

The Discipleship Council is a team of skilled servant leaders that (a) functions, as necessary, on behalf of the Annual Conference in between sessions; (b) ensures that Conference resources align to our vision, mission, and critical issues; and (c) discerns, develops, reviews, and evaluates the strategic direction of the Conference toward its vision and goals. The Baltimore-Washington Conference started the Discipleship Council in 2006 and it serves some of the functions that a local church's church council plays.

We persevere in faith, hope and joy as part of this beautiful, imperfect connectional church. We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses – no church or individual is an island unto itself but rather is connected in mission and ministry with other United Methodist churches, campus ministries, retreat & camping and other entities.

We continue to take seriously our responsibility to ensure that Conference resources align to its vision, mission, and critical issues as we discern, develop, review, and evaluate the strategic direction of the Conference toward its vision and goals.

As we shared with you at the last Annual Conference Session, our goals for 2021 included:

1. Alignment of Discipleship Agency work to the output of the Discipleship Ministries report.
2. At least 60 more churches are on a pathway toward racial justice.
3. Annual Conference Leaders learn and are practicing interculturally competent behaviors for the creation of beloved community.
4. Create and share a clear dashboard of ministry vitality.

We are grateful for the faithful work that has been done toward realizing these goals and our report will share updates on progress made as well as areas where we will continue to focus our attention in the upcoming year.

The Discipleship Council continues to measure progress on board goals as related to the Discipleship Ministries Report which are essential to the mission of inspiring and equipping local faith communities to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The development and implementation of the 2021 Discipleship Ministries Report is the result of a two-year process.

Beginning with the 2019 church conference season, the Pastor's Report included questions regarding the congregation's commitment to racial justice as well as questions regarding the congregation's development of an intentional discipleship process.

During the 2020 church conference season, churches responded to these questions via the Church Profile and last Annual Conference, we shared the results of the 2020 Church Profile form which is typically completed by the Staff-Parish Relations Committee and is not a report shared at Church Conference.

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In 2021, the questions were migrated to a new Discipleship Ministries Report with additional questions added. The Discipleship Ministries Report was seen by more church leaders as it was on the church conference agenda.

The Discipleship Council celebrates the time and diligence that went into developing and implementing the Discipleship Ministries Report. We also recognize the benefit of using this data to align the work of the Discipleship boards and Annual Conference resources to support the vitality of local churches and tracking progress year over year to see if our activities and interventions are yielding fruit. All of this helps us to better live into our vision of more transformed lives transforming lives. We also celebrate that over 90 percent of churches submitted their forms!

We continue to reclaim our Wesleyan discipleship even as we respond to the changing ministry and social landscape. John Wesley's Rule of Discipleship provides a holistic understanding of discipleship: "to witness to Jesus Christ in the world and to follow His teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship and devotion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit."

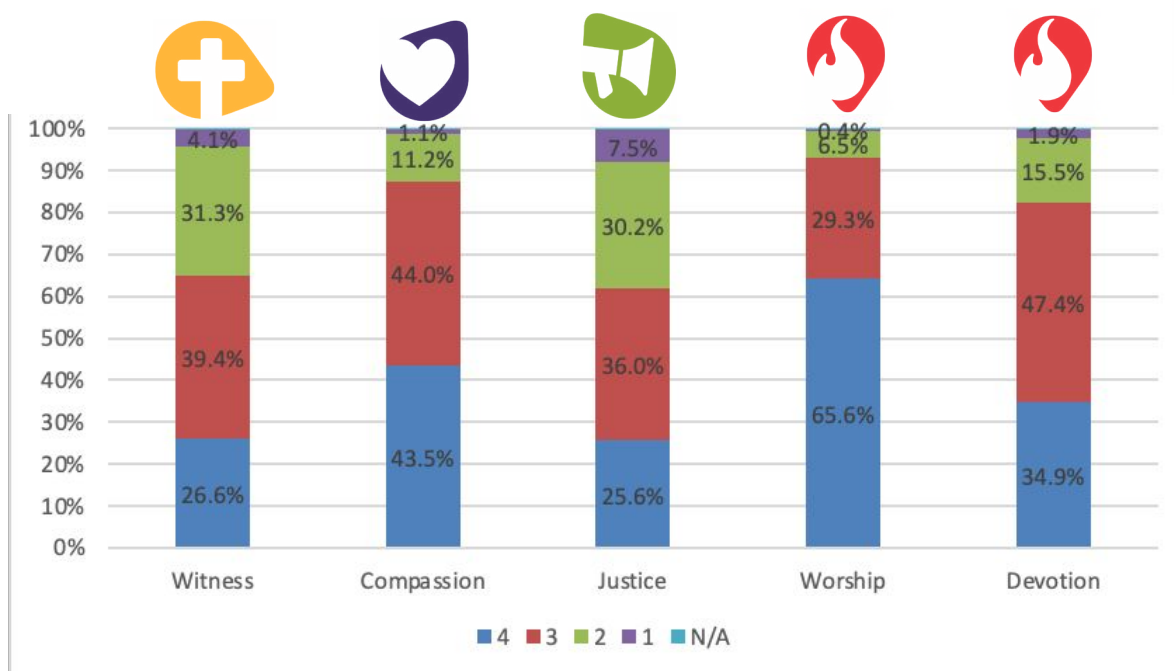
Deepening discipleship continues to be at the heart of all that we do and is one of the four pillars of vitality.

Within this context, churches were asked to rate each dimension by answering questions like Members witness to Jesus often, more often than not, sometimes, rarely or N/A.

This chart stacks answers from most frequent to least frequent behaviors. Ideally, we'd like to see the combination of blue and red (representing most or many type answers) reach at least the 90 percent mark. Worship is just over this mark with compassion and devotion almost there but neither practiced as consistently as worship. Both the spiritual practices of witnessing and justice are not yet practiced enough across all our churches.



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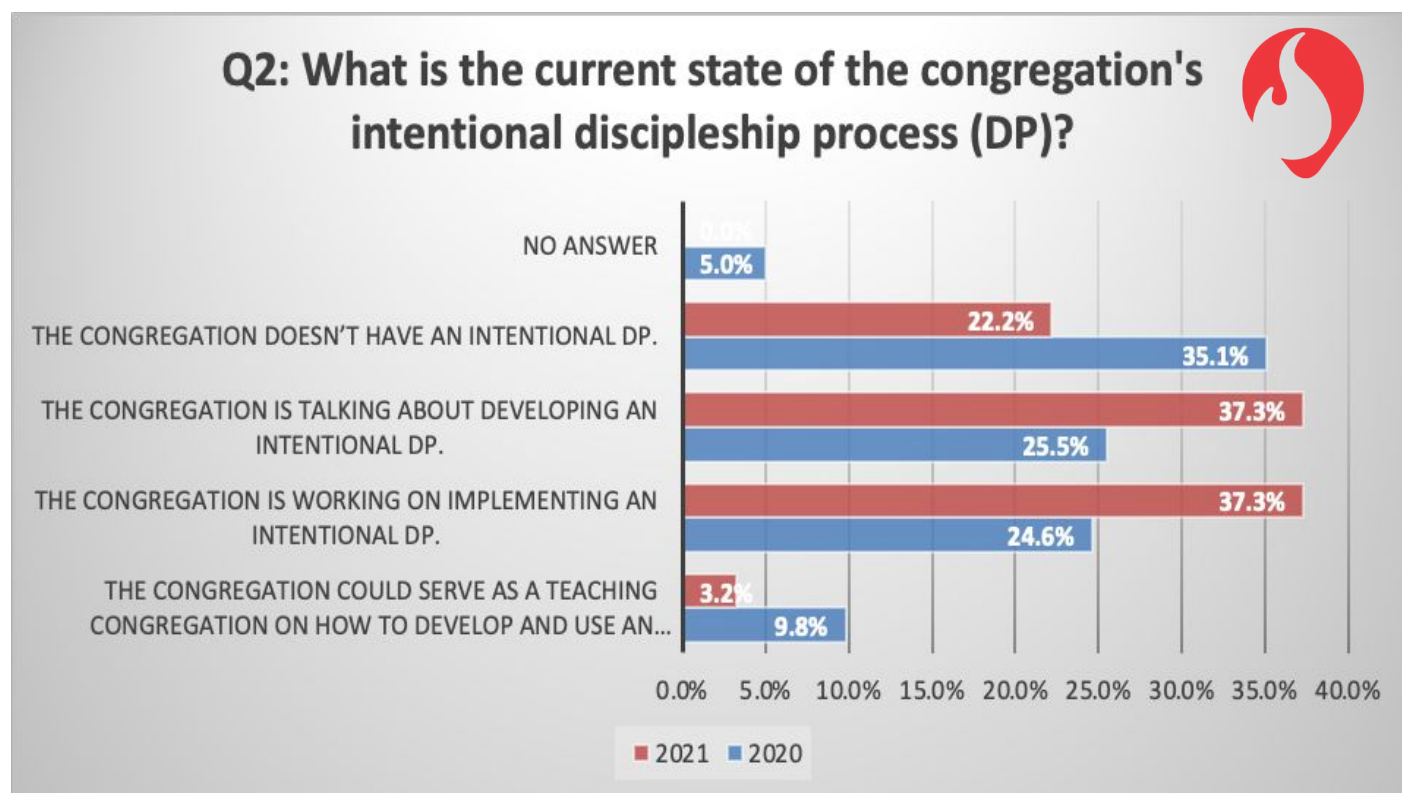


The lightest color is N/A which sits at the very top of each stack. Thankfully, there were fewer N/A responses across the discipleship dimensions, which suggests that more congregations are working to deepen discipleship through practicing the means of grace.

We have had an intentional focus on increasing the spiritual discipline of justice and celebrate an increase in the number of churches that are engaging in the discipline of justice when compared with last year.

The symbols at the top of the stack represent which of the five different Conference boards leads the work which includes analyzing and shepherding that data. Board chairs have expressed just how much overlap there is within the work of the boards and a desire to work more collaboratively.

It is difficult to deepen discipleship without an intentional discipleship process. This next chart illustrates the status of local congregations in the development of an intentional discipleship process.



In this year over year comparison, with blue representing 2020 responses and red representing 2021 responses, we celebrate the diminishing number of congregations without a plan, with an increase to 75 percent of our congregations either talking about it or implementing it.

We **celebrate** this information as it affirms for us that in the midst of uncertain and challenging times within the life of our denomination, congregations within our annual conference are remaining focused on one the core tenets of our faith – Wesleyan discipleship.

We also recognize the need for supporting those congregations that have not yet implemented an intentional discipleship process. And this is being supported by both our Leadership Development Board and Congregational Vitality Pathways.

Furthermore, it is important we continue to deepen discipleship to live into our commitments to the NEJ Call to Action and make real our United Methodist Constitution.

Since its inclusion in the UMC Constitution in 1968, “The United Methodist Church proclaims the value of each person as a unique child of God and **commits itself to the healing and wholeness of all persons**. The United Methodist Church recognizes that the sin of racism has been destructive to its unity throughout its history. Racism continues to cause painful division and marginalization. The United Methodist Church *shall confront and seek to eliminate racism, whether in organizations or in individuals, in every facet of its life and in society at large*. The United Methodist Church shall work collaboratively with others to address concerns that threaten the cause of racial justice at all times and in all places.” (Para 5. Article V. Racial Justice, *Book of Discipline*.)

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For the second year, we invited congregations to tell us where the congregation is on the path toward racial justice. People could--and did--select more than one response.

2021 Discipleship Ministry Report Q4: Advocacy & Action/Racial Justice Team



4. We invite you to describe where the congregation is with regards to racial justice. Check all that apply:
- a. → The congregation is on a pathway toward racial justice. ☐ Yes; ☐ No
 - b. → The pastor preaches on racial justice at least once a month as a part of our spiritual disciple of justice for all God's people. ☐ Yes; ☐ No
 - c. → There are monthly opportunities for dialogue and learning. ☐ Yes; ☐ No
 - d. → Leadership is having conversations in hopes of being able to meaningfully sign the antiracism commitment form. ☐ Yes; ☐ No
 - e. → The congregation has made a formal commitment to antiracism. ☐ Yes; ☐ No
 - f. → The congregation is engaged in all dimensions specified in the antiracism commitment framework. ☐ Yes; ☐ No
 - g. → The congregation has been on a journey toward racial justice for a long time. ☐ Yes; ☐ No
 - h. → The congregation is in agreement that we should be working toward racial justice. ☐ Yes; ☐ No
 - a. → If you answered "No" to items A or H, how is this congregation furthering antiracism based on Article 5 of our United Methodist Constitution.

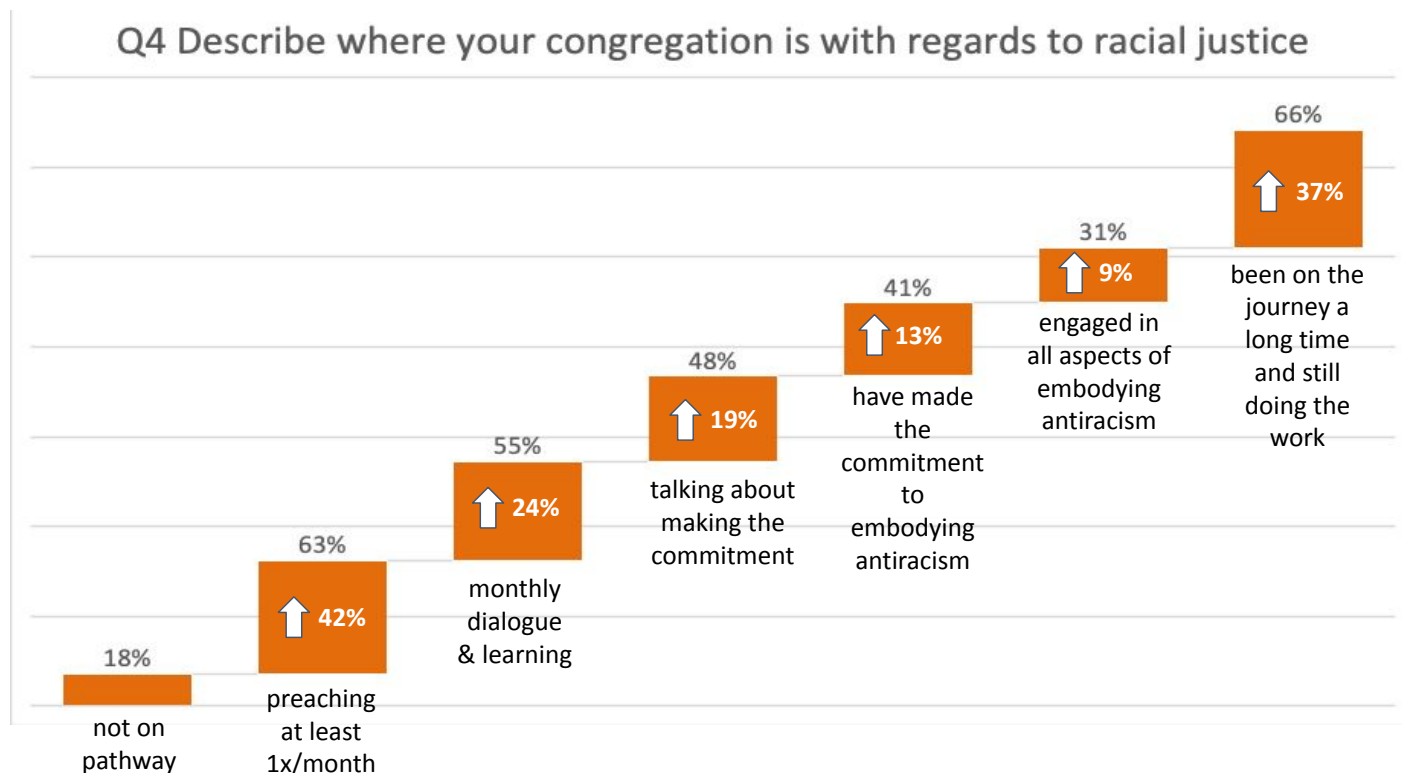
More than one statement could be selected.

We thank God that 82 percent of our congregations are in agreement that we should be working toward racial justice and we are praying that the 18 percent of our congregation who haven't yet begun the journey will take a step forward in the coming year.

As you look at this diagram, please note two things:

1. The numbers above the blocks represent the answers of congregations in 2021. The answers from 2020 are in white text within the block. An up or down arrow indicates whether there was an increase or decrease from last year to this year. All aspects increased this year except those who aren't on a pathway.
2. While we did NOT see at least 60 more churches on a pathway toward racial justice, (which was our 2nd goal for the year) we did see growth of those who were on the path.

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One of the Discipleship Council's roles is to keep this on the dashboard, ensuring the conference is providing adequate support for congregations to do this work and that the appropriate conference groups are helping lead, resource, and monitor progress on the We Rise United project. We thank staff and the Racial Justice Team for their consistent, diligent work for making this happen. We also thank lay and clergy leadership for your hopeful, brave faith and conversations that also support this work.

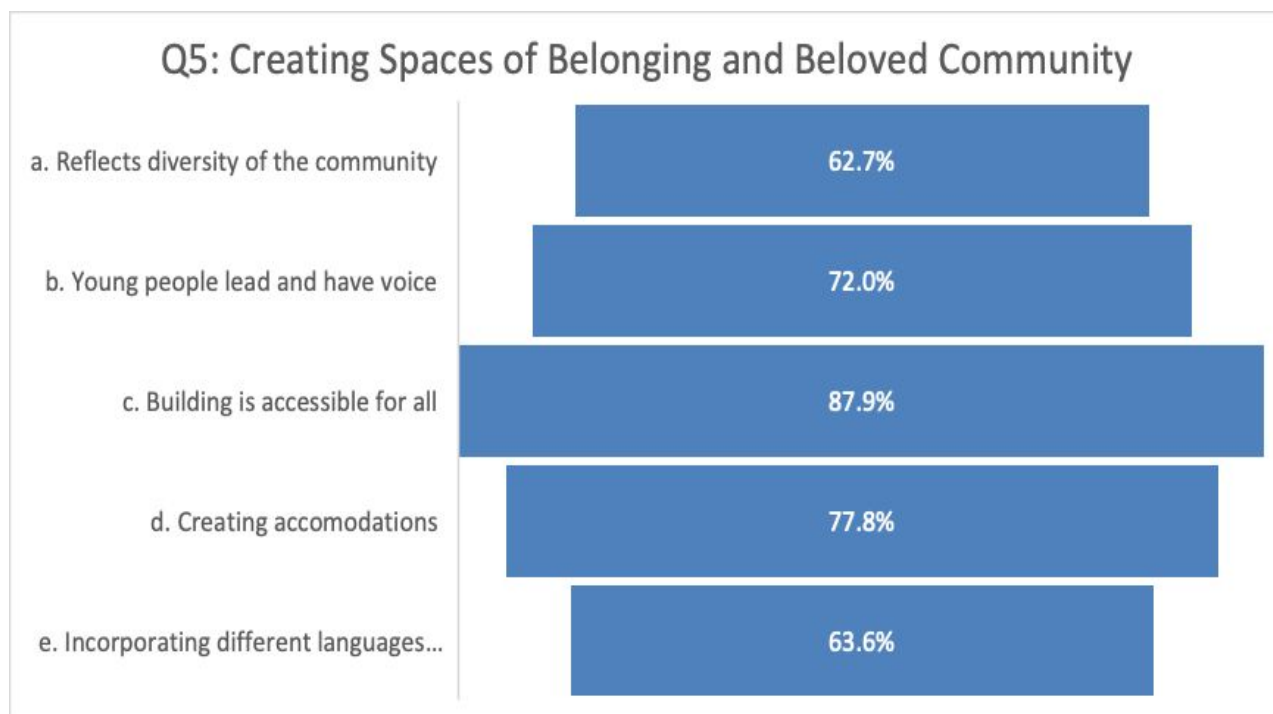
This year, a new question set was added to gain information about the degree to which congregations are intentionally creating spaces of belonging and community.

Congregations were invited to respond to questions regarding whether their demographics were reflective of the diversity of the surrounding community; whether young people were fully included in the life of the church; accessibility of the church building and the inclusion of diverse cultural expression within the life of the church.

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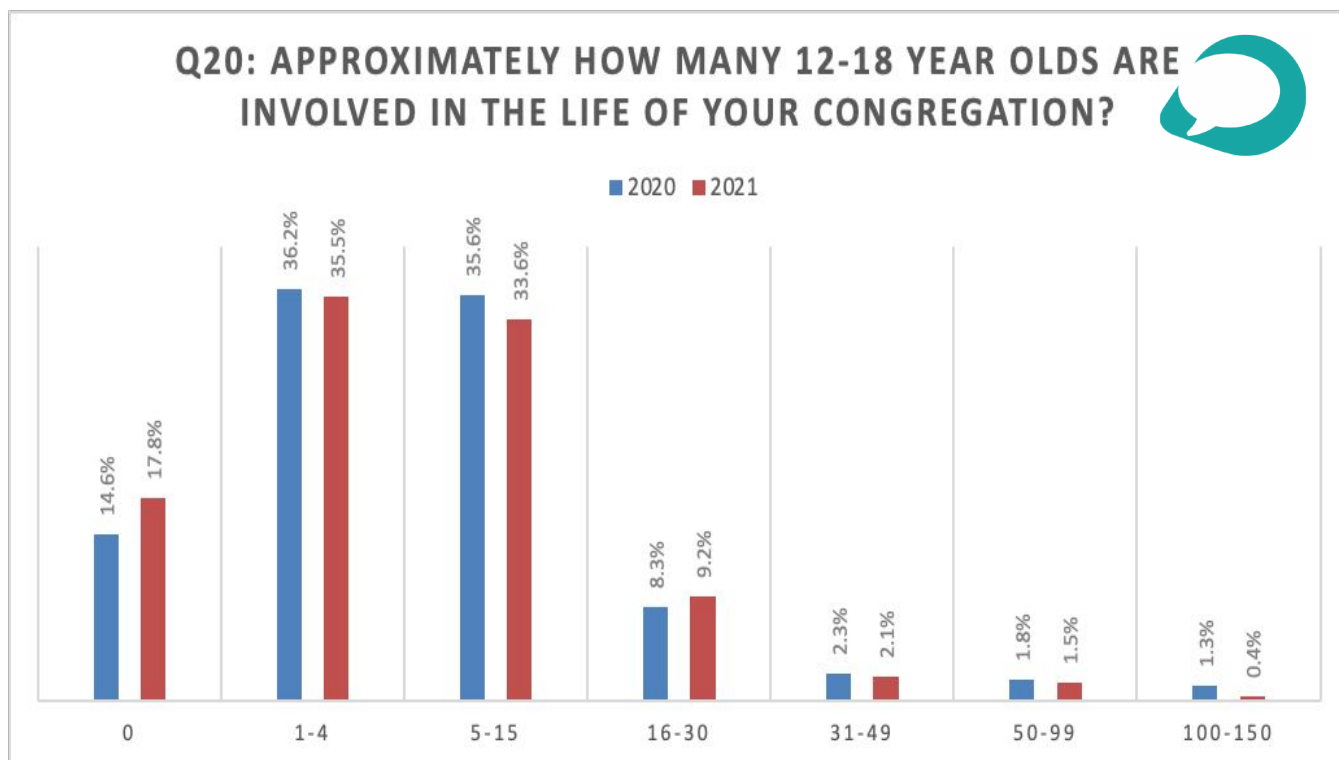
- a. → Our congregation is shaped by the community in all of its dimensions of diversity (age, color, disability, economic condition, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, immigration status, intellectual differences, national origin, racial identity, and sexual orientation). ☐ Yes; ☐ No
- b. → Young people have leadership positions and voice as well as others. ☐ Yes; ☐ No
- c. → Our church building is accessible to people of a variety of physical abilities. ☐ Yes; ☐ No
- d. → We are working with participants, members and persons who use the space to create accommodations that enable them to fully engage in the life of the congregation. ☐ Yes; ☐ No
- e. → If we have different languages and/or nations represented in our congregation we find ways to incorporate all participant's cultures into our common, collective culture. ☐ Yes; ☐ No
- f. → What ministries and accommodations do you offer so that it reflects an increased diversity of people in the community and congregation?

The picture below captures the responses provided by congregations. We continue to analyze this data so we may better interpret and articulate its meaning, as well as address some inconsistencies in responses.



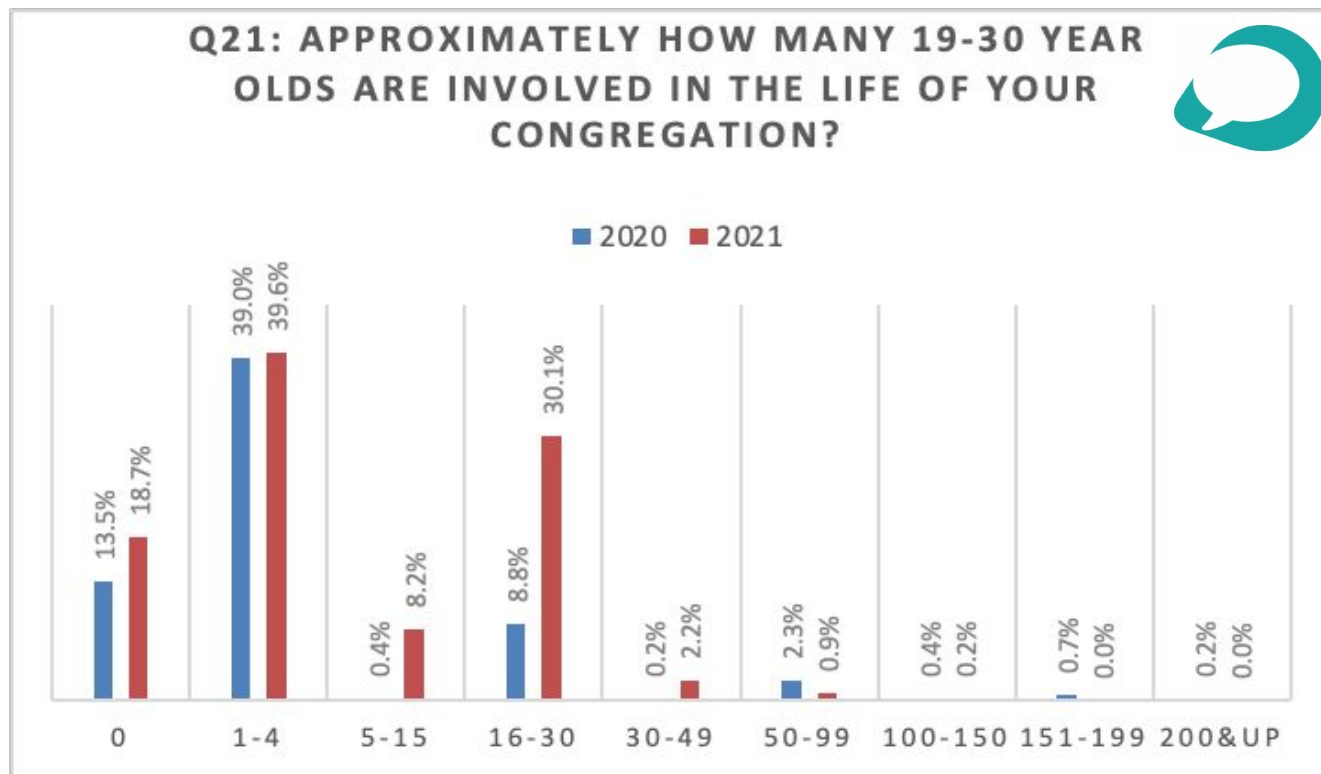
For example, while more than 70 percent of our congregations report inclusive behavior regarding youth, more churches reported having no youth involved in the life of the congregation

at all, as reflected in the diagram below. The impact of Covid-19 is significant on young people's ministry as families try to stay safe and young people may not be interested in engaging through more virtual activities.



The picture for young adults seems even more dramatic as the top four size groups have diminished significantly and we see a rise in the number of young adults who have disconnected from the church. The Young People's Ministry board and staff are responding to this trend and they have made significant strides in connecting with many different populations of young adults and creating spaces of belonging, expression and innovation.

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Effectively measuring ministry vitality remains of critical importance. This year we separated out some of the statements within this section to have a better sense of what is going on within our congregations. The highlighted rows are true year over year comparisons.

Which Best Describes Congregation's Level of Vitality

	2020	2021	Difference
a. No professions of faith for the past 3 or more years.	3.7%	13.1%	9.40%
Struggling to pay our bills and don't have the energy to maintain ministry.	0.7%		
b. Struggling to pay our bills.		16.0%	
c. Don't have the energy to maintain ministry.		7.8%	
d. In decline and have tried many things but none of them have worked.	4.6%	14.2%	9.60%
e. Stagnant or in decline but are hopeful our current initiatives will bear fruit.	18.8%	53.2%	34.40%
f. Stagnant in terms of number of persons engaged.		47.2%	
Stagnant in terms of number of persons engaged but growing as disciples.	28.4%		
We are growing in our discipleship and engagement of persons	39.2%		
g. Growing in discipleship		72.4%	
h. Growing # of people engaged		62.1%	

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We **celebrate** that:

- 72.4 percent report that they are growing in their discipleship *and*
- 62.1 percent report a growing number of people engaged.

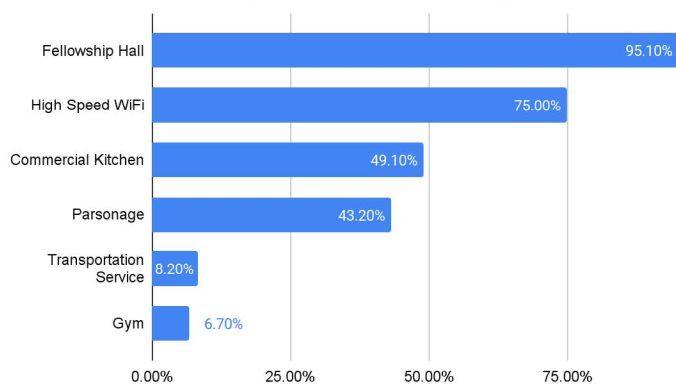
During our time of discussion and discernment around this data, robust conversations were had around the following aspects:

- an increase in the percentage of churches with no professions of faith in the past 3 years.
- while there was a reported increase in churches experiencing decline, there was also a 34 percent increase in churches reporting a sense of hope that their current initiatives will bear fruit.

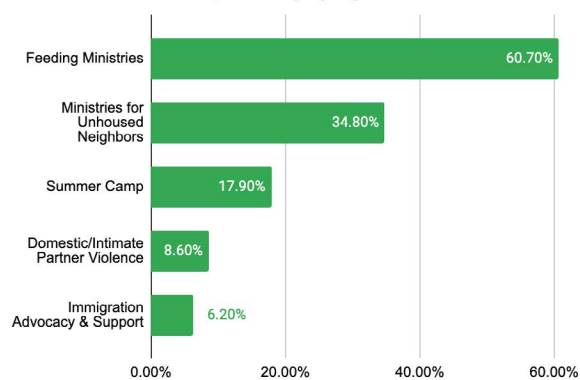
Discipleship Council members acknowledged how hopeful and powerful this is during these challenging times. We celebrate and are grateful that churches and ministries are willing to try new things.

This year we also asked congregations to share with us information regarding God-given assets within their physical plant and partnerships within the local community. Some of this information is illustrated in the charts below. This valuable information helps to provide a snapshot of the potential for community impact. We are grateful for the faithful stewardship of congregations within the Annual Conference and we look forward to seeing how these assets and resources will be used to bear fruit within the communities they serve.

Opportunities for Doing Good with Our Buildings



BWC Churches Report Engaging in These Ministries



We also acknowledge the opportunity that this provides the Discipleship Council to resource our Discipleship Agencies as they continue to support, equip and walk alongside congregations that are *taking risks* and envisioning new ways to engage in impactful ministry.

Our third goal is that Annual Conference Leaders learn and are practicing interculturally competent behaviors for the creation of beloved community, so that by 2026, 100 percent of our churches are doing work to grow in practicing interculturally competent behaviors needed for beloved community throughout the conference.

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We are pleased to report that progress is being made toward this goal as you will read in the We Rise United report. The eight-session Journey to Beloved Community course is structured around the intercultural maturity covenant to create beloved community that embodies inclusion, diversity, equity and antiracism. Not only will it be used to orient new leaders and staff, but it will also be available for local churches to use as an eight week study.

Our fourth and final goal is to create and share a clear dashboard of ministry vitality. We have made progress on this goal through the development and implementation of the Discipleship Ministries Report. The data from this report enables us to establish a clear picture of ministry strengths and weaknesses and helps us to inform the work of our Discipleship agencies as they set priorities for supporting and equipping our congregations for ministry vitality.

In conclusion, we are excited to see how our Episcopal leader's vision of 100 percent of our churches operating at 100 percent vitality might provide a shared focus and vocabulary of thriving for conference ministries and local churches alike.

Submitted By:

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