

ELCA Congregation Evaluation Report Key Findings

A Series of Learnings for the ELEA

Offered by Barna Group



About This Research: Three Surveys

General Population ($n=2,472$)

ELCA Congregants ($n=10,578$)

ELCA Rostered Leaders ($n=861$)

General Population Research

Personas

- Adults **with at least one child under the age of 6** in the household (Q51) (n=609)
 - Referred to as “parents of child under 6”
- **Churched and unchurched** adults with at least one child under the age of 6 in the household (n=349, 260)
 - Churched: Have attended a Christian church service within the past six months
- Adults who would consider attending a church **if the church had a preschool or daycare** (Q24.18) (n=156)
- Adults who would be interested in **a local church offering an early learning center** (Q27a) (n=321)

Themes

- Human flourishing and well-being
- Spiritual and religious background
- What people are looking for in a church
- ELCA brand study

ELCA Leaders Research

Personas

- Leaders of churches **offering early learnings centers** (Q8a) (n=195)
- Leaders of churches **prioritizing resourcing an early learning center** offered by their church (Q9.1) (n=111)
 - “Of those your church currently offers, which five would you say receive the most resources? Resources can be anything from financial support to time and energy.”
- Leaders of churches **prioritizing resourcing a ministry for families with young children** (Q9.14) (n=126)
- Leaders who strongly feel that their church **supports families** well (Q16h) (n=360)

Themes

- Demographic profile of churches with early learning centers
- Church’s overall well-being
- Church leadership culture
- Church community
- Church’s spiritual formation endeavors
- Next generation and young adult prioritization
- Outreach efforts
- Inclusion and trust
- Leader well-being and vocation

ELCA Congregant Research

Personas

- Congregants a part of churches **offering early learnings centers** (Q16a) (n=2810)
- Congregants who have personally been **positively impacted by an early learning center** offered by their church (Q17.1) (n=357)
- Congregants who have personally been **positively impacted by a ministry for families with young children** offered by their church (Q17.14) (n=491)
- Congregants who strongly feel that their church **supports families well** (Q11h) (n=5609)
- Congregants **under the age of 40 with children** under the age of 18 in their household (Q51, Q49) (n=232)

Themes

- Religious heritage and background
- Present-day ELCA church engagement
- Church leadership culture
- Church community
- Church's spiritual formation endeavors
- Next generation and young adult prioritization
- Outreach efforts
- Inclusion and trust

General Population Research Conducted by the ELCA Executive Summary for the ELEA

Unchurched parents of children under 6 prioritize their children's spirituality and might consider attending a Christian church for their child's spiritual education, despite struggling with mental health and skepticism towards church leaders. Furthermore, these parents often doubt the Church's ability to answer their questions and don't necessarily feel more unfulfilled than their churched counterparts. Parents interested in church-based early learning centers (ELCs), whether churched or unchurched, are on a spiritual quest and tend to have positive views of the Christian church.

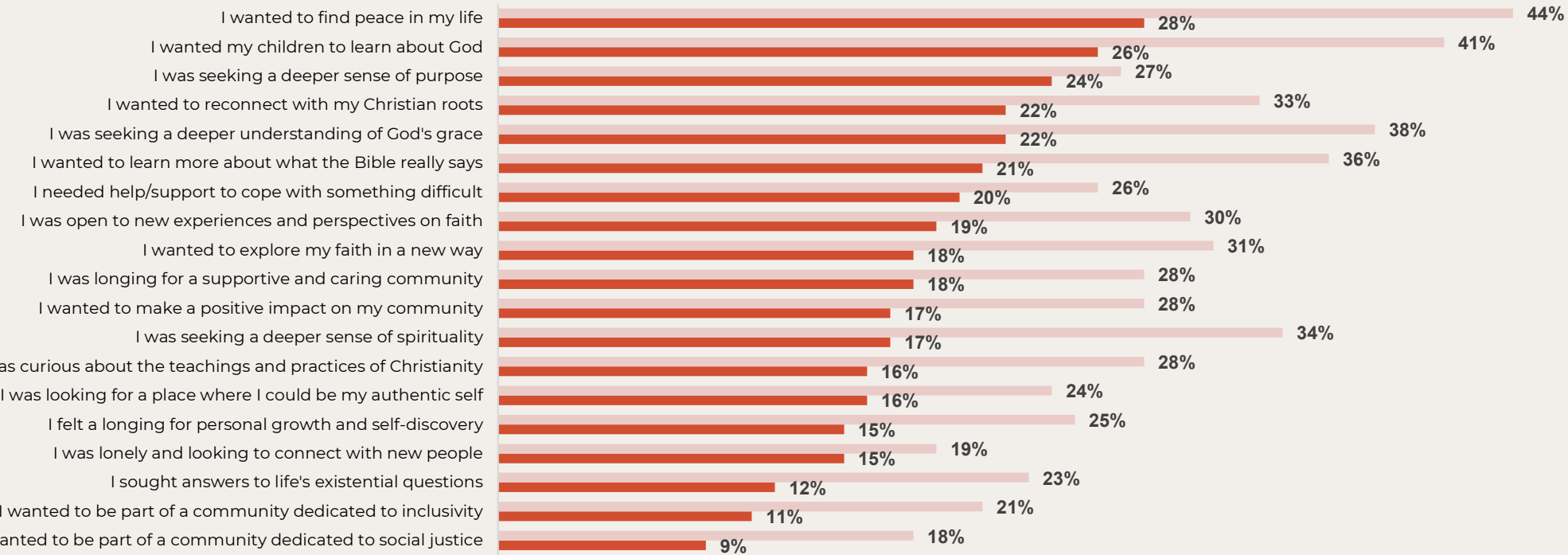
Getting to Know Unchurched Parents of Children Under 6



Unchurched parents of children under 6 show signs of prioritizing their children’s spirituality. They might consider going to a Christian church to find peace and for their child to learn about God.

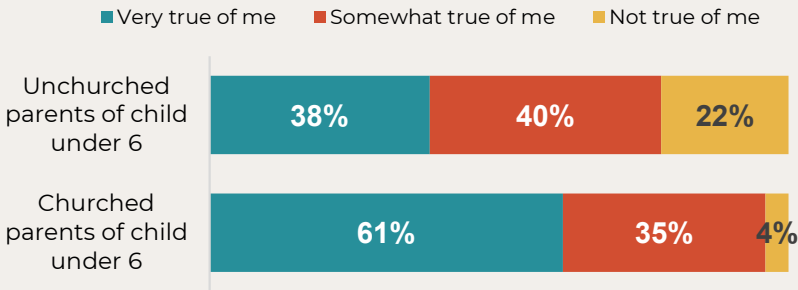
“I might consider going to a Christian church if...”

■ Churched parents of child under 6 ■ Unchurched parents of child under 6

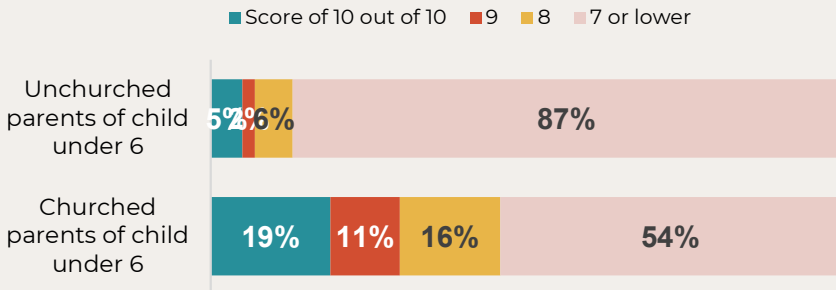


Unchurched parents of children under 6 show signs of struggling with their mental health and well-being more so than churchgoers.

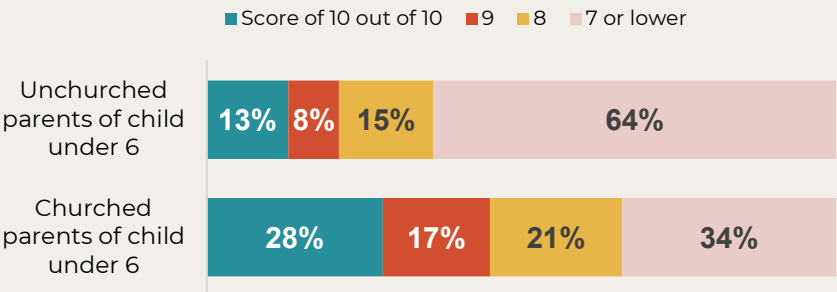
“I am excited about the future.”



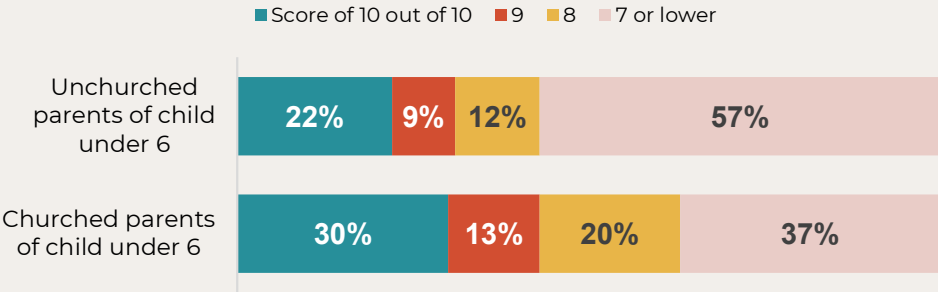
“I volunteer my time to serve others in my community.”



How would you rate your overall mental health?

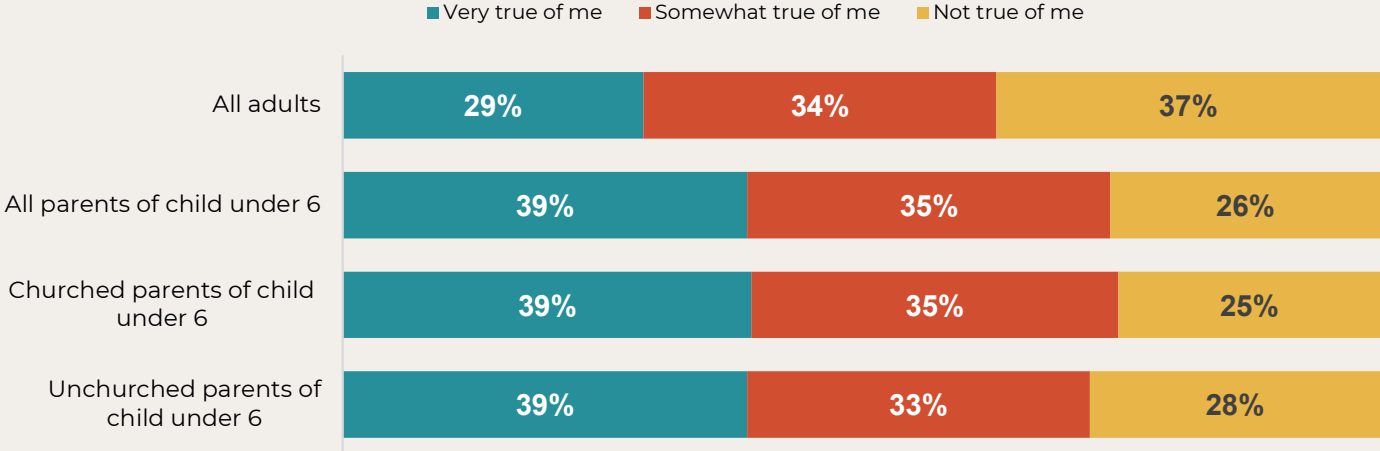


To what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?



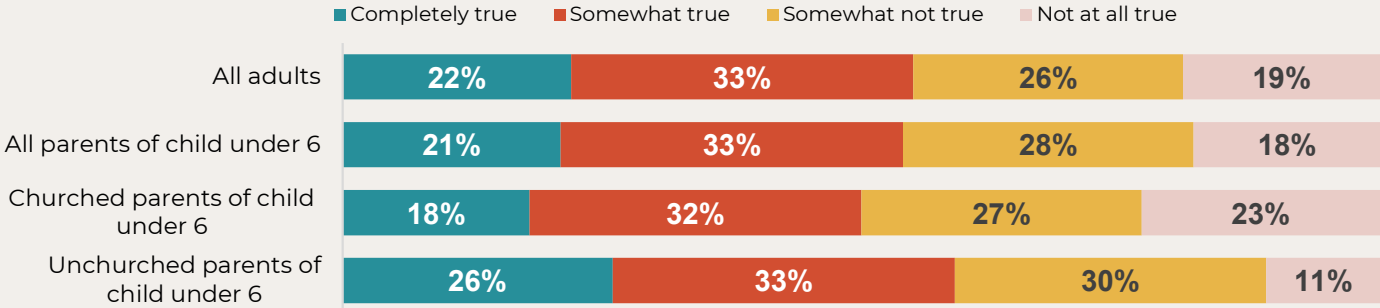
However, these unchurched parents are no less likely than their churched counterparts to feel like something is missing from their life.

“I feel like something is missing from my life.”

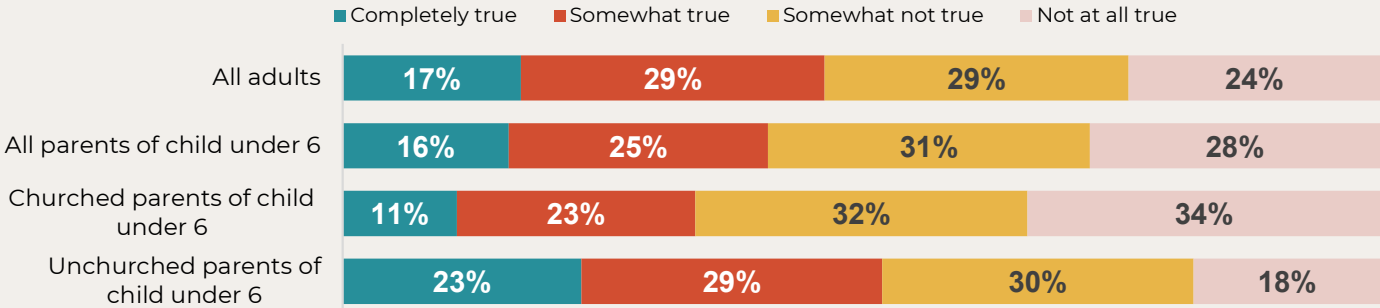


Unchurched parents of children under 6 admit they're skeptical of Christian church leaders. Many believe the Church cannot answer their questions.

“I am skeptical of Christian church leaders.”



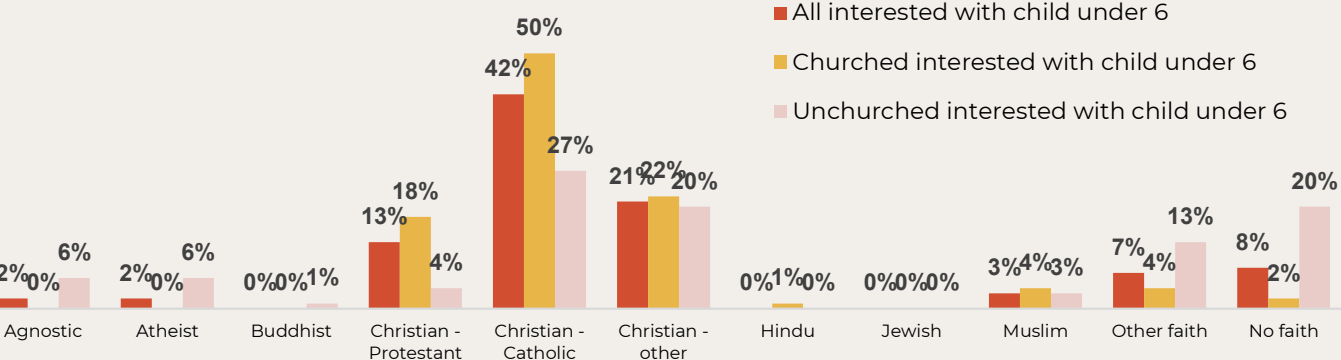
“The church cannot answer my questions.”



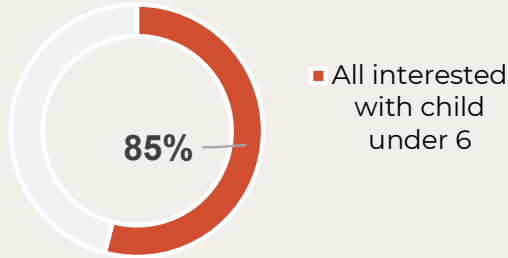
Getting to Know Those Interested in Church-Based Early Learning Centers

Most of those who have a child under 6 and express interest in a church-based early learning center have prior experience with a churchgoing, Christian faith – regardless of whether they are currently churched (65%) or unchurched (35%).

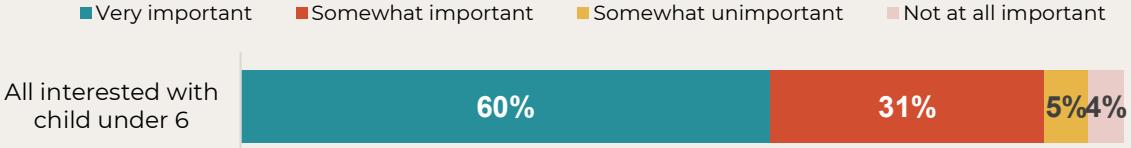
Self-identified religious affiliation:



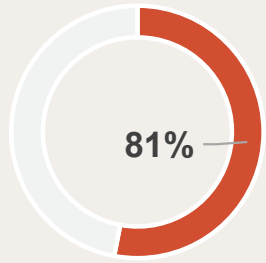
Have you ever consistently attended a Christian church or parish?



How important to you was religious faith during your upbringing?



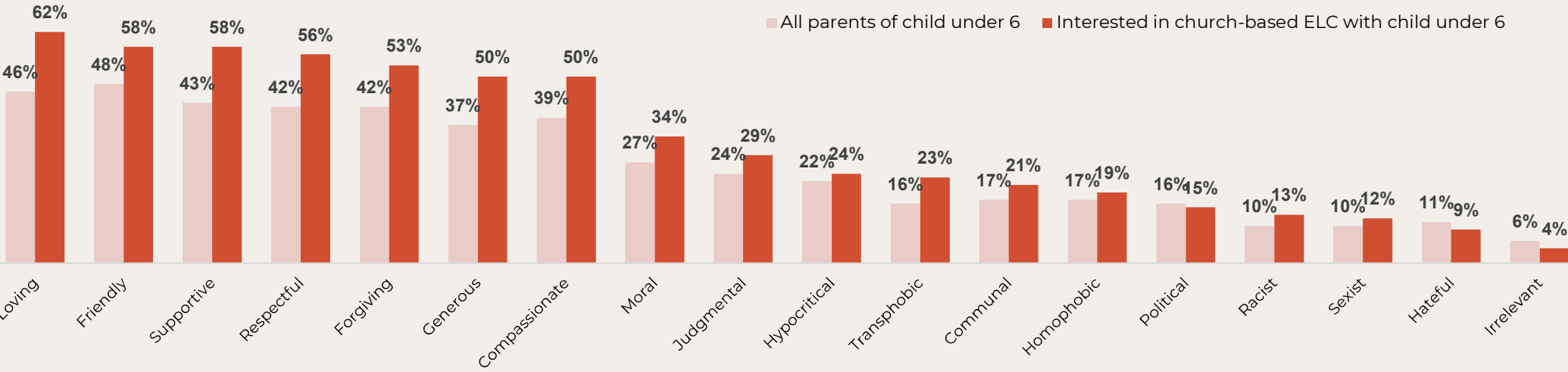
At any point in your life have you considered yourself a Christian?



Relatedly, they tend to have a positive view of the Christian Church.



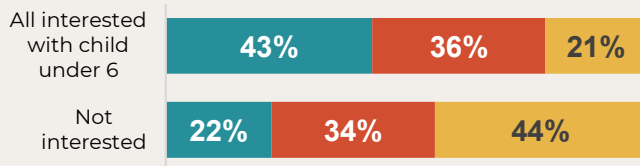
Which of the following terms would you say you most associate with Christians and the Christian church?



These interested parents – churchgoers and nonchurchgoers alike - are actively on a spiritual quest.

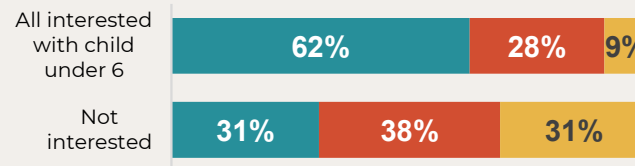
“I long for community where I can speak openly about my spiritual beliefs.”

■ Completely true ■ Very true ■ Less true / not true



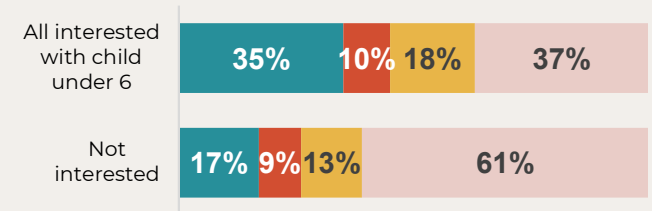
“I am searching for meaning and purpose.”

■ Very true of me ■ Somewhat true of me



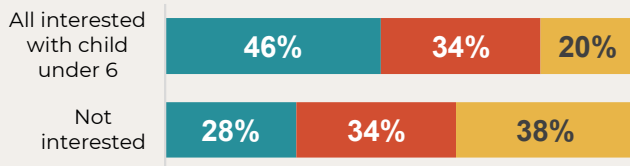
“Growing spiritually is more important than anything else in my life.”

■ Score of 10 out of 10 ■ 9 ■ 8 ■ 7 or lower



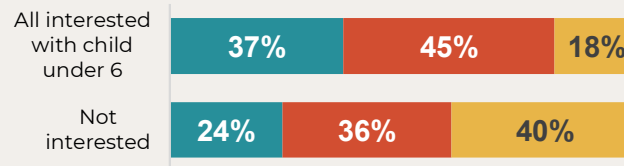
“I feel like something is missing from my life.”

■ Very true of me ■ Somewhat true of me



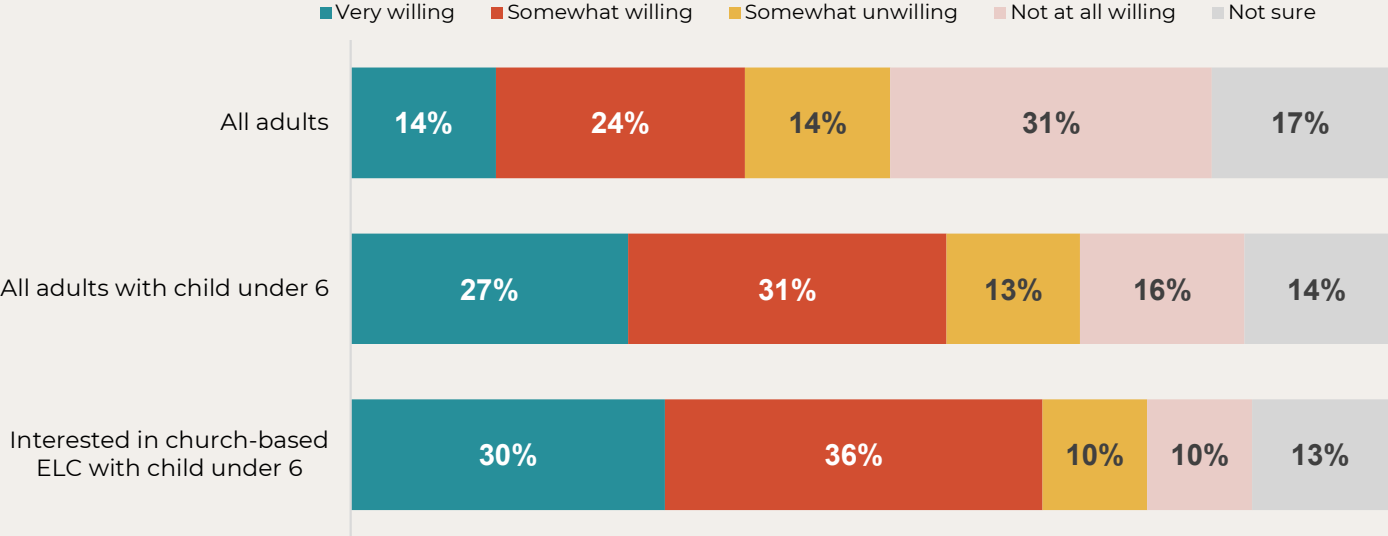
“I am on a quest for spiritual meaning.”

■ Very true of me ■ Somewhat true of me



Many of these interested parents who know of the ELCA share that they are open and willing to visit an ELCA congregation in-person (66%).

In the future, how willing are you to visit an ELCA congregation in-person?
Among those who know the ELCA



Narrowing our focus to *unchurched* adults interested in church-based early learning centers, we see that this group more often identifies as bisexual and tends to have a lower household income. They also often care more deeply about marginalized people groups.

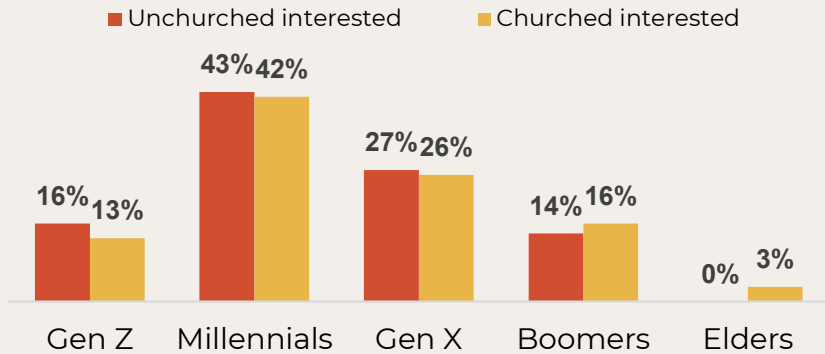
Bisexual:
13%
vs. 5% of all adults

No higher education:
47%
vs. 32% of all adults

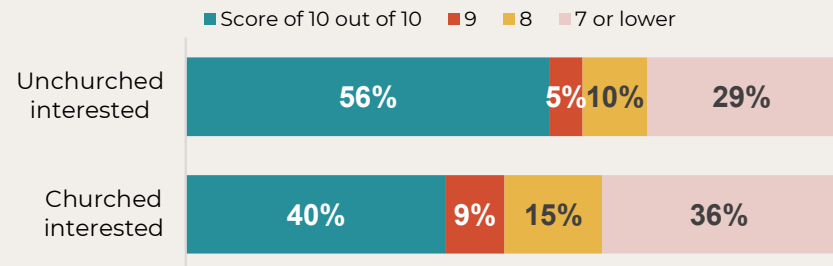
HHI <\$50k:
65%
vs. 49% of all adults

Self-identified Christian:
54%
vs. 62% of all adults

Generation



“I believe that all people should have a chance to speak and be heard, especially those from marginalized groups.”



ELCA Congregational Research Executive Summary for the ELEA

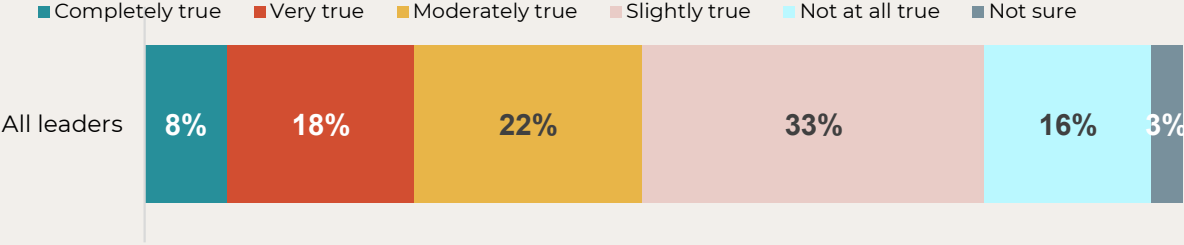
Few ELCA rostered leaders believe their churches adequately address the struggles of the next generation, with only 39 percent affirming strong family support; half of young parents within the ELCA agree familial support is an important area of improvement for the denomination. Churches that excel in supporting families are far more welcoming, foster healthier faith and overall wellness among congregants, and show stronger signs of fruitful next gen engagement. While churches with early learning centers (ELCs) do a better job serving families through a wider variety of ministry offerings, they often lack strong assimilation pipelines and are not more focused on evangelism nor community engagement.

Next-Gen Mindedness in the ELCA

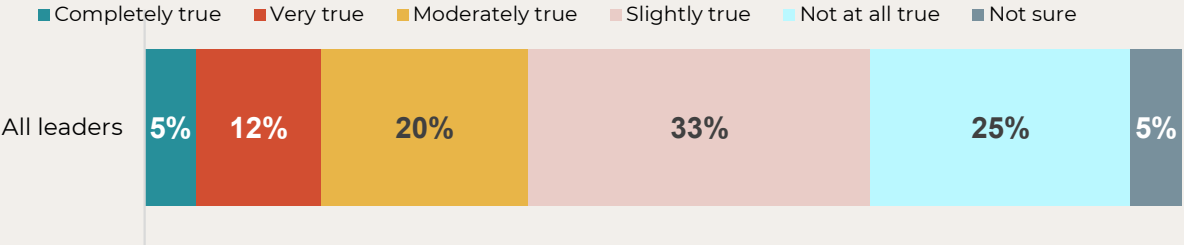


Few ELCA rostered leaders say their churches are mindful of the struggles and realities facing the next generation. *Among rostered leaders*

“Our church recognizes the problems young people face in their day-to-day lives.”



“Our church makes efforts to put itself ‘in the shoes’ of young people.”

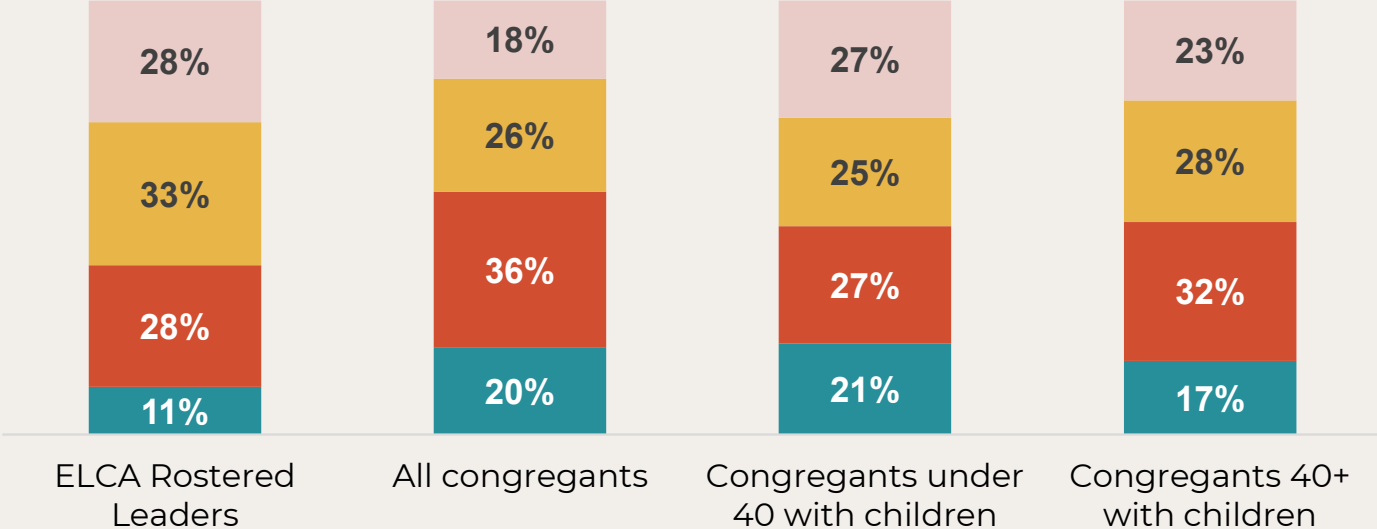


Supporting Families Well

About half of ELCA congregants under the age of 40 with children feel their church supports families well. 39 percent of rostered leaders say the same.

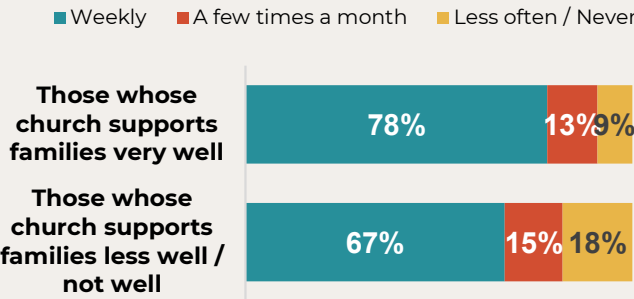
“My church supports families well.”

■ Completely true ■ Very true ■ Moderately true ■ Less true / not true

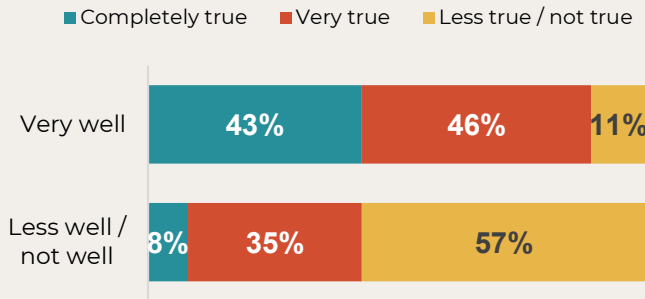


When an ELCA church supports families very well, their church experiences a multitude of benefits and is *far* more welcoming overall. *Among congregants*

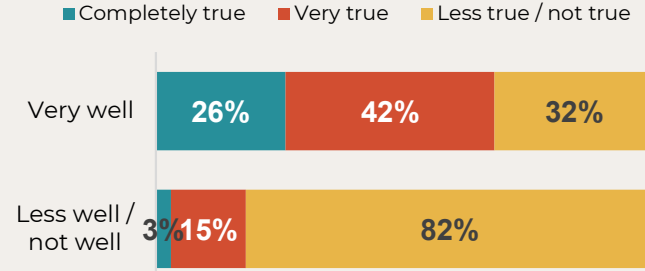
Church Attendance



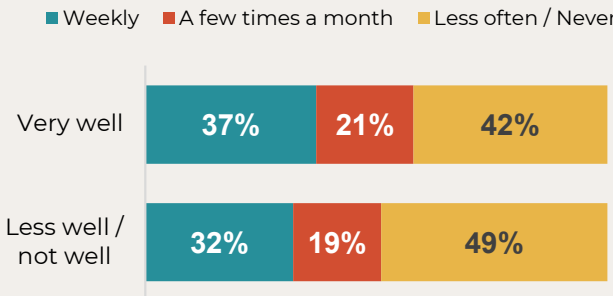
“Our church is hospitable.”



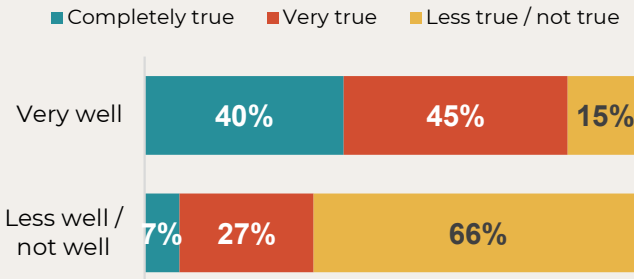
“Our church integrates newcomers well.”



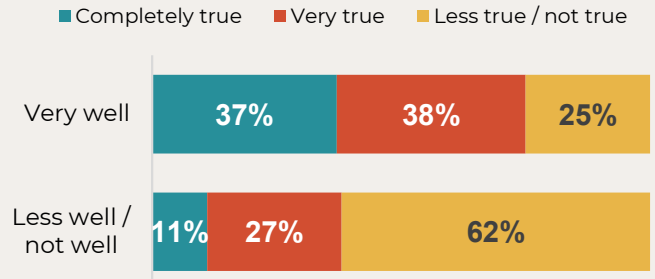
Volunteerism at Church



“Our church makes people feel accepted.”



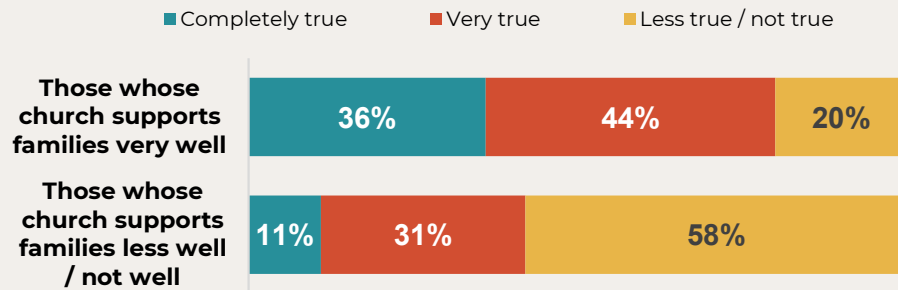
“Our church is a caring neighbor in our community.”



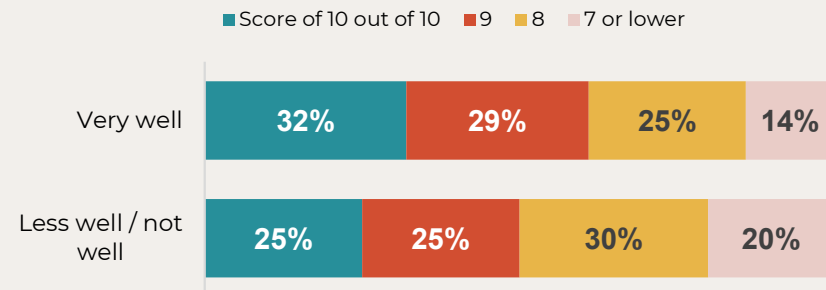
Additionally, congregants of ELCA churches that support families well show signs of having a healthier Christian faith and higher degrees of personal flourishing.

Among congregants

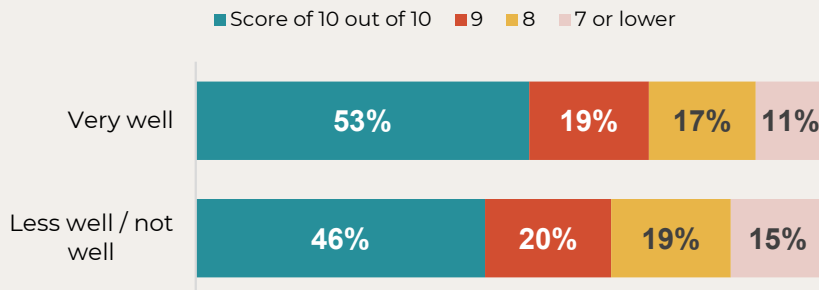
“Our church makes faith relevant to people’s daily lives.”



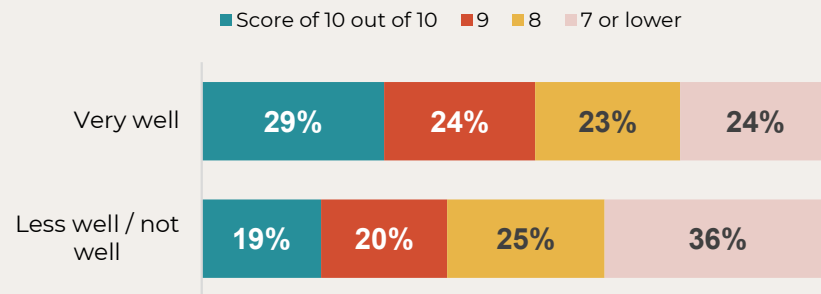
“I feel the things I do in my life are worthwhile.”



“My Christian beliefs affect every aspect of my life.”



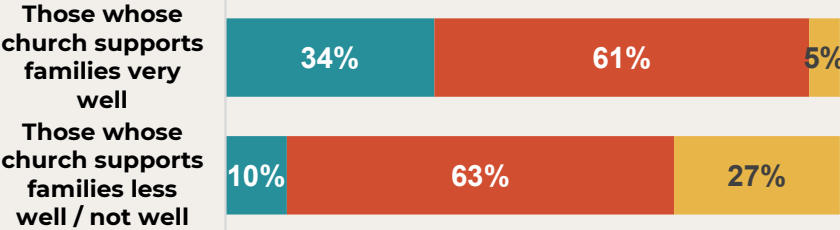
“My relationships are as satisfying as I would want them to be.”



Pastors who say their churches support families well appear to have much more effective discipleship and are more intentional with the next generation. *Among rostered leaders*

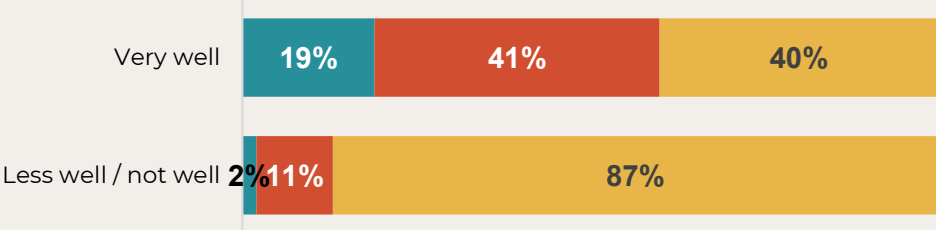
“Our ministries effectively disciple and grow our people.”

■ Agree strongly ■ Agree somewhat ■ Disagree



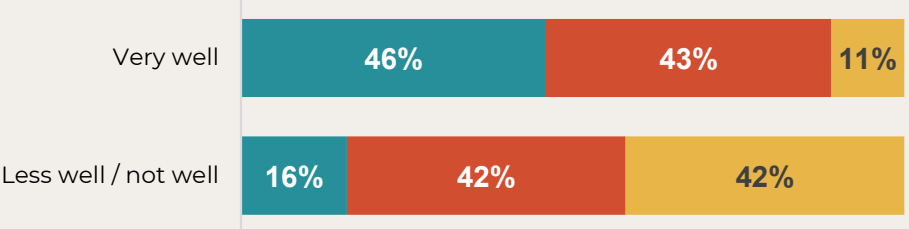
“Our church is sensitive to the needs of different age groups in our church.”

■ Completely true ■ Very true ■ Less true / not true



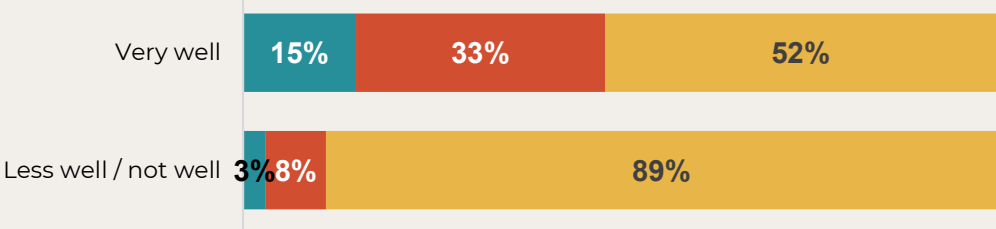
“Our church encourages people to live out their faith in their daily actions.”

■ Completely true ■ Very true ■ Less true / not true



“Our church recognizes the problems young people face in their day-to-day lives.”

■ Completely true ■ Very true ■ Less true / not true

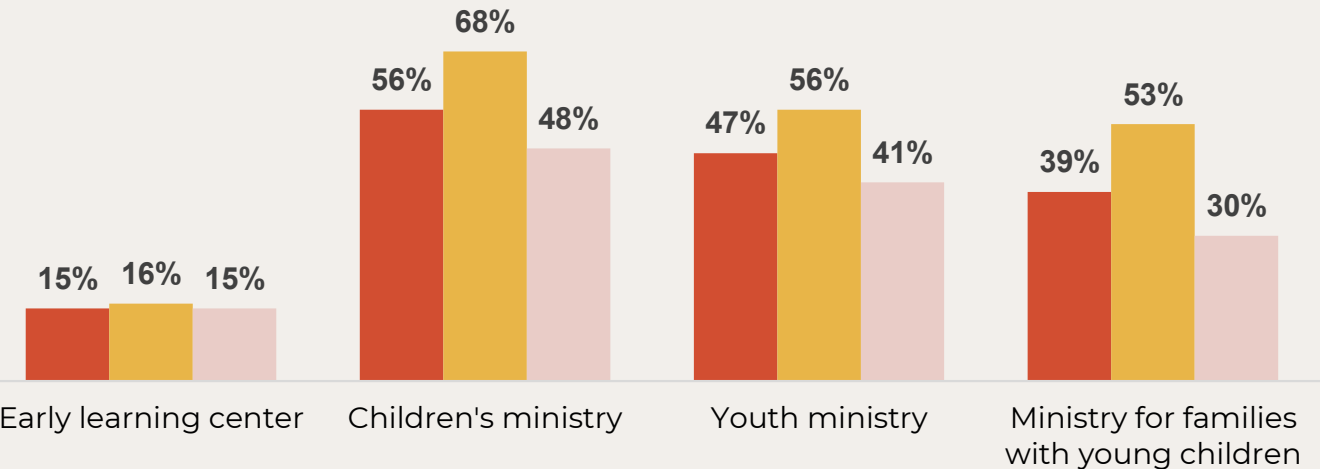


When Early Learning Centers (ELCs) Are Offered...

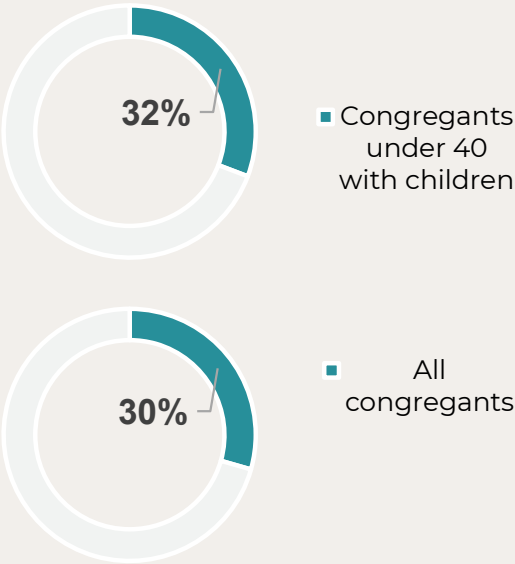
Among pastors who say they support families very well, only 16 percent offer an early learning center (ELC). Interestingly, saying one’s church supports families well does not correlate with a stronger likelihood of offering an ELC.

Does your church offer any of the following?
Among rostered leaders

- All rostered leaders
- Those whose church supports families very well
- Those whose church supports families less well / not well

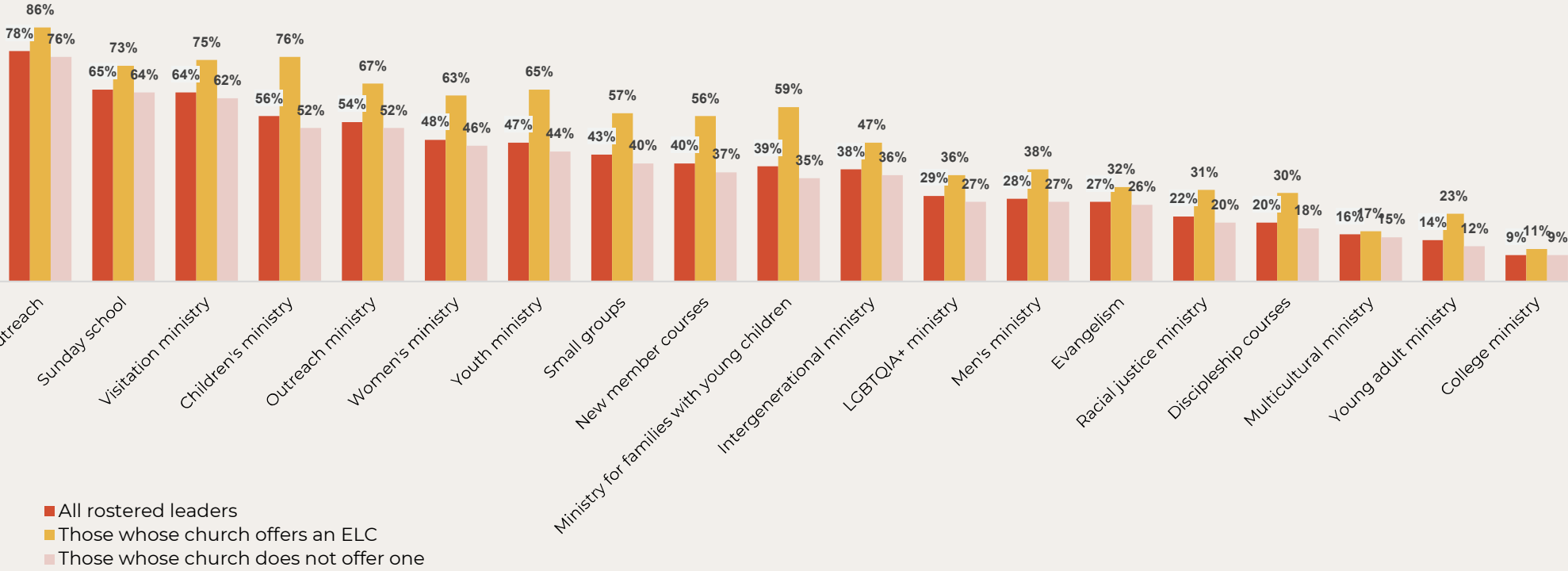


Church has an early learning center



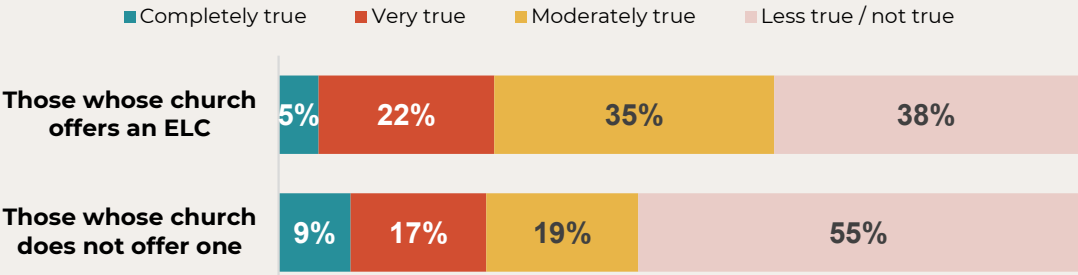
Churches that offer early learning centers are significantly more likely to offer a wider variety of other ministries.

Does your church offer any of the following?
Among rostered leaders

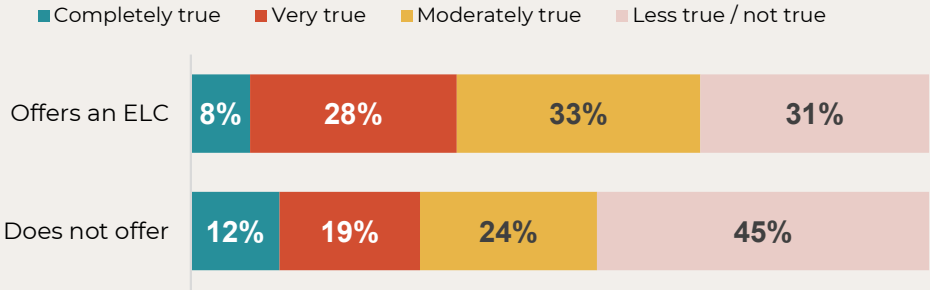


Churches offering ELCs are slightly more likely to be more next-gen minded in their leadership. Across the ELCA, however, this is a key area of improvement that emerges in the data. *Among rostered leaders*

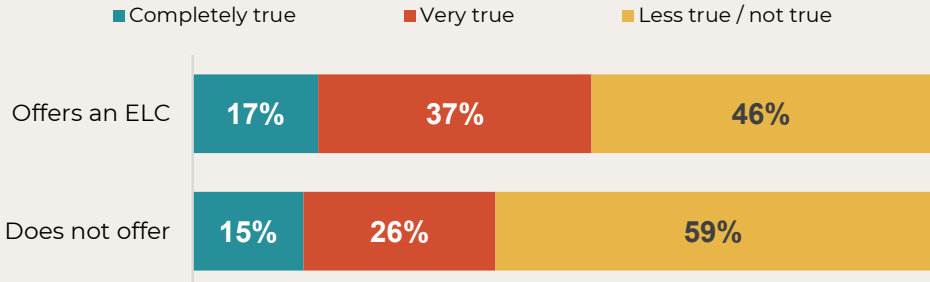
“Our church empowers young leaders to take on challenges.”



“Our church invites young people to serve in key ministry roles.”



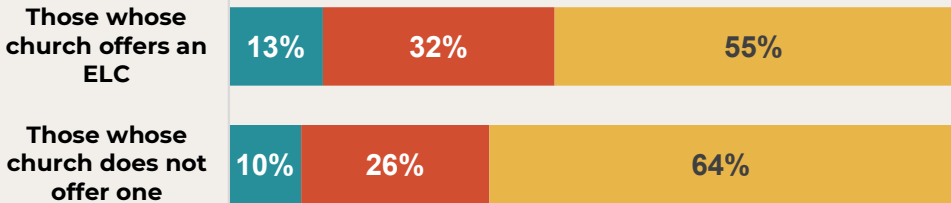
“Our church is a place that families with children feel like they belong.”



Similarly, congregants that are a part of churches with ELCs are only a little more inclined than their counterparts to think their church supports families and different age groups well. *Among congregants*

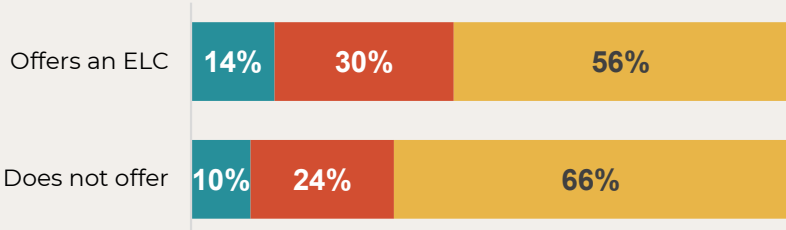
“Our church is sensitive to the needs of different age groups in our church.”

■ Completely true ■ Very true ■ Less true / not true



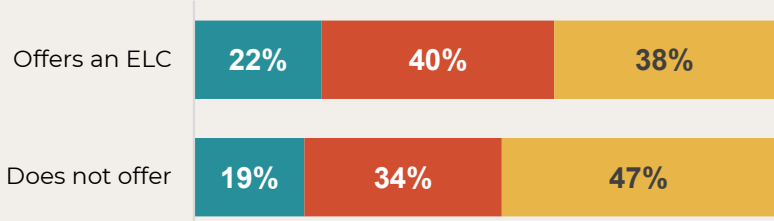
“Our church invites young people to serve in key ministry roles.”

■ Completely true ■ Very true ■ Less true / not true



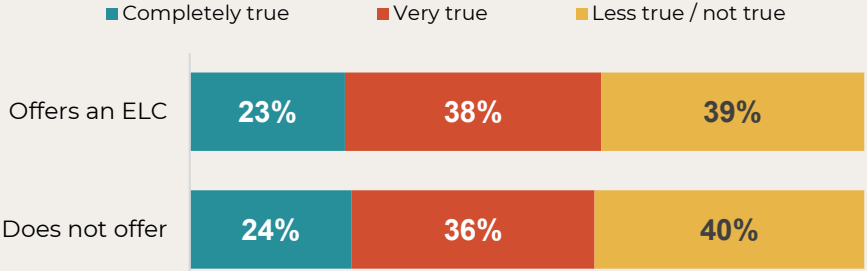
“Our church supports families well.”

■ Completely true ■ Very true ■ Less true / not true

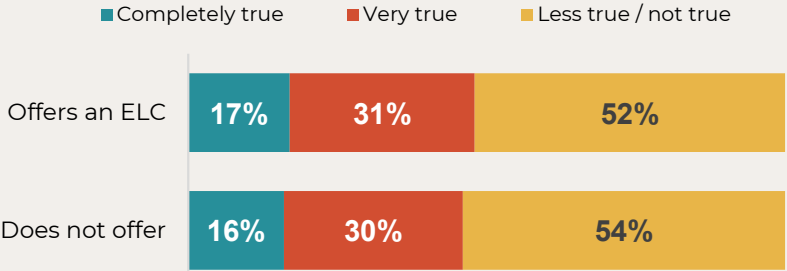


The assimilation pipelines of churches with ELCs are not as strong as they probably should be, considering they have more opportunity for newcomers to visit than most.

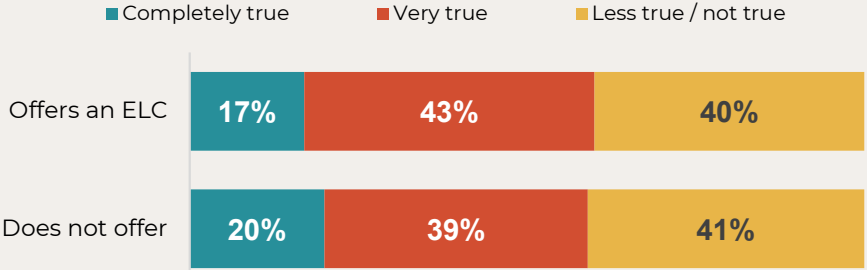
“Our church makes visitors feel welcome.” *Among congregants*



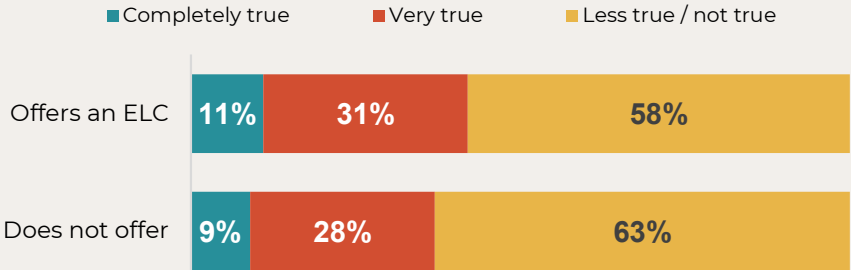
“Our church integrates newcomers well.” *Among congregants*



“Our church makes visitors feel welcome.” *Among rostered leaders*



“Our church integrates newcomers well.” *Among rostered leaders*

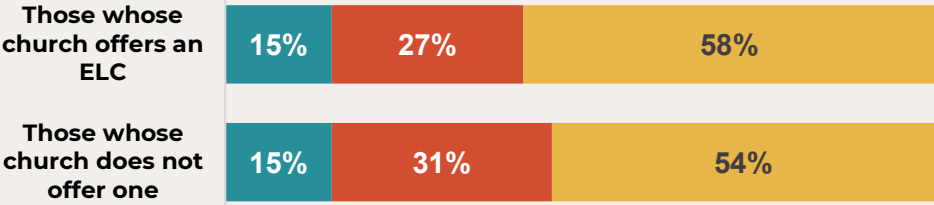


Perhaps related, churches with ELCs are not more evangelistically inclined overall and do not more fervently say they actively care for those in their neighborhoods.

Among rostered leaders

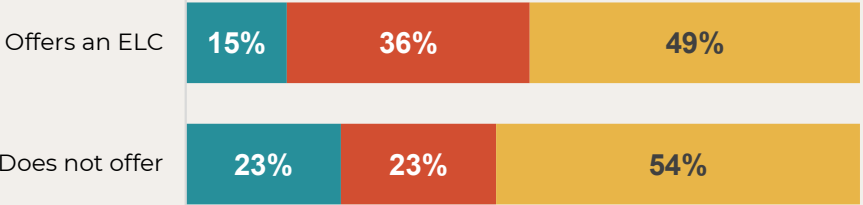
“Our church encourages people to share their faith with others.”

■ Completely true ■ Very true ■ Less true / not true



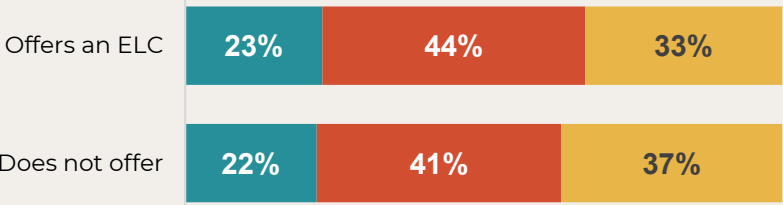
“Our church actively cares for people in our neighborhood, including those who aren’t part of our church.”

■ Completely true ■ Very true ■ Less true / not true



“Our church is hospitable.”

■ Completely true ■ Very true ■ Less true / not true



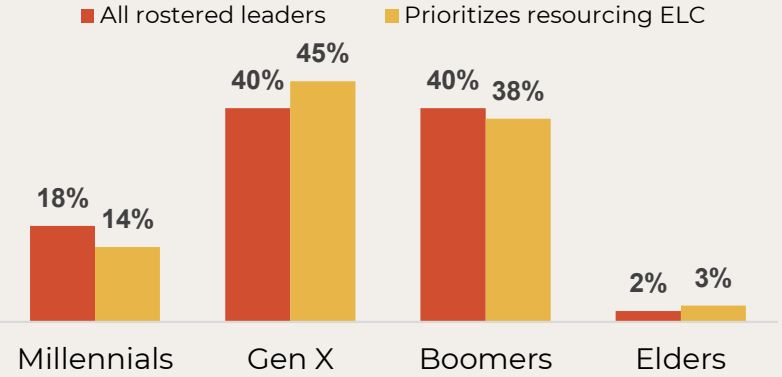
Profile of churches that not only provide an ELC but prioritize resourcing it: Among rostered leaders

LGBTQ+ affirming:
54%
vs. 57% of all rostered
leaders' churches

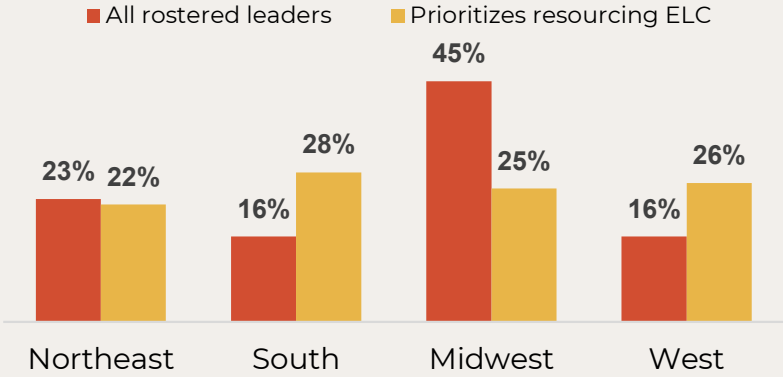
Size of 101+:
13%
vs. 8% of all rostered
leaders' churches

Salary of \$50k+:
59%
vs. 52% of all rostered
leaders' churches

Pastor's Generation:



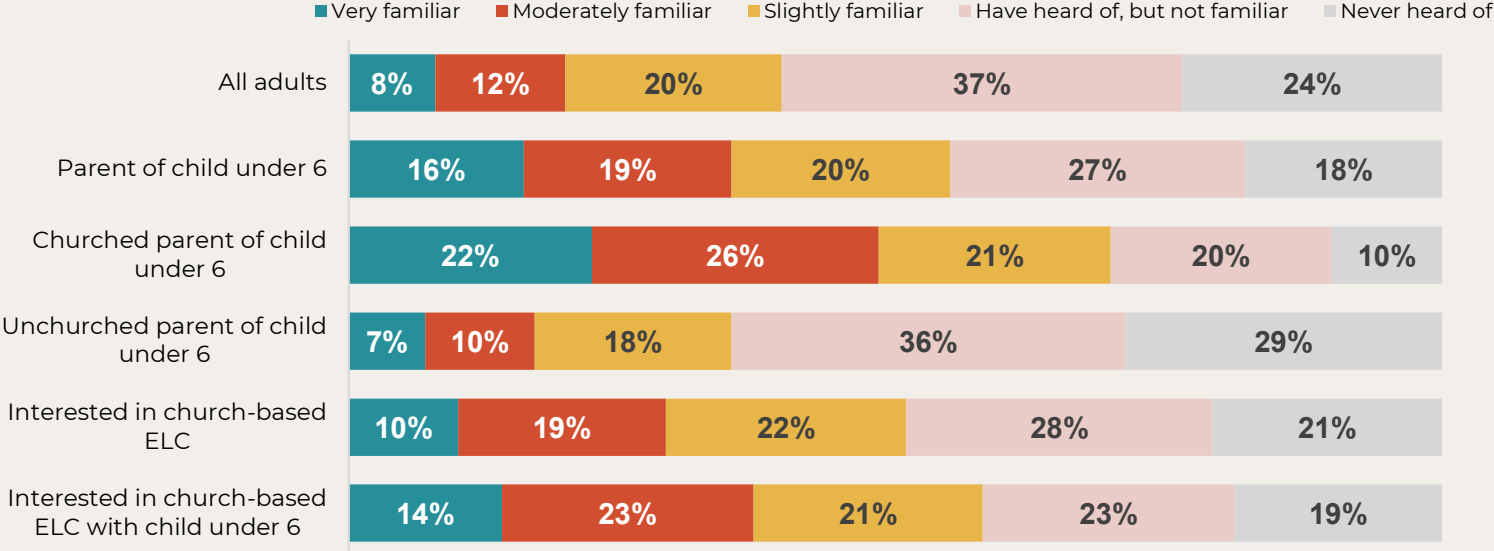
U.S. Region:



ELCA Brand Study

One in three parents of children under the age of 6 claim to be at least moderately familiar with the ELCA religious group.

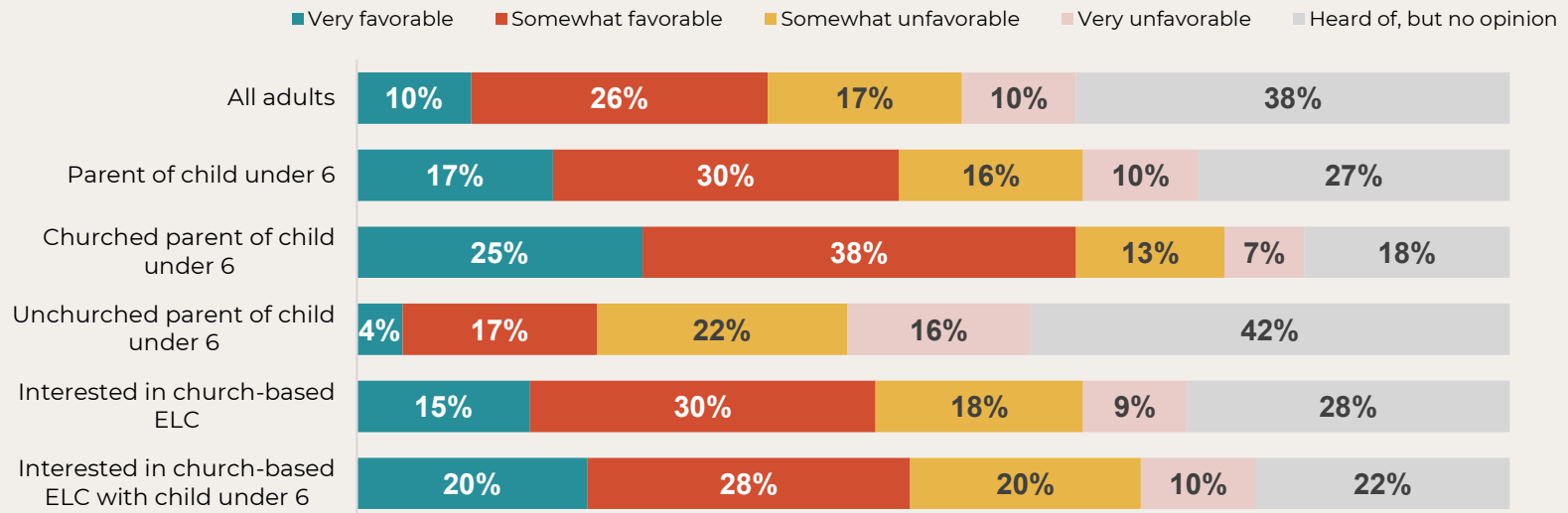
How familiar are you with the religious group... Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)?



Among parents of young children who are familiar with the ELCA, 47 percent offer a positively-skewed favorability rating.

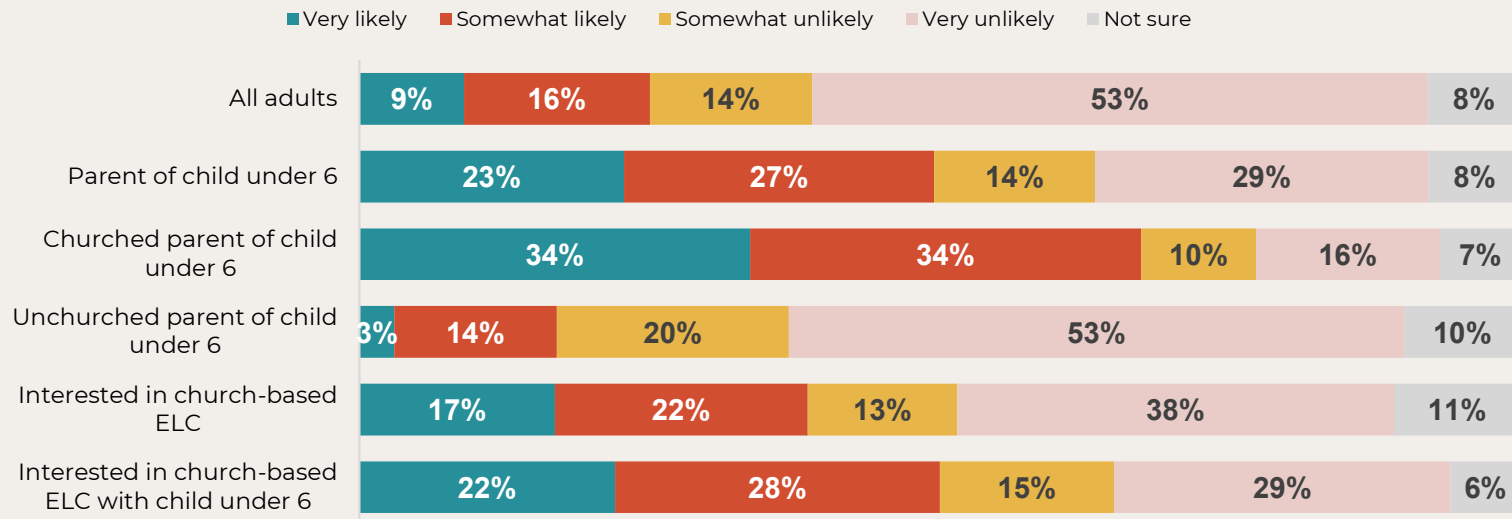
Please indicate if you have a favorable or unfavorable impression of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

Among those who have heard of the ELCA or are familiar with the ELCA



Among those who know the ELCA, churched parents of young children are far more likely to say they might visit an ELCA congregation than their unchurched counterparts.

In the next three months, how likely are you to visit an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Congregation?
Among those who have heard of the ELCA or are familiar with the ELCA



9 percent of U.S. adults say they have attended an ELCA congregation. This percentage is higher among parents.

Have you ever been a member or regular attendee of an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) congregation?

■ Yes ■ No

