

PRESBYTERIAN PANEL SUMMARY

Listening to Presbyterians



THE BIBLE FEBRUARY 1995

	Members	Elders	Pastors	Specialized Clergy
Number of Panelists	1,412	1,319	1,253	681
Number of questionnaires mailed	835	815	935	491
Percent returned	59%	62%	75%	72%

The February 1995 questionnaire was developed at the request of staff persons in the Theology and Worship Program Team, part of the Christian Faith and Life Program Area. Christian Faith and Life is one of three program areas in the Congregational Ministries Division of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Questions were designed to gather information on individual Bible reading, group Bible study, and the use of the Bible during Sunday worship services.

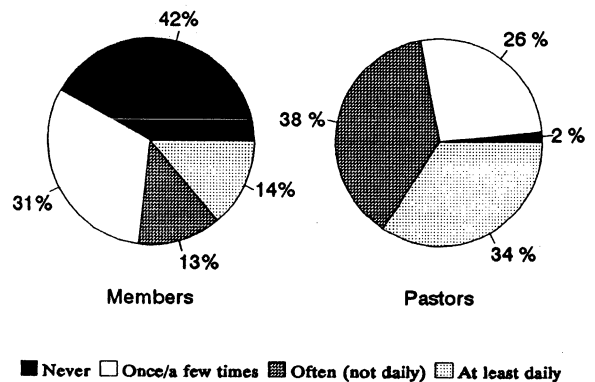
MOST PRESBYTERIANS READ THE BIBLE

Most Presbyterians read the Bible at least occasionally, whether the time referent is the previous week or the previous year. The most frequent form of Bible reading is that which is done individually, on one's own. Still, sizable proportions of panelists in all samples, especially among pastors, report Bible reading with their families, in Bible study groups, or in church school.

INDIVIDUAL BIBLE READING IS COMMON AMONG PRESBYTERIANS, BOTH IN A "TYPICAL" WEEK . . .

In the week prior to completing the survey, a majority of panelists in every sample reported reading the Bible individually ("on your own") at least once. The relative frequency, however, varied considerably by sample—only 14% of members and 16% of elders reported reading the Bible "at least daily," compared to 34% of pastors and 25% of specialized clergy. Overall, 27% of members and 30% of elders reported reading the Bible either "often" or "at least daily," while the corresponding proportions for pastors and specialized clergy were much greater: 72% and 57%, respectively.

FIGURE 1
How Often Did You Read the Bible on Your Own Last Week?



. . . AND IN A "TYPICAL" YEAR

Almost all panelists indicated that, in the past year, they had spent time individually reading the Bible. Indeed, only 12% of members, 5% of elders, 1% of specialized clergy, and less than 0.5% of pastors indicated that they had *not* read the Bible on their own during that period. Among members and elders, however, sizable proportions indicated that they had read it rather infrequently: overall, just 38% of members and 44% of elders reported that they had read the Bible weekly or more often in the prior year.

For pastors and specialized clergy the corresponding proportions are 92% and 79%.

MORE CLERGY THAN MEMBERS OR ELDERS PARTICIPATE IN GROUP BIBLE STUDY

In all samples, panelists are less likely to read the Bible in groups than individually. Moreover, if they do read the Bible in groups, they generally do so less frequently than they read the Bible in private. For example, in the week before the survey, 28% of members, 37% of elders, 73% of pastors, and 44% of specialized clergy reported at least one period of Bible reading as part of a distinctive *Bible study group*. Nevertheless, only about one-third of these members, elders, and specialized clergy, and one-half of these pastors, reported that such group-related Bible reading occurred more than twice in the prior week.

For all samples the highest group Bible reading rates were reported in conjunction with other church activities, such as women's circles or church school classes. Majorities of elders (54%), pastors (79%), and specialized clergy (56%) reported that they had read the Bible in the prior week in conjunction with such other church-related groups, although, as with more narrowly focused Bible study groups, most reported having done so only "once or twice."

The overall group Bible reading patterns found for the prior week were also found when panelists were asked about the entire prior year. That is, clergy, particularly pastors, are much more likely to have read the Bible in a group situation than are members and elders. Furthermore, among those in every sample who reported group-related Bible reading of any type, pastors and other clergy are much more likely than members and elders to have reported a frequency of "weekly/almost weekly" or "daily/almost daily." The largest contrast is between members and pastors for Bible study groups: only 7% of pastors *never* participated in a Bible study group in the past year, while 59% participated in one at least weekly. Among members, a majority (52%) did *not* participate in any Bible study group and, overall, only 18% participated in one at least once per week.

FEW REGULARLY READ THE BIBLE WITH FAMILY MEMBERS

Only about a quarter of members and elders, 44% of specialized clergy, and one-half of pastors reported any reading of the Bible with family members in the

prior week, and majorities of these subsets of panelists reported doing so only "once or twice." This relative dearth of family Bible reading was reported despite apparent widespread opportunity: large majorities in all Panel samples share their residences with at least one other family member (82% of members, 79% of elders, 88% of pastors, and 86% of specialized clergy live with one or more relatives). Even when we narrow the analysis to only these panelists (i.e., those living with a relative), we find that only minorities of members and elders read the Bible with another family member.

The most commonly reported family Bible reading occurs on religious holidays, such as Christmas and Easter—38% of members and 39% of elders reported such family Bible reading. Majorities of pastors (61%) and specialized clergy (60%) in family households also reported holiday-linked Bible reading with relatives. Even among pastors sharing a family household, however, a regular time of family Bible study is reported by only 18%.

PRESBYTERIANS USE MANY WAYS TO CHOOSE THEIR INDIVIDUAL BIBLE READINGS . . .

We asked the subset of panelists who reported some individual Bible reading in the prior year whether or not, during that time, they used any of six methods for choosing Bible passages. Curiously, the selection technique reported by the most members (80% reported using it) and elders (77%) is "reading passages at random." About two-thirds of pastors (64%) and specialized clergy (63%) also reported using this approach. Other methods of selection reported by a majority of at least one Panel sample include: "reading a particular book of the Bible from beginning to end" (52% of members and 64% of pastors so reported), "reading selections from the lectionary" (76% of pastors and 73% of specialized clergy), and "reading selections from a devotional magazine like *Upper Room* or *These Days*" (55% of members and 59% of elders). (Note that we only asked panelists whether or not they used each method at least once in the prior year, not how often they used each.)

. . . BUT BIBLE STUDY GROUPS TEND TO SELECT A PARTICULAR BOOK OF THE BIBLE

Panelists reveal greater consistency in how they choose Bible passages for reading as part of Bible study groups. Only one method (of five options listed) was

reported as having been used by a majority of Bible study group participants: “reading a particular book of the Bible from beginning to end.” At least 60% in every sample indicated that this approach had been used at least once in the past year to pick their group-related readings.

FOR THEIR INDIVIDUAL READING, MOST TEND TO PICK EQUALLY FROM BOTH TESTAMENTS

Around two-thirds of panelists in every sample—ranging from 63% of elders to 70% of pastors—reported that they “read about equally from both the Old and New Testaments.” Few of the remaining panelists limit themselves to only one of the testaments; overall, *none* of the specialized clergy and less than 0.5% of pastors reported reading one to the exclusion of the other. Among members and elders, exclusivity was a bit higher, but still low (*combined*, it was only 3% for members, 4% for elders). Nevertheless, many panelists indicated that their readings tended to be more in one testament than the other, and these individuals overwhelmingly reported that most of their reading was from the New Testament. Overall, between a quarter and a third of every sample reported that they read “mostly from the New Testament,” while only 6% or less in every sample indicated reading “mostly from the Old Testament.”

INDIVIDUAL BIBLE-READING SESSIONS ARE TYPICALLY BRIEF

When Presbyterians read the Bible on their own, how long do they typically spend doing so? While there is much personal variation, in general the time spent reading is relatively brief. Among members, a majority (53%) spend between 15 and 44 minutes at a typical Bible reading session. While the comparable proportion for pastors is somewhat *lower*—40%—it is because more pastors reported spending an hour or more per reading session (48%, compared to 30% of members). Specialized clergy typically spend less time than pastors but more time than laity in their individual reading sessions, with 42% spending 15-44 minutes per session, and 41% spending an hour or more.

MOST INDIVIDUAL BIBLE READING TAKES PLACE AT HOME FOR ALL BUT PASTORS

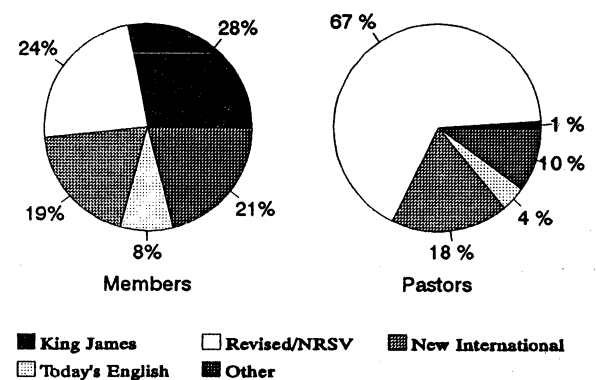
Not surprisingly, a majority of pastors—57%—usually do their own individual Bible reading at their offices.

What is perhaps surprising is that so large a minority—43%—do not. For most of these pastors—41% overall—their usual place of individual Bible reading is at home. Among members and elders, 95% usually read the Bible at home, as do two-thirds of specialized clergy. Interestingly, 1% of panelists in each sample reported that they usually read the Bible in a car or while riding a form of public transportation.

BOTH CLERGY SAMPLES PREFER THE (NEW) REVISED STANDARD VERSION, WHILE LAITY ARE MORE MIXED

When asked about the English Bible translation that they most prefer to read, a two-thirds majority of pastors (67%) and specialized clergy (69%) chose either the Revised Standard Version or the New Revised Standard Version. The only other selection chosen by as many as one in ten clergy was the New International Version, picked by 18% of pastors and 12% of specialized clergy. Among members, 28% selected the King James Version; 24%, the Revised/New Revised Standard Version; and 19%, the New International Version. Responses for elders were similar.

FIGURE 2
Preferred English Translation
of the Bible



STUDY BIBLES ARE WIDELY USED

Most pastors and specialized clergy (majorities of 70% or greater) reported that they regularly used a study Bible and a Bible commentary in conjunction with their Bible reading in the last year. A study Bible was reported as a regular adjunct by a majority among members (60%) and elders (63%).

PRESBYTERIANS READ THE BIBLE FOR VARIOUS PURPOSES

When given a list of five possible reasons for reading the Bible, panelists in every sample (indicated by the proportion responding “always” or “often”) reported that they read the Bible most often for “inspiration” and least often for “entertainment” (see Table 1).

TABLE 1

Percent Reporting They Read the Bible “Always” or “Often” for Each Particular Reason

Possible Reasons for Reading the Bible	Members	Elders	Spec.	
			Pastors	Clergy
inspiration	83%	80%	91%	88%
guidance	76%	73%	76%	79%
information	72%	70%	74%	73%
comfort	57%	52%	44%	37%
entertainment	7%	7%	7%	7%

CITATIONS, CONTEXT OFTEN PRECEDE BIBLE READINGS IN WORSHIP . . .

Bible readings during Sunday worship services are preceded by an introduction to the passage (either concerning its history or meaning) in most congregations—but not every Sunday. For example,

over one-third of pastors (39%) reported that an historical introduction “sometimes” precedes the Bible reading in worship, while 19% reported that it “often” precedes the reading, and only 5% reported that it “always” precedes the reading. More regular is the practice of providing worshipers with a “citation reference” to the reading or readings: large majorities of panelists in every sample, including 88% of members and 85% of pastors, reported that when the Bible is read aloud in their congregations’ worship services, the reader typically introduces the passage (or passages) by noting its book, chapter, and verse.

. . . BUT ONLY ABOUT ONE HALF FOLLOW ALONG IN THEIR BIBLES

Nevertheless, only about one-half or fewer panelists (members, 40%; pastors, 53%) reported that they follow along in their own or a pew Bible either “always” or “often.”

WORSHIP ALMOST ALWAYS INCLUDES READINGS FROM BOTH TESTAMENTS

Sunday worship Bible readings typically include both an Old Testament and a New Testament selection. In fact, at least 90% in every sample reported this practice. Further, responses suggest that about one-half of the time a Psalm is read, either as the sole Old Testament passage or in addition to another one. Gospel readings are a bit more common than Epistle readings, although the New Testament reading often includes both.

For a copy of the full *Report* of the February 1995 *Presbyterian Panel*, send a check for \$5 (no cash, please) to the address below. The *Panel* is administered by the Office of Research Services of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

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