



WISCONSIN COUNCIL
OF CHURCHES

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Wisconsin Clergy Survey July 2020
COVID-19 & Ministry Stressors
Results & Recommendations

Rev. Kerri Parker, Executive Director

WI Council of Churches Clergy Survey July 2020

COVID-19 & Ministry Stressors

About Wisconsin & COVID

- One of the most polarized states in the US
- COVID-19 began rising in March, voluntary church building closures
- Government-initiated *Safer at Home* order April -May
- Supreme Court decision overturns order May 13
- Statewide Mask Order August 1

By summer: increasing anecdotal evidence of

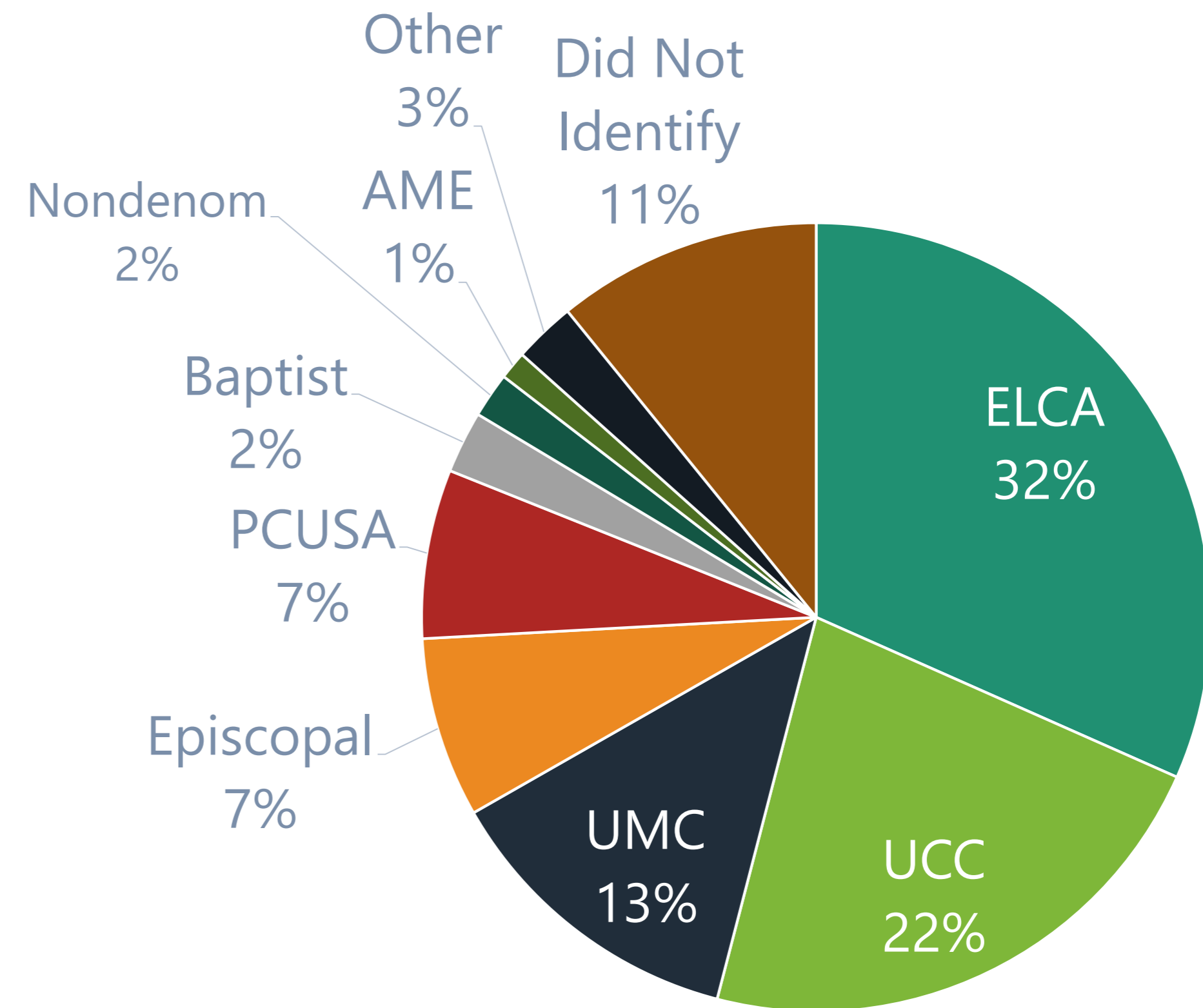
- Pressure to resume worship in physical space
- Frustration with politicization
- Family strain
- Deteriorating mental/spiritual health

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COVID-19 & Ministry Stressors

How does perception compare to data?

- Month-long statewide survey
- 434 Respondents
- 17 Christian traditions (not all members)



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Church Activities

WORSHIP

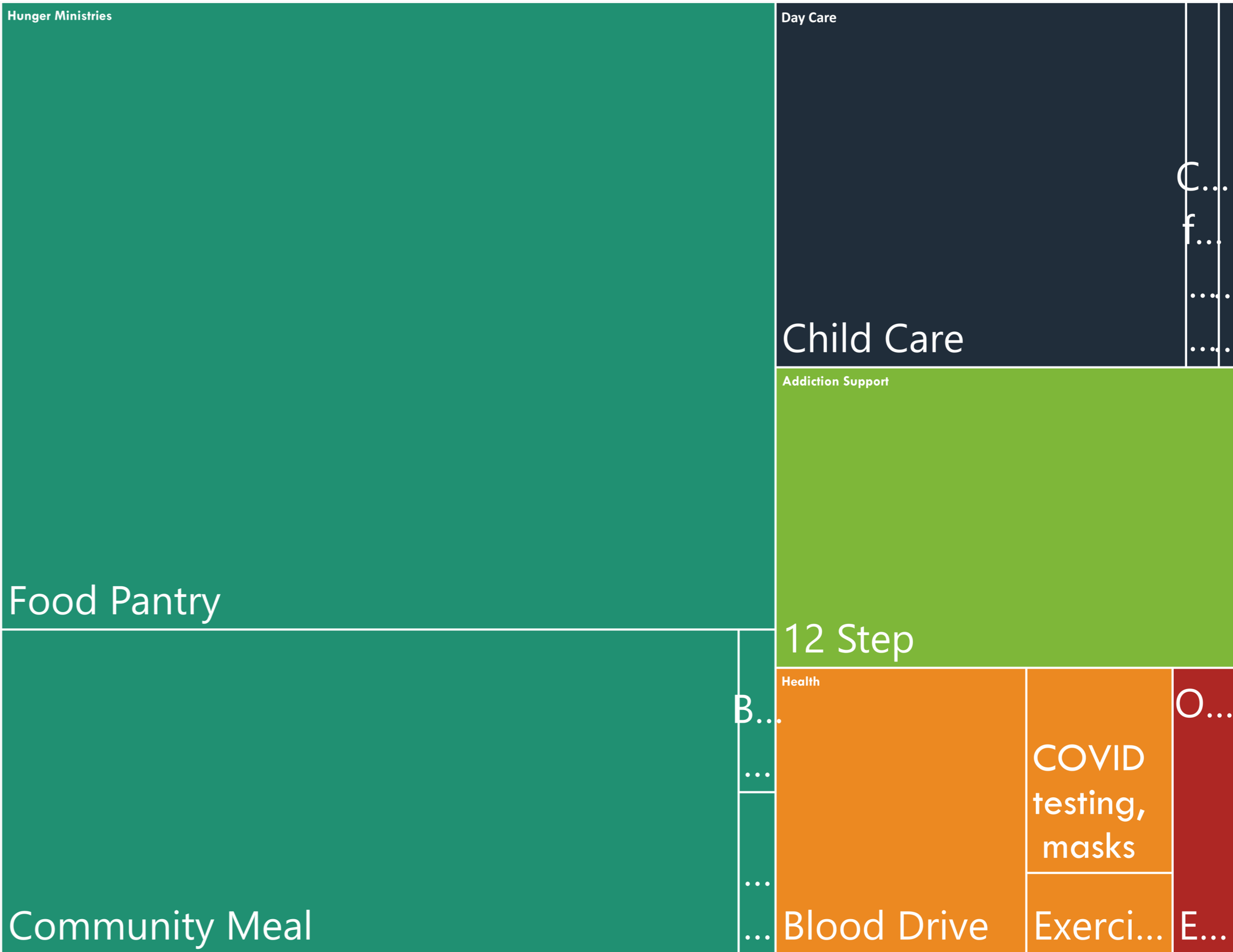
- 90% offering online options
- 50% exclusively online
- 24% indoors
- 6% exclusively in a physical location (indoor/outdoor)

Supplementing with Email, USPS, Radio...

MEETINGS, FORMATION, FELLOWSHIP

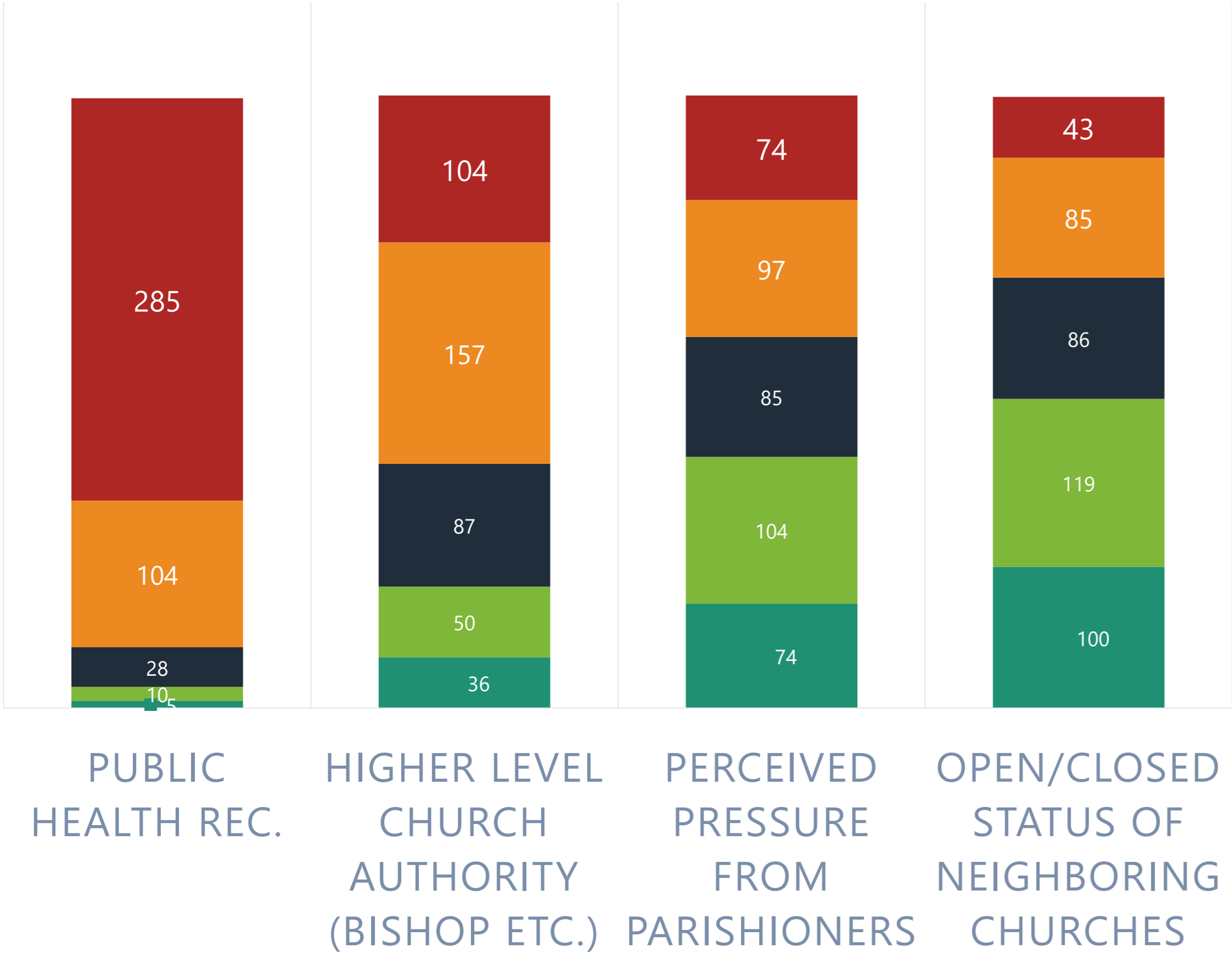
- 72% online
- 27% outdoors
- 17% indoors (*comments: limited/precautions*)
- 18% not at all

COMMUNITY MINISTRIES – 55% of respondents



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Influences on Reopening



Dark Green=1 (not influential) Red=5 (very influential)

Also:

- Health/wellbeing of medically vulnerable people in the group
- Connections to the church community for those with low/no tech access

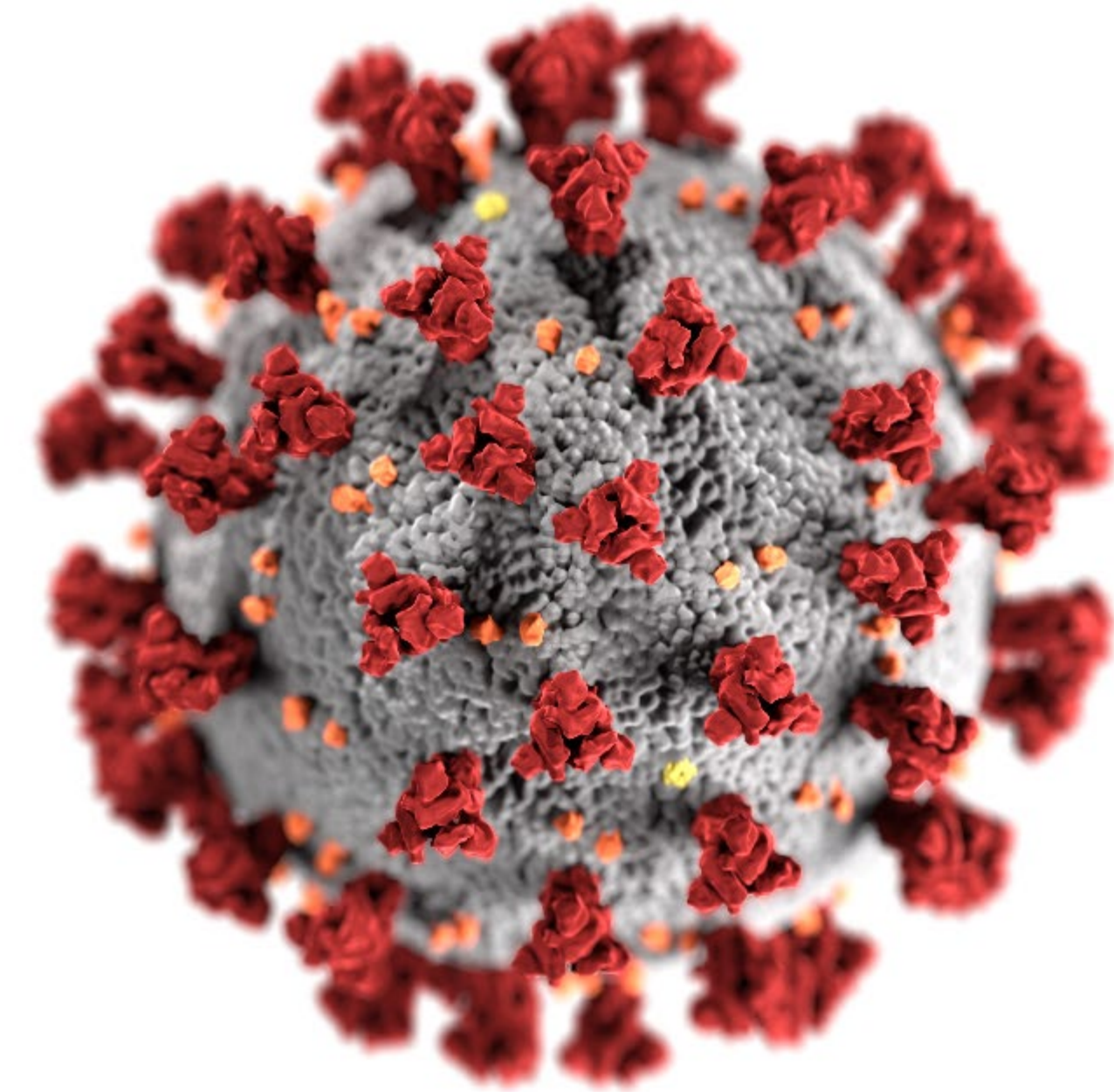
These # rankings are at odds with the narrative illustrations at end of survey which indicate a high level of pressure from parishioners and attention to what other churches are doing.

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COVID-19 Awareness

How close has COVID-19 come to the life of our state's Christian leaders?

- 2% had COVID themselves
 - 41% knew someone who recovered at home
 - 24% knew someone hospitalized
 - 24% knew someone with a long recovery
 - 11% knew someone who had died
-
- 60% knew someone working in COVID response



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Precarious Employment & Sense of Vocation

10% of clergy experienced a threat to their employment related to COVID-19 ministry decisions

- Direct and indirect
- Withholding giving / threats to
- Threats to begin gathering without the pastor
- Pressure to give up pay & contracted benefits, PTO
- Questioning productivity

25% have seriously considered retiring or resigning due to ministry stressors in the time of COVID

- "Twice as long to do half as much"
- "Damned if I do, and damned if I don't"
- Risk of moral injury: "can I live with myself?"
- Hard to stay healthy
- Feeling vulnerable
- Family care and isolation
- Preparing for ultimatums: If....then...
- How to do church differently?

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Equity Analysis

Geography

- Optional response
- 5% based in Madison, 8% Greater Milwaukee
- 72% identified location in balance of state

Race and Ethnicity

- Not a core question – maximize confidentiality if desired
- Identified 7 clergy of color
(serving in Historically Black and Hispanic churches)
- Clergy of color serving predominantly white churches a reality in WI, but # of respondents unknown.
- **NO mention of threat to employment/resigning call**
- Judicatory highest influence on reopening
- High respect for CDC, public health, severity of pandemic, “common sense”
- **Multiple pandemics: COVID-19, economic, racial injustice**

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Some Questions for the Church

The **psychological strength and physical fortitude** needed to provide balanced leadership when it comes to shouldering the burden of ministry tasks, public health information, the ethical/ moral spectrum of beliefs, gospel vs economic values, unsolicited political pressure from the legislature and president, and providing regular risk assessment based on literal life and death decisions has been hard to sustain. **Daily I ponder my calling to serve the church.** In the last three months I have applied to academic programs and looked at job listings. I am thankful to be in a faith community that was healthy and supportive pre-Covid and yet we are still feeling this pull us apart. **Maybe this is what it feels like to be “the body of Christ... broken.”**

– A Central Wisconsin Pastor

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Some Questions for the Church

How can we best:

1. support local churches in *focusing ministries to meet the deepest need*, rather than replicating the church's usual worship and program online?
2. *foster regular collaboration* between parish clergy so they are less isolated?
3. offer clergy and their families *generous community-wide care* so rest and respite is not seen as a deficiency?
4. open up *permission-giving ministry space* in partnership with the Holy Spirit? and
5. *further develop ecumenical networks* to strengthen us all for ministry in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous time?

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Some Questions for the Church

FOCUS TO MEET THE DEEPEST NEED

- Risk of mapping usual patterns onto a new medium.
- Consumerism: what / want
- COVID continues. Zoom fatigue. Weather shift.
- Barna survey: prayer & emotional support¹

KEY QUESTIONS

- **Which activities are most important?**
- **How to encourage local innovation? best platforms?**

¹<https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning-part-2/>

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Some Questions for the Church

MAKING COLLABORATION THE NORM

- Expectation of high quality weekly resources
- Individualistic, atomistic ethic
- Staff size & technological aptitude
- Occasional peer to peer support

KEY QUESTION

- **How can we foster a more normative pattern of collaboration between pastors and networks of churches?**

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Some Questions for the Church

CLERGY & COMMUNITY CARE

- Eroding trust between clergy & congregations
- Perception of not being able to take time off
- Family care struggles & disparate gender impact
- Culture of shame/secretcy around seeking support

KEY QUESTIONS

- **How to place clergy & family in a matrix of community care that gives them the time & space they need for healing, even when travel is limited?**
- **How to communicate & structure generous care and taking sabbath/leave not as *deficiency* but indicator of *community wellness*?**
- **How to normalize the regular use of mental health resources & spiritual direction?**

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Some Questions for the Church

TRADITIONAL PRACTICES & NORMS

- Many structures were already precarious
- COVID accelerating & intensifying change
- Questions of survival: churches, pastors, judicatories
- Think beyond practical ministry concerns

KEY QUESTIONS

- **Will we allow this exile to reshape us?**
- **Can local church, middle judicatories & wider church bodies envision exploratory & permission-giving ministry space in partnership with the Holy Spirit?**

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Some Questions for the Church

CURATING NEW RESOURCES TOGETHER

- Larger organizations have strong history of creating resources, budget struggles leave gap
- Clergy looking beyond denominational boundaries for resources, rapid-response support
- Notable Needs: theological frames for secular tools & skills, current events
- In responding to significant anxiety, fear, atomistic values, faithful resilience matters!

KEY QUESTION

- **Can the wider church, parachurch, and ecumenical bodies work together to envision a sustainable ecosystem of resources for a new world of ministry?**

THANK YOU

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