



SBC Worship: Congregations and Leadership Study

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1. Executive Summary

In 2026, SBC Worship¹ conducted the Congregations and Leadership Study—the first comprehensive study of music and worship ministry (M&WM) in Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) churches since 1938. The study aims to recognize, analyze, and communicate the state of M&WM across the SBC and identify opportunities, challenges, and trends. Such findings can help to galvanize support for congregational worship by enabling data-based decision-making among churches, denominational entities, educational institutions, and other supporting organizations. This research effort seeks to understand and communicate worship practices in SBC congregations, in the hope that more conversations about worship might encourage increased faithfulness and effectiveness in worship ministry among SBC churches. Though this study does not claim exhaustive coverage of every aspect of SBC M&WM, this study provides a unique, data-driven assessment of M&WM that offers insights into multiple dimensions of congregational worship in the SBC. The findings can strengthen congregational worship for over 46,000 SBC churches.²

4,530 SBC churches—approximately 9.7% of all SBC churches—completed this survey. Responses came from churches of all sizes in forty-nine states and four U.S. territories. The sample size yields a 99% confidence level with a 1.8% margin of error, indicating high reliability. The survey covered a broad variety of topics germane to M&WM in SBC congregations, including each respondent church's demographic profile; worship leader experience, employment status, and tenure; worship service structure, including amount of time allocated to singing, whether livestreaming is available, and the number of weekend worship services; worship leader training; instrumentation; service planning; size of volunteer ministry; and identification and development of future worship leaders. The responses paint a picture of the current state and possible future of M&WM in the SBC.

¹ SBC stands for "Southern Baptist Convention," but SBC Worship is a subsidiary of The Worship Initiative and not an official entity of the SBC.

² As of September 2025, the SBC reported 46,876 cooperating churches in the SBC, mostly concentrated in the United States. Additional responses came from SBC churches in United States territories, Canada, and Japan. See Southern Baptist Convention, "Fast Facts," last modified September 1, 2025, <https://www.sbc.net/about/what-we-do/fast-facts/>.

Summary of Findings

The following list summarizes the key findings of this study. Subsequent sections of this report offer increased detail pertaining to these and other topics.

1. **By 2040, SBC churches will need to identify, equip, and train over 20,000 worship leaders.** By the year 2040, approximately 20,000 of the worship leaders who currently serve SBC churches will be retired or at retirement age (65). This estimate does not include attrition for any other reason other than expected retirement, indicating that the future worship leadership shortage may be larger than 20,000.
2. **4% of SBC churches that regularly have a worship leader currently have a vacancy in that position.** This statistic emphasizes an immediate need. Nearly 1,900 in SBC churches currently do not have a primary worship leader, and many struggle to find candidates for their vacancies.
3. **23% of SBC churches report having one or more persons who have expressed a call to worship ministry or are currently being trained to become a worship leader.** This statistic alone demands an increased focus on identification and development of future worship leaders to meet the need arising from retiring worship leaders in SBC churches.
4. **SBC churches indicate limited strategies and resources for developing worship leaders.** Overall, 51% of SBC churches report no identified development plan for training current and future worship leaders. 19% of all SBC churches report informal mentorship as the primary development method.
5. **The majority of churches with participating young people do not have a clear development plan.** Although 26% of SBC churches report involvement from young people in M&WM, only 4% of churches report a structured development pipeline as their primary approach to identifying and training future worship leaders.
6. **SBC churches can do more to help church musicians wrestle with calling and potential interest in M&WM.** In 70% of the churches whose primary worship

leader will reach or exceed retirement age by 2040, not even one person in the church has expressed a call to serve in worship leadership or is being trained to become a worship leader.

7. Development for both volunteers and worship leaders becomes increasingly important as M&WM team size increases.

From a list of twenty-five potential challenges in M&WM, the fourth most common response concerns better leadership training for volunteers, while better leadership development for new worship leaders ranked tenth overall. 22% of extra-large churches consider training for volunteers to be a top need, compared to 11% of small churches. Similarly, 21% of extra-large churches acknowledge worship leader development to be a top need, compared to just 8% of small churches.

8. 10% of SBC churches do not regularly feature live instrumentalists in their services.

Churches without live instruments typically rely on recorded media such as YouTube or CDs, while 18% of such churches choose to sing a cappella when they have no one to play instruments in their worship services.

9. Perceived strengths offer insight into various issues related to M&WM in SBC congregations, including congregational participation in singing, conflicts over musical style, and support from a pastor.

Participants identified their top selections from a list of eighteen successes or strengths in M&WM. 61% of SBC churches testify that the M&WM has strong support from the senior pastor. 54% of SBC churches celebrate no significant conflicts over musical style as a recent success. 44% of SBC churches consider congregational enthusiasm and joy when singing to be a top strength.

The nine points listed here do not sufficiently represent the many positive takeaways from this study. Overall, the survey findings provide much reason for celebration of the Lord's kindness to SBC churches in the area of worship. Many churches demonstrate a vibrant worship culture and are actively investing in the development of future worship leaders. However, many churches, especially smaller churches, report serious struggles in M&WM. One of the most important findings from this research is that a large number of SBC churches do not have a plan to identify and train young musicians for either vocational or volunteer service in

M&WM. The current lack of young people aspiring to worship ministry will only augment the dearth of worship leaders in the future. Development of musically-capable and theologically-robust worship leaders will not occur overnight, so the topic must be discussed with relative urgency. Creative solutions will need to be employed to address this imminent leadership gap.

2. History and Methodology

The last comprehensive study of worship and church music practices in SBC churches was conducted in 1938 and published in the 1939 edition of *The Southern Baptist Handbook*.³ That survey, which its authors stated was the first comprehensive study of a single denomination's musical practices "in the history of this nation," was completed by 1,381 (5.5%) of the roughly 25,000 churches that comprised the SBC at that time.⁴ The study contained twenty-four questions, covering topics such as musical training of music leaders in the church, musical instruments used in worship services, financial expenditures related to music, and which hymns and gospel songs were most commonly-used in congregations.⁵ The 1938 survey was a catalyst for advances in SBC church music that occurred in the 1940s and 1950s including the establishment of the Baptist Sunday School Board's Church Music Department (now Lifeway Worship); the growth of graded choir and youth choir programs within SBC churches; and the proliferation of church music periodicals, conferences, training events, and church music degree programs at SBC-affiliated colleges and seminaries.

Eighty-eight years after the inaugural 1938 study, SBC Worship conducted the second comprehensive survey of M&WM in SBC congregations. Preparations for this work began in 2025, when SBC Worship established a Worship Research Committee comprised of five professors from SBC-affiliated colleges and seminaries with the stated goal of serving the church by providing research-driven insights that encourage healthy, biblically faithful worship. The committee decided in the summer of 2025 to conduct a new, comprehensive survey-based study on the state of worship and church music in the SBC. The committee's goal for this survey was to understand, analyze, and communicate the state of worship across the SBC by identifying opportunities, challenges, and trends in order to guide both local churches and denominational entities toward greater faithfulness and effectiveness in congregational worship.

³ E. P. Aldredge, ed., *Southern Baptist Handbook 1939* (Nashville, TN: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1939). This volume contains the complete findings from the 1938 survey, "A Survey of the Music Program of Southern Baptist Churches," which can be found at the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archive online.

⁴ Aldredge, *The Southern Baptist Handbook 1939*, 12–13.

⁵ Aldredge, *The Southern Baptist Handbook 1939*, 11–12.

The SBC Worship research committee began planning and designing the survey in November 2025. By early 2026, the committee finalized the survey with a total of 41 questions that could be completed in 10–12 minutes. The committee tested a pilot study of the survey with a small focus group in February and March 2026. The final version of the survey officially launched on March 24, 2026, and remained open through May 1, 2026. Between May 1 and early June, the committee tabulated the results and delivered a presentation of preliminary findings on June 8, 2026 at the SBC Worship Micro Conference in Orlando, Florida.

Between March 25 and April 30, 2026, the members of the research committee sent a link to the survey via email to over 30,000 SBC churches and 1,200 leaders representing state conventions, associations, and other networks within the SBC. By the time the survey closed on May 1, the committee received submissions from over 5,300 churches. After removing all incomplete and duplicate responses, 4,530 complete responses remained. Those 4,530 churches represent approximately 9.7% of all SBC churches in 2026—a significantly higher percentage of church participation than the 1938 study. This SBC Worship Congregations and Leadership Study is likely the largest survey-based research of a single denomination's worship practices ever conducted.

Furthermore, the tremendous outpouring of participation in this research study contributes to a high statistical reliability. This survey has a 99% confidence level and a margin of error of 1.8%. These numbers suggest that the survey accurately represents the overall population of SBC churches. As a result, insights extracted from this survey can be considered generalizable to the total population of SBC churches.

3. Respondent Profiles and Initial Findings

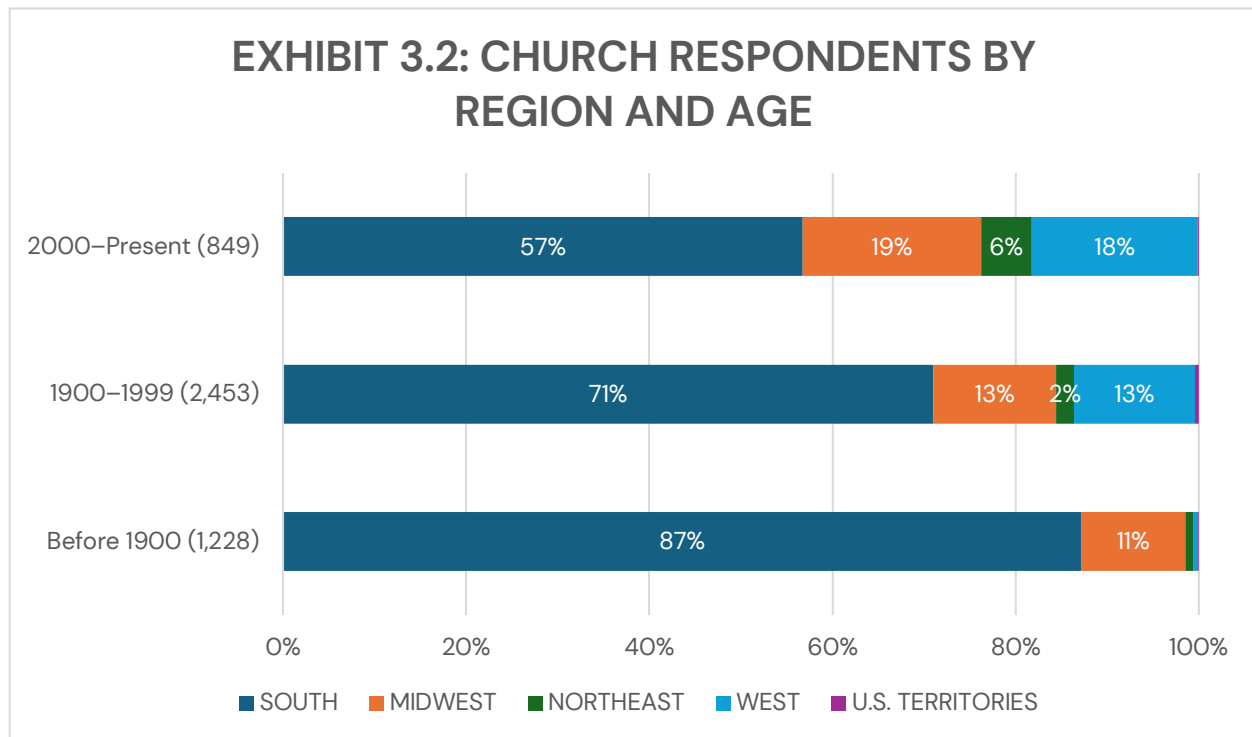
The churches that completed the survey represent diversity in attendance levels, location, geographic context, and age. This section summarizes the demographic profiles of participating churches. Churches responded from forty-nine of the fifty states, the District of Columbia (Washington D.C.), and from each of the four U.S. territories with SBC churches: Guam, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and the Virgin Islands. Two SBC churches in Canada and three in Japan also responded. While forty-nine U.S. states were represented, not one of Rhode Island's thirty SBC churches responded to the survey. Exhibit 3.1 displays respondent churches by state and territory, listed according to the total number of participating churches.

EXHIBIT 3.1: RESPONDENT CHURCHES BY STATE

State / Territory	Count	State / Territory	Count	State / Territory	Count
Texas	480	Indiana	48	Oregon	13
North Carolina	440	Maryland	46	Maine	12
Mississippi	322	Colorado	44	Montana	11
Georgia	318	Iowa	33	South Dakota	11
Oklahoma	264	New Mexico	33	Nebraska	10
Missouri	263	Idaho	31	North Dakota	8
Florida	230	New York	30	New Jersey	8
Kentucky	223	Nevada	26	Vermont	7
				District of Columbia	5
Alabama	196	Hawaii	26	<i>Outside of the US</i>	5
Tennessee	185	Michigan	24	Connecticut	5
South Carolina	181	Pennsylvania	22	Delaware	3
California	166	Wyoming	21	New Hampshire	3
Virginia	150	Utah	19	Puerto Rico	3
Louisiana	131	Minnesota	17	Virgin Islands	2
Arkansas	106	Wisconsin	17	Guam	1
Ohio	89	Massachusetts	17	American Samoa	1
Arizona	63	Alaska	17	Rhode Island	0
Illinois	61	Washington	16		
Kansas	53	West Virginia	14		

Most respondent churches were established in the twentieth century, but many were founded before 1900. As shown in Exhibit 3.2, the South serves as the

home to most of the oldest SBC churches established prior to 1900. Churches founded in the twenty-first century comprise 19% of all respondents.



Although responses could be analyzed by region or church age, the research committee chose church size as the primary dimension for comparative analysis across metrics. For this report, respondent churches were grouped according to the four size categories utilized by Lifeway Research in their Annual Church Profile reports.⁶ Categorizations for church size in this report are:

1. **Small Churches:** 0–49 in weekly worship attendance
2. **Medium Churches:** 50–99 in weekly worship attendance
3. **Large Churches:** 100–499 in weekly worship attendance
4. **Extra-Large Churches:** 500+ in weekly worship attendance

Based on the parameters listed above, 22% of the churches in this survey average 49 or less in weekly worship attendance (small churches). 25% average 50–99 in weekly worship attendance (medium churches). On the other side of the spectrum, 11% of respondent churches average 500 or more in weekly worship

⁶ See Lifeway Research, “ACP,” <https://research.lifeway.com/tag/acp/>.

attendance (extra-large churches), including 5% that report attendance of 1,000 or more in weekly worship attendance. See Exhibit 3.3 for a full breakdown.⁷

EXHIBIT 3.3: CHURCH RESPONDENTS BY WEEKLY ATTENDANCE/SIZE

Church Size	% of Survey Responses	# of Survey Responses
0-49 (Small)	22%	1,013
50-99 (Medium)	25%	1,135
100-499 (Large)	42%	1,887
500+ (Extra-Large)	11%	488

Exhibit 3.4 displays how the respondent churches' composition by size compares to the SBC segments of the same size.⁸ Additionally, the exhibit reports the percentage that each church size segment comprises of the overall SBC distribution for the same size segment. For example, in this study, the 22% of responses in the small church categorization represent 5% of all small SBC churches. Similarly, the 11% of extra-large church respondents represent 26% of all extra-large SBC churches. Collectively, the 4,530 responses represent 9.7% of all SBC churches.

EXHIBIT 3.4: RESPONDENT CHURCH SIZE COMPARED TO SBC DISTRIBUTION OF CHURCHES BY SIZE

Church Size	% of Survey Responses	% in the SBC*	% of Survey Responses from all SBC churches of each size segment
0-49	22%	41%	5%
50-99	25%	27%	9%
100-499	42%	28%	14%
500+	11%	4%	26%

**Percentages come from the 2024 SBC Annual Church Profile data (2025 data not available at the time of this report).*

⁷ The total responses in Exhibit 2.3 equal 4,523 rather than the reported 4,530 total completed responses. The reason for the 7 less recorded in Exhibit 2.3 is because three responses indicated "none of these" and four responses indicated "I'm not sure." Exclusion of these seven responses does not materially alter the overall results.

⁸ SBC data is based on the 2024 Annual Church Profile data. See Lifeway Research, "2024 ACP Church Statistics," <https://research.lifeway.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/2024-ACP-Church-Statistics.pdf>.

“All SBC” Reporting

Many of the following charts and tables contain a category titled “All SBC.” This metric uses mathematically-weighted percentages to better estimate a more realistic representation of SBC churches. Such estimates are valuable because this survey oversampled larger churches and undersampled smaller ones.⁹ For example, small churches provided 22.4% of the survey responses. However, small churches comprise 41% of churches in the SBC. The small church respondents in the present study comprise only 5% of the total number of small churches in the SBC. In contrast, extra-large church respondents represented 26% of all extra-large churches in the SBC. Therefore, averages of the survey sample skew more towards the disproportionately-larger representation of large and extra-large churches compared to smaller churches.

As a result, this report leverages a mathematical weighting to better represent the entire SBC by adjusting the contributions of each size segment to the overall sample average. Each segment was assigned a weighting based on its representation in the sample as compared to that segment’s representation in the overall SBC. For example, small churches represent 22.4% of survey responses but comprise 41% of the SBC. This methodology then assigns a church size coefficient by dividing the percentage of the SBC (41%) by the percentage of survey responses (22.4%), yielding 183%. The same methodology can be applied to each size segment to produce the size coefficients in Exhibit 3.5.

EXHIBIT 3.5: ALL SBC MATHEMATICAL WEIGHTING

Church Size	% of Survey Responses	% in the SBC	Size Coefficient
0-49	22.4%	41%	183%
50-99	25.1%	27%	108%
100-499	41.7%	28%	67%
500+	10.8%	4%	37%

The 183% size coefficient multiplies each small church’s response to give it nearly twice the weighting in the overall sample. This methodology applies to

⁹ See Exhibit 3.4 and compare the “% of Survey Responses” column to the “% in the SBC” column.

responses in each of the other size segments as well, reducing the impact of the larger churches in the “All SBC” average. As a result, this allows the “All SBC” row to more accurately represent the entire SBC than a simple average of the survey sample.

Respondent Church Service Styles and Structure

Although aligned on core theological convictions, SBC churches vary widely in service styles and structures.¹⁰ They embrace different styles of music, different allocations of time for music in services, and different numbers of services each weekend. This section provides a snapshot of the diversity in these aspects of worship services among SBC churches. See Exhibit 3.6 for a distribution of responses on the number of Sunday morning services.¹¹

EXHIBIT 3.6: NUMBER OF SUNDAY MORNING SERVICES

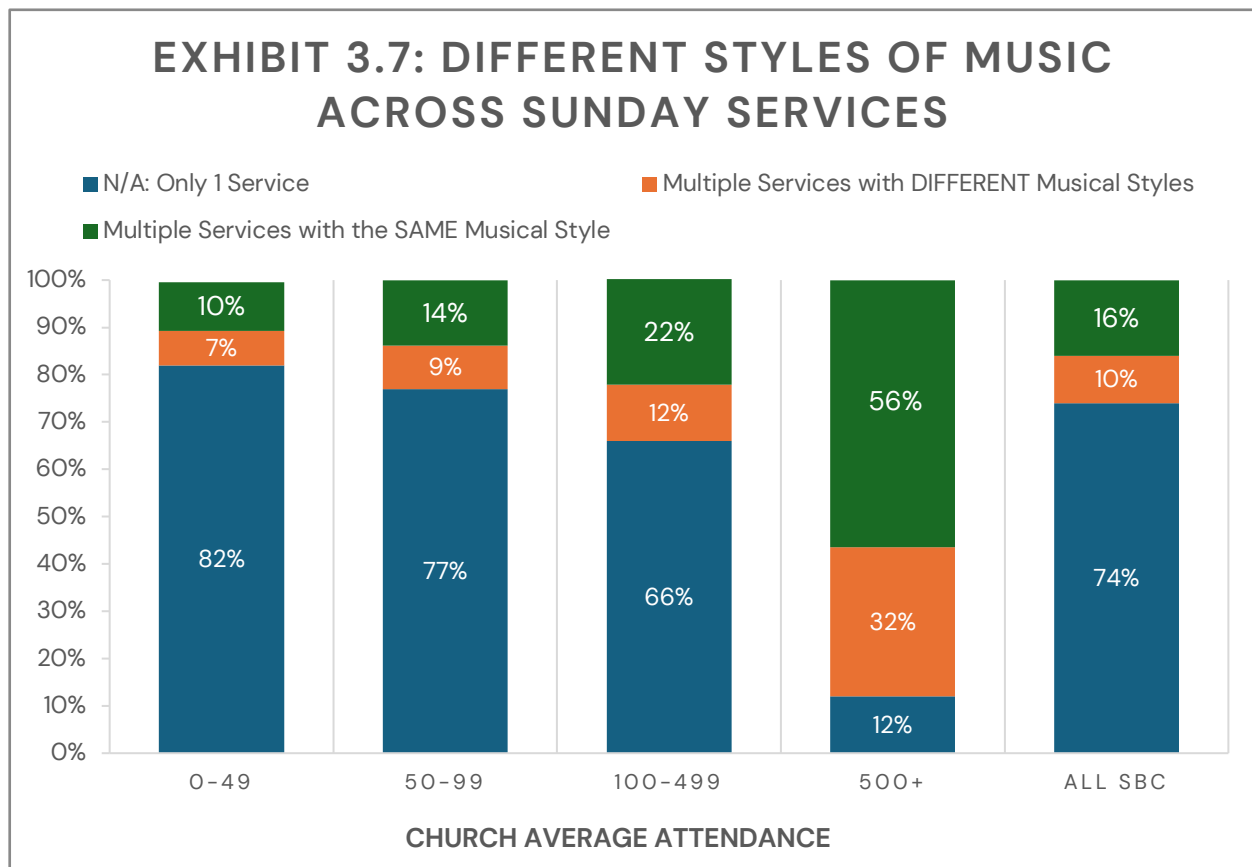
1	68%
2	23%
3	7%
4	1%
5	<1%
6+	<1%

For churches with more than one Sunday service, some choose to mirror both services with the same style of music. However, another segment varies the style of music across different services. The majority of churches that offer multiple services with different musical styles fall into the extra-large category of 500+ in

¹⁰ Per Article 3 of the SBC Constitution, a cooperating church must hold to “a faith and practice that closely identifies with the Convention’s adopted statement of faith.” The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 serves as the current SBC statement of faith. See “Constitution,” *Southern Baptist Convention*, <https://www.sbc.net/about/what-we-do/legal-documentation/constitution/>; and “Baptist Faith and Message 2000,” *Southern Baptist Convention*, <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/>.

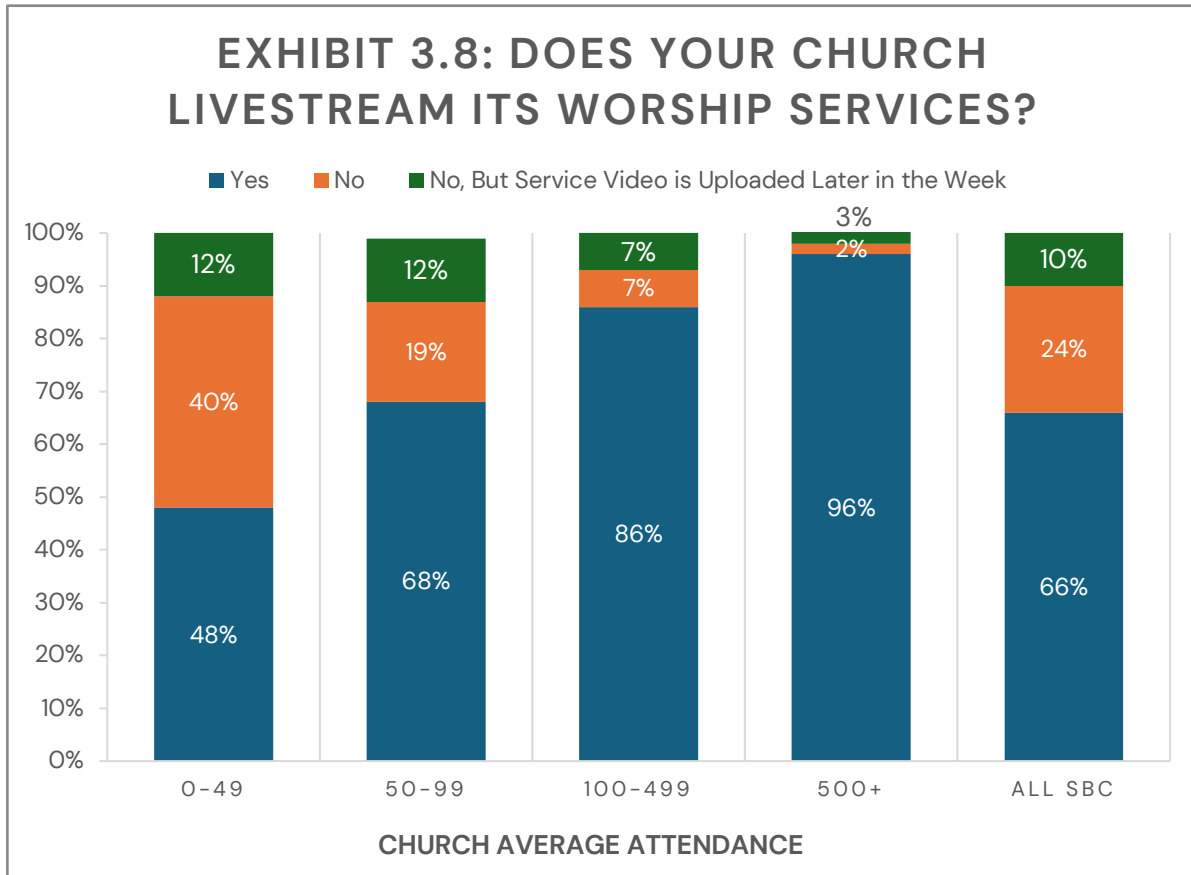
¹¹ Throughout this report, “Sunday morning services” represents the primary weekend worship gathering, as distinct from other meetings of the church. The study described such services as “an in-person gathering of a local church that regularly features preaching, prayer, congregational singing, and the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.” As such, the study encouraged congregations to include all primary worship services, even those that may not necessarily occur on Sunday morning. For example, some SBC congregations regularly hold primary weekend worship gatherings on Saturday nights, Sunday nights, and even Thursday nights.

attendance. 12% of small churches report two Sunday morning services, while 7% of small churches report services with different styles of music.¹² It is possible that some small churches considered variation in musical styles across a Sunday morning and Sunday evening service when completing this response. More research would need to be conducted to ascertain the likelihood that small churches run two services with different musical styles. See Exhibit 3.7 for a summary of church responses.



In addition to in-person attendance, most SBC churches offer livestreaming or upload a video recording of the service later in the week. See Exhibit 3.8. No pre-COVID comparison data are available.

¹² The research team questions whether or not 7% of small churches actually run two services with different styles of music. However, this report presents the churches' responses to the question.



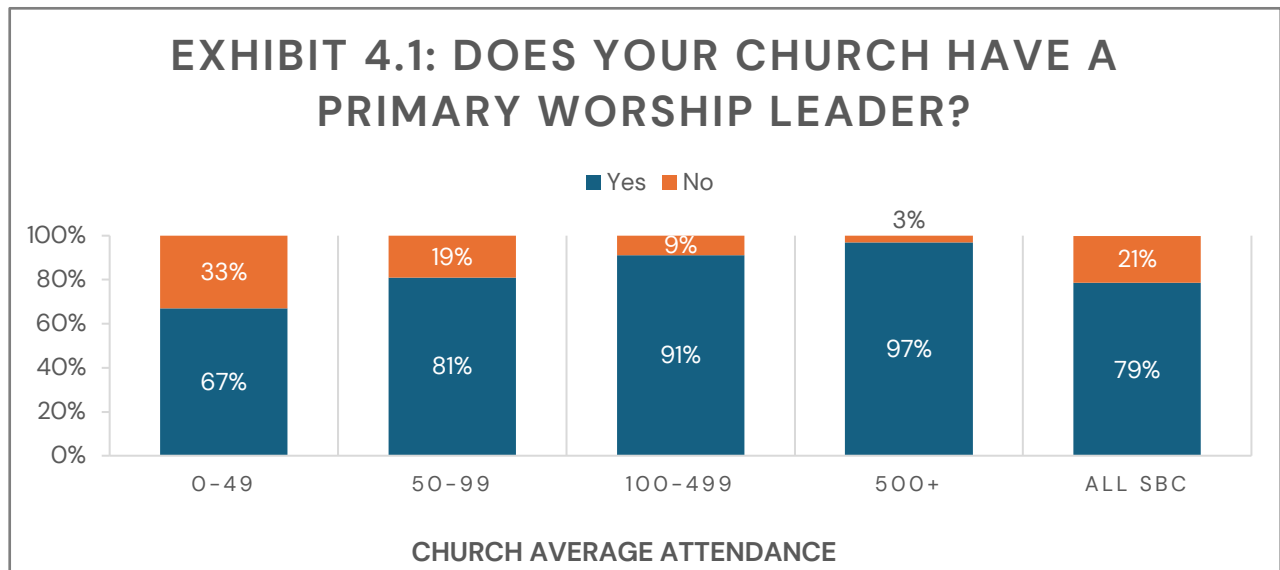
In summary, the survey results include responses from churches of diverse sizes and contexts throughout the SBC. The churches that responded represent the breadth of the SBC, encompassing a variety of church sizes, ages, geographic contexts, number of Sunday services, and service styles. The remainder of this report provides insight into the details of respondent churches' worship leadership, M&WM practices, and leadership development.

4. Worship Leaders in the SBC

In SBC churches, the profiles of those who lead congregational singing vary widely. Some churches hire a full-time or part-time worship leader, while others rely on volunteers. Job titles are equally diverse, including the commonly-used, “worship leader,” “minister of music,” or “worship pastor.” Those who serve as the primary worship leader come from diverse backgrounds with a mix of formal and informal training for their current responsibilities. This section offers a review of worship leader profiles across such dimensions.

Primary Worship Leaders

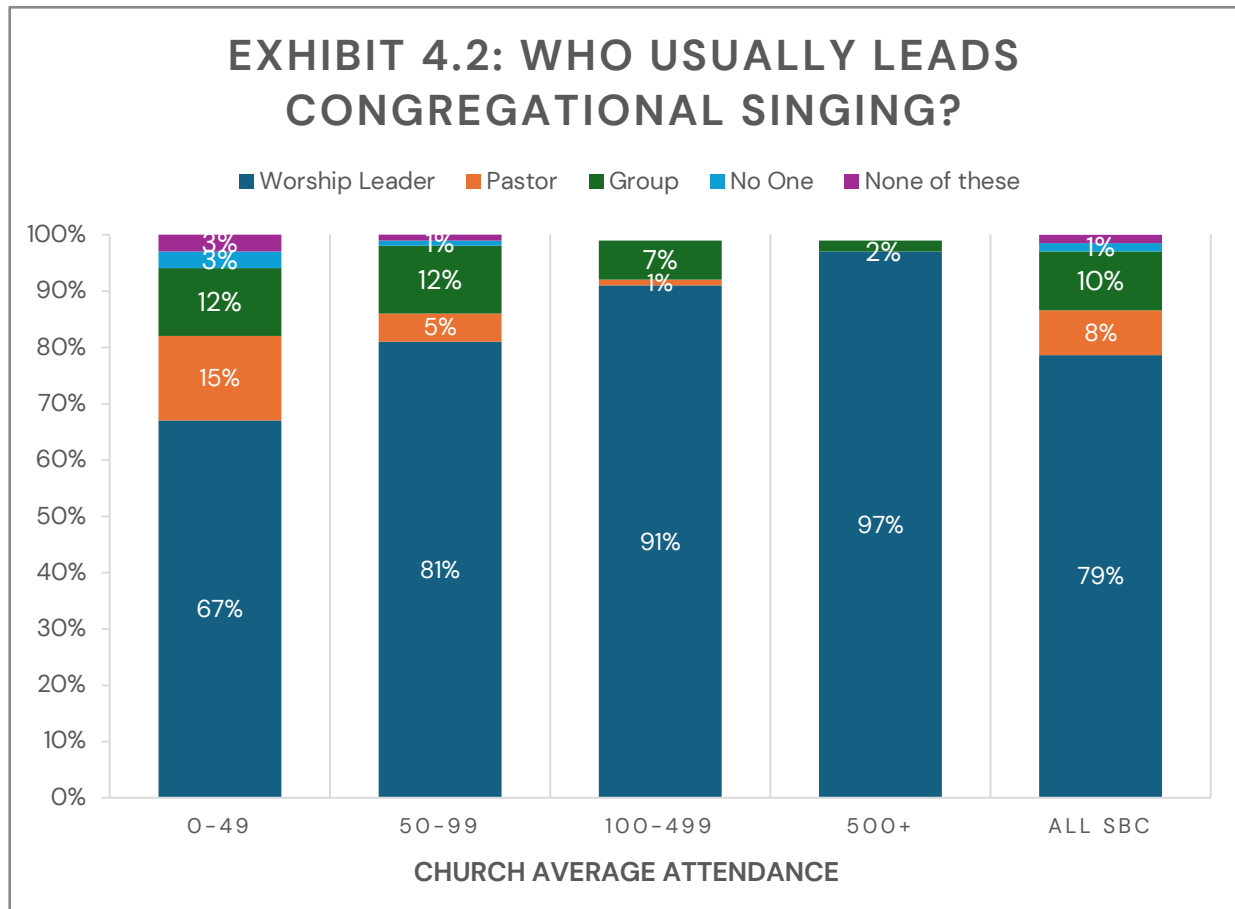
Most SBC churches report that they have a primary worship leader. The survey defined a “primary worship leader” as “someone who leads, plans, and oversees the congregational singing in their church’s worship services.” “Primary” indicates that this person is the lead worship leader of the church, but this person may not necessarily be the only worship leader within the congregation.



Based on survey responses, Exhibit 4.1 reveals that most SBC churches (79%) report having a primary worship leader.¹³ The likelihood that a church has a primary

¹³ 83% of SBC churches report that they have a primary worship, but 4% of churches report that the role is currently vacant. 4% of the 46,876 SBC churches equates to nearly 1,900 churches currently reporting a vacant worship leader role.

worship leader increases with size. 97% of the largest churches—those with more than 500 in attendance—report a primary worship leader. Even for the smallest churches, at least two-thirds report a primary worship leader. But some congregations report other means of leading congregational singing, as demonstrated by Exhibit 4.2.

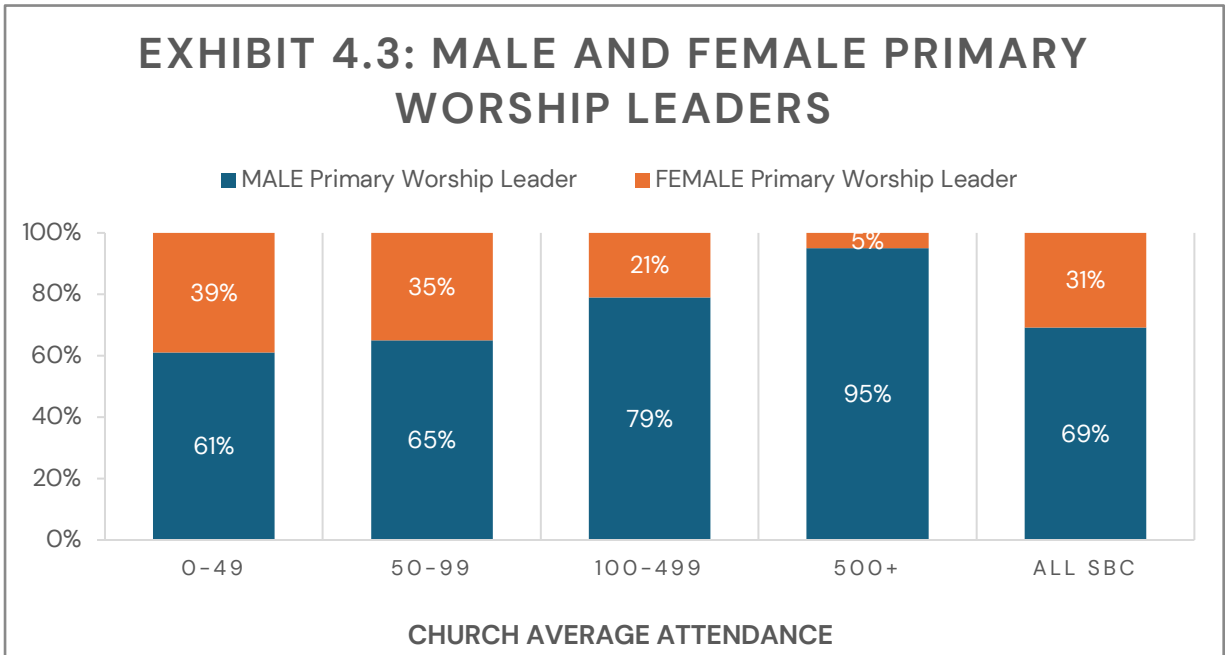


The overwhelming majority of churches report that a designated worship leader leads congregational singing during worship services. Yet, in smaller churches without a primary worship leader, the pastor—and not a primary worship leader—often leads the congregational singing. Among churches with less than 100 in average attendance, approximately 3,500 pastors both lead singing and preach every week.¹⁴ Another common leadership structure includes a group who works together to plan and lead congregational singing.

¹⁴ This estimate is based on the churches with average attendance between 0–99. Of churches between 0–49 in attendance, 14.91% report that the pastor (and not the worship leader) chooses songs and

Gender of Primary Worship Leaders

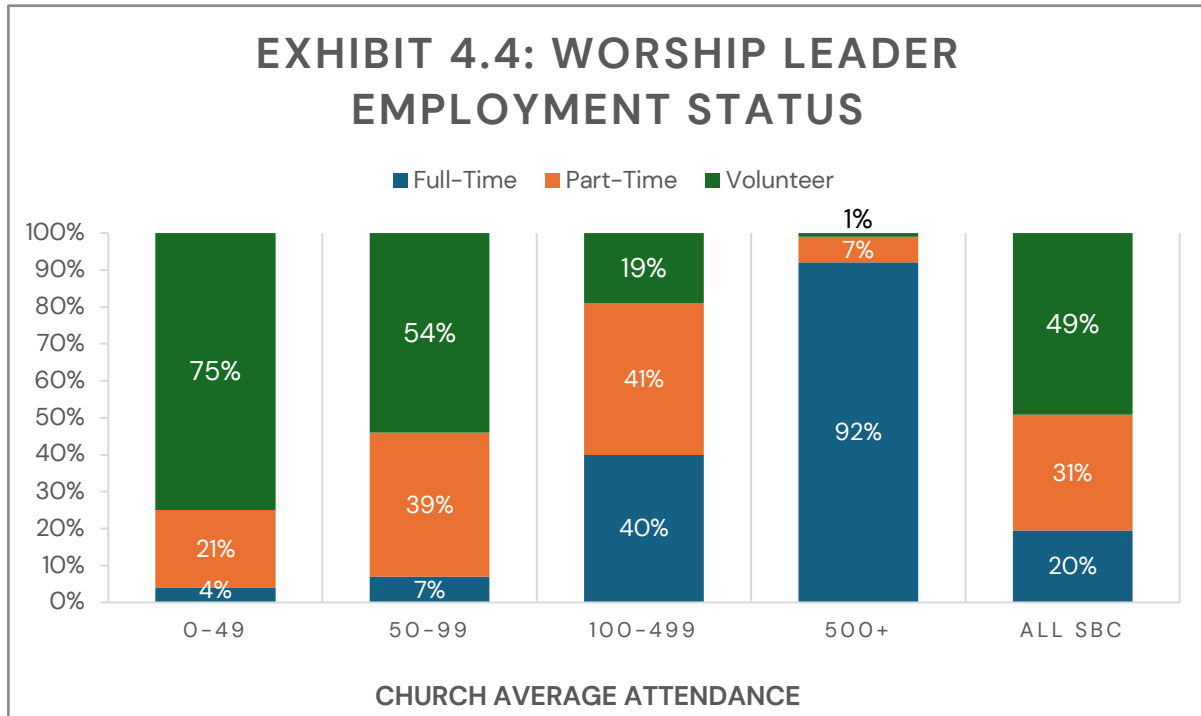
Generally, 31% of worship leaders in SBC churches are female. However, the larger the church, the more likely the primary worship leader will be male. Female primary worship leaders are more likely to serve in small or medium churches than in large or extra-large churches. See Exhibit 4.3 for a full breakdown by church size.



Employment Status of Primary Worship Leaders

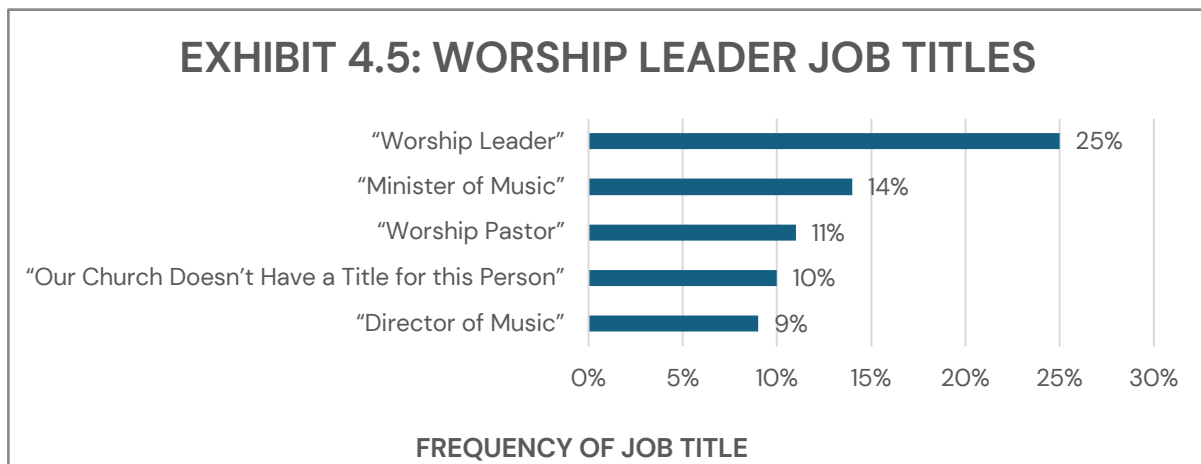
Exhibit 4.4 highlights the variation in employment status of worship leaders in SBC churches. The larger the church, the more common a part-time or full-time worship leader will serve as the primary worship leader. 75% of small church worship leaders are volunteers. For the SBC at large, the study estimates that 49% of worship leaders are volunteers, while 51% of worship leaders are either part-time or full-time.

leads the singing. Of churches between 50–99 in attendance, 5.29% report that the pastor (and not the worship leader) chooses songs and leads the singing.



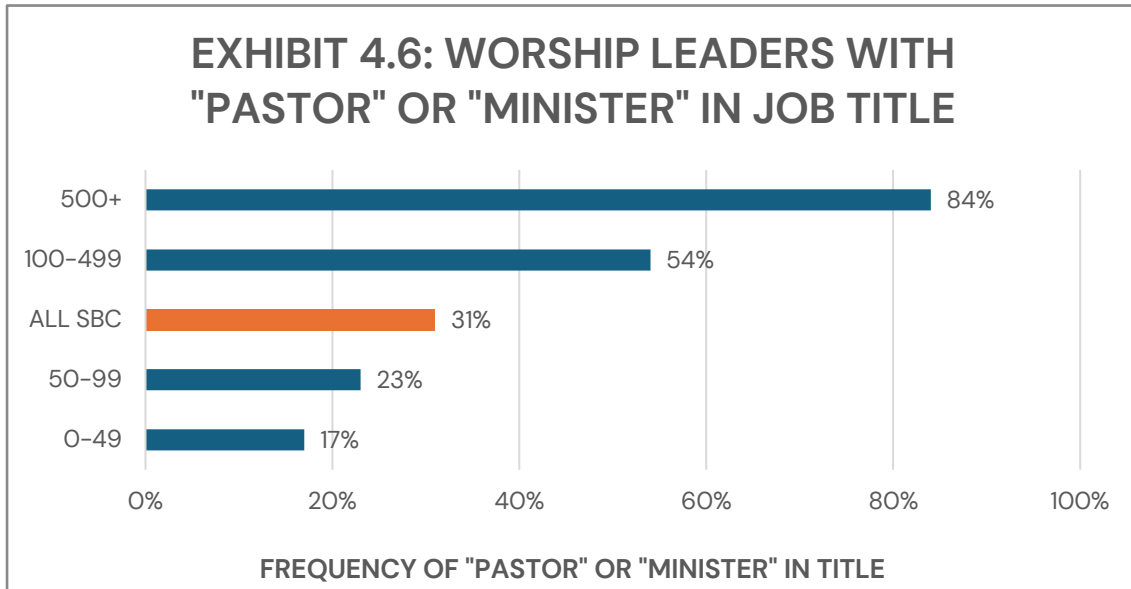
Job Titles for Primary Worship Leaders

Job titles for worship leaders vary significantly, almost as much as SBC church names! Exhibit 4.5 reveals the top five job titles for worship leaders. Most frequently, churches use “worship leader,” but only in 25% of churches, indicating fragmentation of titles. The data reveal the difficulty of determining an appropriate title: 10% of SBC churches report that they do not even have a specific title for the person who leads the singing.¹⁵



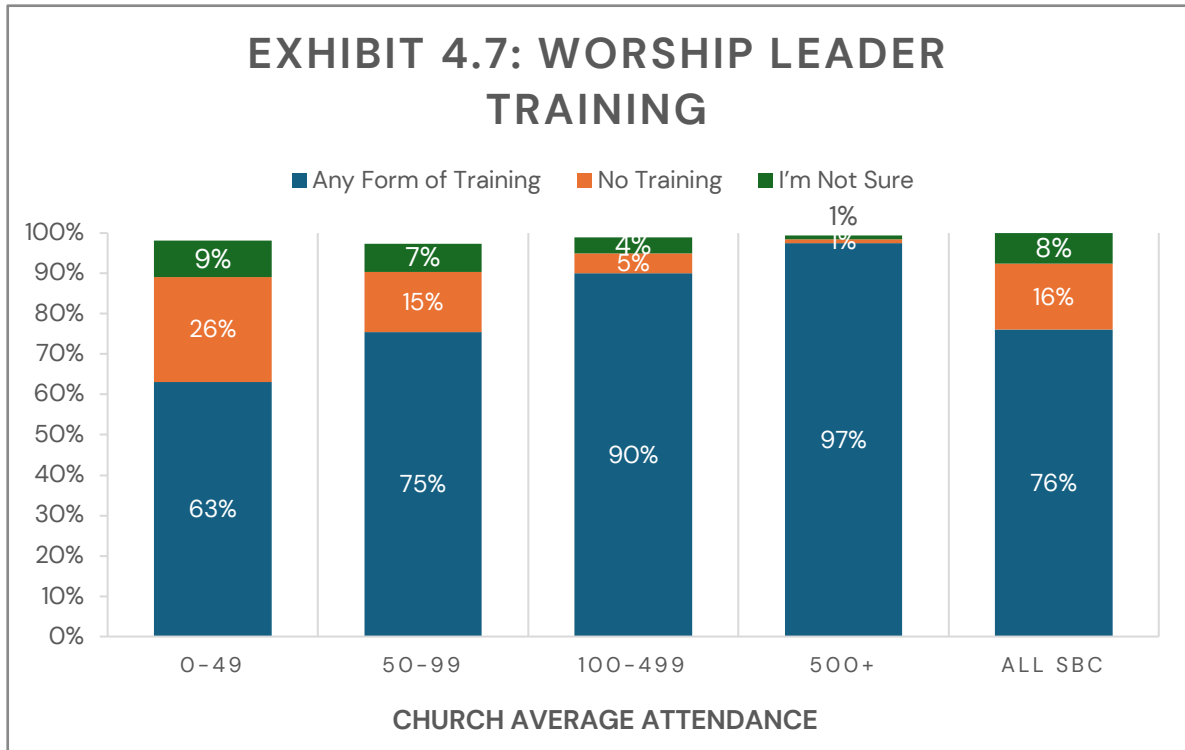
¹⁵ Of the churches that report “our church doesn’t have a title for this person,” nearly all responses come from small churches.

Although this survey did not explicitly ask questions about the ministerial qualifications or ordination status of worship leaders, the job titles of worship leaders offer a window into their possible ministerial status. 31% of churches reported usage of either “pastor” or “minister” in the job title for their primary worship leader. Furthermore, the larger the church, the more likely either “pastor” or “minister” will be included in the title of the primary worship leader.

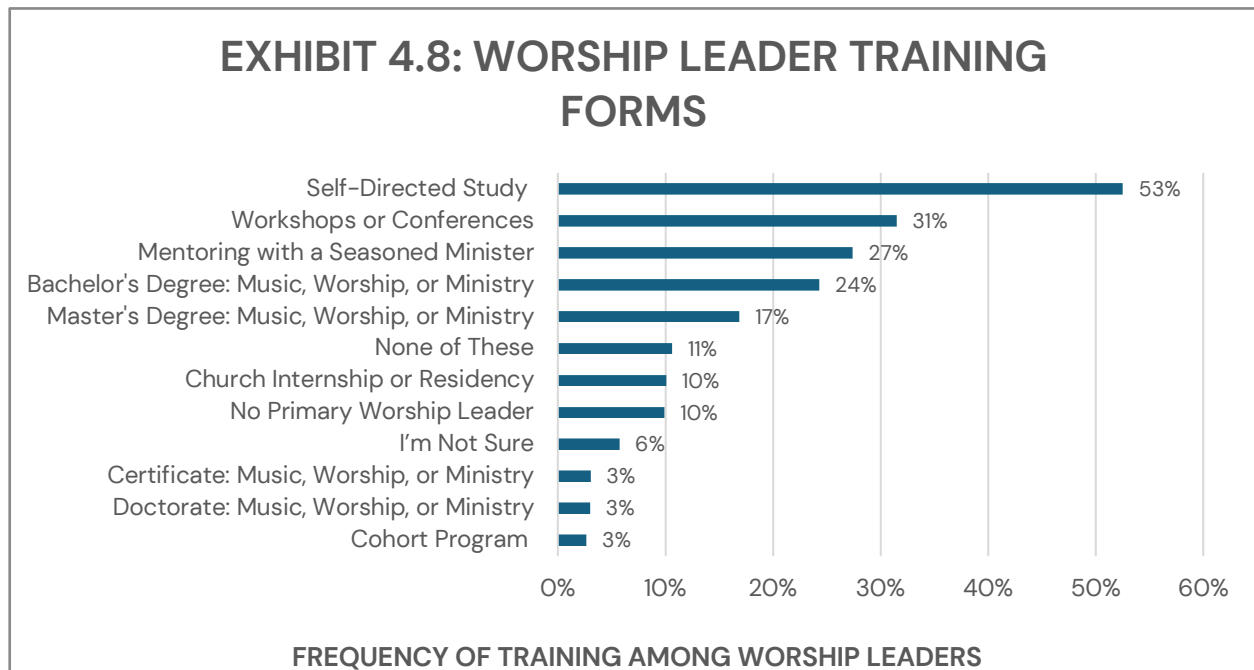


Training for Primary Worship Leaders

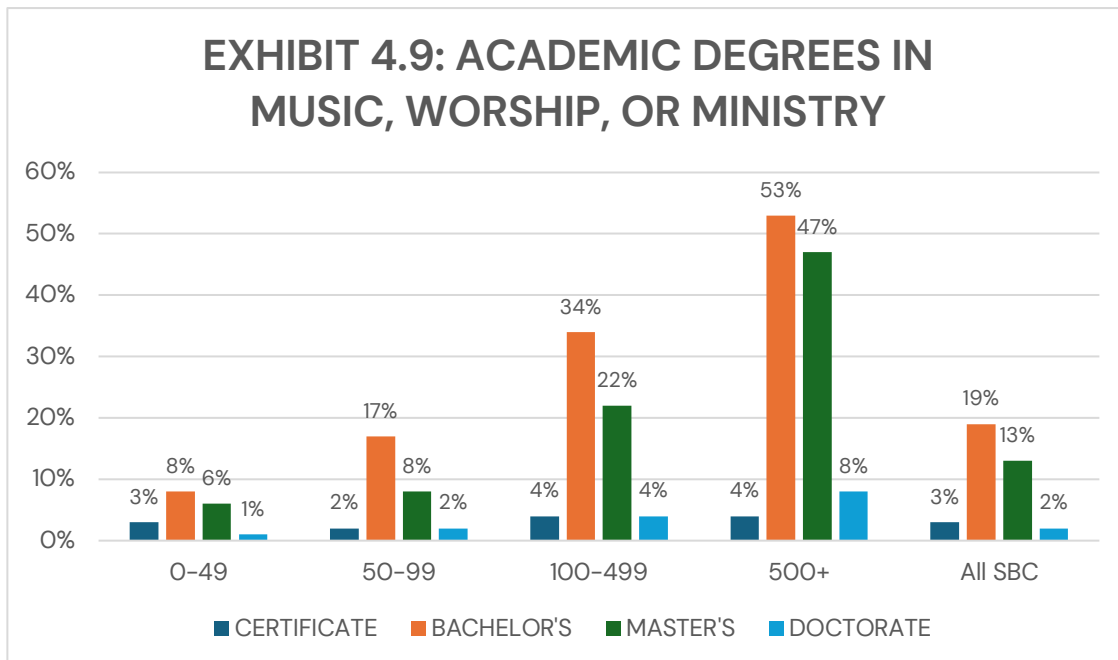
The survey included questions about the various types of training that worship leaders experienced to prepare them for their roles. The survey asked about both formal training—such as academic degrees and internships—and informal training—such as watching YouTube videos and self-guided study. Exhibit 4.7 displays the percentage of worship leaders that report any type of training, including 16% who report no training of any type related to worship leadership.



Of those who reported worship leader training of some type, training forms range from mentoring and attendance at workshops and conferences to academic degrees and residencies. Exhibit 4.8 shows that the most frequent form of training is self-directed study (53% of respondents).



Only 32% of primary worship leaders in SBC churches hold a certificate, bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree in music, worship, or ministry. In large churches, worship leaders hold a bachelor's degree in one of these disciplines in 34% of the instances. In extra-large churches, while 53% of worship leaders hold a bachelor's degree in music, worship, or ministry, 47% also hold a master's degree in these disciplines. The larger the church, the more likely it is that the primary worship leader will hold a bachelor's or a master's degree in music, worship, or ministry. See Exhibit 4.9 for a depiction of worship leaders' academic credentials.



Age of Primary Worship Leaders

The survey respondents most frequently reported that their primary worship leader is between 60–69 years of age (~20% of the responses). In general, the larger the church, the younger the worship leader. Smaller churches tend to skew towards older worship leaders. 33% of SBC worship leaders are at least sixty years of age. By 2040—only fourteen years from the date of this study—49% of all SBC worship leaders will be at retirement age or older (based on worship leaders that are fifty years or older from the survey data). See Exhibit 4.10.

EXHIBIT 4.10: Worship Leader Average Age

Church Size	13–17	18–22	23–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70–79	80–89	90+
0–49	1%	2%	5%	11%	14%	19%	26%	19%	3%	0%
50–99	0%	2%	9%	17%	17%	18%	23%	13%	2%	0%
100–499	0%	2%	12%	23%	22%	18%	18%	5%	0%	0%
500+	0%	0%	8%	30%	29%	16%	15%	1%	0%	0%
All SBC	0%	2%	7%	15%	16%	16%	20%	11%	2%	0%

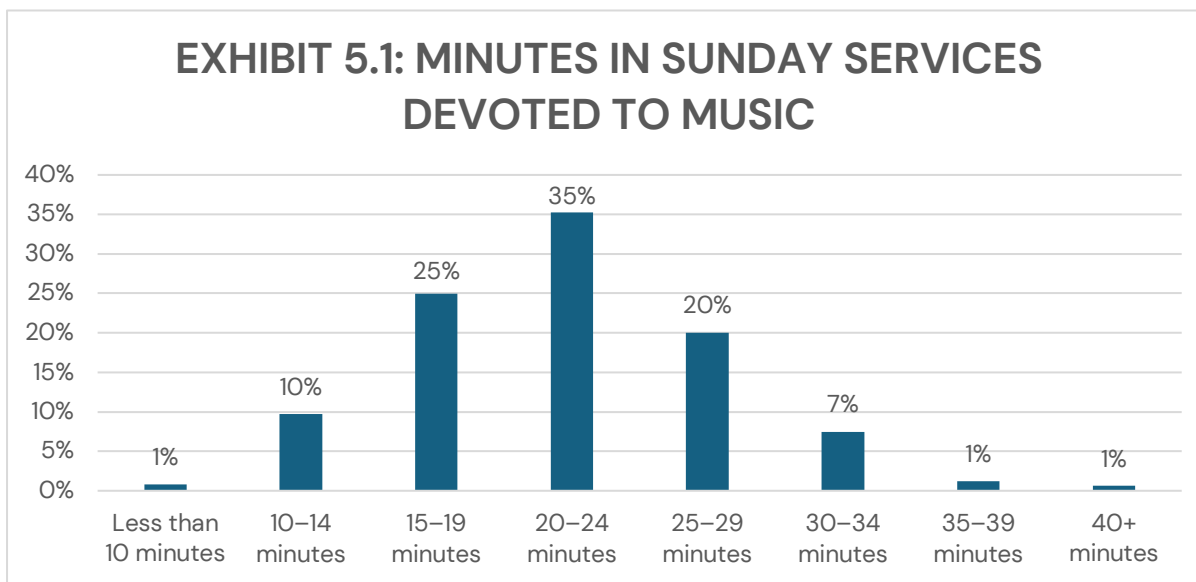
Based on the projected number of worship leaders who will reach retirement age or older by 2040, SBC churches will need to identify and train 20,000 worship leaders to fill the positions of those who will be retiring. In 70% of the churches whose primary worship leader will reach or exceed retirement age by 2040, not even one person in the church has expressed a call to serve in worship leadership or is being trained to become a worship leader. Identifying and developing future worship leaders will be critical in the coming years to meet the need in SBC churches. Section 7 will report additional results on the state of worship leadership pipelines in SBC congregations.

5. Practices in Music and Worship Ministry (M&WM)

SBC churches vary in their instrumentation, use of technology, and the level of volunteer involvement. Some churches use bands and rhythm instrumentation, while others utilize orchestras. Still, some churches rarely use instruments. Click and stem tracks tend to be more frequently used in larger churches. And as church size increases, the number of people involved in worship ministry generally increases commensurately. This section reveals that a single prescribed model does not exist but that churches across contexts make different decisions based on resource availability, practical need, and localized preference.

Congregational Singing in Services

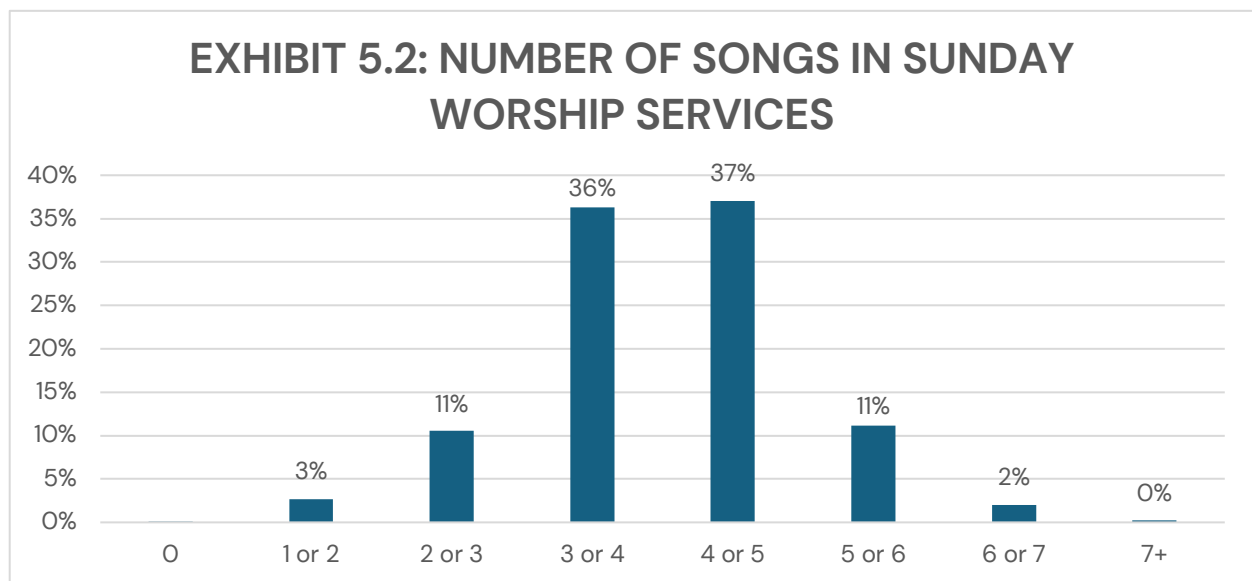
The survey respondents indicated most frequently that 20–24 minutes of the Sunday morning worship service are allocated to musical worship. Moderate variation exists across sizes.



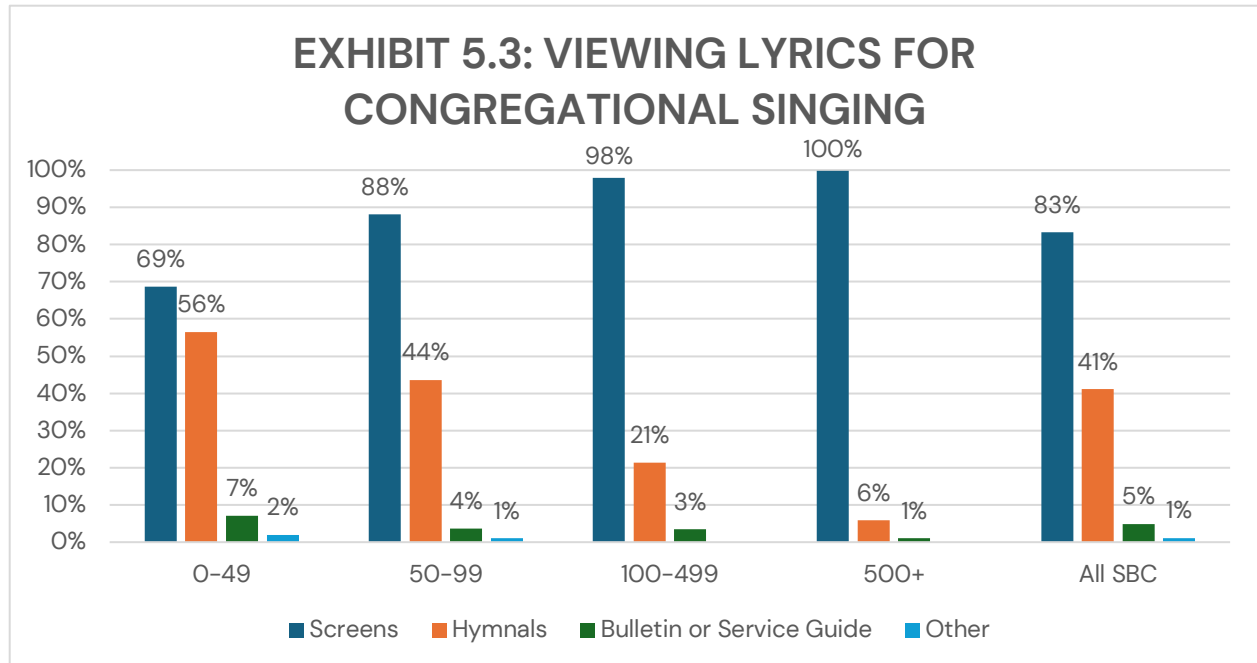
While church size does not result in a significant deviation in time allotted to Sunday morning singing, employment status of the worship leader introduces greater variation. If a worship leader is full-time, the time allotted to musical worship is 20 minutes or greater 78% of the time. However, if the worship leader is part-time

or volunteer, the likelihood that musical worship is 20 minutes or greater decreases to 67% and 26%, respectively. This indicates that congregations with part-time or volunteer worship leaders tend to sing less on a given Sunday than those with full-time worship leaders.

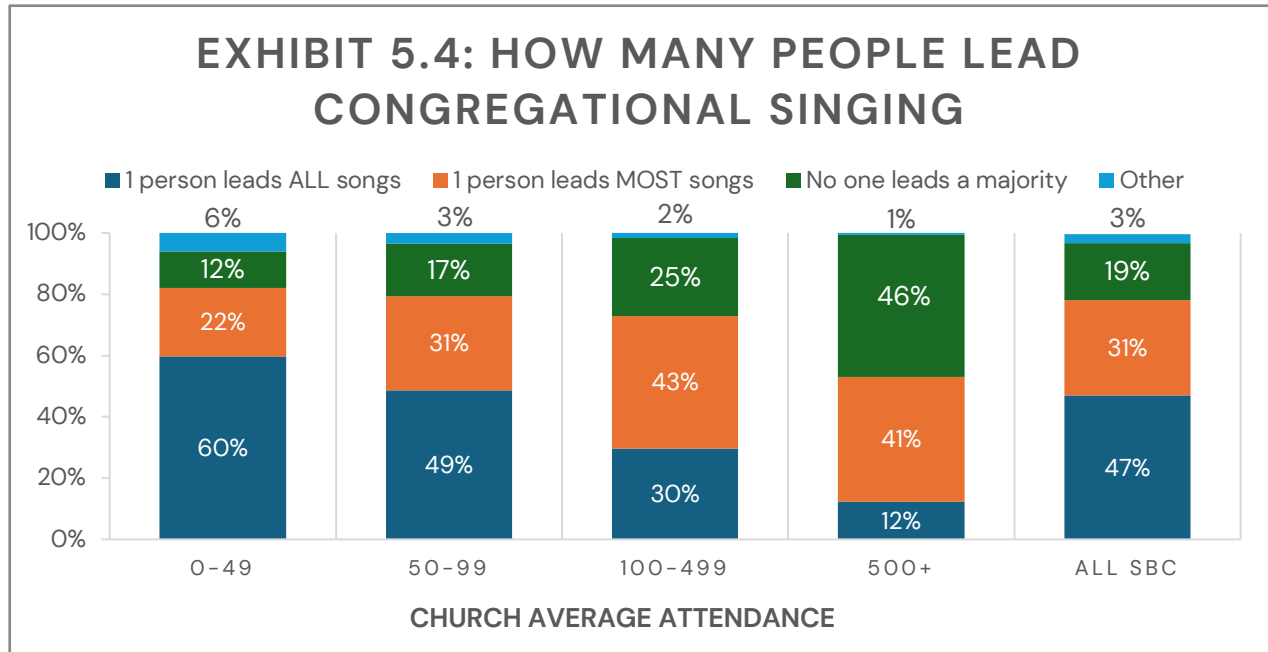
The average SBC church sings between three to five songs on a Sunday morning. Little variation exists across church sizes. Even when considering the worship leader's employment status, the average number of songs does not change materially. This implies that the average length of a song may be shorter if the worship leader is not a staff member, but the total number of songs in the service remains generally consistent. Exhibit 5.2 depicts the distribution of the number of songs in Sunday services.



The methods by which congregations view song lyrics differ across church sizes. The larger the church, the more likely the church uses screens to view lyrics and the less likely the church uses hymnals or printed bulletins for lyrics. Screens are nearly universal for churches with average attendance of 50 or more. However, 41% of SBC churches still use hymnals at some point in worship services. See Exhibit 5.3.



SBC churches vary in how many people lead congregational singing in a single service. The larger the church, the more likely that multiple people will lead congregational singing during the worship service. While the survey did not collect data on the identities or roles of those who lead songs beyond the primary worship leader, possibilities could include other staff worship leaders or volunteers on a praise team. Conversely, smaller churches are more likely to designate a single person to lead congregational singing. This observation may indicate that small churches often do not have access to other people who can lead besides one primary worship leader. See Exhibit 5.4.



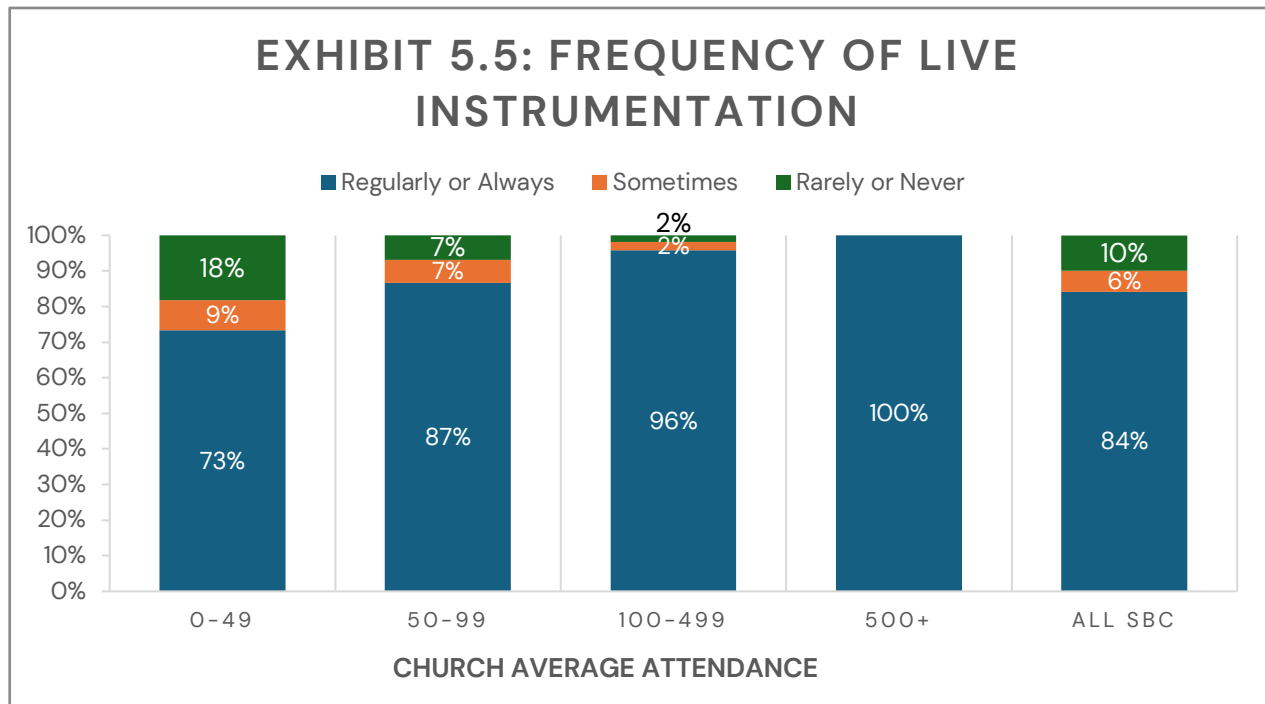
By analyzing the data, several other trends are noted related to the number of people involved in leading congregational singing. The following are more likely to have a single person lead all the congregational singing:

- Churches in the South (contrasted to the remainder of the United States)
- Churches with a choir
- Churches established before the twenty-first century (contrasted with churches planted in the twenty-first century)

Thus, older churches in the South seem most inclined to have a single person lead all of the congregational singing. Churches with a choir follow this same trend. Recently-established churches (planted in the twenty-first century) more regularly share leadership of congregational singing when compared to older churches.

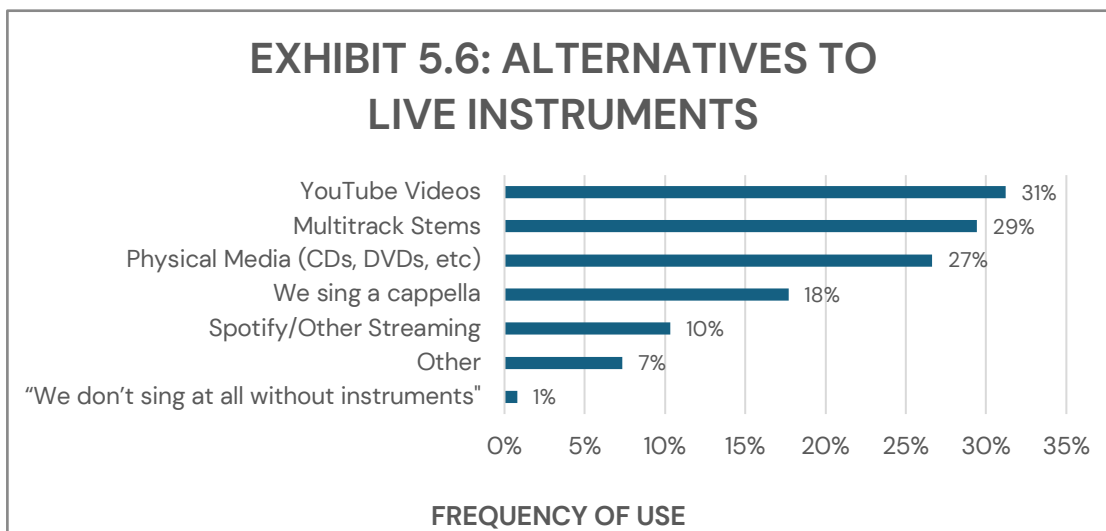
Instrumentation

In addition to congregational singing practices, SBC churches also differ in their use of live instruments during their services. While the vast majority of SBC churches use live instrumentation, 10% of churches (an estimated 4,700 churches) rarely or never use instruments in worship services. The likelihood of live instrument usage in worship increases with size, with 18% of small SBC churches rarely or never using live instruments in services. Exhibit 5.5 visually depicts this distribution in instrument usage.



When churches do not have live instruments, they employ various other resources to accompany congregational singing. The majority of churches without live instruments rely on recorded media—such as YouTube videos or CDs. 18% of the churches without live instruments choose to sing a cappella. See Exhibit 5.6.¹⁶

¹⁶ To quantify those churches who do not always use live instrumentation, only those churches who answered “sometimes” or “rarely or never” were included in the sample to calculate those without regular instrument usage. However, some churches that responded that they “always” use live instruments also indicated other alternatives to instruments, implying a possible misunderstanding of the questions.



The survey prompted respondents to review a list of fourteen different keyboard, rhythm, orchestral, and bluegrass instruments and select those instruments that their church regularly utilizes in Sunday morning worship services. Exhibit 5.7 shows the distribution of keyboard and rhythm instruments based on church size.

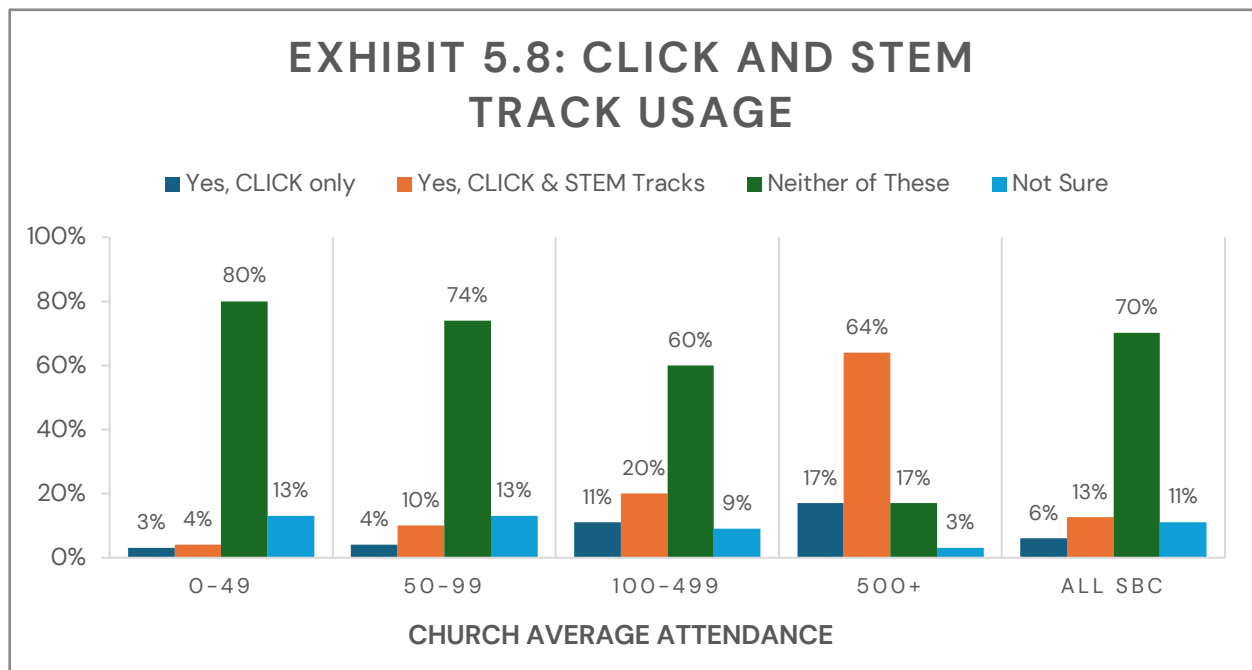
EXHIBIT 5.7: KEYBOARD AND RYTHM INSTRUMENTS

Church Size	Piano	Organ	B3	Acoustic Guitar	Electric Guitar	Bass	Drum Set
0-49	73%	10%	1%	36%	10%	14%	14%
50-99	89%	17%	3%	54%	22%	34%	32%
100-499	95%	23%	8%	82%	51%	72%	82%
500+	98%	24%	23%	97%	92%	97%	98%
All SBC	84%	16%	4%	56%	28%	39%	39%

As shown in Exhibit 5.7, the larger the church, the more frequently each type of instrument is generally used. The piano is the most frequently-used instrument. However, of the reporting churches, only 73% of small churches use a piano. This may not be due to a lack of access to a piano but possibly a lack of piano players. Also, organ usage for the entire SBC is reported at 16%. The 1938 survey reported less than 5% of SBC churches used an organ. Organ use actually grew between 1938

and 2026, though the exact trends in usage during the nearly-century period between surveys are not available to analyze.

One of the most significant innovations in worship technology of the last two decades is the use of click tracks and instrumental stem tracks in church services. Although the largest SBC churches regularly use both click and stem tracks, 70% of all SBC churches do not use either. Even 17% of extra-large churches do not use click or stem tracks. See Exhibit 5.8.



Finally, 52% of worship leaders in the survey lead congregational singing while playing an instrument. Among such worship leaders, 92% most frequently lead using a guitar or keyboard. In churches where a worship leader leads singing while playing an instrument, 53% lead from an acoustic or electric guitar, while 38% lead from a piano, organ, or keyboard.

Ensembles

SBC churches regularly use various types of ensembles ranging from a band to orchestra, from praise team to choir. Generally, more ensembles are offered as church size increases. See Exhibit 5.9.

EXHIBIT 5.9: ENSEMBLES

Church Size	Band	Choir	Orchestra	Praise Team	Children's Choir	Youth Choir	No Ensembles
0-49	17%	16%	1%	31%	2%	2%	47%
50-99	34%	37%	1%	54%	11%	3%	14%
100-499	70%	50%	10%	79%	28%	6%	3%
500+	93%	72%	45%	93%	48%	22%	<1%
All SBC	39%	33%	5%	53%	14%	4%	24%

Only 14% of SBC churches report having a children's choir, and only 4% report having a youth choir. The next section of this report contains findings related to the absence of young people in music ministry and worship ministry. One of the challenges facing smaller churches is their inability to offer ensembles for children and youth to learn how to worship through song and lead others in worship. This study demonstrates an urgent need to identify and train more young people who are capable and eager to lead others in congregational worship in the local church.

Volunteers in Music and Worship Ministry

Generally, as church size increases, M&WM involves increased numbers of people. Exhibit 5.10 shows a distribution of the number of people involved in M&WM based on church size.

EXHIBIT 5.10: NUMBER OF PEOPLE INVOLVED IN M&WM

Church Size	4 or less	5–9	10–19	20–49	50–99	100–199	200+
0–49	57%	29%	11%	2%	–	–	–
50–99	20%	39%	31%	10%	<1%	–	–
100–499	2%	16%	29%	37%	14%	2%	0%
500+	<1%	1%	4%	19%	32%	26%	17%
All SBC	30%	27%	21%	15%	5%	2%	1%

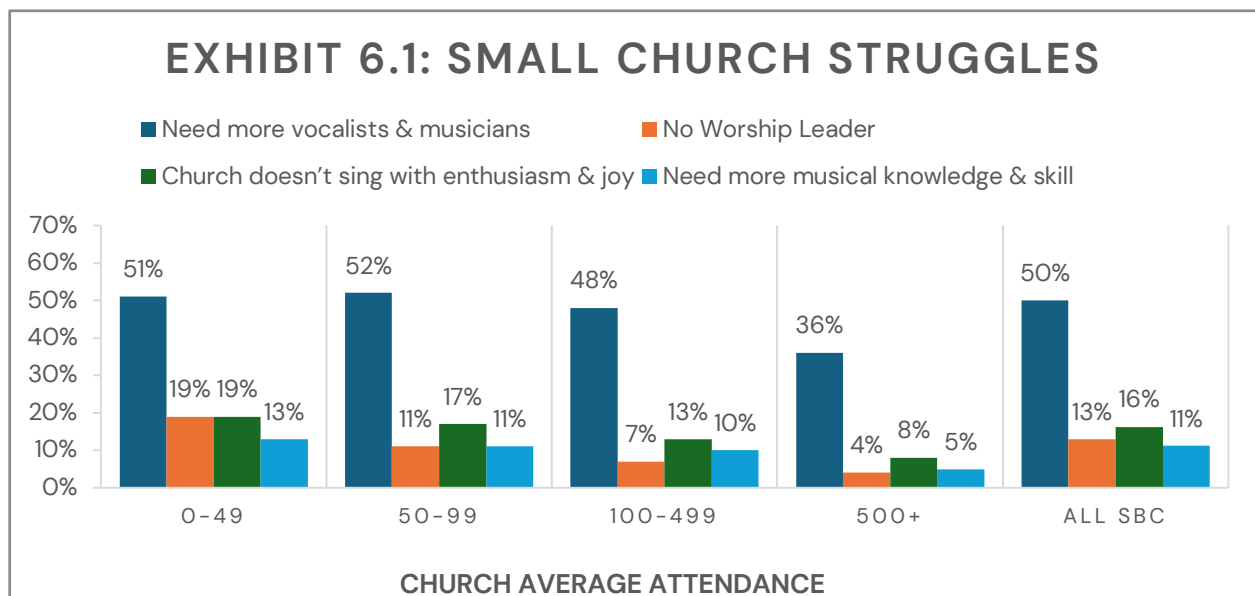
The majority of small churches involve four or less people in M&WM. Larger churches tend to have larger numbers of people serving in M&WM as compared to smaller churches. 82% of large churches have at least 10 people involved, while 94% of extra-large churches have at least 20 people involved. 43% of extra-large churches have at least 100 people involved in M&WM.

6. Strengths and Struggles in Music and Worship Ministry (M&WM)

SBC churches differ in their musical styles, instrumentation, service structure, and use of technology. However, health of M&WM should be a priority regardless of church size. One way to gauge the relative health of M&WM is by asking respondents to identify their own strengths and weaknesses. When evaluating the data for churches across sizes, smaller churches tend to emphasize different struggles and successes than larger churches. This section views these responses about the self-reported health of M&WM in the SBC.

Struggles in M&WM

The survey prompted respondents to select three most pressing or urgent struggles from a list of twenty-five options. “None of these” was also an available option. As seen in Exhibit 6.1, small churches emphasize different areas of struggle than larger churches. For example, 51% of small churches and 52% of medium churches need more vocalists and musicians, while many large and extra-large churches do not report this shortage of musicians and vocalists as one of their top three struggles. Small churches more frequently note the lack of a worship leader as a top challenge. And, compared to larger churches, smaller churches report less enthusiasm and joy in their congregational singing.



Larger churches are not immune to struggles but report different challenges when compared to smaller churches. For example, larger churches more frequently indicate a need for better training resources for volunteers. This may be due to the additional complexity in technology and increased use of musical instruments by larger churches. Also, larger churches generally involve more people in their M&WM (see Exhibit 5.10). As a result, respondents recognize a need for increased fellowship among their ministry teams, which may be more difficult to generate as the teams and churches are larger. Further, more than 50% of large and extra-large churches report a need for increased volunteers to assist with audio and visual technology. Finally, larger churches express a need for better training tools for children in the areas of music and worship. This correlates with the increased number of children and youth in worship ensembles (see Exhibit 5.9). See Exhibit 6.2 for a distribution of the top five most common struggles reported by larger churches.

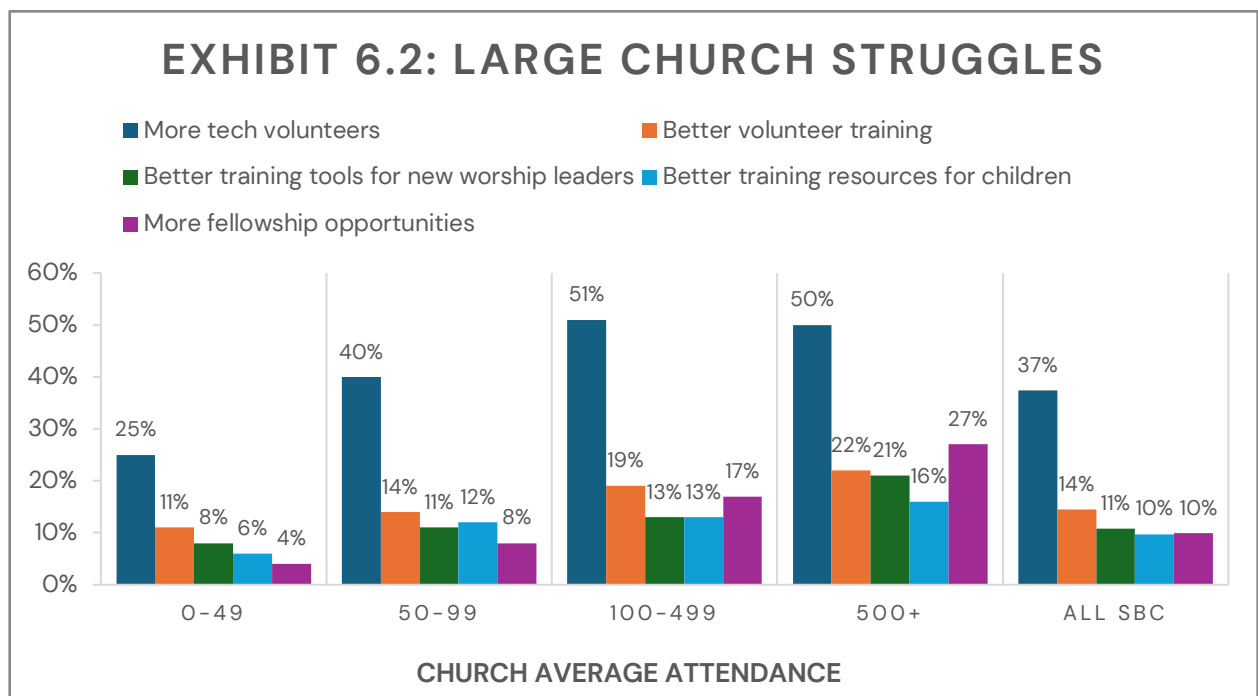
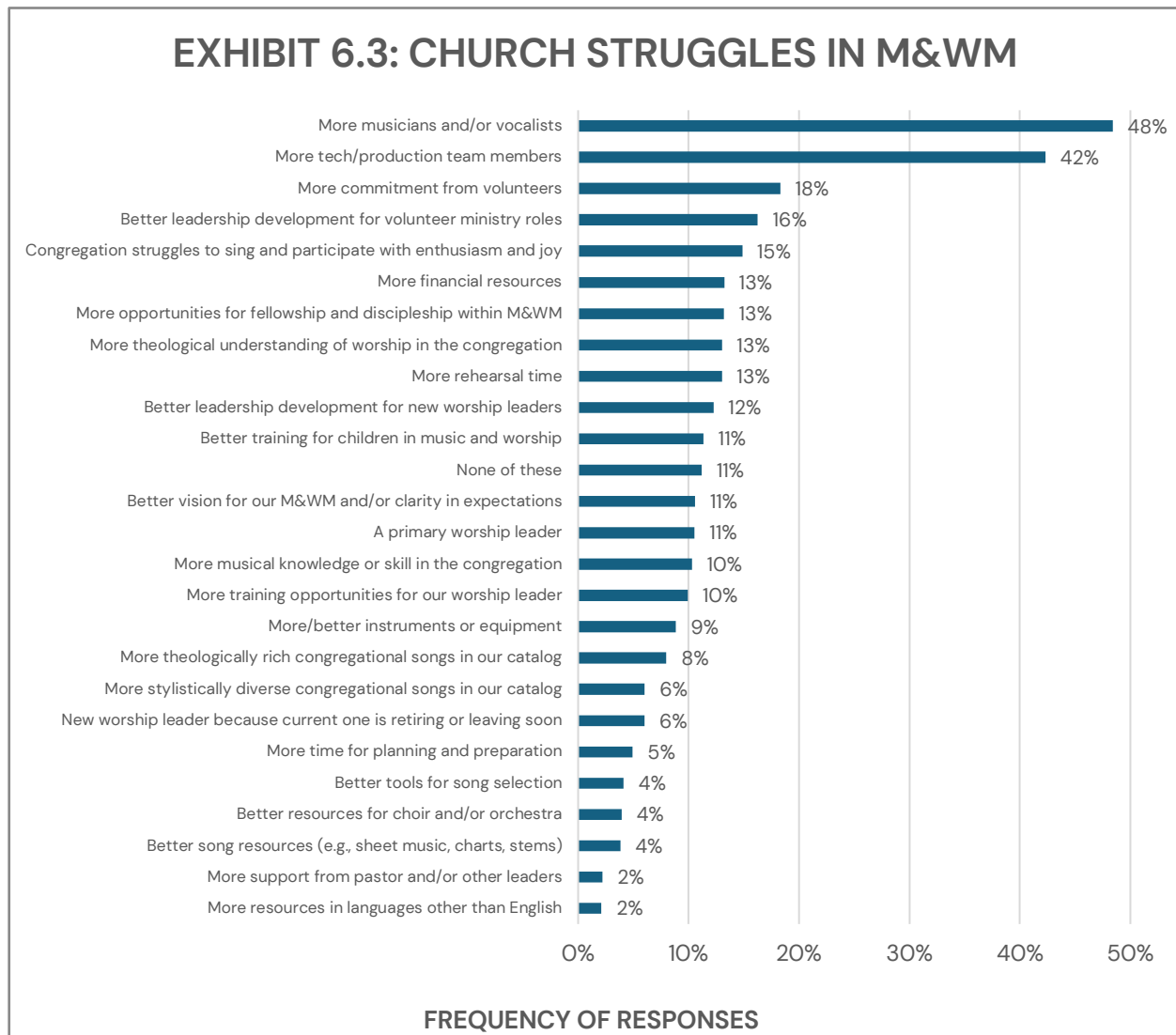


Exhibit 6.3 shows the frequency of all twenty-five top challenges across all respondents. In addition to the aforementioned challenges, respondents express a need for better leadership development, fellowship and discipleship, and theological understanding of worship in the congregation. Additional song resources and additional support from pastors consistently do not appear in the top three

struggles for many churches. Generally, congregations report low needs for additional song resources or support from pastors and church leadership.



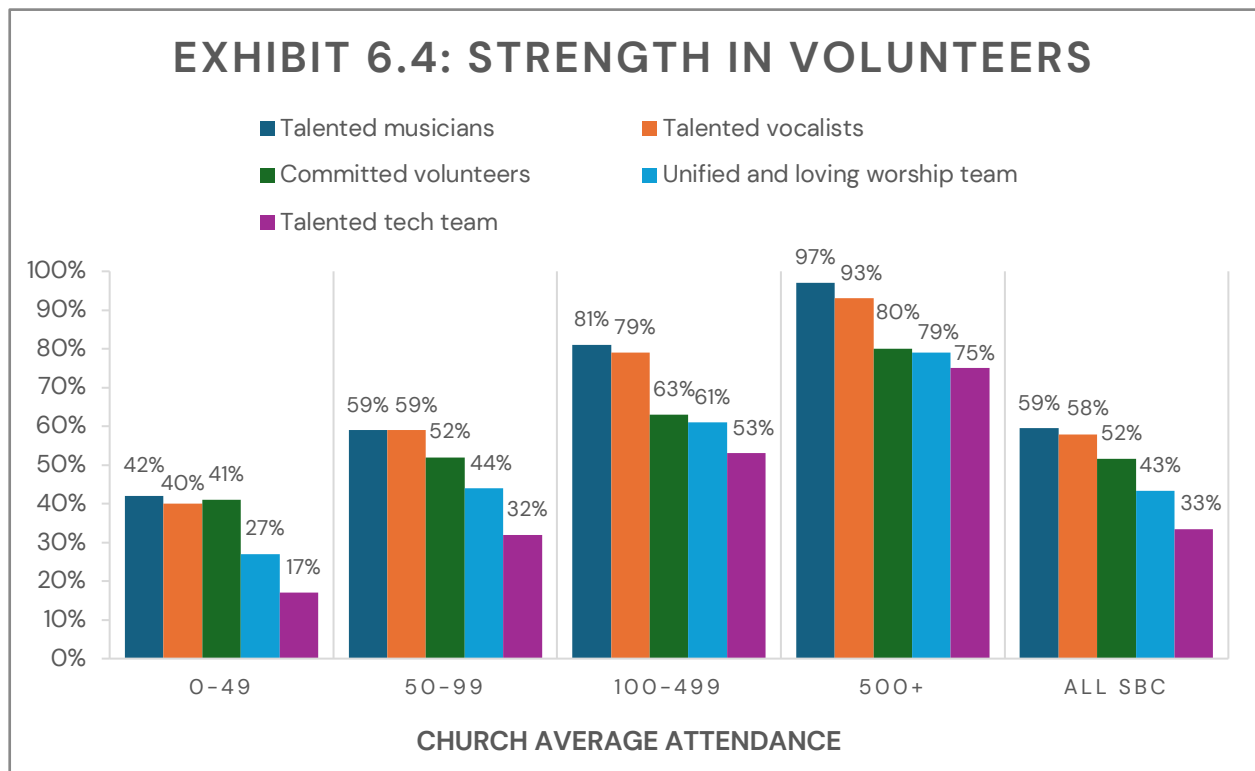
Although not fully addressed in the scope of this report, several additional observations emerge from the responses. First, churches report needs for greater musical skill and theological understanding of worship in the congregation. Generally, the larger the church, the less the need for musical skill and the greater the need for a theological understanding of worship. Conversely, the smaller the church, the greater the need for musical skill and less the need for a theological understanding of worship. Second, leadership development training for both worship leaders and other ministry volunteers becomes increasingly important as church size increases.

While 8% of small churches report leadership development for new worship leaders as a need, this increases to 21% for extra-large churches. This increased demand for leadership training is likely due to the heightened leadership demands of those who lead larger teams (see Exhibit 5.10).

Strengths in M&WM

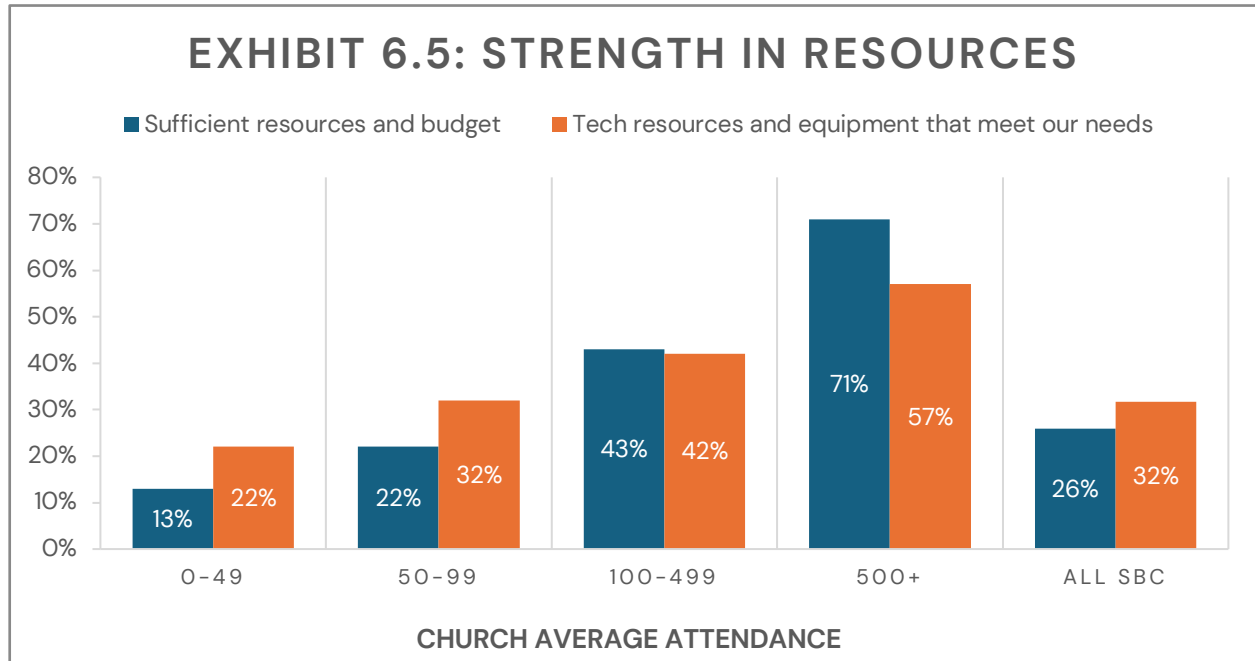
In addition to the areas of challenge, the survey presented respondents with the following question: “What are some recent successes or strengths in your church’s worship ministry?” The survey offered eighteen options and asked respondents to select any and all that apply to their church. The survey also provided “none of these” as a possible response.

In the first chart that follows, respondents indicated their relative talent, commitment, and unity within M&WM. Significant variation exists in some of the responses—more than fifty percentage points in some cases. See Exhibit 6.4.

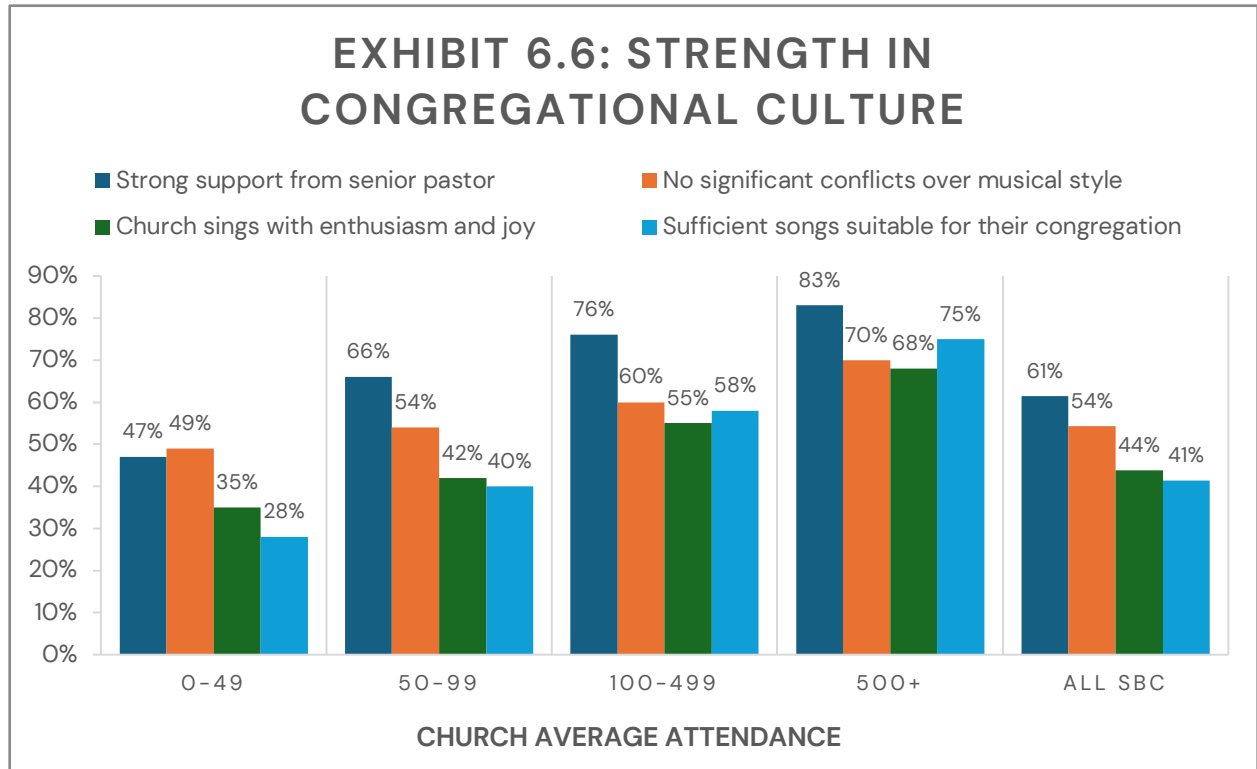


As shown in Exhibit 6.4, increasing satisfaction about volunteers correlates with increasing church size. For example, extra-large churches report a fifty-five-percentage point improvement in talented musicians compared to small churches.

Further, differing church sizes report differing levels of satisfaction with access to M&WM resources. Smaller churches generally have fewer resources than larger churches. Over 70% of the extra-large churches report sufficient access to resources and budget dollars contrasted with only 13% of small churches. Satisfaction with technology resources and equipment correlates with satisfaction with budget and resources. See Exhibit 6.5.



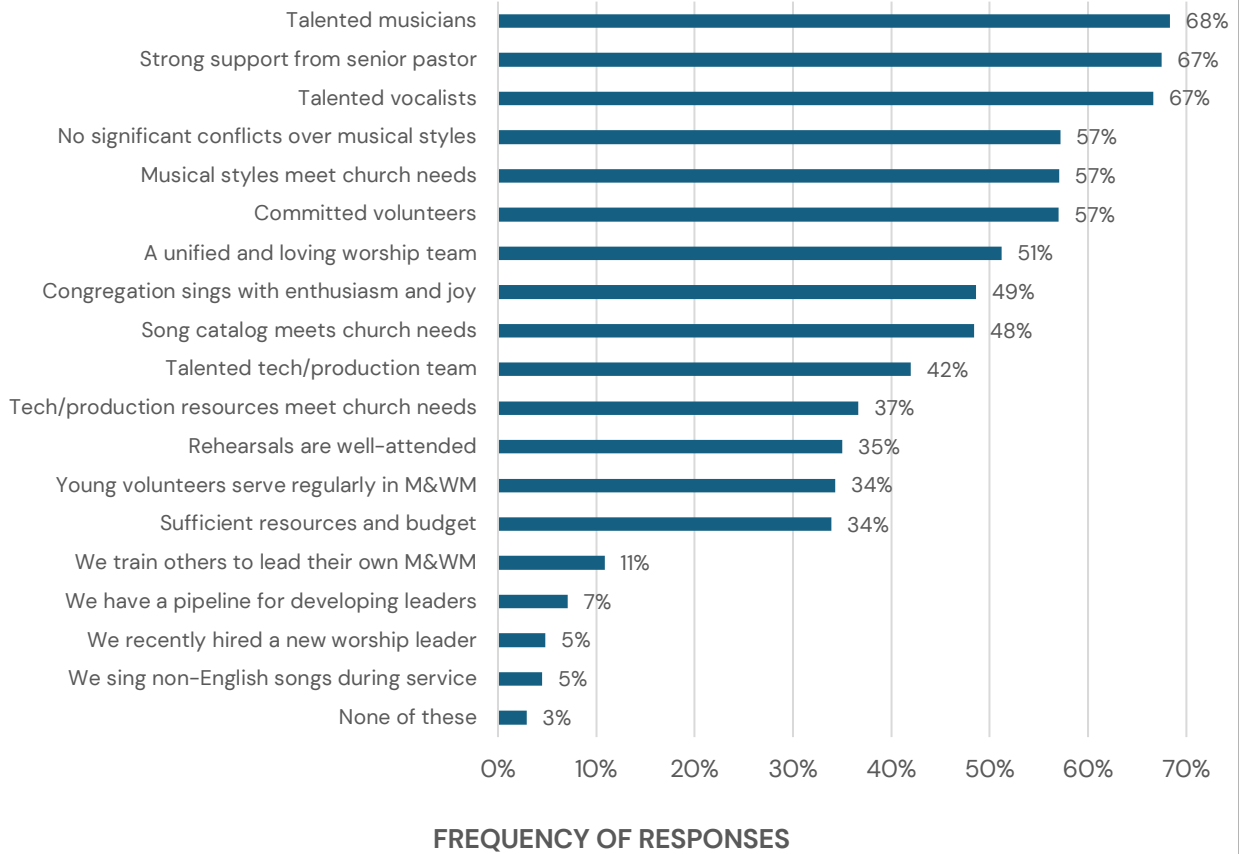
Turning to congregational culture, the responses present variation in markers of health. 57% of respondents (54% all SBC) could affirm that no significant conflicts over musical style exist in the congregation. 67% of respondents (61% all SBC) agreed that they have sufficient support from their pastor. And 49% (44% all SBC) report that their congregation sings with enthusiasm and joy. While these are reported as strengths, they also indicate areas for improvement in congregational culture and health. See Exhibit 6.6.



Unfortunately, 4% of churches, including 9% of small SBC churches, selected “none of these” in response to what is going well in their M&WM. At the very least, the strengths of M&WM in small churches may not have been adequately represented among the eighteen options provided in this study. At the same time, the prevalence of “none of these” responses in small churches might also present a sobering reality that a subset of churches cannot identify a single aspect of their M&WM that presents encouragement.

Exhibit 6.7 ranks the eighteen areas of strength reported by respondent churches regardless of size.

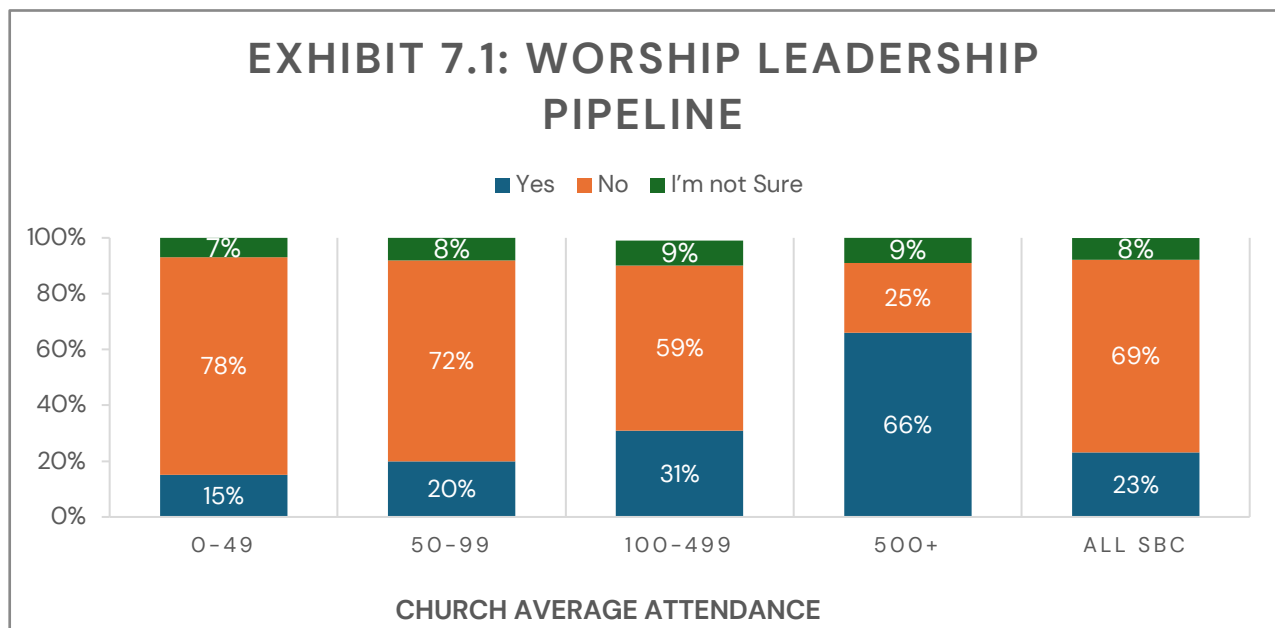
EXHIBIT 6.7: CHURCH STRENGTHS IN M&WM



7. Leadership Development in Music and Worship Ministry (M&WM)

As already reflected in this report, SBC churches will need more worship leaders in the coming years to fill the gap arising from worship leaders who will retire or transition out of their roles. Worship leaders will also be needed for new church plants or to fill unexpected openings. This section briefly reviews the responses of SBC churches regarding leadership pipelines and development needs.

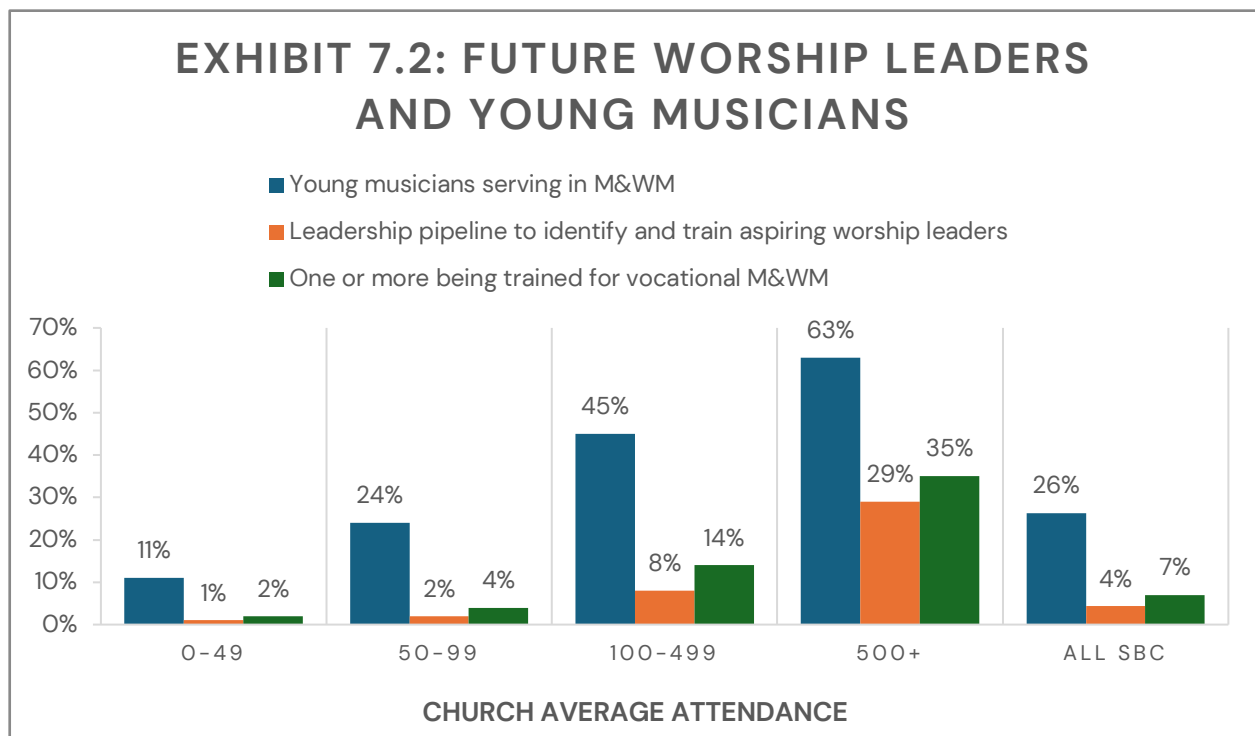
23% of SBC churches report that they have at least one person in their church who aspires to worship ministry or is in the preparation process to serve as a worship leader. While some churches might have multiple people preparing for ministry, this statistic equates to approximately 10,800 people—at a minimum—considering or preparing for worship leadership.¹⁷ A projection of 10,800 potential worship leaders is an encouraging statistic, but the number betrays a more sobering reality—over three-fourths of all SBC churches do not have someone in the pipeline for worship leadership development. See Exhibit 7.1.



¹⁷ 23.1% of respondent churches answered “yes” to this question. Multiplying 23.1% by the 46,876 SBC churches yields 10,828, or ~10,800.

Because the worship leader gap will be at least 20,000 by 2040, identification and training of people for worship leadership remains an urgent priority for SBC churches. Larger churches report much more frequent identification of someone pursuing a call to worship ministry than smaller churches. 66% of extra-large churches have identified at least one person, while only 15% of small churches report the same.

Young musicians provide an important source for any worship leadership pipeline. In 26% of churches, young people serve as musicians or in technology roles. However, only 4% of churches report a structured leadership pipeline as their primary approach to identifying and training future worship leaders. This indicates a gap between the opportunity—those young people engaged in M&WM—and the process to advance them in their training. This challenge exists among churches of all sizes, though at different scales. While 63% of extra-large churches report young people involved in M&WM, only 29% of extra-large churches report an intentional leadership pipeline to identify and develop people for worship leadership. However, among churches of all sizes, a significant gap exists between the current involvement of young people in M&WM and an intentional plan to identify and train future worship leaders from this segment. See Exhibit 7.2.



The state of worship leadership pipelines and development opportunities, as revealed in this study, presents an important and urgent topic for SBC congregations. In many SBC churches, young people do not participate in M&WM—perhaps due to limited resources or lack of interested young people (see Exhibit 5.9). Further, because aspiring worship leaders more often find training opportunities in larger churches, developing worship leaders at larger churches may be excellent candidates as worship leaders in other congregations rather than only in their existing church. Worship leadership training and development should include not only technical skills but also leadership skills—essential to effectively leading teams of volunteers (see Exhibit 6.3). Intentional focus on the theology of worship and leadership should accompany technical skill development in training plans. While the need is significant, SBC churches face the opportunity to intentionally invest in identifying and training future well-rounded worship leaders who can provide healthy worship leadership in churches for decades to come.

The lack of sufficient worship leaders in the pipeline points to the urgent need for SBC churches to identify and develop future worship leaders. As this report highlights, the need for worship leaders will only continue to increase over the next decade, and more than 20,000 new worship leaders will be needed by 2040. Each of these future worship leaders should receive training and development. Most SBC churches do not have a plan to develop future worship leaders. By surfacing these insights, the SBC Worship Research Committee encourages SBC churches to recognize the urgency and take steps to identify and develop worship leaders who are well-equipped to faithfully serve SBC churches in the coming generations.