



# Worship

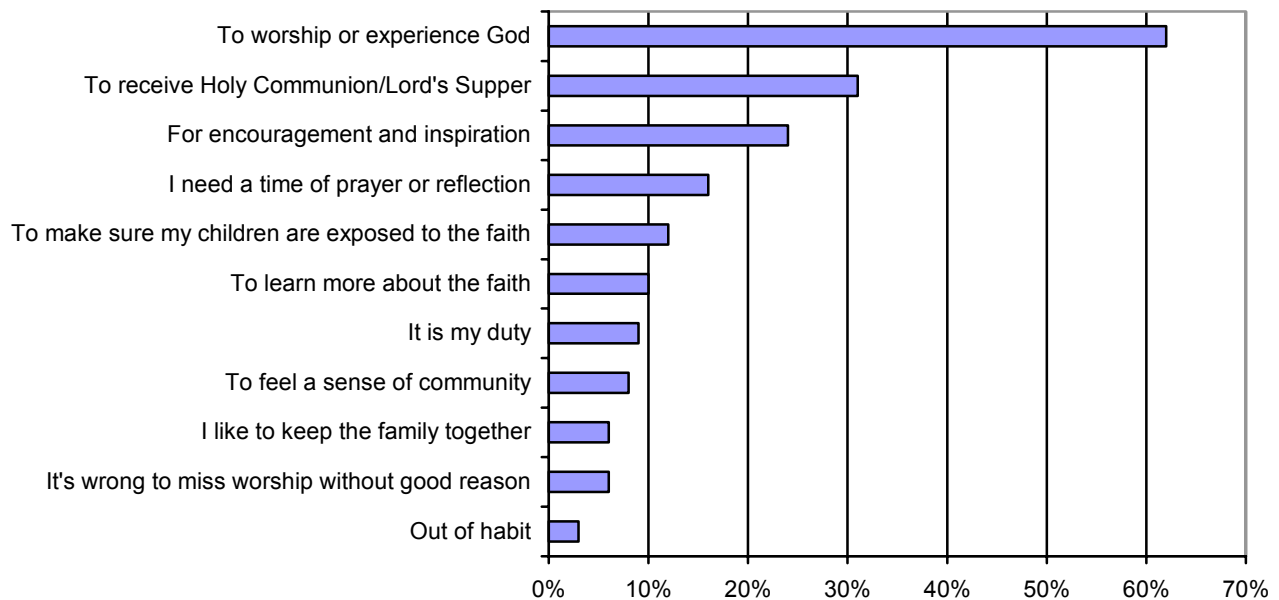
## Findings from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey

Worship is at the heart of every congregation and nurtures the faith of those who attend. Worship services are usually the main gathering of a congregation and the first place where new people connect with the congregation. What did worshipers from over 2,000 congregations that participated in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey<sup>1</sup> tell us about worship in their congregation?

### Why Do Worshipers Attend Services?

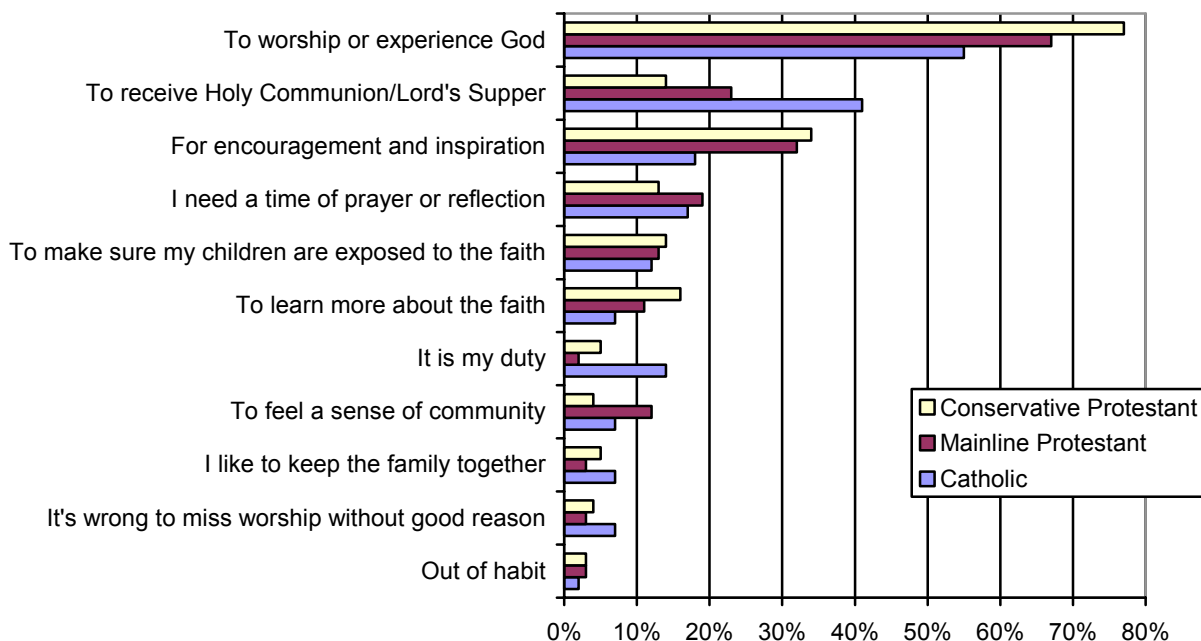
- Experiencing the presence of God is what draws most worshipers (see Figure 1). Worshipers focus on two reasons for attending services: (1) to worship or experience God (62% of worshipers said this was one of the two main reasons they attend), and (2) to receive Holy Communion or the Eucharist (31%). Other reasons for attending services include seeking encouragement and inspiration (25%) and searching for a time of prayer or reflection (15%).

**Figure 1: Two Main Reasons for Attending Worship Services**



- Theology plays a role. Reasons for attending worship vary by the type of congregation where people attend.<sup>2</sup> People attending Protestant congregations are more likely than those in Catholic parishes to seek to worship God and to receive encouragement. Worshipers in Catholic parishes are more likely than others to attend out of a sense of duty or to take part in the Eucharist (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Two Main Reasons for Attending Worship Services, by Denominational Family**

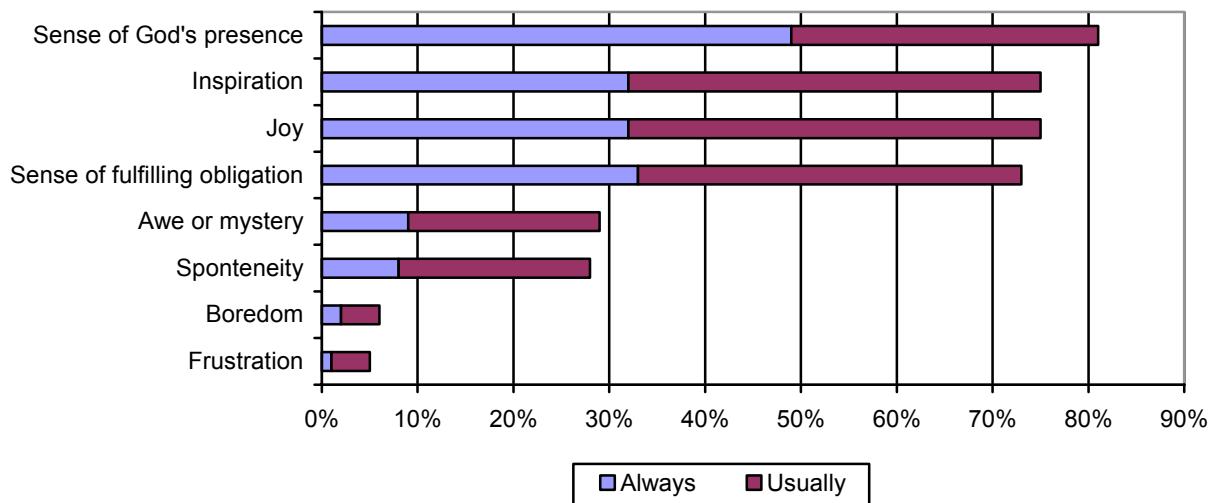


- Almost 90% of worshippers say they “look forward to coming to worship each week.” In fact, about half of worshippers (49%) strongly agree with that sentiment, and most of the rest agree.
- Do worshippers believe the services in their congregation appeal to people who don’t usually attend? Yes, the majority of worshippers (55%) believe their services appeal to people outside the church. Yet, more than one-third (38%) are not sure. Worshippers in conservative and mainline Protestant churches are more likely to believe their services appeal to the unchurched than are Catholic worshippers. Just one-half of those in Catholic parishes believe so, while 60% of mainline Protestants and 64% of conservative Protestants do.

**What Do People Experience in Worship?**

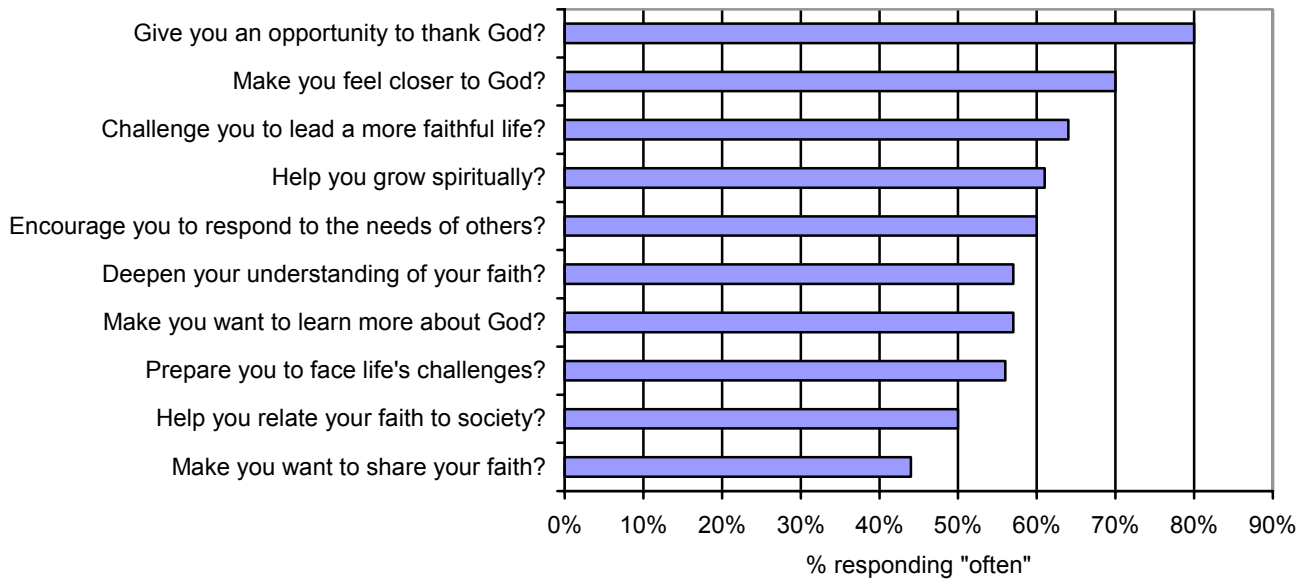
- Most experience God’s presence, inspiration, and joy. Yet, many also have a sense of fulfilling an obligation when they attend services (see Figure 3). Few regularly experience boredom or frustration.

**Figure 3. Experiences During Congregational Worship**



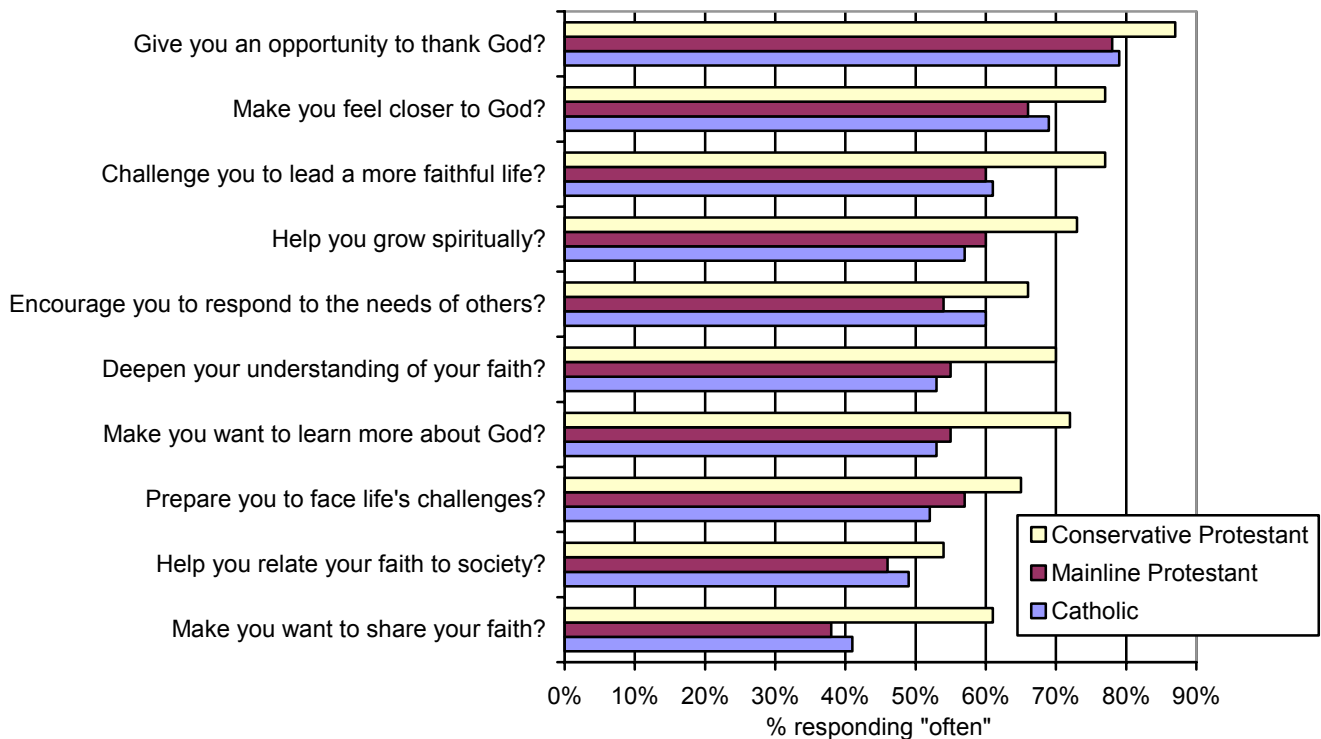
- Most say worship often gives them the opportunity to thank God (80%) and helps them feel closer to God (70%; see Figure 4). The majority of worshipers often experience all of the items on the list below except one. Less than half of the worshipers report that the services often make them want to share their faith (44%).

**Figure 4: How Often do Worship Services ...**



- Worshipers in congregations of different denominations/faith groups get something different out of attending services, as Figure 5 shows. Each of the ten experiences was more likely to be reported by worshipers in conservative Protestant churches.

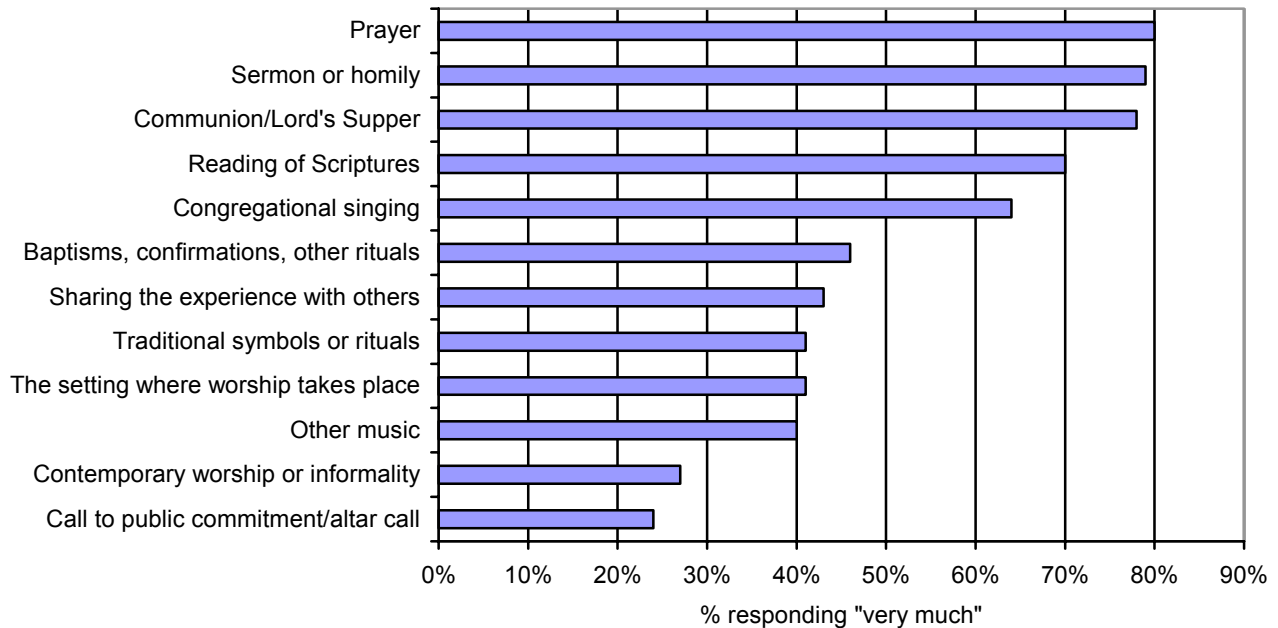
**Figure 5: How Often Do Worship Services ... ? by Denominational Family**



## What Matters Most to Worshipers?

- Worship services include a variety of activities and are conducted in a variety of styles. Which elements are *most* meaningful to worshipers? Three stand out: prayer, the sermon or homily, and Holy Communion (see Figure 6). The majority also feels that reading Scriptures and congregational singing are very helpful in making services meaningful.

**Figure 6: Extent to Which Each Element Makes Worship Meaningful**

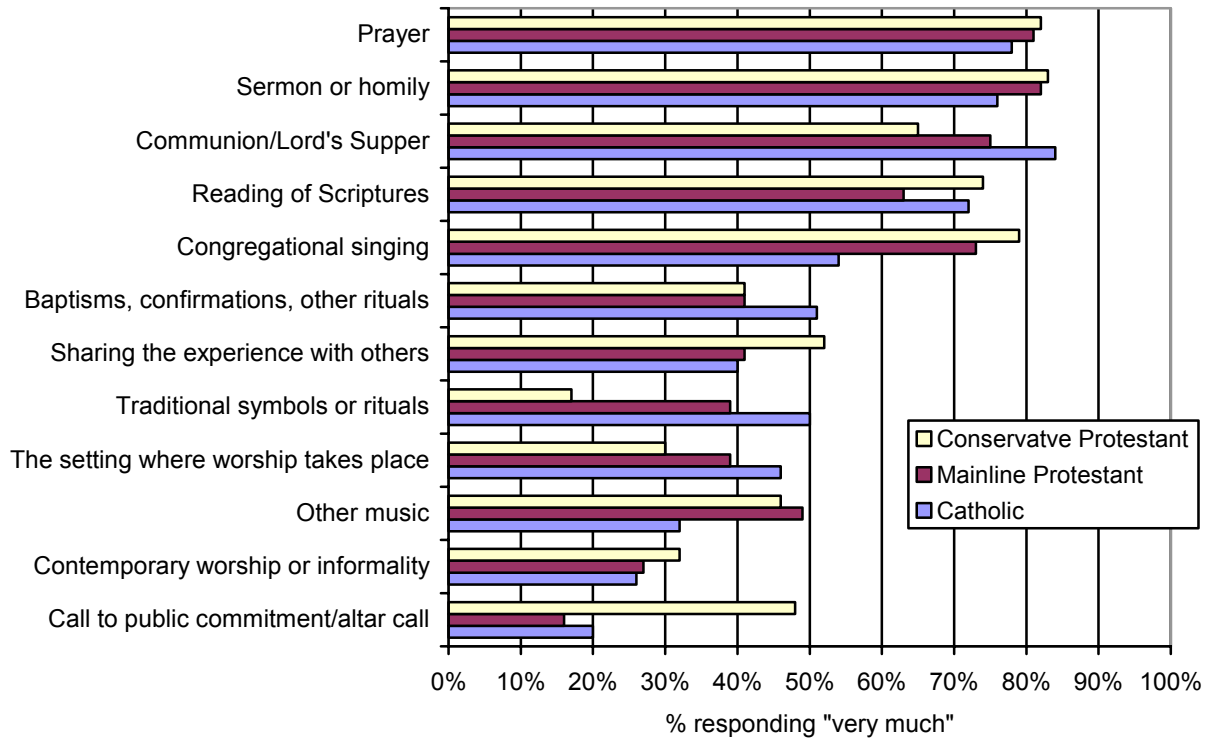


- Denomination or faith group differences were found here, too (see Figure 7 on page 5). Worshipers in conservative Protestant congregations are more likely than those in other congregations to find a call to public commitment (altar call) and sharing worship with others to be meaningful parts of the service. Catholics are more likely than others to find these aspects of the service to be particularly meaningful: Holy Communion, reading of scriptures, traditional rituals, the physical location, and baptism and other rituals.
- Worshipers who attend every week are more likely than others to find certain aspects of the service to be meaningful: sermons (very helpful to 81% of frequent attendees and 74% of others), Holy Communion (81% vs. 63%), reading scripture (72% vs. 62%), sharing the experience with others (44% vs. 38%), and baptism and other rituals (50% vs. 32%).

## What About the Music in Worship?

- Traditional hymns are still the favorite type of music for most worshipers (61%). Praise music or choruses (33%) and contemporary hymns (25%) are less popular. Other options were selected by less than one-quarter (e.g., music from a variety of cultures, 9%; contemporary music or songs, 13%). (Note that worshipers selected their two favorite styles of music.)

**Figure 7: Extent to Which Each Element Makes Worship Meaningful, by Denominational Family**



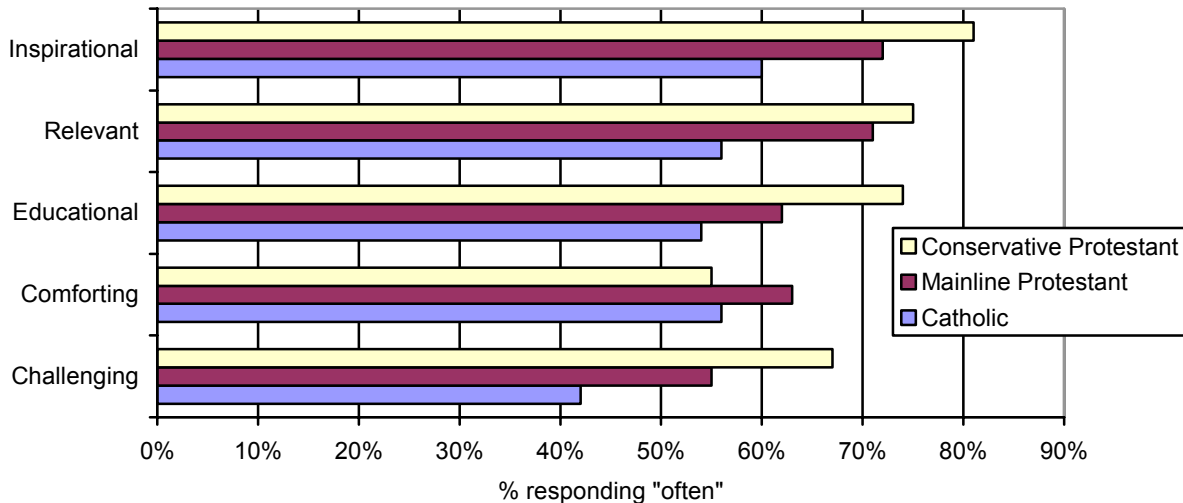
**What Other Preferences do Worshipers Have?**

- Worshipers are fairly evenly split in their preferences for worship that is enthusiastic and energetic (preferred by 44%) and worship that is quiet and reflective (41%). A similar split exists between those who prefer consistency versus variety in worship—43% prefer worship that offers new experiences each week, while 42% prefer worship that is consistent from week to week. (In each pair, the remaining 15% have no preference.)
- Conservative Protestant and Catholic worshipers like different types of worship. About half of worshipers in conservative Protestant churches prefer worship that is enthusiastic and energetic (52%) and offers new experiences (50%). Among Catholics, the largest groups prefer worship that is quiet and reflective (45%) and consistent (48%). Responses of worshipers in mainline Protestant churches are most similar to the overall results.
- Worshipers who favor quiet reflective worship also tend to favor consistency from week to week (66% do). And those who prefer enthusiastic and energetic services also tend to favor services that offer something new each week (63% do).
- The largest numbers of worshipers (37%) say that clear and relevant preaching of God’s work is most important to them (when asked to choose among four common aspects of worship). Almost as many (32%) prefer feeling moved by the power of God’s spirit. Fewer worshipers describe as most important mystery and awe in the presence of God (16%) and being moved to care for others (11%). For conservative Protestants, preaching is what’s most important to a majority (55%).

## How Do Worshipers Respond to the Sermons or Homilies?

- Two-thirds of worshipers (68%) say the sermons (or homilies) they hear in their congregation's services are often inspirational. Many also find them to be often relevant (64%), educational (60%), comforting (57%), and challenging (51%). As can be seen in Figure 8, worshipers in different types of congregations describe the sermons they hear differently. Conservative Protestants are more likely than others to say the sermons are educational, inspirational, challenging, and relevant. Mainline Protestants are more likely to say the sermons are comforting.

**Figure 8: Worshipers' Views of the Sermons they Hear, by Denominational Family**



## Is It All About Worship Style?

- There is no clear consensus about worship style. Four in ten (41%) say that traditional symbols or rituals are very important in making worship meaningful, while 27% respond the same about contemporary worship or informality (above in Figure 3).
- When asked what a congregation should do if other worshipers prefer a different style of worship, no strategy was the clear winner. One-third believe the congregation should offer different services with different worship styles, but one-quarter favor the status quo—continue with the current style of worship. Others suggest blending the styles in one service (14%) or letting the majority choose the style of worship (11%).
- Some worshipers may be resistant to change in worship styles. Less than half (46%) believe that people in their congregation welcome new styles of worship; almost as many (42%) are not sure if worshipers are open to such change. Faith group plays a role in these beliefs, though. In mainline and conservative Protestant churches small majorities (53%) believe their congregation welcomes new styles of worship; just 41% in Catholic parishes respond similarly.
- A majority (55%) believe that worship services in their congregations need to be more appealing to youth. This belief is somewhat more prevalent in Catholic parishes (59%) than in conservative Protestant churches (46%).

## How Are Worshipers Involved in Services?

- Most congregations offer opportunities for worshipers to be involved in worship services, including planning or leading worship, reading Scripture, serving Communion, being in the choir, or being an usher or acolyte. Almost four in ten worshipers (37%) say that in their congregation worshipers play an important role in planning and leading worship services, and another 27% say worshipers are somewhat involved in these tasks.
- Nonetheless, most worshipers (68%) are not themselves involved in such activities. Among those who are, 15% take part frequently in planning or leading worship and 13%, occasionally.
- Several factors are related to whether worshipers are involved in worship leadership. Larger percentages of worshipers in mainline Protestant churches (44%) and smaller percentages in Catholic parishes (22%) are involved in the worship service. Also, smaller percentages of new people (worshipers who began attending the congregation in the last five years) have specific roles in worship (23% of new people and 33% of “old timers” who have been attending for more than five years help to plan or lead worship). Finally, those who attend worship frequently are more likely to play a leadership role in the service—32% of those who attend every week, but only 13% of those who attend less frequently, help plan or lead worship.

## Conclusion

Consistent differences were found among congregations of varying denominations—Catholics, mainline Protestants, and conservative Protestants. Care should be taken in drawing conclusions based on these results. There are many differences between these three broad categories of congregations—in theology, polity, practices, and policies, for example, but also in the type of worshiper each draws. Worshipers bring their own expectations and perceptions to worship, and it’s possible that those drawn to conservative Protestant churches expect different things from their worship experiences. Thus, these differences may be due as much to differences in the denominations as to differences in the worshipers who choose to join such congregations.

## Data Source

U.S. Congregational Life Survey (2001). Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce. Louisville, Kentucky: U.S. Congregations and Research Services, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

## To Cite This Source

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<sup>1</sup> Over 300,000 worshipers in over 2,000 congregations took part in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey in April 2001. Congregations were selected to be representative of all congregations across the country. For more information: [www.USCongregations.org](http://www.USCongregations.org)

<sup>2</sup> Congregations were grouped into five categories based on their denomination or faith group: (1) Catholic, (2) mainline Protestant, (3) conservative Protestant, (4) congregations in historically Black denominations, and (5) others (non-Christian congregations). Most of the items on worship included here were answered by a sample of respondents only (n=1,156), which results in sample sizes for historically Black denomination churches and non-Christian congregations that are too small for analysis. Thus, differences by faith group presented here include only the first three denominational families.