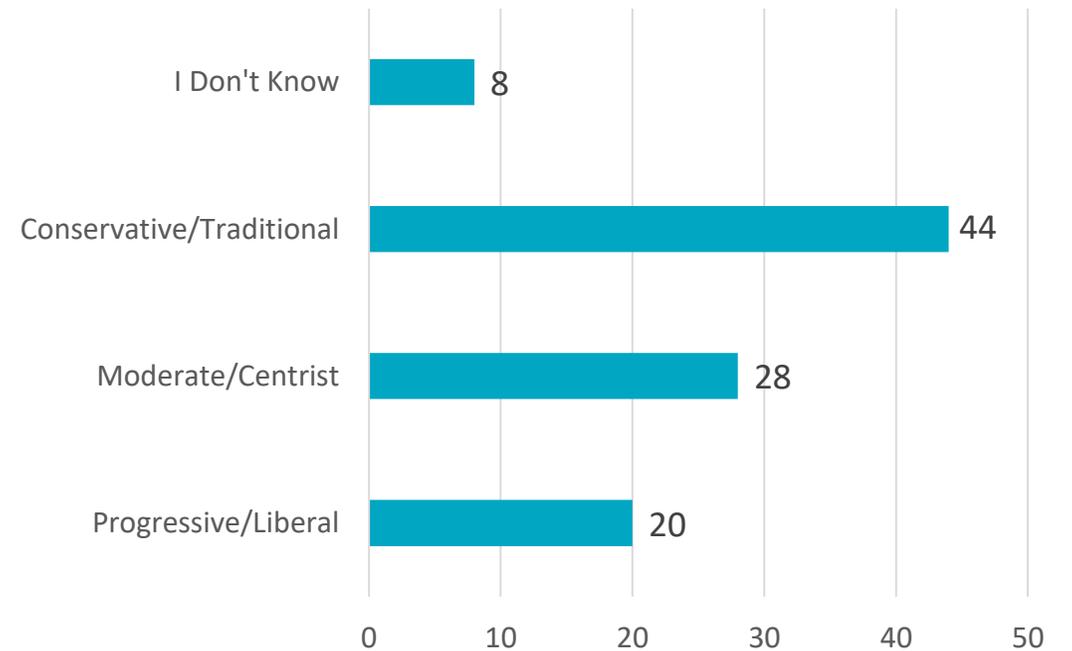
63% believe the primary focus The United Methodist Church should be bringing new people into relationship with Jesus Christ.

# Personal Theology Among Members

Most authoritative in your personal theology



## Personal Theology



Theology is the study of the nature of God and religious belief. Personal theology covers a wide spectrum, or range, and is often difficult to describe. As a United Methodist we would like to understand how you describe your personal theology. Commonly used words can help place each of us at a point on this spectrum. Please select from the list below that which best describes your personal theology. This is not asking how you vote in a political election. This is asking you to describe your personal theology.

# Impact of COVID-19

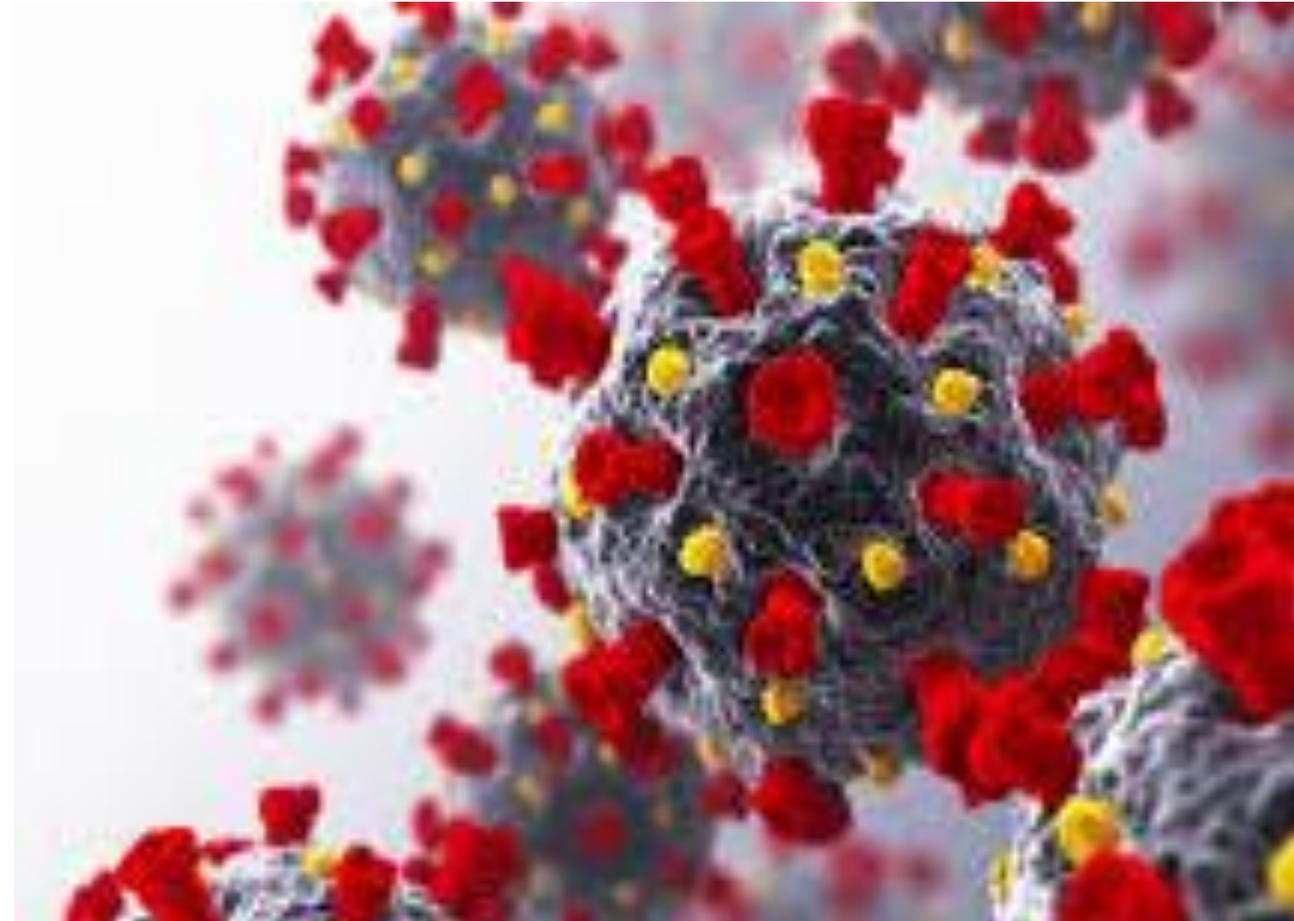
The COVID-19 crisis prompted the UMCOM Research Team to field a series of studies to understand what local churches are facing and how UMCOM can respond and prioritize assistance.

Phase I launched on March 26, 2020 and focused on ways churches are adapting. This study helped identify interest in resources and tools to support local church during the crisis.

Phase II was conducted in late April 2020 to assess more comprehensively how the pandemic is affecting congregations at this more advanced stage of the crisis.

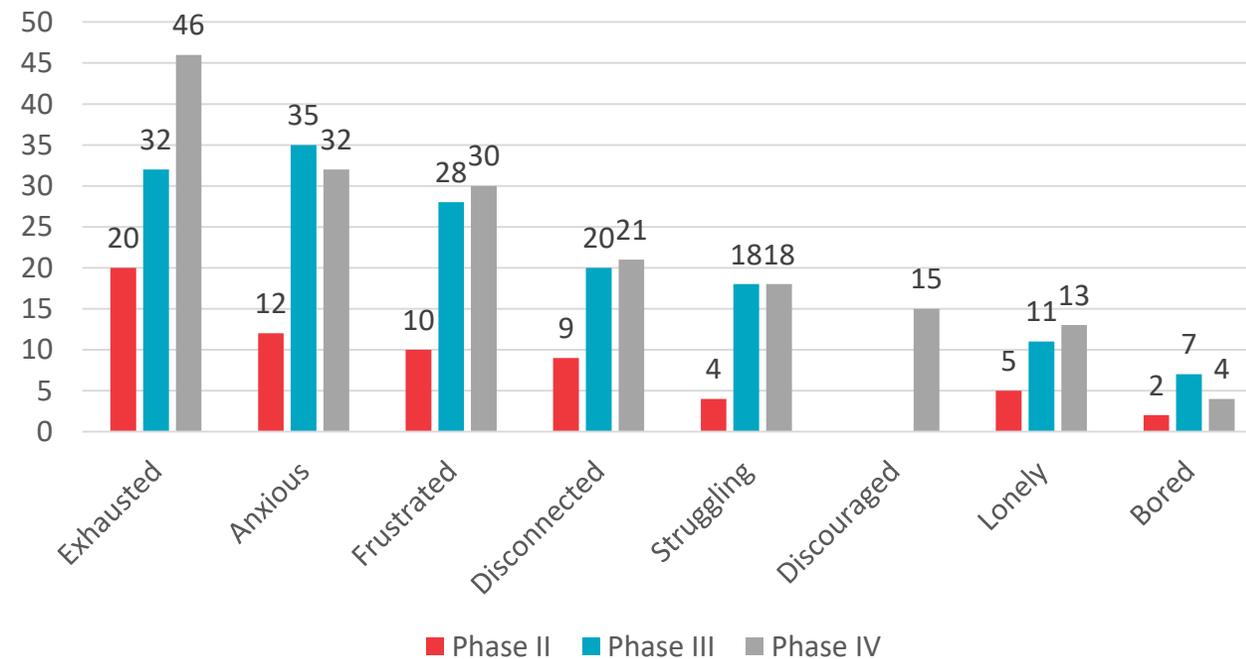
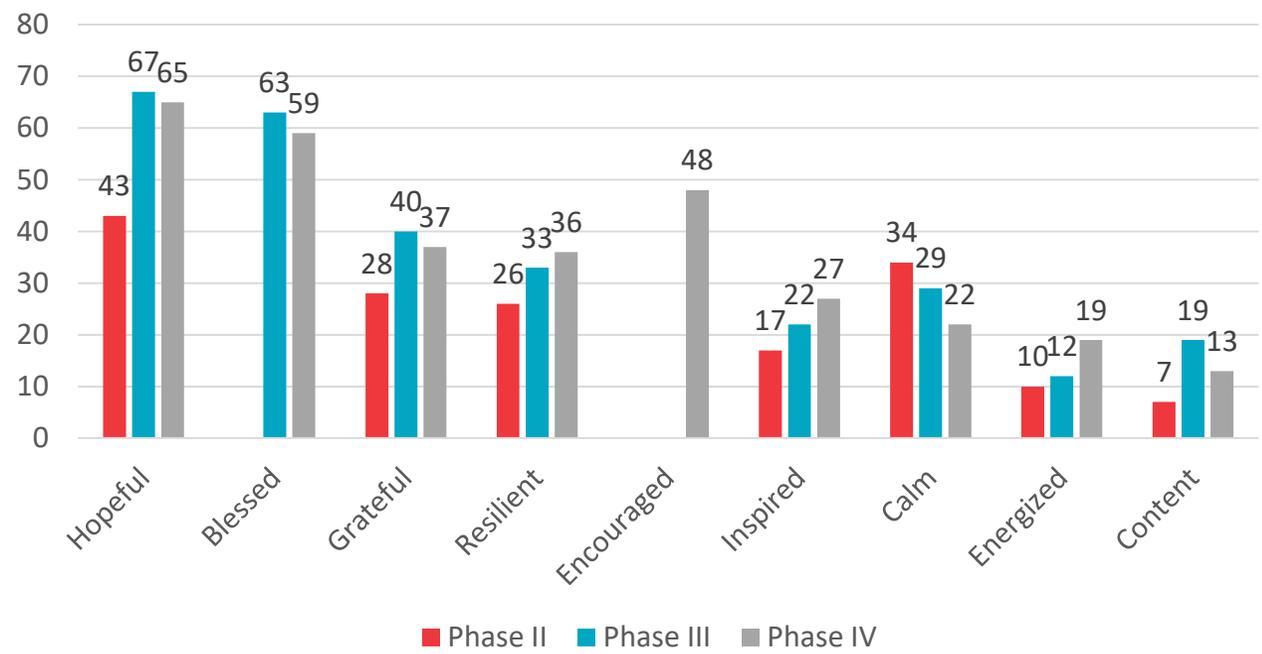
Phase III fielded in early June 2020 and continued to track attendance, online worship, giving, and added a series of questions about reopening.

Phase IV of the study launched May 19 and digs deeper into church needs as the pandemic continues. It offer trends over the past year.



# Pastor Wellbeing

- UMC pastors and leaders are very adaptive and capable of new ways of conducting ministry and supporting members. They have determination and commitment to find creative solutions. Churches boosted attendance by aggressively transitioning to online worship formats.
- Pastors are an adaptive, resilient group. Levels of reported exhaustion and loneliness are increasing. Pastors are committed, hard workers that need help.



# Member Perspectives on the Local Church

- 84% think their local church is headed in the right direction.
- The biggest issues facing the local church are declining attendance and financial concerns.
- Relatively few members indicate that they have children living at home.
- Non-whites are likely to say their local church is too involved in politics and social advocacy.



# Member Perspectives on Racism

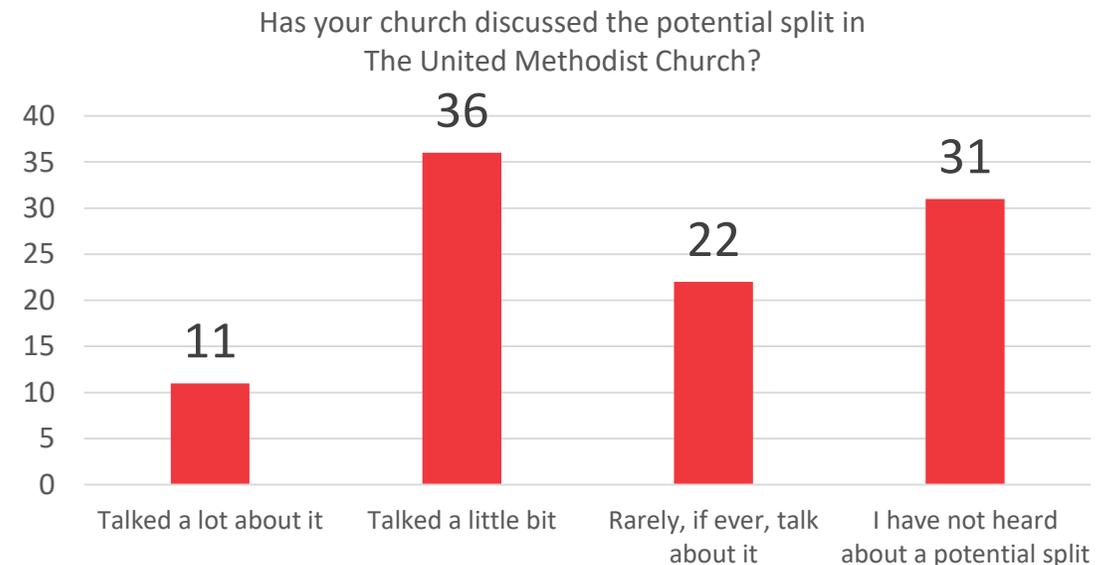
- Slightly over half of members think racism is very or somewhat prevalent in America.
- A quarter of members consider racism very or somewhat prevalent in The UMC.
- Members expressed support for the church's messaging during the unrest.
  - 16% of members said they had seen ads related to the UMC campaign against racism.
  - 72% agree with the direction of the message with only 7% in opposition.
  - 67% thought it was appropriate for the UMC to make such a statement.



# Member Perspectives on the Denomination

- The most important issues facing the denomination, beyond the proposed split, are similar to the issues faced by the local church.
  - Aging of membership 53%
  - Declining membership 53%
  - Financial struggles 30%
- Other Issues:
  - Discrimination against non-heterosexuals (18%)
  - Church too involved in politics and social advocacy (13%)
  - Lack of ethnic diversity (11%),
  - Only 3% saw racism as one of the top three issues.

Most members have little exposure to the proposed split. Only 11% say their church has “talked a lot about it”.



Most members (86%) expect they will remain in the denomination.



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