

2023
ORTHODOX CONVERT SURVEY
SUMMARY

Prepared for the 2023 Parish Development Forum

Presentation Goal

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- Relevant background info...
 - ▣ on recent Orthodox Christian converts, based on “2023 Orthodox Convert Survey”
- Prepare you...
 - ▣ for portions of the Forum *Project 2030* discussion on “Attracting and Integrating Converts”

This presentation cannot possibly cover all of the insights from the Survey.

Balance...

Entertain

vs

Equip

Summary

vs

Verbatim

“Convert”:

in this context is a short hand *label* for a person who has intentionally embraced Jesus Christ through the Orthodox Faith

The term *convert* is NOT intended to describe or imply a different or separate class or type or “quality” of Orthodox Christian.



We're all converts



Less Familiar: Adult Chrismation; Baptism

6



Even Less Familiar: Larger Multiples

Happens only in 'South'?



Rockford IL

St Herman of Alaska Orthodox Church, *Hudson OH*

8

“We’ve had more catechumens in the past 18 months than we had in past 18 years.”
Fr. Basil Rusen



Convert 'Dividend'

9

- ❑ Serious about their faith; knowledgeable
- ❑ Often active in ministry
- ❑ Often good financial stewardship
- ❑ Fresh ideas
- ❑ Diversify the parish: age; background
- ❑ Children
- ❑ Invite others



What We Hoped to Learn from the Survey

10

- Why the recent increase in Orthodox converts?
 - ▣ Why now? Continue?
- Why some parishes... not others?
- How to connect to this “trend”?
 - ▣ Characteristics
 - ▣ Seeking...what?
 - ▣ Information/formation
 - ▣ Their experiences? Good/less good

Survey Questions

773 Responses = a ton of information!

11

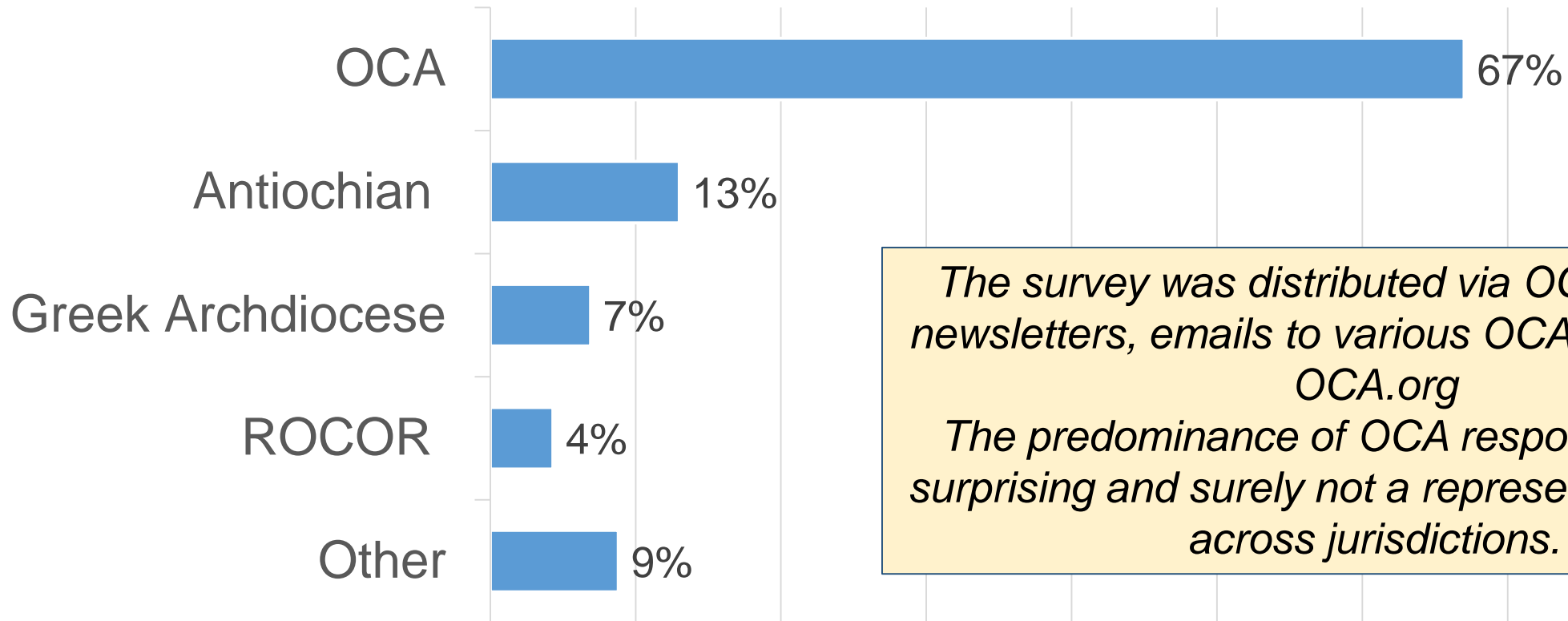
- Closed end questions
 - ▣ Age
 - ▣ Gender
 - ▣ Parish Location
 - ▣ Education
 - ▣ Marital status
 - ▣ Previous religious tradition
 - ▣ When converted
- Open ended questions
 - ▣ How did you become acquainted with Orthodoxy?
 - ▣ Attractive qualities of Orthodoxy?
 - ▣ Most difficult issues
 - ▣ Selecting a parish
 - ▣ Turnoffs & Surprises

Jurisdiction of Survey Respondents

At the Time They Converted

12

What Jurisdiction? n=773

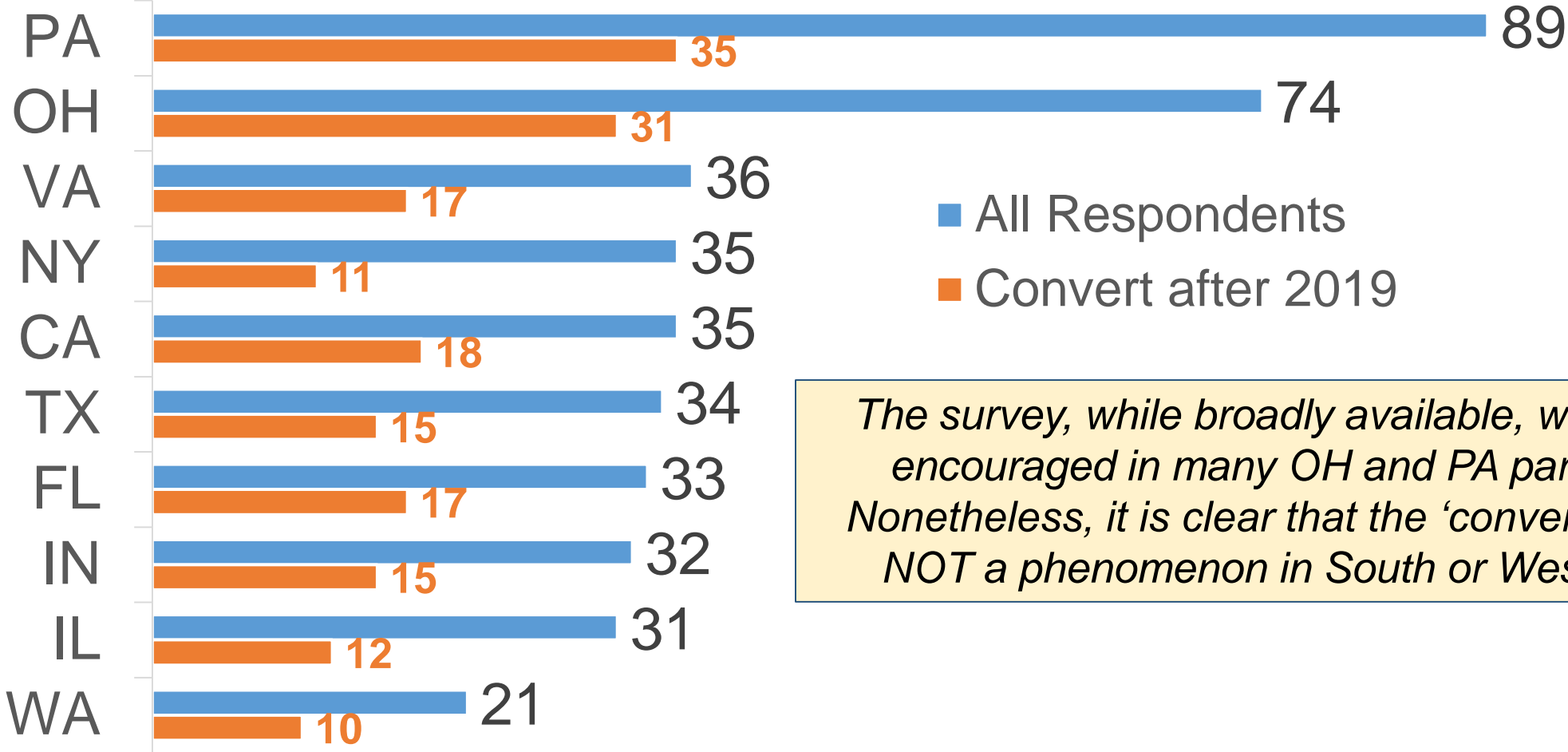


The survey was distributed via OCA Dioceses, newsletters, emails to various OCA parishes; and OCA.org

The predominance of OCA respondents is not surprising and surely not a representative sample across jurisdictions.

Location of Respondent's Parish at Conversion

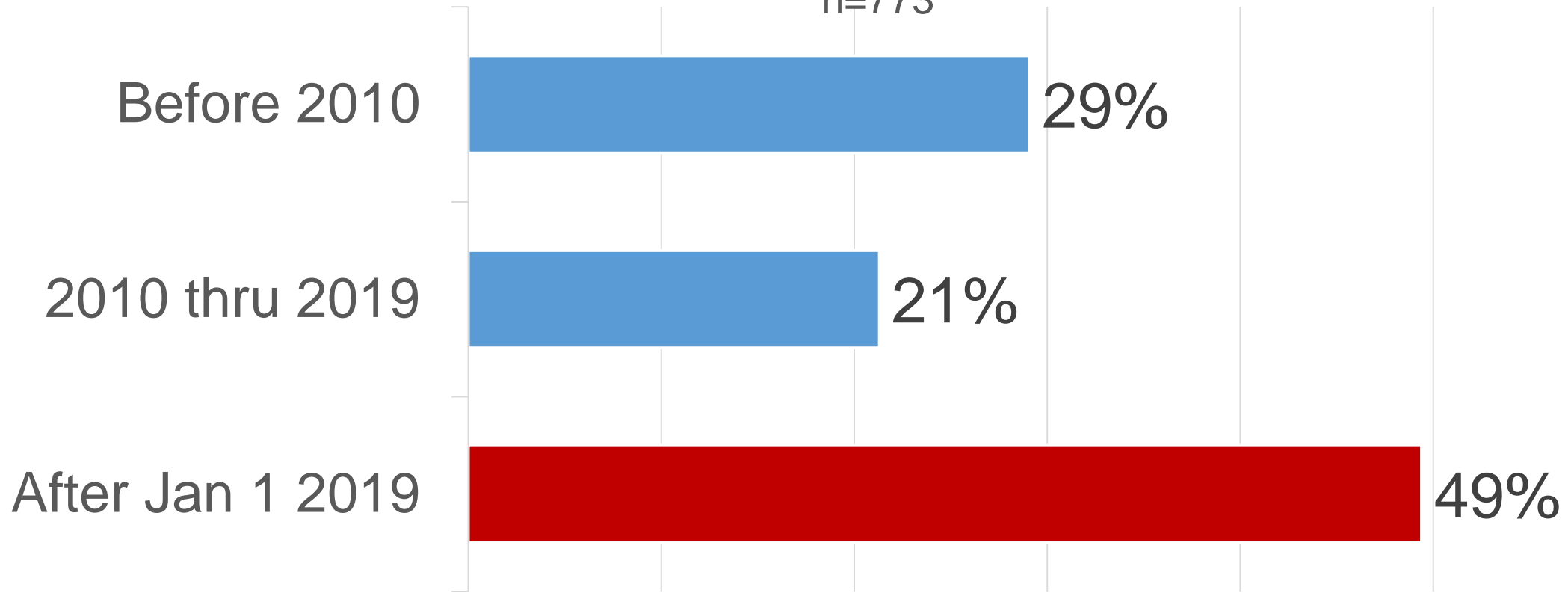
45 States in All



The survey, while broadly available, was likely encouraged in many OH and PA parishes. Nonetheless, it is clear that the 'convert flow' is NOT a phenomenon in South or West only.

Almost Half Converted ~ Since Pandemic Began

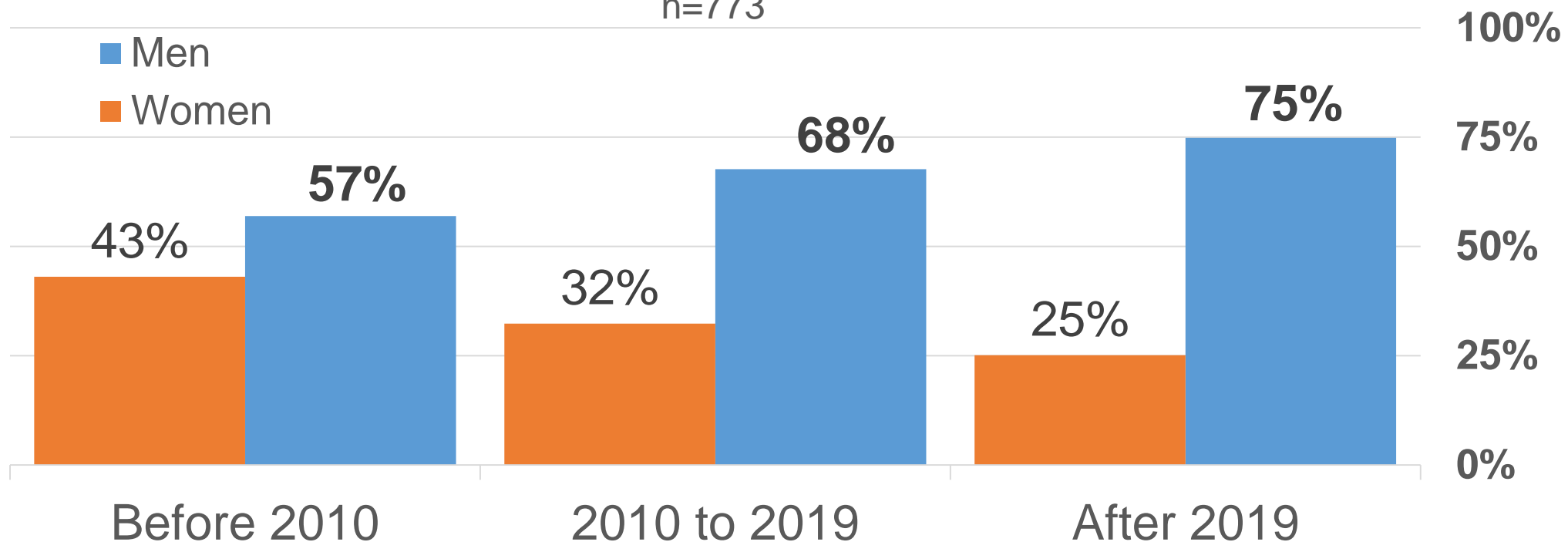
Conversion Date
n=773



Male % Increasing

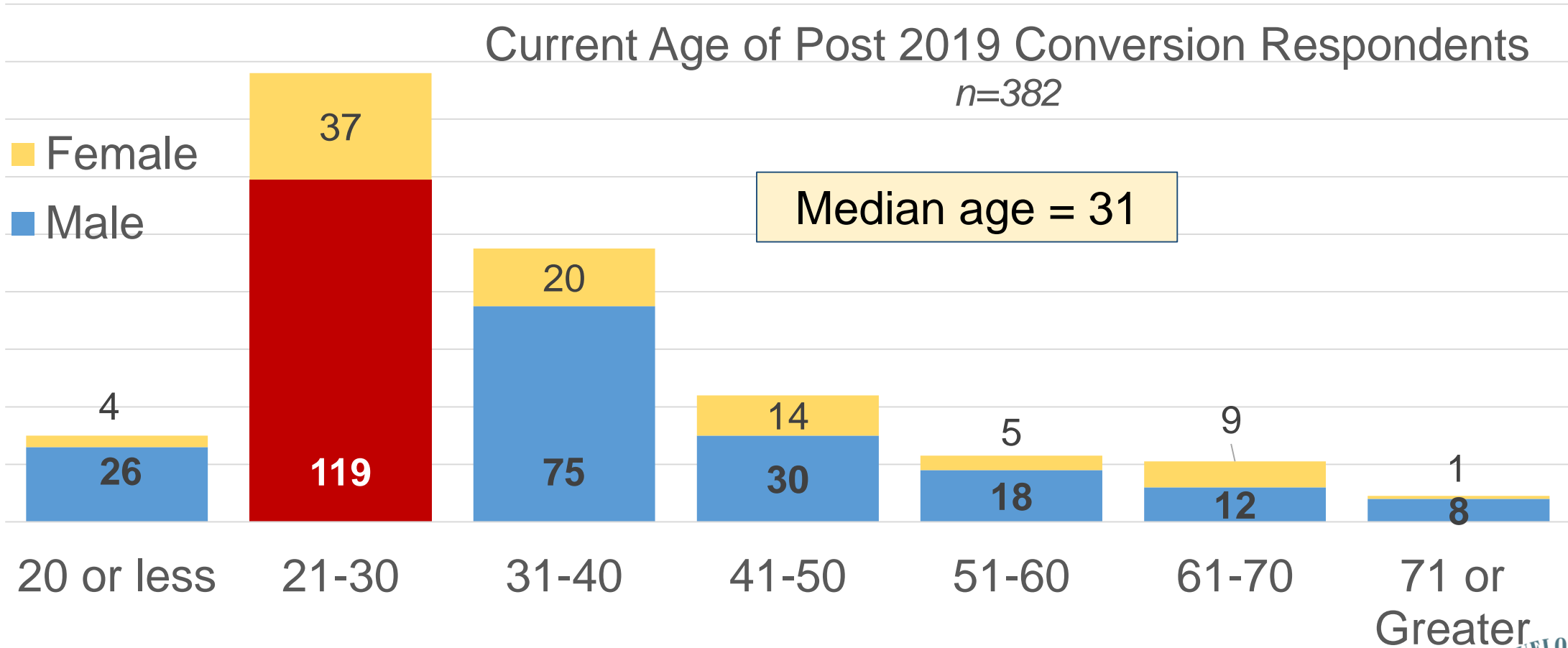
Gender vs. Conversion Period

n=773

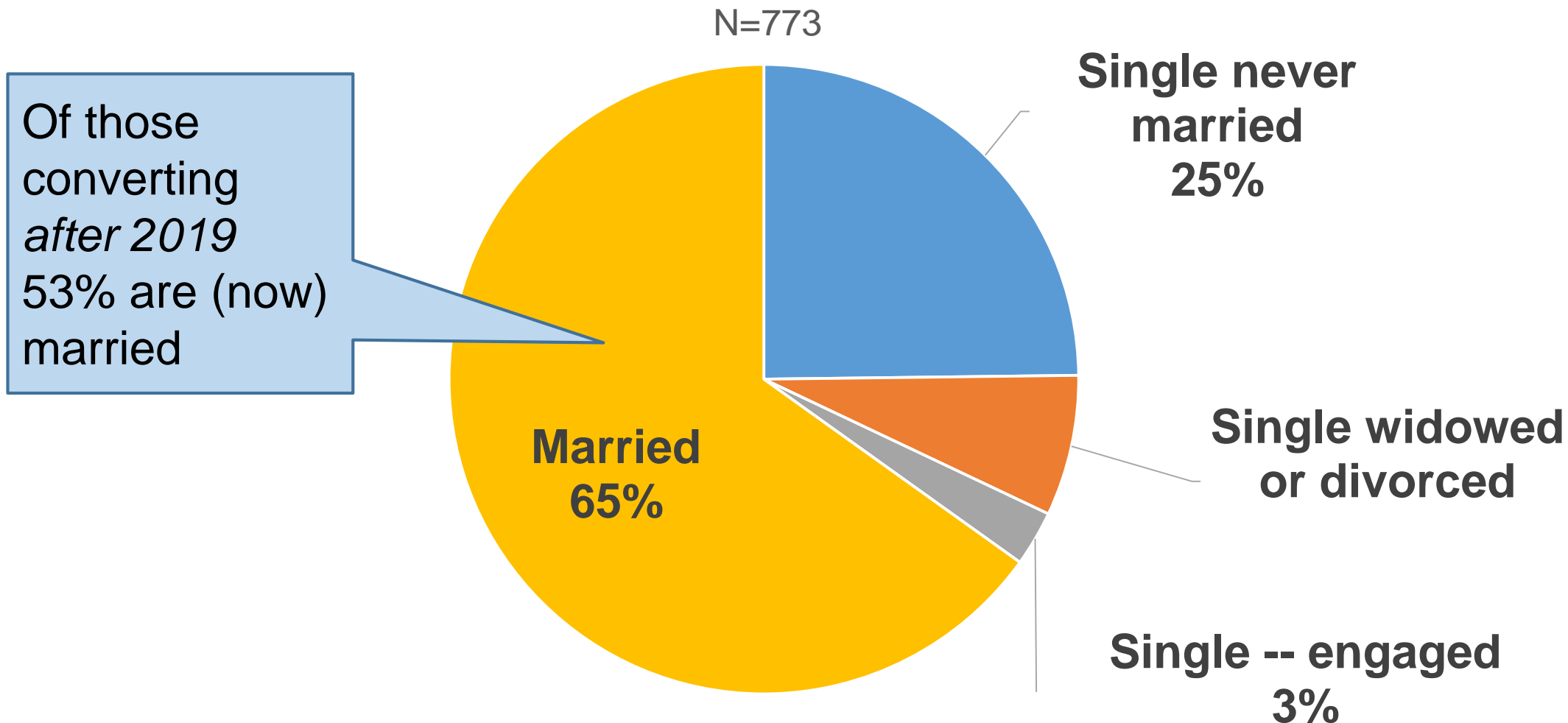


Many Young Persons

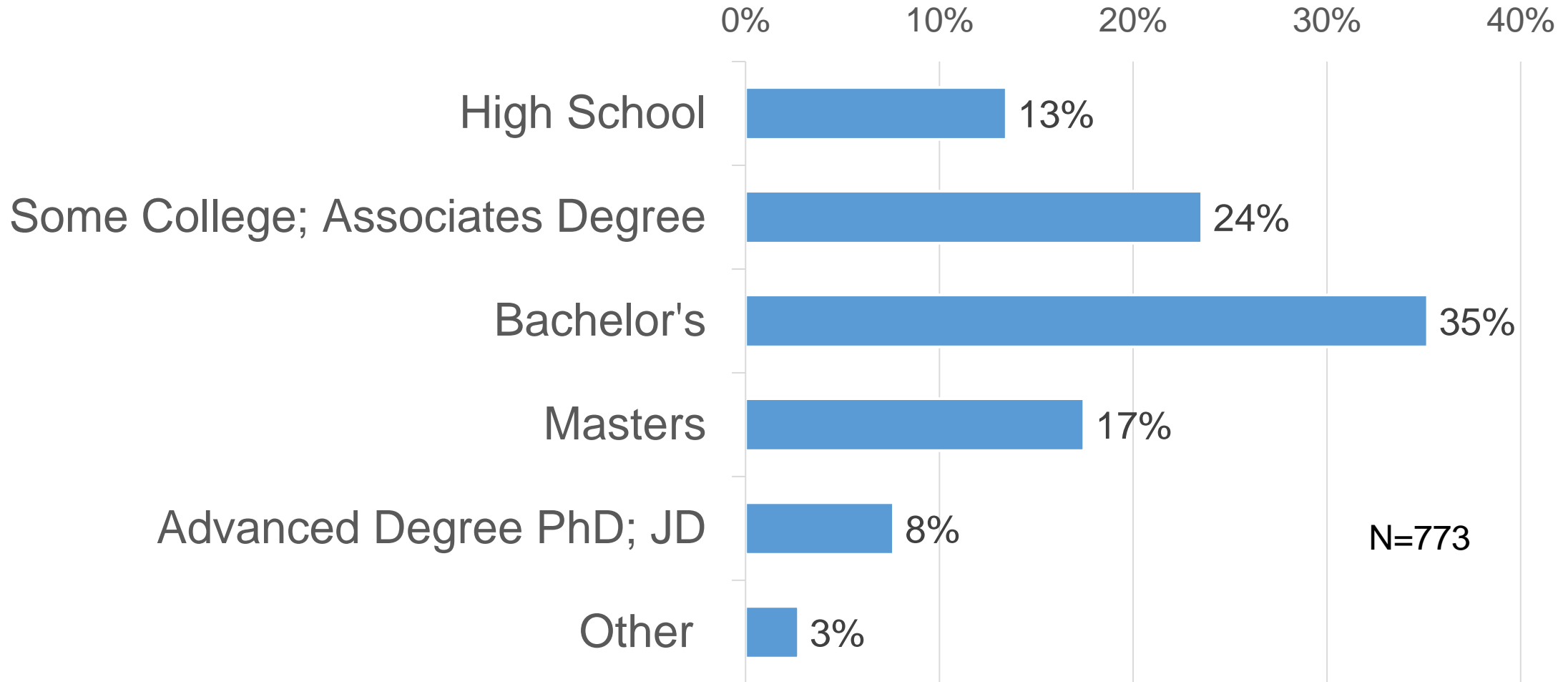
Under 40 = 78% men



Marital Status of Respondents

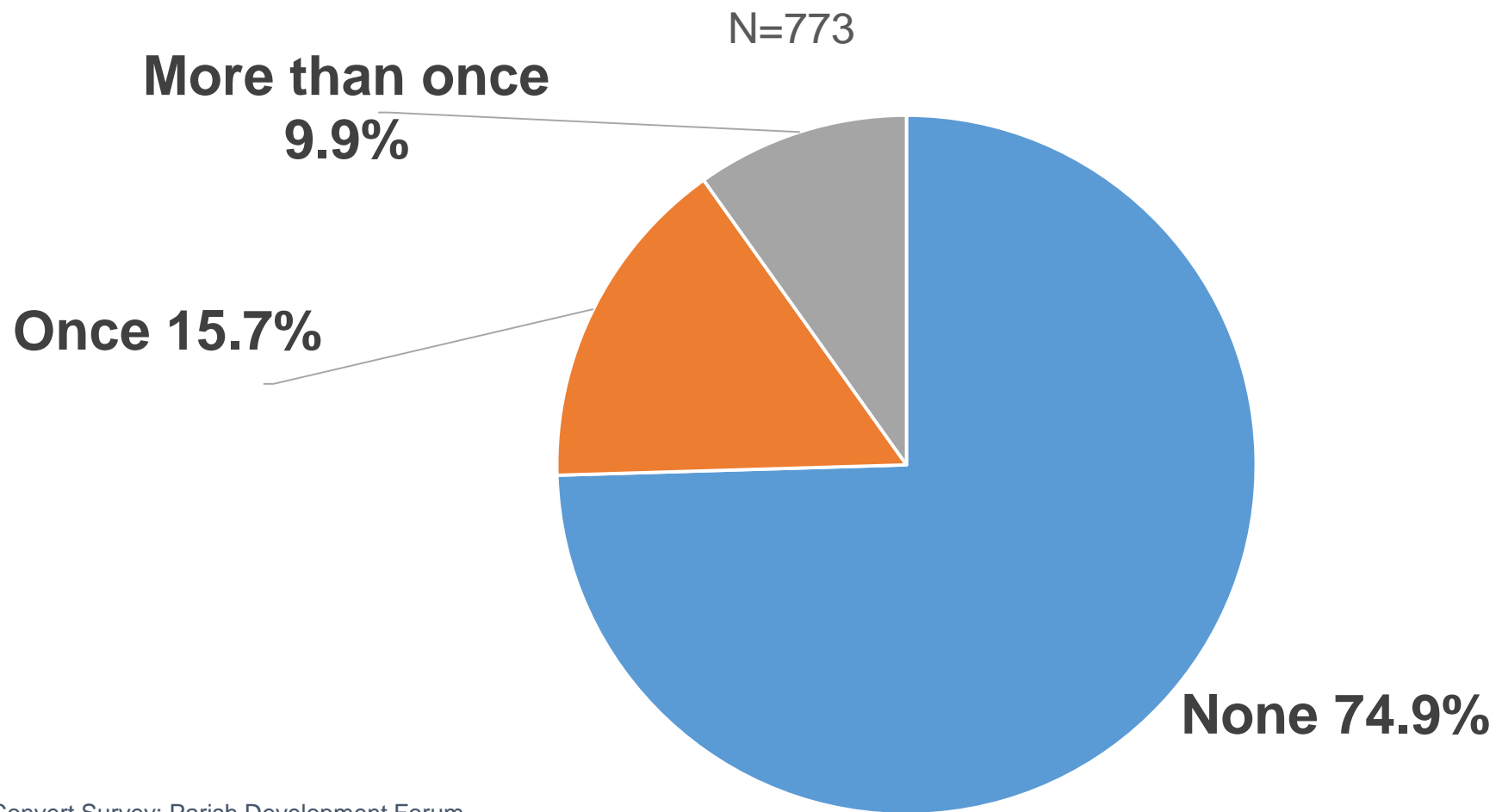


Education Level at Conversion

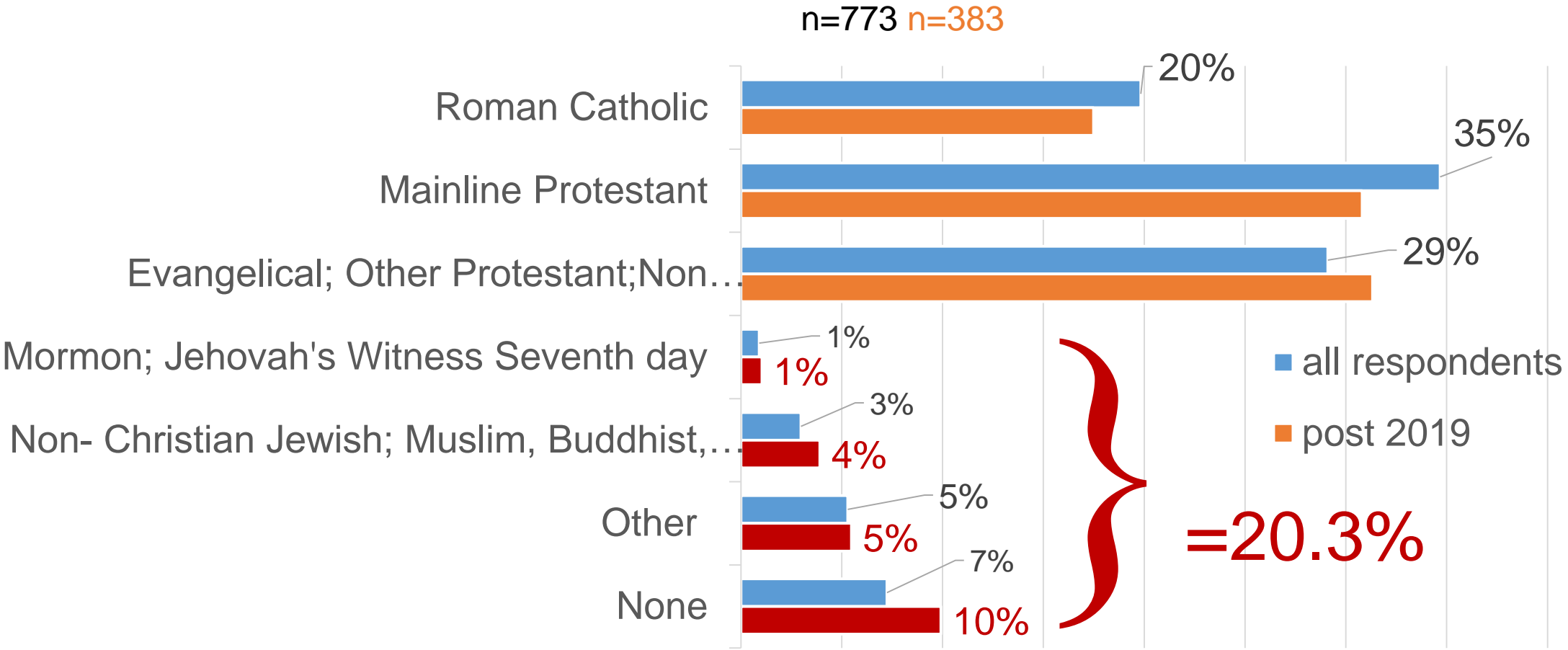


Number of Previous Religion Switches *Before Becoming Orthodox*

19



Respondent's Previous Religious Affiliation



What attributes attracted you?

Post 2019 Convert Respondents

21

- Apostolic; Authentic; original; historical; Continuity unchanged; Stability,
- Answers to faith questions
- Fullness, depth; Holistic; theological coherence,
- Structured liturgy; Engages all senses; “Experiential”
- Sacramental; Eucharistic; Reverent
- Understanding of scripture
- Psalmody- part of every service.
- Amazing modern saints!
- Veneration of the Theotokos
- Christo-centric
- Love of beauty’ Music!
- Ascetical tradition; Quiet
- Mysticism
- Cycles/calendar; fasting/feasting
- Self-discipline; accountability
- Masculine; bold; uncompromising; tangible; “gloriously weighty”
- Rigorous; Not watered down; intellectual coherence
- Countercultural; No room for unhealthy/worldly trends.
- Children in worship; infant communion
- Real community
- Less legalistic
- Pure

What attributes attracted you?

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22

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**Scriptural, Sensory,
Sacramental, Sacred, Saints;
Stability, Singing, Sounds Smell,
Self discipline, (not) Shallow**

Generation Z Yearns for Stability

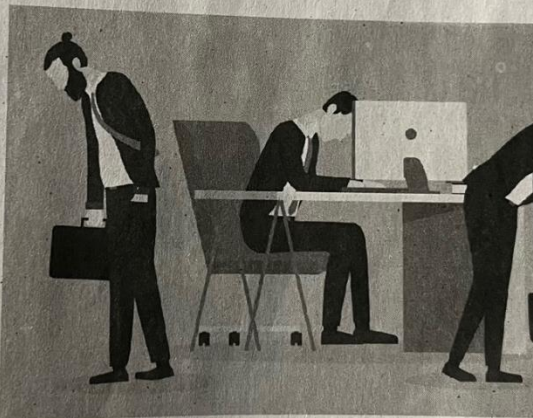
By Suzy Welch

Not long ago, a friend who teaches a communications course at a Midwestern business school asked me to speak to her class. Her instructions were invitingly wide: "Just tell them about your career." And so I did, trying to hit all the points that might be relevant to student job market.

Stability

most from their future employers. The overwhelming majority—85%—answered "stability." High pay and benefits also ranked high, but both of them in my estimation are proxies for "a fast-growing company," on the other hand, garnered only 29% of the vote.

I suppose I shouldn't have



people that life is going to calm down, that stability is coming, that things will eventually be normal. Especially when you

The cure to professional malaise and existential dread? Focus on making

era of "permacrisis."

Many of my students say they feel as if they're at their limits. "You're always hearing the world is filled with opportunity," one student told me.

didn't know it at the time.

Yet lump me in with the boomer

depleted"—but he said happy about the drain of

America Longs for Authenticity

She is an intelligent, attractive person with a good record—strong two-term South Carolina governor, presentable United Nations ambassador. Diplomats who served with her speak highly of her off the record. She navigated the T



Nikki Haley announces her presidential campaign Wednesday.

Authenticity

Finally next week th wasn't Good. It of the At been ina Here into soon volve "li structly walk in "It is barras when 3 million someth doing knowh to adm late I show ing st "1

Connected to this, the second part of our column, on last weekend's Su There were a few sweet moments—the new dog in the plastic

scriptural
 Theotokos fullness
 infants communion holistic
 stable gloriously weighty answers
 confession authentic pure undiluted
 ascetical reverent theological sacred music children structured
 sounds singing liturgy unhealthily/worldly eucharistic christo-centric coherence
 theology mystical engages mystical community intellectual feasting unchanged
 beauty self-discipline discipline community fasting tangible
 depth countercultural rigorous gloriously original quiet
 senses uncompromising psalms cycles/calendar
 continuity historical
 bold veneration
 real

What Attracted You

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- “I wanted a faith that intruded into my daily life, & would be a visible presence every day of the year, not just Sundays; I wanted to deepen & grow in my faith... the (protestant) church just couldn't provide that for me.”
- “...allowed God to be God and for things to "not make sense”
- “does not have the tendency to over define every single thing to finest possible detail... simply allows Mystery to be Mystery”
- “Willing to admit when things are not knowable”

What Attracted You

26

- “(Orthodoxy) focused on resurrection & forgiveness, not just sin”
- “I was missing a sense of the sacred”
- “Other faiths felt shallow and malnourished.”
- “My (protestant) faith felt like dipping my finger in a lukewarm bowl of water. Orthodoxy felt like reaching my arm into a pool to find out how deep it goes and finding myself falling headfirst into unknown, infinite depths.”

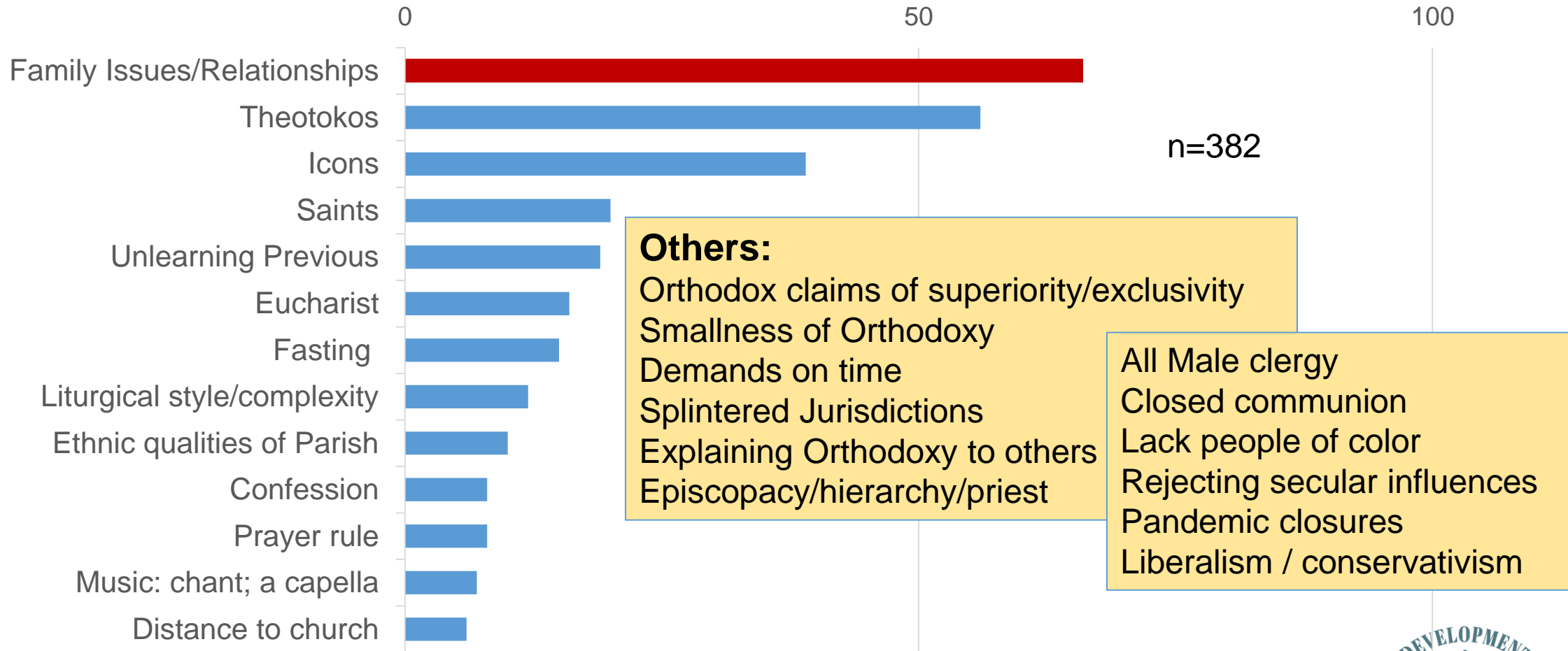
What Attracted You

27

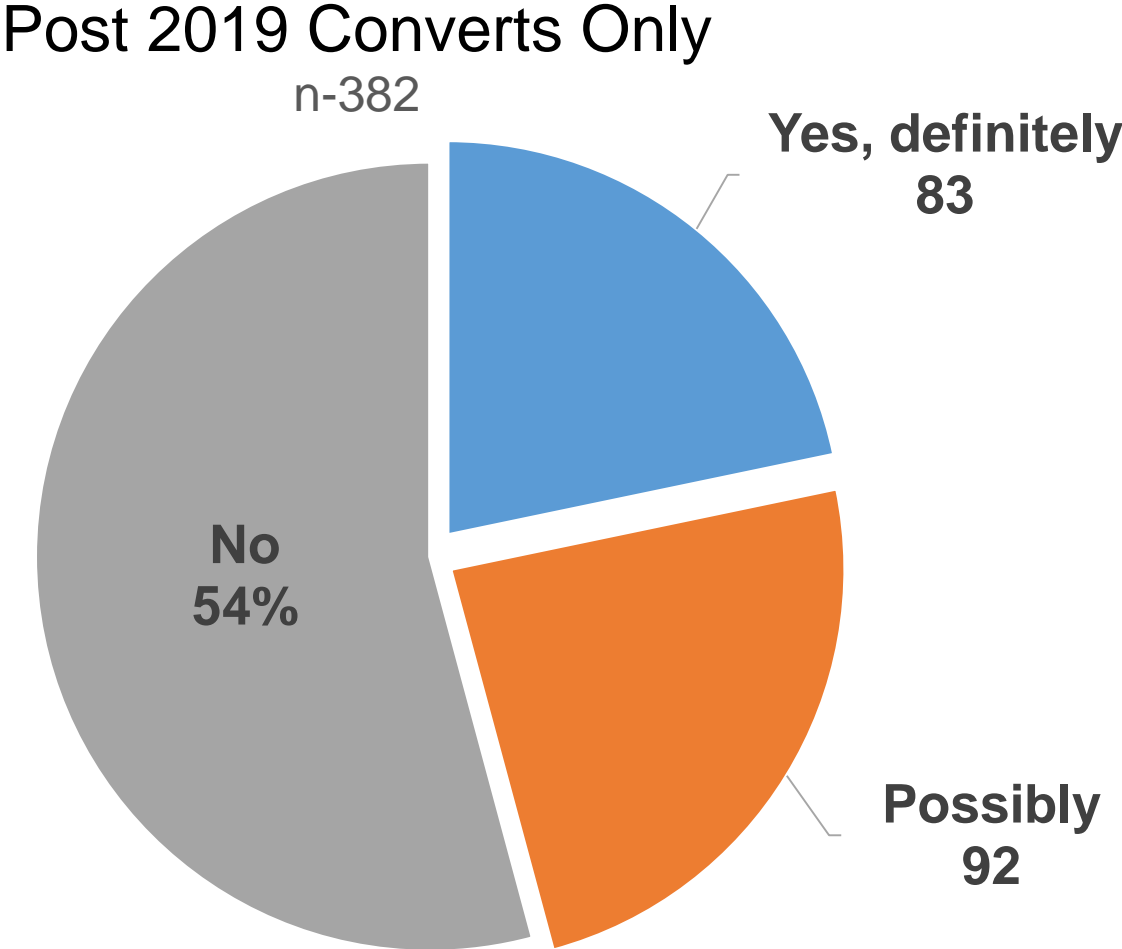
- "...didn't feel like a spectator anymore"
- "a faith that... asked me to die to myself & actually had the substance to fill my whole life without me having to make it up."
- "doesn't place reason as supreme"
- "Orthodoxy treats sin as a disease which must be treated rather than sin which must be paid for."
- "Spiritual discipline tempered with mercy & love."
- "...far removed from being at a protestant rock concert with a 30 minute Ted talk"
- "more than just a *conversion experience*"
- "A liturgical spirituality not beholden to illusions of relevance."
- "It's not trying to entertain me"

Elements of the Orthodoxy that were Most Difficult for You?

Approx. #of Mentions; Post 2019 Converts



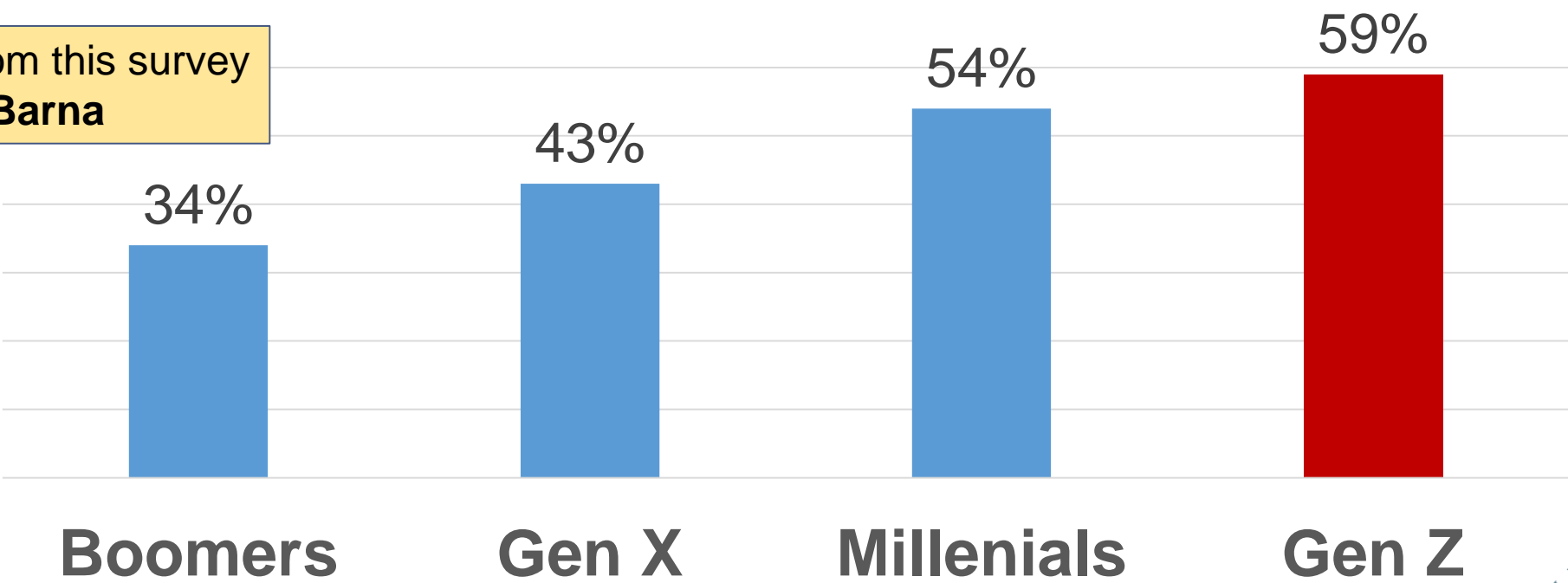
Did the Pandemic Influence Your Decision to Explore the Orthodox Faith?



Rising Spiritual Hunger

I am more open to God today than I was before the pandemic

This data NOT from this survey
Source: Barna



First Encounters

31

Many Standard Sources

- Ware, Schmemmann, Meyendorf, Hopko et al

Other

- Friend/associate invited me;
- “Walked into a church one day”
- “looking for another topic”
- Newspaper ad for an Orthodox Church.
- Orthodox hymns online
- Google search “Church Fathers”
- ‘Becoming Truly Human’ film
- “saw priest performing Panikhida w/a family at cemetery”

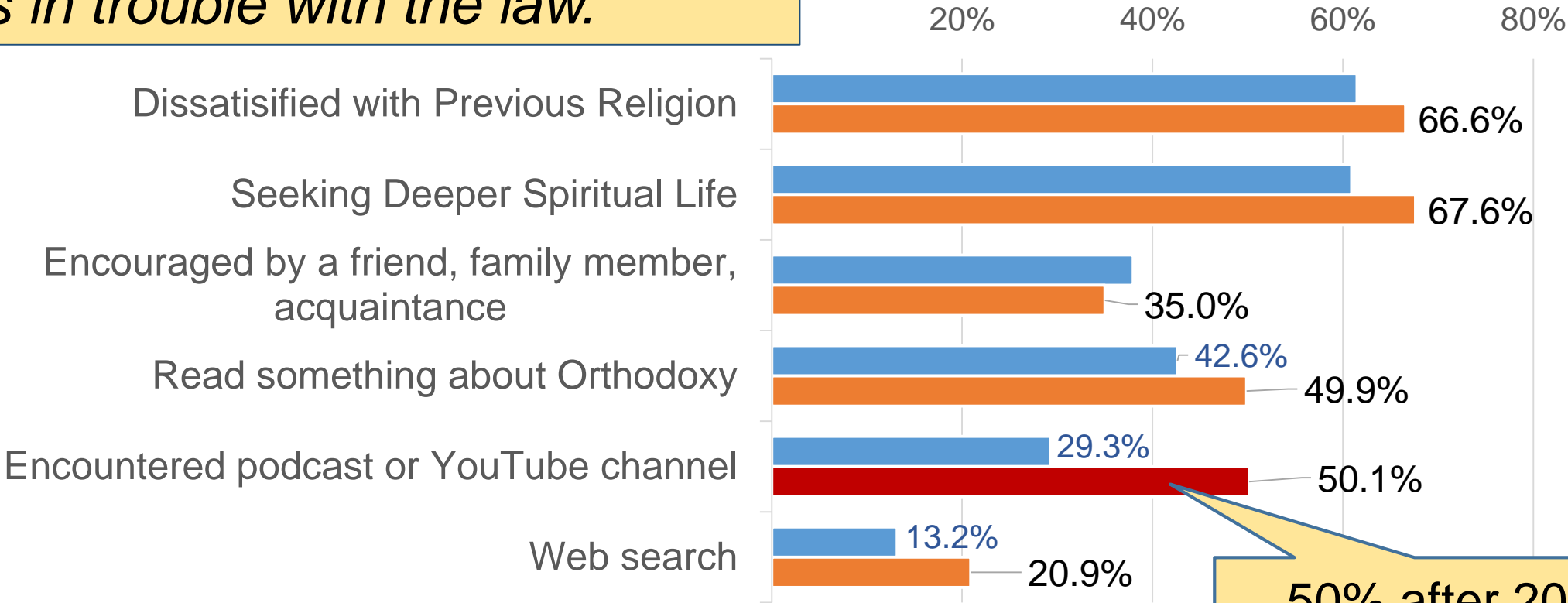
Unusual Sources

- Service at a Boy Scout Jamboree
- Christian Denomination Selection Quiz(!)
- Video games with Byzantine themes/ references(!)
- Homeschoolers FB conversation;
- “I was a local builder commissioned to work on a new (Orthodox) church building”
- “wanted to worship somewhere beautiful.. I liked the idea of cathedrals and looked up which denominations had cathedrals.”
- “I’d exhausted other options... saw Christianity as.. last resort to... find God...went to Google maps, looked up “church” ... an Orthodox parish happened to be the nearest to me.”

What motivated you to first become acquainted with the Orthodox faith? How did you become acquainted?

■ Converted Before 2019 n=390 ■ Converted after 2019 n=383

“I was in trouble with the law.”



50% after 2019
30% before 2019

Online Influencers- Most Mentions

“If you were influenced by an online source tell us which one(s).”

33

1. Jay Dyer
2. Fr Josiah Trenham
3. Ancient Faith Radio
4. Jonathan Pageau
5. Bailey Spiridon
6. Lord of Spirits (Fr Andrew Damick/Stephen De Young)
7. Fr Peter Heers
8. Abbott Tryphon
9. Jordan Peterson
10. David Erhan

*“Unfortunately I was influenced by _____, whose videos on ...Roman Catholic innovations over the last 1,000 years got me reading the early church fathers and the Orthodox positions on theology and ecclesiology. **I do not follow him anymore, and honestly hope that the clergy clamp down on online apologists.**”*

More 'Influencer' Comments (Pro/Con)

(and more later)

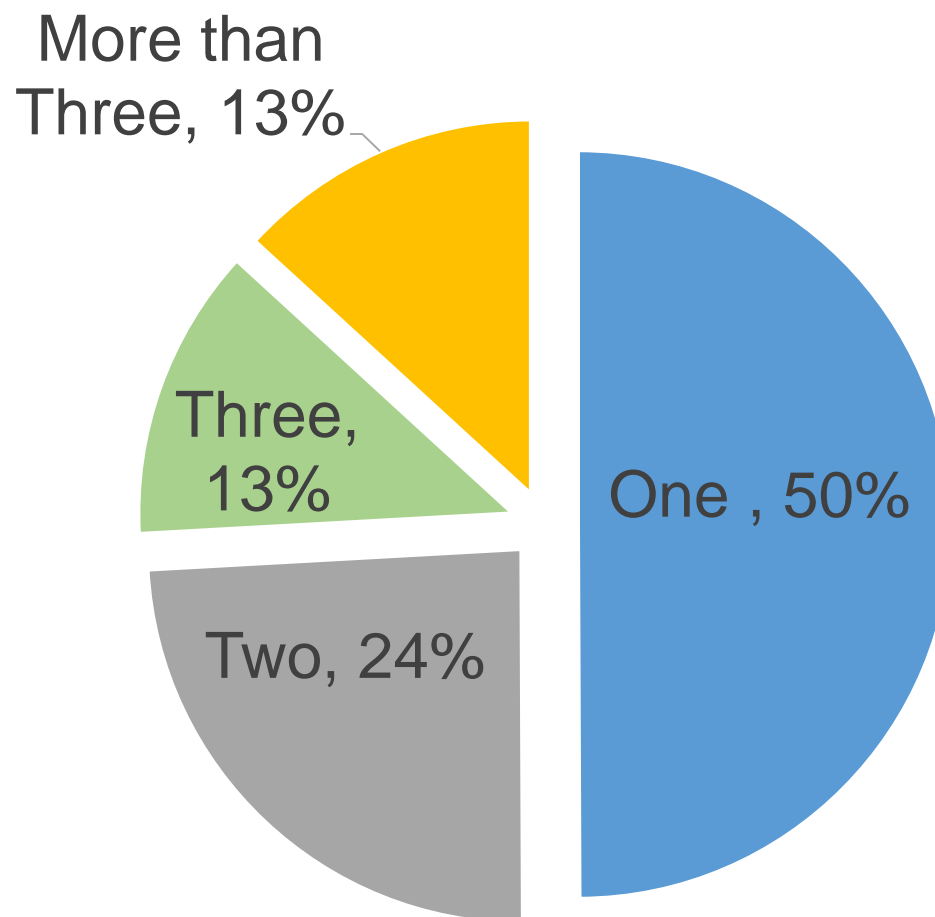
34

- “speaking about Christ with my friend & he asked me if I knew about Orthodoxy. When I said that I didn’t, he linked me with Dyer’s channel... after I watched his video refuting Protestantism, decided to check out my nearest Orthodox church and that led me on the path to my conversion. Before that, I had never entertained a single thought of converting from Baptist Christianity.”
- “Dyer introduced me to Orthodoxy...saw interview on YT channel on Technocracy. I thought he was handsome and very intelligent.”
- “Came across debate by Jay Dyer... against Muslim scholars that helped me a lot” (respondent formerly Muslim)
- “YouTube personalities cause(d) rigorist trends made me hesitate in converting”
- “Started with Jordan Peterson, then Johnathan Pageau, then to Ancient Faith podcasts like Lord of Spirits”
- “I find a lot of AFR programming off-putting. It feels like Protestant mega-church, cult of personality, programming.”
- “Watched a video ... to get talking points for the side of Protestantism against *Ortho leaning* friends. Came away realizing I was the wrong one.”
- “I grew up in many places of the world, and always seemed to encounter at least one Orthodox Christian wherever I went.... they had all been reference points for me that I looked back on.”

How many Orthodox parishes did you attend/visit before deciding to embrace the Orthodox faith?

35

Your parish likely will be compared to others



Positive Parish Characteristics

36

Most often mentioned attributes by converts after 2019:

1. English
2. Proximity to my residence
3. Priest - knowledgeable, good teacher; no pressure; good example; dedicated; trustworthy
4. People: friendly welcoming; encouraging; active parish life; find a friend; people, my age
5. Children –welcomed; many; church school
6. Diversity (or lack): some want diversity; others like mostly young /mostly converts
7. Non-ethnic
8. Music –decent (or better); participative
9. Church beauty; iconography
10. Array of services; # of services
11. Size –more mentioned small than large



Parish Selection Quotes

38

- “Women dress modestly & a majority wear head coverings. *I feel that I attend a parish where people take their faith seriously.*” (female)
- “...good priest who’s not an ecumenist or modernist” ...
- “priest who doesn't believe in ecumenism or anything ‘woke’”
- “Old calendar, single spoon, no masks”
- (Parish) “has many converts like me who left some of the same megachurches I’d attended.”
- “I came for theological and philosophical reasons. I have fallen in love with the people”
- “being around cradles is helpful for my spiritual growth”
- (Ethnic parish) “It's not my culture; I don't know the dances or the food”
- (chosen parish) “felt uniquely ‘American’”

Parish Selection Quotes

39

- “A parish that notices when you step through the door is a truly blessed one. ...(they) include inquirers/ catechumens in activitiesthey love each other, you can feel it.”
- “display/practice traits of true Christians”
- “I never once attended a service without people bringing me blessed bread. I LOVED THAT!”
- “If someone sitting near us shared antidoron with us, that was a particularly friendly parish.”
- “numerous worship opportunities... important to me as I have great need for spiritual growth.”
- “attracted by excellent choir...members sing during liturgy instead of remaining silent”
- “accepting of young children being present during the Liturgy”
- “vibrant, intellectual adult education/discussion community”
- “Is this a place where 1 or 2 people do everything or are responsibilities more spread out?”

Turnoffs

In Order of Most Mentions

40

1. Ethnic/ Insular elements of parishes
2. Parish size/Parish/Parishioner Qualities
3. Covid issues/Reactions
4. Toxic Orthodox social media environment; Overly zealous "online Orthodox".
5. Liberal ideas in the Church; "Creeping secular liberalism"
6. Doctrinal confusion/guidance



Ethnic/Insularity

Turnoffs

41

- “Orthodox people (generally) tend to be colder and more aloof than anything I experienced as an Evangelical.”
- “[ethnic group] women making the comment that, ‘the converts are changing the culture of OUR church’ – that was a huge turnoff.”
- “[ethnic parish] can be cold towards converts versus the warm Protestant environment I was used to. I still hear negative terms used of converts.”
- “No one spoke to me... priest seemed to be bothered that I wasn't [ethnic group]...”
- “I attended the local [ethnic jurisdiction] parish for more than a year, but they decided they didn't want to baptize or chrismate anyone who wasn't marrying into a [ethnic] family & suggested all of us non-[ethnic group people] go back to our American churches”
- “Welcomed with: ‘Why you here?’ You [ethnic group]? You husband- he [ethnic group]?”
- “[Ethnic] parishes... such as Greek, Russian, etc. seem to feel exclusive and focus on their ethnicity more than being a Christian.”
- “sentiment was I didn't need to be Orthodox because I was not [ethnic] and should go back to Evangelical church after spending my money at their festivals.”

Spectrum of Atmospheres

42



Parish size/Parish/Parishioner Qualities

Turnoffs

43

- “it wasn't easy for me to be somewhere that you're instantly noticed. Even though some parishioners greeted me... it was quite some time before I had the courage to start coming to coffee hour.”
- “median age in parish is quite old”
- “Parish communication not always up to date” (e.g. bible study canceled; no message/website info)
- “Sunday School curriculum not well organized”
- “Lack of evangelism”
- “there are times I wish our parish was larger”

Parish size/Parish/Parishioner Qualities

Turnoffs

44

- “It’s been an adjustment to not jump into ministries immediately upon joining the church. The non-denominational church really moves people into programs quickly; doesn’t take time to acclimate and disciple people”
- “Male-only leadership and limits on what lay people could do in worship were hard since I was used to leading worship and preaching in my previous church”
- “(Cradles) who didn’t take their faith seriously disturbed me... a lazy faith can be a turn off for new people.”
- “Lack of understanding and appreciation of their faith amongst many cradle Orthodox”
- “many people didn't know why they said or did what they did...they just did.”
- “Sometimes I felt talked down to by men in their 20s and 30s (roughly my age range), especially men who were converts.”

Toxic Orthodox Social Media Environment

Turnoffs

45

- “(Based on) online community... I thought all Orthodox were bloodthirsty people who only cared for debating.”
- “toxic, legalistic culture, casual bigotry toward Jewish and LGBT individuals, & conspiracy theories”
- “felt like the Orthodox version of “Lord of the flies”, a lot of unsupervised, macho energy”
- “a cesspool of culture war sniping, racism, hatred, - betrays a completely blind adherence to the modern need for 'certainty' ...had I approached Orthodoxy from another vantage point they could have very well scared me off entirely”
- “Oftentimes, it feels as though people want more to defeat an enemy than to win a brother. This spirit is, I believe, keeping many Catholics, and Protestants from seriously looking at Orthodoxy.”
- “To me much [online discourse] seems to be more informed by fundamental Protestantism than Orthodoxy.”
- “People that, for whatever reason, view the Church as a place where they’re allowed to be hostile to LGBTQ people, left-wing people, or people outside a particular ethnic group. Thankfully, I’ve not experienced that from church members who stay through the process.”

Surprises/Disappointments

46

- Youth/Children
 - ▣ “Disappointed by lack of youth services in the OCA; need more support from OCA for parishes trying to establish youth ministry.”
 - ▣ “Happily surprised at how much my children have absorbed from being in the services...they burst into hymns spontaneously at home.”
- Disunity
 - ▣ “Orthodoxy in America is so fractured”
 - ▣ “My bishop is 16 hours away and the 2 other churches in my city are not under the same management”

Surprises/Disappointments

47

- Evangelism/Mission Lacking
 - “need greater emphasis on bringing NEW people into Church.”
 - “lack of wanting to evangelize & share the faith from people who have been Orthodox their entire lives”
 - “(why do some) attack online Orthodox channels that open the door to the now secular western world to the Orthodox Faith?”
- Women
 - “Glad our parish includes girls in the service with holding candles”
 - “Lack of ministries and fellowship for women”
 - “Why we don't have female deacons (as the Church once did!)”
but also...
 - “why women are not more persuaded to wear a veil.”

Surprises/Disappointments

48

- Music/ Singing
 - “New priest said that we shouldn’t sing along with the choir unless you are in the choir”
 - “I miss people singing in worship . Protestants sing like their salvation depends on it.”
 - “(Why doesn’t) Orthodox church *keep up with the times* and be culturally relevant in their worship music.”

Liberal ideas in the Church; “Creeping secular liberalism”

Turnoffs

49

- Too Liberal...*dislike*...
 - “attempts at 'modernization' and 'making relevant' of the Faith.”
 - “endorsement of the Pan-heresy of ecumenism.”
 - “people who want to drag it down the same paths that led to the destruction of the Western denominations”
 - “tolerance of envelope-pushers in academic/theological circles...the episcopal failure to discipline/censure is a great disappointment”
- On the other hand... *dislike*...
 - “a need to always set Orthodoxy as in opposition to ‘the west’ to the point that if a western person says “the sky is blue” we must say it’s green so as not to be western.”
 - “Simplistic fundamentalism... priests muddling about in minor matters rather than present the rich treasures of the Church, decrying anything they don't like as 'modern/western’.”
 - “We’re increasingly presented with two alternatives - liberalization akin to what occurred in mainline Protestantism or rigorism that robs its adherents of the easy yoke that comes with following Christ.”
 - “correlation between traditional, liturgical worship, and social and political conservatism. People of all political persuasions can, and are, strongly attracted to Orthodox worship.”

50

In Conclusion

Convert Profile

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- Serious about Faith –
 - ▣ Not Orthodoxy lite; OINO (Ordodox in Name Only)
 - ▣ Looking for ‘meaning’
 - ▣ Not all are looking for a friend
 - ▣ Akathists vs. Golf tourneys
 - ▣ Can lead to: “ultra”/hyperdoxy/emphasis on “exotic” (differentness); freezing everything
- Demographics
 - ▣ Male; Young
 - ▣ Many: socially (often politically) conservative
 - ▣ Most already Christian (to some degree)
- Many arrival paths; invitation; reading; internet/influencers (all)
- Attracted to:
 - ▣ Apostolic; Authentic; Historical; Continuity Unchanged; Stability; Fullness
 - ▣ Active, participative worship, English; Beauty
- Fleeing
 - ▣ Shallow; doctrinal/social innovation
- Difficulties
 - ▣ Families; friends

Why the Significant Number? Why Now

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- General religious “churn”
- Pandemic
 - ▣ Time on their hands
 - ▣ Began to consider deeper ‘life questions’
 - ▣ Became disconnected from current tradition/relationships
- Dissatisfaction with current religious tradition
 - ▣ Denominational issues
 - ▣ Creeping secularism
 - ▣ Theological ‘shallowness’
- Internet
 - ▣ Streaming; improved websites
 - ▣ Podcasts & influencer/persuaders
 - ▣ Word of mouth accelerated/intensified via social media

Why Some Parishes Not Others?

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- Local demographics: age; people moving in/out
- Nobody likes an empty restaurant (church)
 - ▣ Concentrate on the “food”
- Converts beget converts; – inviting – virtuous cycle.
- There are seekers near you!
 - ▣ Help them find you and don't act surprised!



Recommended Actions

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- Come to Church
- Worship warmly and well
- Build awareness for your parish
- “Identify” as an Orthodox Christian
- Be welcoming & understanding to guests & inquirers
- Be able to answer a few questions
- Integrate newcomers



Man Visiting Church Website Really Looking Forward To Upcoming 2009 Picnic

A Good Parish Discussion Question(s)

55

- What fundamental changes would be needed in our parish to strengthen our ability to attract inquirers looking for Jesus Christ and develop them into catechumens, converts and productive members of the Body of Christ?
 - ▣ Changes to:
 - Mindset/ attitude
 - Parish practices
 - ▣ How to do that?

- “The greatest asset in the church is that we love one another. However, I have likewise seen that the greatest weakness in the church, with regard to growth, is that **we love one another, but *only* one another. It is next to impossible to grow the church without loving those outside the church.** Without love, the virtues of prudence, temperance, courage, justice, even, faith and hope become no more than the laws of man, godless rules by which we attempt and fail to live. Therefore, remember: ‘*The greatest of these is love*’ (1 Cor. 13:13).”

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Thank you!