



E PLURIBUS UNA ECCLESIA

FINDING UNITY IN THE
MISSION OF THE CHURCH

PROJECT NOTEBOOK
TAYLORSVILLE, UT
BROOMFIELD, CO
SHERIDAN, WY

JOHN CRAFT
Regional Executive Director
Rocky Mountain Church Network

DON'T LET IDEOLOGY DIVIDE

Purpose of the Survey

The Initial Survey serves two purposes. First, the Initial Survey helps identify and define the ministry context of this action research project. This includes the nature of congregations in the Rocky Mountain Church Network, which provides a foundation for understanding the data concerning Ideologically Driven Disunity (IDD). Second, the Initial Survey provides data that reveals possible correlation between various factors and the presence and impact of IDD.

Initial Survey Data Concerning RMCN Congregations

The Rocky Mountain Church Network consists of 46 churches located in 4 states in the Rocky Mountain region, along with one church in Kansas and one church in Nebraska. The researcher recruited pastors and church leaders throughout RMCN via email, phone calls, and personal conversations. Twenty-two pastors and church leaders consented to participate in the action research project. The project participation represents 46% of RMCN congregations. These congregations either have a strong history of connection with the regional association or are experiencing a growing relationship with RMCN. While the researcher had desired to have 50% participation, the churches represented in the project are a sufficient representation of the congregations in RMCN.

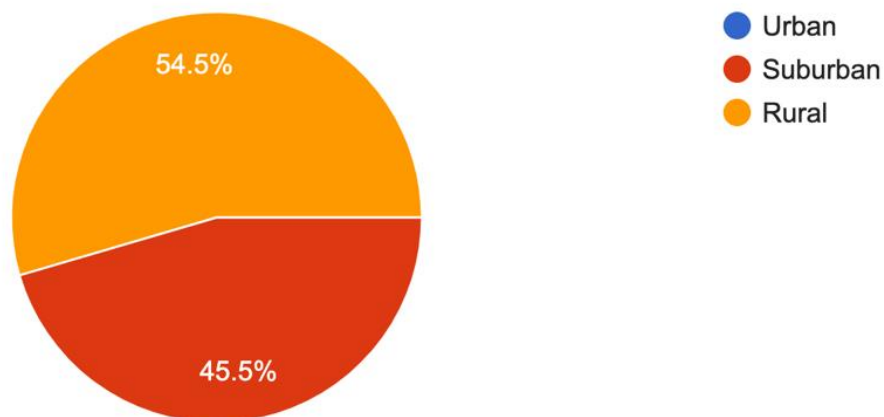
Ministry Context

The congregations represented in the Initial Survey are nearly evenly divided between suburban and rural settings, with 54.5% indicating a rural location and 45.5% indicating suburban. As there are only three metropolitan regions (Denver, Colorado Springs, and Salt Lake City) within the purview of RMCN, this result is an accurate reflection of the ministry context.

Churches from each of the three metropolitan regions and the four Rocky Mountain states (Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and Utah) were represented in this data.

What best describes your ministry context?

22 responses



While no churches identified their ministry context as Urban, RMCN serves several churches within Denver. However, there was no participation in this action research project among those congregations due to several factors. Some currently have no Senior Pastor and the researcher had difficulty obtaining contact info for a different church leader. Others had out-of-date contact information. Others gave no response to the researcher's invitation to participate in this project.

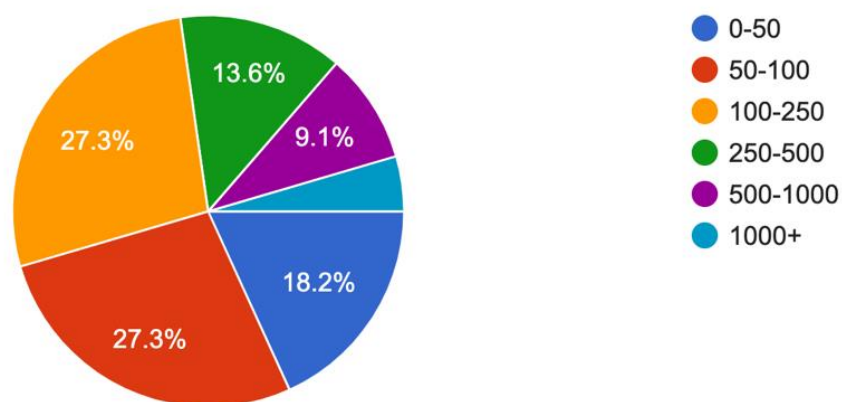
Congregational Size

Project participants report a wide array of worship service attendance, which is a reflection of the varied nature of RMCN churches. This provides insight into the presence and impact of IDD within congregations with different dynamics. The size of congregations in RMCN varies greatly, with churches from 0-50 in weekly attendance to over 1000 gathering

each week. There are churches with solo pastors and churches with multiple levels of professional staff accountability. There are churches with one service and churches with multiple services. These various factors are present in both the suburban and rural churches represented in this project. The varied nature of this data allows the researcher to identify trends and correlations that are not dependent upon a singular aspect of the ministry context.

What is the approximate size of your weekend service(s)?

22 responses



Age of Congregations

The churches represented in the project have existed for an average of 88 years, with a median age of 87.5 years. Of the 22 congregations represented, 11 of them are over 100 years old, with two over 150. This data partly reflects the lack of church planting in the Rocky Mountain Church Network.

Effectiveness in Great Commission Fulfillment

Two methods of measuring a congregation's effectiveness in fulfilling the Great Commission are the number of professions of faith witnessed through the direct ministry of the church¹ and baptisms. Project participants reported an average of 12.9 professions of faith in the past 12 months. However, this average is skewed by the presence of one church that witnessed 124 professions of faith. A more accurate reflection of Great Commission effectiveness seen through RMCN churches over the past 12 months may be the median number of professions of faith, which is 3.5. The average number of baptisms in the past year in project participants' congregations is 11.1, with the median number of baptisms being 5.5.

In order to determine any correlation between Great Commission effectiveness and the impact of IDD, the researcher utilized an additional metric based on professions of faith and baptisms per congregant. One obstacle to this was the fact that participants chose between various ranges of congregational size rather than reporting a specific worship attendance. To account for various sizes of churches, the researcher used the midpoint of the congregational size. For example, churches that reported a weekend gathering attendance of 0 to 50 were considered congregations of 25 and churches that reported a weekend gathering attendance of 500 to 1000 were considered to have an attendance of 750. Churches over 1000 in attendance were assigned the weekend gathering attendance of 1500. Utilizing this metric, congregations represented in the project reported seeing between 0 to 0.13 professions of faith per attender and 0 to 0.12 baptisms per attender. Any potential correlation between this metric and the impact of IDD will be discussed in a later section.

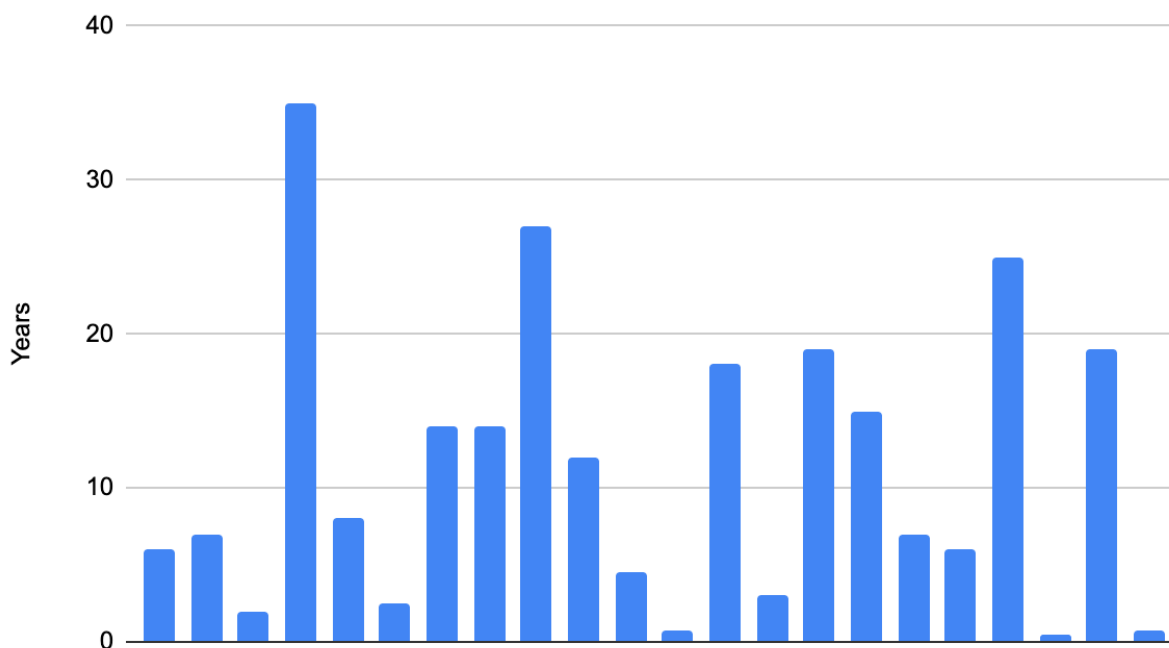
¹ The Initial Survey specifically gauged professions of faith through the direct ministry of the church. This is differentiated from professions of faith that are witnessed through external ministries the church supports, including missionaries, parachurch organizations, or other Christian ministries. While important, supporting such ministries may not reflect a culture of Great Commission fulfillment in a local congregation.

Initial Survey Data Regarding RMCN Pastors

Project participants were limited to Senior Pastors or, in the case of a pastoral vacancy, a primary church leader such as a Chairman of an Elder Board or Church Council. This action research project was completed by 19 Senior pastors and three church leaders. Each responded to survey questions regarding their tenure, education, and political leanings.

The church leaders in the survey have served their current congregations for an average of 11.2 years, with the shortest tenure being 6 months and the longest 35. The median tenure is 7.5 years.

How long have you served at your church?

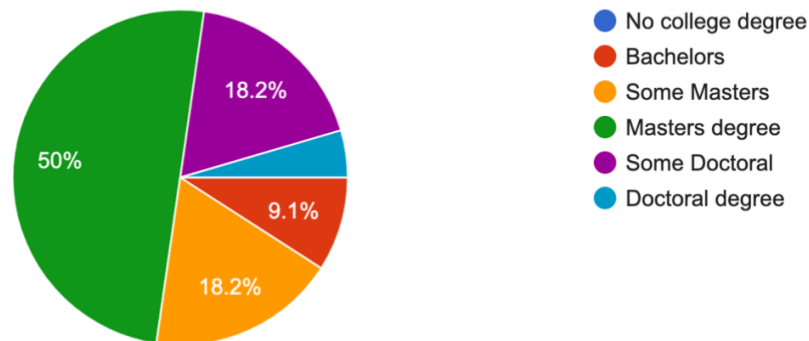


The project participants reported their highest level of education. Fifty percent of respondents indicated they had received a Master's Degree, which was the most reported level of education. Two participants have attained a Bachelor's degree, while one has received a Doctorate. The remaining participants have either achieved some Master's level or Doctoral level education.

Project participants also identified their personal political leanings. Each participant utilized a scale from Very Conservative to Very Liberal to gauge their own political ideology. For the purpose of discovering any correlation between political viewpoints and IDD, the researcher assigned each response a numerical value. Very Conservative has a value of 1, while Very Liberal has a value of 5.

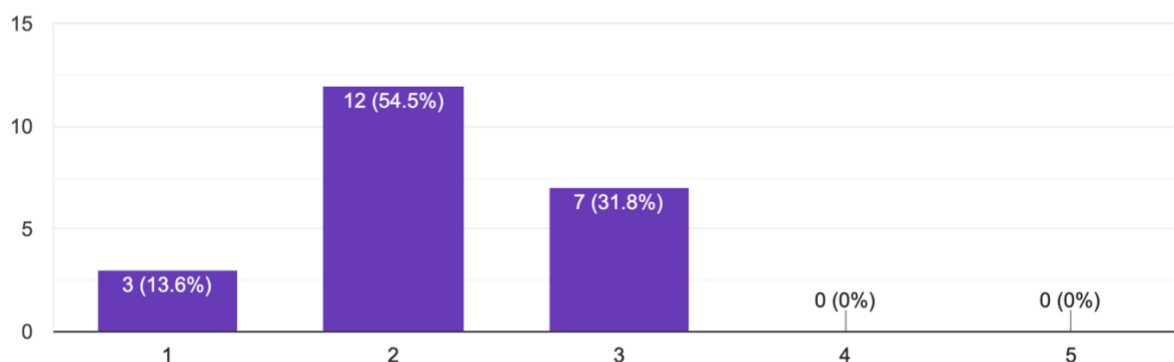
What is the highest level of education you have attained?

22 responses



Rate your political leaning.

22 responses



The project participants identified their political leanings from 1 to three, with an average of 2.2. This shows that the participants in the study identify their political leanings as Center-Right.

The Impact of Ideologically Driven Disunity

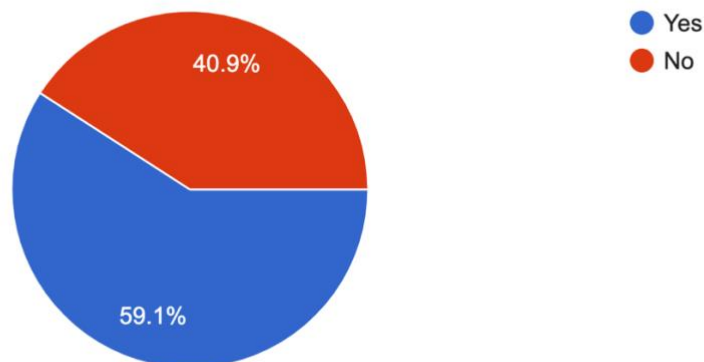
Impact on Congregations

The Initial Survey reveals the presence and impact of ideologically driven disunity in three time periods: the past 12 months, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2020 election season and its aftermath. The Initial Survey also reveals the impact of IDD on pastors, church leadership, and congregations.

Project participants were asked if their congregation had experienced IDD in the past twelve months. Of the 22 participants, 59.1% indicated the presence of IDD. The presence of IDD in churches represented in this project is shown in the chart on the following page.

Has your church experienced ideologically driven disunity in the past 12 months?

22 responses

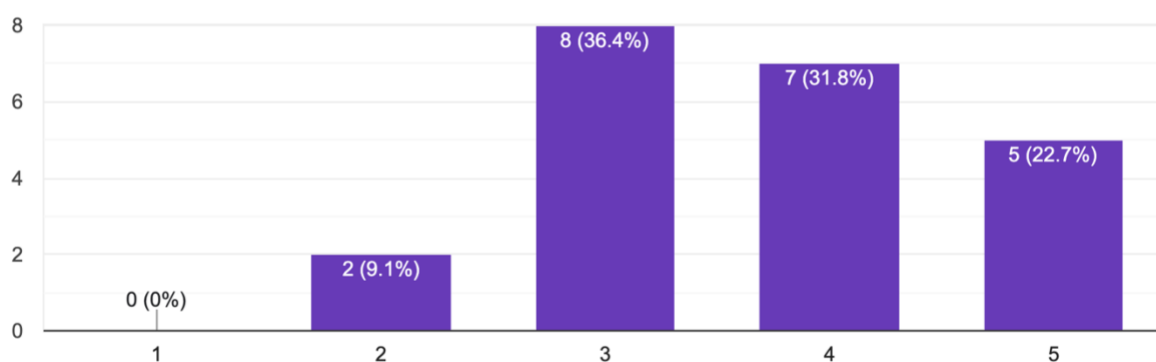


Project participants also rated the impact of IDD on their congregation on a scale from Severe to None. This scale was assigned numerical values, with Severe equaling 1 and None equaling 5.

The average impact of IDD in churches represented in this project was 3.7.

Rate the impact of ideologically driven disunity in your congregation.

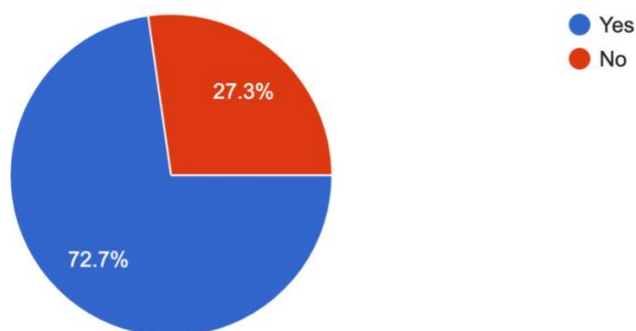
22 responses



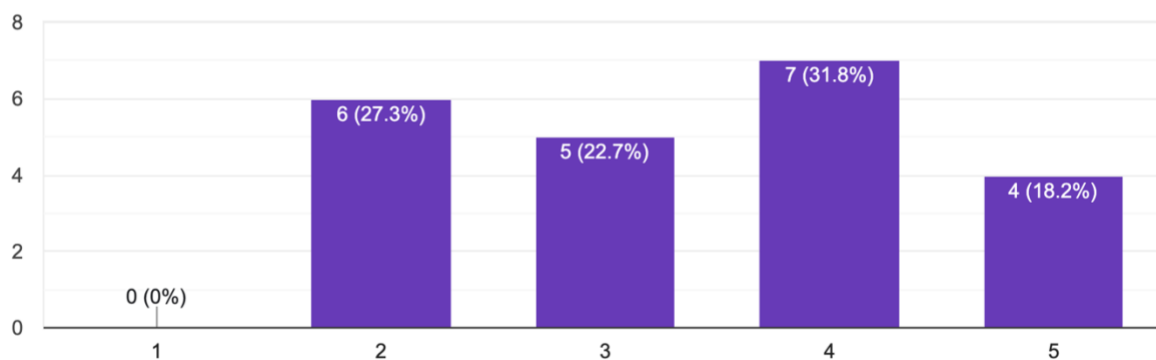
Project participants indicated that events, namely the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 election season and its aftermath, worsened ideologically driven disunity. 72.7% of participants indicated that IDD was worsened by the pandemic. Project participants also indicated IDD had

greater impact during the COVID-19 pandemic than during the past 12 months, averaging 3.4 on the same scale used to determine the impact of IDD during the past 12 months. This is an increase of reported impact of 7%.

Was ideologically driven disunity in your congregation worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic?
22 responses



Rate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ideologically driven disunity in your congregation.
22 responses

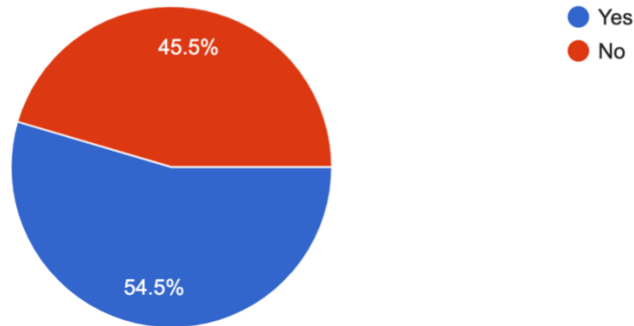


The 2020 election and its aftermath also increased the presence of ideologically driven disunity, with 54.5% of participants indicating an increase in IDD. According to project participants, however, the impact of IDD was less than the past 12 months, unlike the COVID-19 pandemic. The average response to the impact of IDD, using the same scale as the previous two

examples, was 3.82. This represents a 3.8% decrease in perceived impact versus the impact of IDD during the past 12 months.

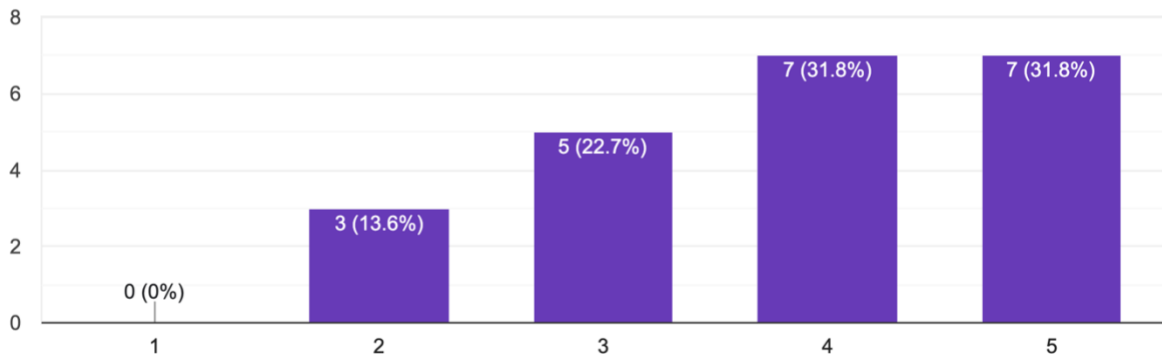
Was ideologically driven disunity in your congregation worsened by the 2020 election and its aftermath?

22 responses



Rate the impact of the 2020 election and its aftermath on ideologically driven disunity in your congregation.

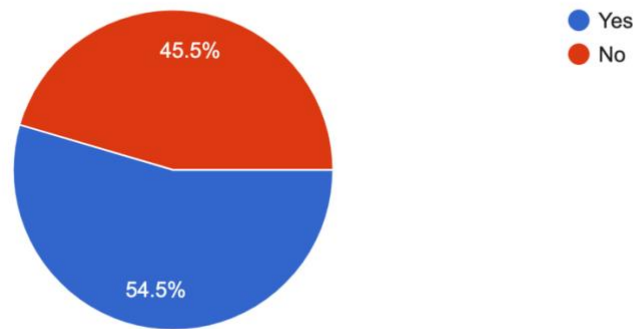
22 responses



The presence of ideologically driven disunity has had an impact on congregational life and on the ability to fulfill the Great Commission. When asked if people had left their congregation in the past 12 months due to ideological differences with church leadership or with other members

of the congregation, 45.5% of participants responded, “Yes.” Participants also indicated that IDD had impacted their church’s ability to fulfill the Great Commission.

Has ideologically driven disunity impacted your church's ability to fulfill the Great Commission?
22 responses

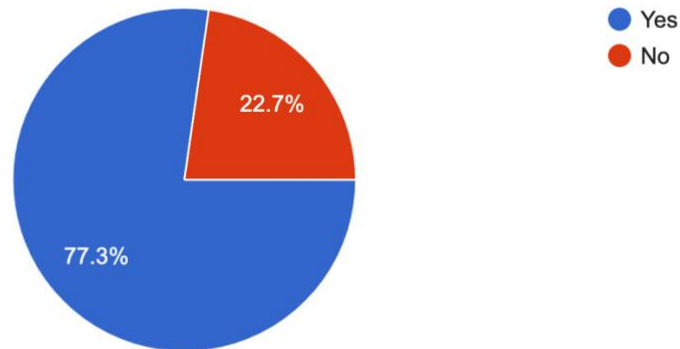


Impact on Pastors and Church Leadership

The impact of ideologically driven disunity on pastors in RMCN is evident. 77.3% of project participants reported that IDD caused stress on the Senior Pastor. This is 31% higher than the reported presence of ideologically driven disunity. Stress on church leadership is evident as well, with 72.7% of the project participants indicating their leadership group has felt stress due to IDD.

Has ideologically driven disunity caused stress on the pastor?

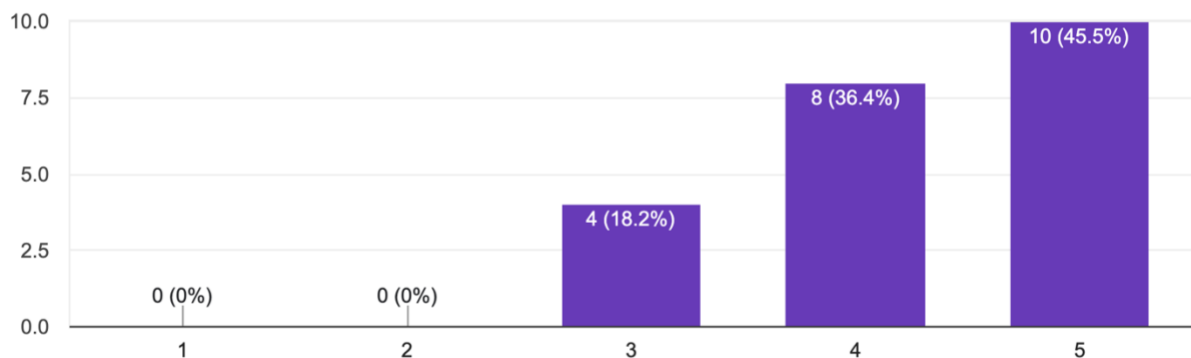
22 responses



While both pastors and church leadership have experienced stress due to ideologically driven disunity, church staffs and leadership groups have experienced unity. Despite 59.1% of project participants reporting disunity in their congregations, only 27.3% reported IDD in their leadership group. When asked to rate the impact of IDD on their leadership group, participants reported a very low impact. Using the same scale from Severe (1) to None (5), participants rated the impact of IDD on their leadership group at an average of 4.3.

Rate the impact of ideologically driven disunity in your leadership group.

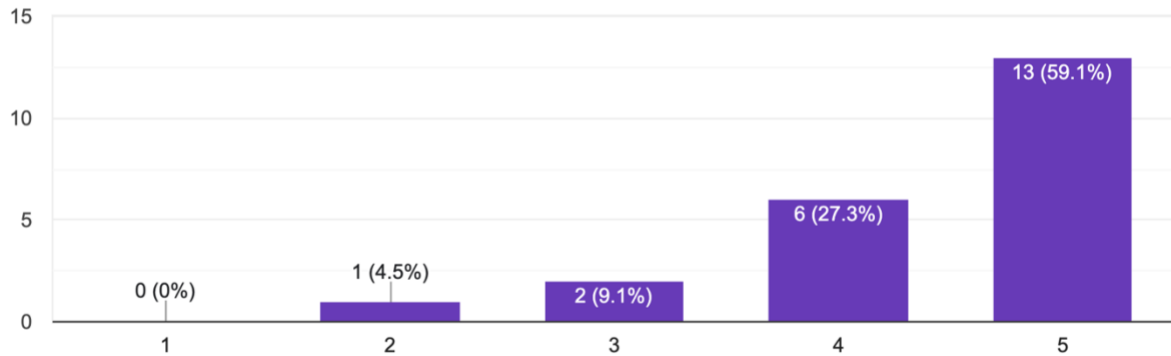
22 responses



The impact of IDD on church staff² was rated even lower, with only 18.2% of respondents indicating the presence of disunity. Further, the impact of ideologically driven disunity was rated even lower than the impact on church leadership, with an average of 4.4 on the same scale.

Rate the impact of ideologically driven disunity among your staff (paid and/or volunteer).

22 responses



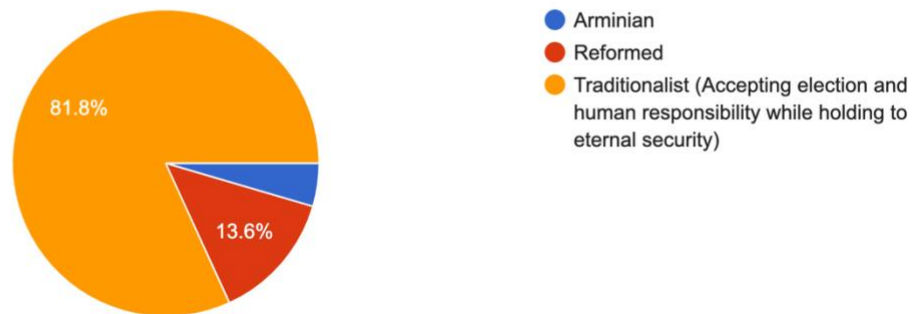
Statistical Correlations in the Initial Survey Data

The Initial Survey revealed several statistical correlations. What is more unexpected, however, was the relative lack of correlations in the data. The researcher asked about several factors that might have influenced the presence of ideologically driven disunity. Most of these factors, however, seem to have no effect on the presence of IDD. Some of this was due to the monolithic nature of the responses to some questions. For example, questions regarding the soteriological view and preaching style of the project participants engendered one response that was so overwhelmingly monolithic that the results were rendered statistically irrelevant due to being nearly the same as the entire participant pool.

² For the purposes of this study, church staff is defined as paid and/or volunteer.

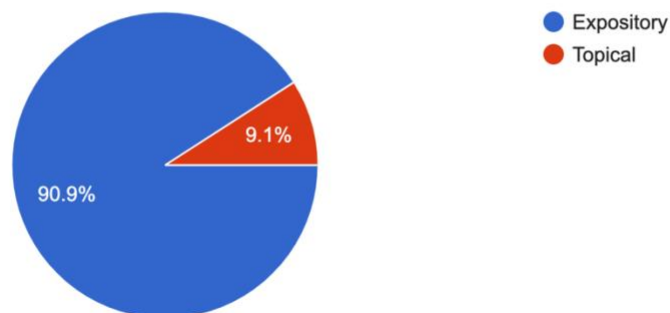
How would you define your soteriology?

22 responses



What is your typical preaching style?

22 responses



Other data revealed no correlation between specific factors and the presence of ideologically driven disunity. For example, neither the number of professions of faith in the past 12 months nor the number of baptisms in the same period bore any relevance to the presence or impact of ideologically driven disunity. This was the same result when the time parameter was the past twelve months, the COVID-19 pandemic, or the 2020 election and its aftermath. Similar results were achieved when considering the political activity of the project participant, the size of the congregation, or the socioeconomic status of the congregation.

Using the Pearson Correlation Coefficient³, the researcher discovered several correlations between different variables and the presence of IDD. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient measures correlation between two sets of variables on a scale from -1 to 1. Correlation coefficients from -1 to 0 are considered negative correlations, whereas coefficients from 0 to 1 are positive correlations.⁴ Within negative and positive correlations there are widely accepted ranges determining whether the correlation is weak, moderate, or strong.⁵

<i>r</i> value	
+.70 or higher	Very strong positive relationship
+.40 to +.69	Strong positive relationship
+.30 to +.39	Moderate positive relationship
+.20 to +.29	Weak positive relationship
+.01 to +.19	No or negligible relationship
0	No relationship (zero correlation)
-.01 to -.19	No or negligible relationship
-.20 to -.29	Weak negative relationship
-.30 to -.39	Moderate negative relationship
-.40 to -.69	Strong positive relationship
-.70 or lower	Very strong positive relationship

³ “Correlation Coefficient: Simple Definition, Formula, Easy Steps,” Statistics How To, accessed March 30, 2023, <https://www.statisticshowto.com/probability-and-statistics/correlation-coefficient-formula/>.

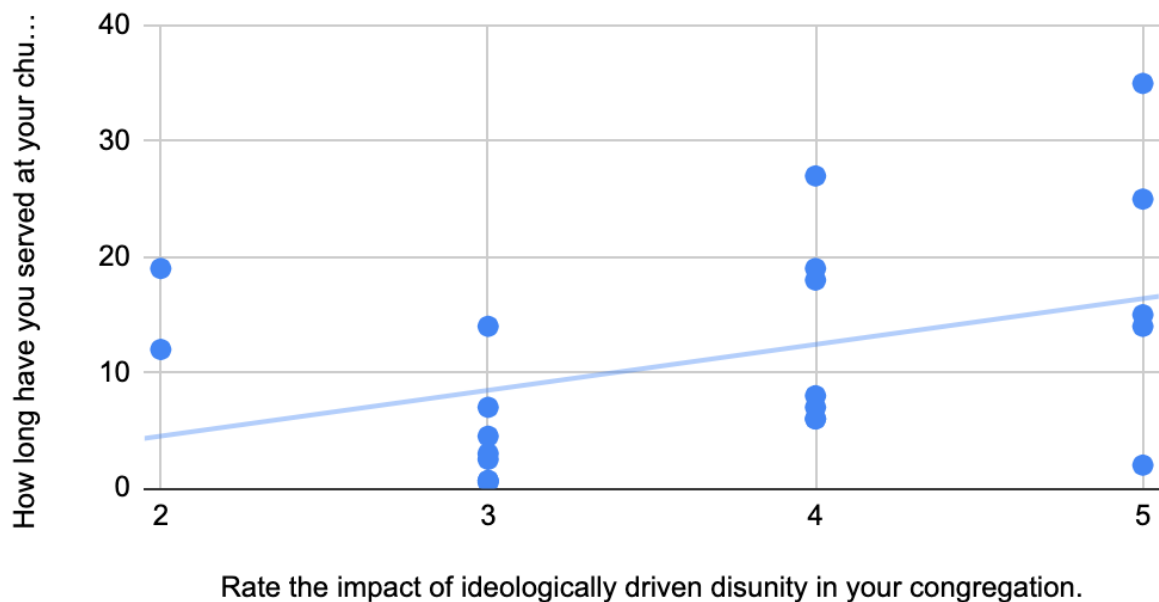
⁴ A negative correlation happens when the value of one variable goes up while the other goes down. A positive correlation happens with both variables ascending or descending concurrently.

⁵ “Correlation Coefficient.”

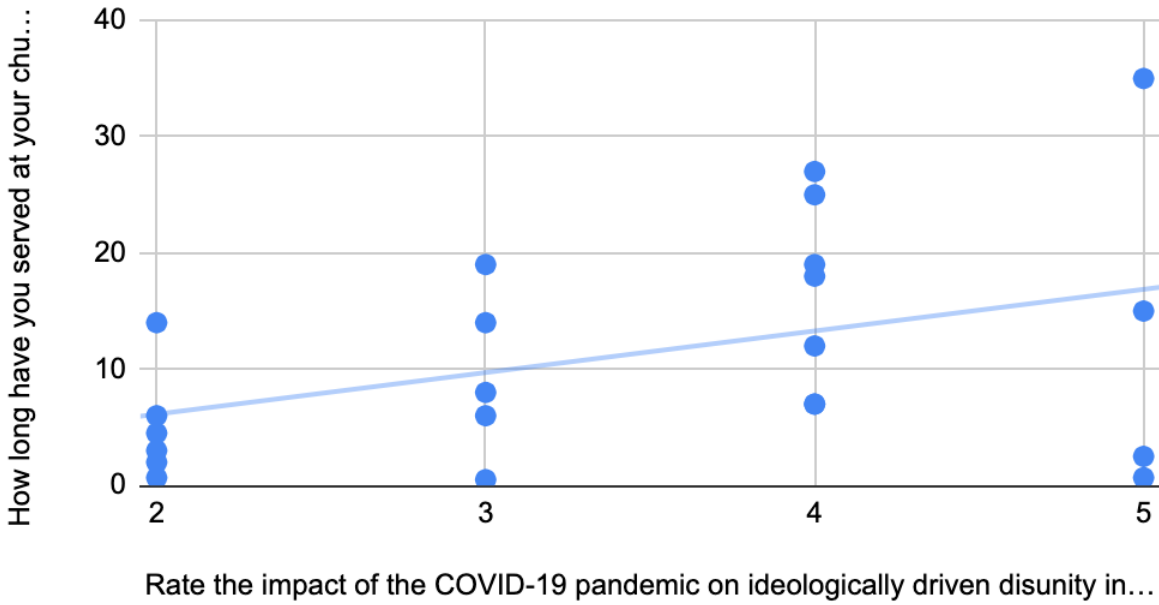
While Pearson's Correlation Coefficients may show a statistical relationship between two sets of variables, it cannot identify which variable, if any, is causative. The only inference that one may draw from these statistical correlations is that there is a relationship between variables. For example, while there is a strong positive relationship between the length of tenure of the Senior Pastor and the absence of IDD, one may not conclude that the length of tenure caused the absence of disunity. It may be the case that the Senior Pastor has a long tenure due to the lack of stress in an environment in which there is no disunity.

Tenure of the Senior Pastor has the strongest correlation with the presence or absence of ideologically driven disunity. This is true whether one considers the past twelve months (PCC +.39), the COVID-19 pandemic (PCC +.41), or the 2020 election and its aftermath (PCC +.44).

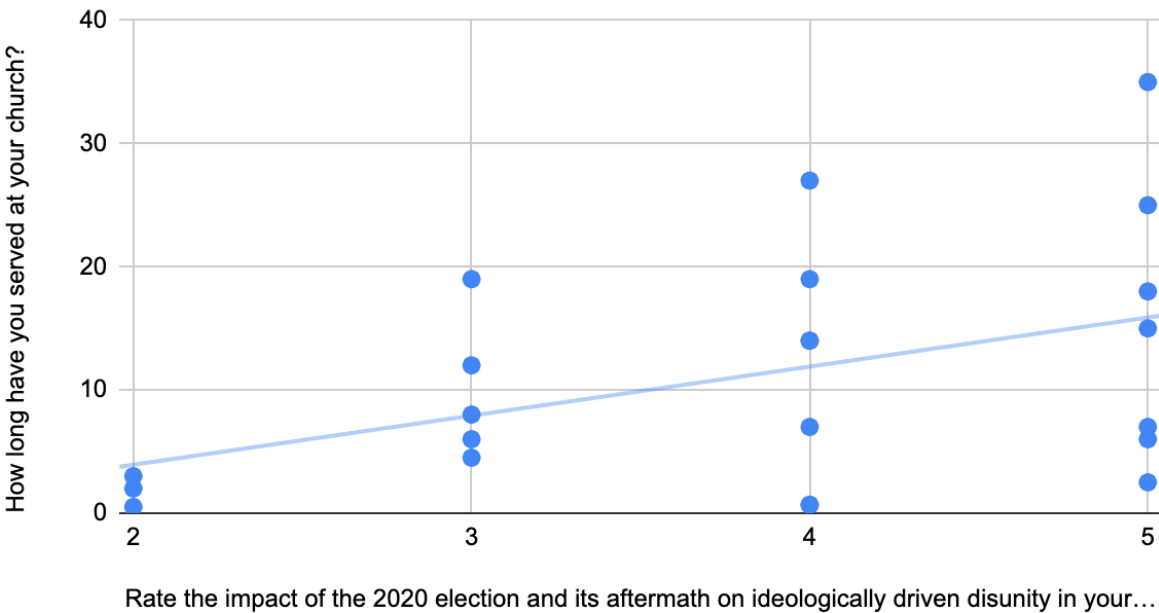
How long have you served at your church? vs. Rate the impact of ideologically driven disunity in your congregation.



How long have you served at your church? vs. Rate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ideologically driven disunity in your congregation.



How long have you served at your church? vs. Rate the impact of the 2020 election and its aftermath on ideologically driven disunity in your congregation.

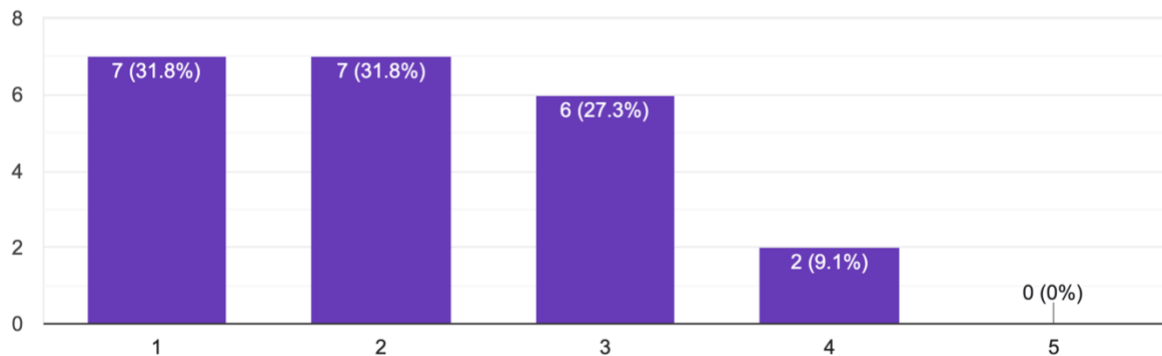


Several variables had weak-to-moderate correlation. There is a weak negative relationship (PRR -.21) between the typical political leaning of one’s ministry context and the

impact of IDD in a congregation, meaning that the more conservative the ministry context, the less impact IDD has on the congregation. There is a stronger negative relationship between the typical political leaning of one's ministry context and the impact of ideologically driven disunity during the COVID-19 pandemic (PCC $-.27$). Of note, however, is the typical political leaning of the ministry context. When asked to rate the political leaning of their ministry context, the project participants responded with an average of 2.14 on a scale of 1 being Very Conservative and 5 being Very Liberal. As both this average and the average rating of the congregation (1.86 on the same scale) are below the midpoint of 2.5, the typical congregation experiences IDD based primarily on levels of conservatism rather than on conservative versus liberal viewpoints. There is no significant relationship between the political leaning of one's ministry context and the impact of IDD during the 2020 election and its aftermath.

What is the typical political leaning of your ministry context?

22 responses



The frequency with which the Senior Pastor addresses political issues from the church platform also has a moderate correlation to the impact of ideologically driven disunity. However, this correlation is widely varied when confined to specific time periods. During the past 12 months, there is a near-moderate positive relationship (PCC $+.29$), meaning that the more often

the Senior Pastor addresses political issues, the more impact IDD has in the congregation. However, there is a near-moderate negative relationship when the timeframe is confined to the 2020 election and its aftermath (PCC $-.29$), meaning the more often the Senior Pastor addressed political issues, the less impact IDD had on the congregation. Lastly, there was no statistically significant relationship between addressing political issues and the impact of IDD during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is also a moderate correlation between educational levels and the impact of ideologically driven disunity. This relationship, however, is different when one considers the educational level of the Senior Pastor and the typical educational level of members of the congregation. When the Senior Pastor has more education, the impact of IDD is less (PCC $-.29$). However, when the congregation has a higher education level, the impact of IDD is greater (PCC $+.34$).

When considering the correlation between the presence of ideologically driven disunity and the presence of clear mission and vision statements, the researcher could not use Pearson's Correlation as he was comparing two sets of "Yes" or "No" responses. Instead, the researcher compared the presence of IDD against the two possible responses to whether a church has clear mission and vision statements and whether a majority of the congregation embraces the mission and vision of the church. 53% of churches that have clear mission and vision statements experience IDD. This figure is 70% when the timeframe is constrained to the COVID-19 and 47% when constrained to the 2020 election and its aftermath. Ideologically driven disunity is exacerbated, however, by the lack of mission and vision statements and by a majority of a congregation not embracing those statements. Churches without clear mission and vision statements experienced IDD at the rate of 100% in the past twelve months, 80% during the

COVID-19 pandemic, and 80% during the 2020 election. Churches in which a majority of the congregation did not embrace the mission and vision of the church experienced IDD at a rate of 67% in the past 12 months, 83% during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 67% during the 2020 election.

Conclusions on Initial Survey Data

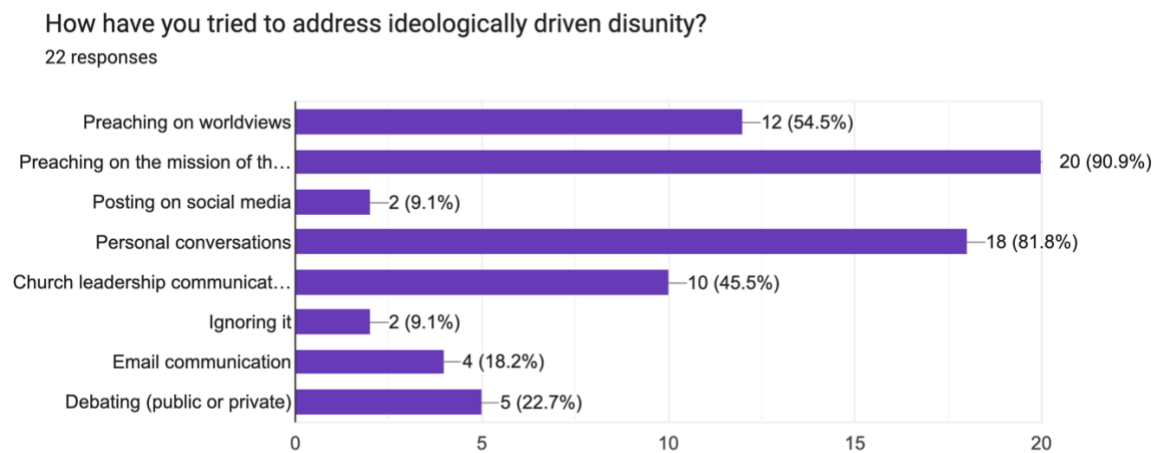
After collecting, categorizing, and analyzing the data from the Initial Survey, the researcher has come to several conclusions. The conclusions based on quantitative research, along with factors discovered in the qualitative research performed in interviews and a focus group, provide a clearer understanding of the problem facing RMCN Senior Pastors and church leaders. These conclusions also provide a foundation upon which methods to address IDD may be built.

IDD Exists in Multiple Environments

The researcher sought to find a correlation between multiple factors that may influence the presence and impact of ideologically driven disunity. There were several factors that had no bearing on the presence or absence of IDD, in some cases surprisingly so. Prior to receiving the data from the Initial Survey, the researcher supposed that measuring the number of professions of faith and baptisms would reveal a greater commitment to the Great Commission that would make a church more likely to avoid IDD. However, this was not the case as there was no statistical correlation between the number of professions of faith/baptisms and the impact of IDD. This is just one example of the presence of IDD regardless of the presence of other factors. While it is tempting to believe that this is not a significant finding, the opposite is, in fact, true. The

presence of IDD despite the presence of other factors shows that ideologically driven disunity causes issues for a broad cross-section of congregations in the Rocky Mountain Church Network.

The fact that IDD exists in multiple environments also reveals that the efforts of church leadership to address it have been largely unsuccessful. In comparing the methods project participants have utilized to address IDD with its presence and impact, the researcher could find no pattern or correlation either alleviating or worsening disunity.



This lack of pattern or correlation leads the researcher to conclude two things. First, Senior Pastors and church leaders in RMCN have identified IDD as an issue and are trying to address it in multiple ways. The researcher concludes that church leadership sincerely desires to remedy the ideologically driven disunity found in their congregation. However, the methods that have been utilized have had little to no effect. Either church leaders need a different method, or their methods need adjusting.

IDD Is Worsened by Events

Comparing the presence of ideologically driven disunity during the past twelve months with its presence during the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 election and its aftermath shows

that IDD is not as prevalent during what may be considered a normal season—the pandemic has largely lost its influence in culture as it has abated and the United States is between election cycles. However, the presence of ideologically driven disunity increased dramatically during the pandemic and, to a lesser extent, during the 2020 election cycle. The researcher concludes this is due, in part, to the foundational nature of ideologies. While many assume that their ideology rests upon their theology, the opposite is often true. Mark Labberton writes,

Evangelicals can affirm that faith commitments and their implications are essential to discerning values; but when evangelicals who affirm the same baseline of faith reach radically opposing social and political opinions, we have to ask what else is at play. The collision can't be explained by different definitions of the incarnation or by alternate views of the Bible and its authority. Rather, opposing views expose that underneath “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” lie basic instincts in our mental and social frames related to who and what actually matters.⁶

The reversal of the assumed priorities between ideology and theology can be attributed to the similarities between the two. The English political theorist Maurice Cranston described the characteristics of ideologies.⁷ They are comprehensive in that they seek to incorporate all of the human experience. They are goal-oriented in that they often have an objective toward which adherents of the ideology strive. They require effort to maintain. They require a commitment to a cause. Finally, they are intellectual, driven more by reason than emotion. Collin Slowey writes, “The first four of Cranston’s characteristics of ideology, when disconnected from the word itself, describe just as accurately the function of religious beliefs as they do that of political ones.”⁸ When believers mistake foundational ideology for foundational theology, a congregation will

⁶ Mark Labberton, ed., *Still Evangelical? Insiders Reconsider Political, Social, and Theological Meaning* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2018), 6.

⁷ Collin Slowey, “The Christian and Ideology,” *Initiative on Faith & Public Life* (blog), September 2, 2020, <https://www.faithandpubliclife.com/the-christian-and-ideology>.

⁸ Slowey.

have, at best, an ideological unity rather than one built upon the foundation of theology and the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Because ideology is foundational, it takes on greater prominence when the pressure of an external event is exerted on a congregation. Wayne Dyer explains this in recounting a conversation in which he points out that when one squeezes an orange, orange juice is the result because “that’s what’s inside.” Dyer concludes, “Let’s assume that this orange isn’t an orange, but it’s you. And someone squeezes you, puts pressure on you, says something you don’t like, offends you. And out of you comes anger, hatred, bitterness, fear. Why? The answer, as our young friend has told us, is because that’s what’s inside.”⁹ Unless church leaders in the RMCN understand the foundational nature of ideologies and their rise to prominence during events that bring pressure upon their congregation, the cycle of increasing IDD during such events will continue.

IDD Is Weaker When Relationships Are Stronger

Two findings of the Initial Survey reveal the importance of relationships in addressing ideologically driven disunity. There is a clear positive correlation between the length of the Senior Pastor’s tenure and the lessened impact of IDD—the longer the pastor has served the congregation, the less disunity the congregation experiences. As a pastor’s tenure lengthens, three things occur. First, he gains a greater understanding of the culture of the congregation, enabling him to more effectively navigate the times that “squeeze” the congregation. Second, he becomes more engrained within the culture, rather than being viewed as new to it. This allows a

⁹ “Why the Inside Matters,” *Dr. Wayne W. Dyer* (blog), May 13, 2013, <https://www.drwaynedyer.com/blog/why-the-inside-matters/>.

church leader to play a greater role in shaping the culture of the church into one which values unity based in fulfilling the Great Commission. Third, trust between the pastor and the congregation grows in the context of longer relationships. This trust allows the pastor or church leader to lead with more courage during difficult seasons of ministry.

In addition to seeing the importance of relationships in the tenure of the Senior Pastor, one can also conclude that ministry relationships foster unity. The data concerning the presence of IDD among church leadership and church staff reveals this. These two groups are most often committed to one another and to fulfilling the mission and vision of the church; therefore, they experience less IDD. As believers strive together to fulfill the Great Commission, ideological differences can take on less importance as they work toward a greater goal.

Addressing Ideologically Driven Disunity—A Strategy

The Process Begins

We are tempted to begin the process of addressing Ideologically Driven Disunity (IDD) outside of ourselves. Believing that we are correct, we suppose that unity can be found through proving others wrong. The people with whom we disagree simply need to realize the error of their thinking, replace that with better thinking, and see the world from our perspective. If this takes place, we can move forward together in fulfilling the mission of the church. Having established this as the most logical process—at least in our own minds—we begin to have conversations with people who hold different viewpoints than we do. Sometimes these conversations take place in person, with two believers sitting down over a cup of coffee. Sometimes these conversations happen online privately through an extensive email thread. Sometimes they occur online publicly, exchanging increasingly agitated thoughts in a Facebook

post or comment thread. As church leaders, sometimes we use our public platform to address what we see as a faulty worldview. While we might tell ourselves that we are simply communicating the truth, we often have one or two people in mind as we're preaching, hoping they will hear what we're saying, listen to the truth of our message, and change their ways so that we can have unity.

The problem is...none of this is helping. There are several flaws in this approach. First, it fails to recognize the foundational nature of ideologies. Every person in the world has an ideology—the way they make sense of the world and interact with others. Second, it assumes that IDD is caused by intellectual differences. On the surface, this seems true. However, IDD is caused not by intellectual differences, but by fear of loss. Third, it leads us to try to address ideologically driven disunity through means that exacerbate it rather than reduce it. This creates a cycle of dysfunction in which we try address IDD, make it worse, then try even harder and more forcefully. Most importantly, trying to address disunity through focusing on convincing someone else of our rightness ignores our own foundational ideologies and their role in creating disunity. As we discover a strategy for addressing IDD, the process that naturally seems correct will be reversed. We will begin with the mission of the church, move toward understanding our own role in addressing IDD, and then consider how to have missional, biblical relationships with believers who see the world differently than we do.

Finding the Third Voice

Ideologies are pervasive. Every person who has ever lived has held some form of ideology. This ideology is shaped by family background, experience, education, cultural influences, and a host of other factors. Irwyn Ince writes, “[T]he products of a culture form from

the values that lay beneath the surface of the water. There we find values, beliefs, social expectations, parenting styles, gender roles, ideas of modesty, concepts of time, importance of space, the nature of friendship, concepts of beauty, and other unspoken aspects of culture that shape our understanding of who we are.”¹⁰ Just as you are unaware of your own regional accent, assuming that yours is the normal way to speak while everyone else sounds different, you are probably unaware of the impact of your ideology. Assuming that yours is the correct way to view the world, you believe that others have a peculiar way of understanding how the world works. Since you don’t necessarily recognize your ideology, you may not be aware of its influence on the way you view Scripture and spirituality. Mark Labberton writes, “What divides evangelicals can be found underneath our theology, on the often unrecognized mental and social frame on which our theology sits.”¹¹

When two individuals who have differing ideologies interact, tension often results. Unaware that each has a foundational way they view the world, these two individuals will often assume the best of their own motives and understand and assume the worst of the other. This has led to a disunity that feels, at times, based in the understanding of Scripture but is actually a disunity based in ideology. Walter Brueggemann writes,

Paul asks the question, 'Is Christ divided?' He intended the answer, 'No, Christ is not divided.' But our lived experience tells us otherwise. Christ is indeed divided; we have each taken the part of Christ that we prefer and treasure. But here I do not speak of the big divisions among traditions and denominations. Rather, I speak of the deeply felt divisions at the local level in which the church, propelled by anxiety, divides into red and blue, liberal and

¹⁰ Irwyn L. Ince, *The Beautiful Community: Unity, Diversity, and the Church at Its Best* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2020), 131.

¹¹ Mark Labberton, ed., *Still Evangelical? Insiders Reconsider Political, Social, and Theological Meaning* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2018), 5.

conservative, camps that mostly exhibit little openness for unity with those across the divide.¹²

As mentioned previously, ideology and spirituality appear very similar on the surface. Christena Cleveland notes that the “definition of religion is basically a definition of [ideology] that focuses on the sacred.” This adds an air of moral superiority to one’s ideology over against someone else’s. This results in two individuals, each finding fault in the other’s viewpoint. This disunity is then aggravated by mistaking ideology for spirituality, turning an ideological difference into a moral or spiritual dispute. This only serves to further entrench the two individuals into positions that disregard the other as unthinking and unspiritual. When this happens between groups of individuals in the church, the result is ideologically driven disunity that negatively impacts a congregation. Brueggemann writes, “And the outcome, I suggest, is at best an anemic capacity to respond to the gospel for the sake of the world.”¹³

With the church seemingly more and more divided along ideological lines, how do pastors and church leaders help their congregations find unity? Since the foundational nature of ideologies often prevents us from hearing each other, the only way to find true unity is through listening to a third, transcendent voice. For believers—members of the universal church—that voice is the voice of Jesus. As the Founder of the church,¹⁴ he gives the only foundational ideology that matters: the Great Commission command to “make disciples of all nations.”¹⁵ As pastors and church leaders, we must view every ideological discussion through this lens. By listening to the third, transcendent voice of Jesus, we can move beyond ideological differences in

¹² Walter Brueggemann and Louis Stulman, *Truth and Hope: Essays for a Perilous Age*, First edition (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 140.b

¹³ Brueggemann and Stulman, 16.

¹⁴ Matthew 16:18.

¹⁵ Matthew 28:19

order to become a unified community of mission without having to come to an ideological agreement. Stanley Hauerwas notes, “That conflict is part and parcel of Christian unity means that the unity of a church is not based on agreements, but rather one that assumes that disagreements should not lead to division but rather should be a testimony to the existence of a reconciling people.”¹⁶

What Have We Done?

Energy follows attention. This simple axiom is at the heart of many disciplines. The things to which we pay attention receive our effort in business, relationships, and physical exercise. If you pay attention more to your desire for rest and relaxation than to your desire for fitness, you won’t get off your couch and head to the gym. If you pay more attention to your love for BBQ than to your need to “lose a few pounds,” you’ll find those pounds don’t go anywhere. This axiom can be applied to congregations experiencing ideologically driven disunity. The journey toward addressing IDD starts with the desire of the pastor or church leader to address it. There are several other options that compete with this desire. A pastor may not want to relinquish a life-long stance. A church leader may rather avoid a difficult conversation due to his or her family history. If a pastor or church leader does not focus attention on the issue of IDD, energy will not flow into addressing it.

A church leader or pastor focuses attention on addressing IDD by recognizing the presence of his own foundational ideologies. Left unchecked, these foundational ideologies can create unnecessary division among their congregation as they interact with others who have

¹⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics, and Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2013), 109.

differing ideologies. Unwittingly, pastors and church leaders can increase the level of disunity in their congregations, causing the stressful situations they want to avoid. When encountering IDD, whether with another believer or within a congregation, pastors and church leaders should begin by answering some questions:

- How have I contributed to the situation?
- Am I more concerned with my own stance than with finding unity?
- Am I having more political or ideological conversations than spiritual conversations?
- Am I confusing ideology and spirituality?
- Is the Great Commission's charge to make disciples of Jesus more important to me than leading people to see the world the way I do?

Without recognizing the presence of their own foundational ideologies, pastors and church leaders will continue to foster environments in which IDD can thrive. Allen Hilton writes, “Christian leaders and churches identify with blue or red, imagining that righteous political convictions license us to nurse open disdain for half the nation.”¹⁷ By identifying their own foundational ideologies, pastors and church leaders take the first step of focusing their attention on addressing IDD. As they focus attention on this, energy will follow.

Out of Many, One Church

While one can identify the cause of ideologically driven disunity and desire to address it, the presence and impact of IDD may seem overwhelming. Facing the pressure day after day, pastors and church leaders struggle to have meaningful conversations that bring God’s people together in fulfilling the Great Commission. Developing a strategy for addressing IDD is crucial. Without a strategy for addressing IDD, pastors and church leaders will continue to experience stress and congregations will be hindered in their attempt to fulfill the mission God gives them.

¹⁷ Allen Hilton, *A House United: How the Church Can Save the World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018), Loc. 50, Kindle.

Understanding the Cause of Disunity

Ideologically driven disunity is worsened when pastors and church leaders do not understand the root of the issue. On the surface, it appears that disunity arises as believers with differing ideologies consider their viewpoints to be more important than others. It can appear that IDD is caused by stubbornness, arrogance, or animosity. However, these are the symptoms of the cause, not the cause itself. At its core, IDD is caused by fear.

Those who bring disunity are fearful of loss: loss of influence, loss of prominence, or loss of what they feel they once had. Believers taking an ideological stand will often say something like, “The United States is not as Christian as it once was,” or “The church needs to take a stand and be heard.” However, statements such as these are often not focused on true spiritual revival. Rather, they are focused on addressing political, cultural, or ideological expressions. Those who recall the time before the United States became a more postmodern, post-Christian nation will remember when being a person of faith was a more respected position than it currently is. This causes some to try to regain what was lost or prevent further loss, fearing diminished respect and influence.

Another source of fear, related to the first, is the fear of the “other side” winning. Outside of the church, ideological or political discussions often take on a zero-sum game nature—the only way to win is to cause the other to lose. Unfortunately, this mindset has crept into the church as well. Labberton comments

For many conservative evangelicals, changes in theological understandings, social patterns, and moral norms threaten the instinct to control. The perceived loss of control then spawns the impulse to fight back. It isn’t surprising, therefore, that evangelicals have consistently been politically conservative and

frequently frame their engagement in politics with the language of apocalypse, fear, and warfare.¹⁸

While the church should have a different way of interacting with each other than those outside the church, this often is not the case. Instead of seeking the unity that comes as believers join together to fulfill the Great Commission, being distinct from the vitriol and strife seen in secular culture, the church often is more a reflection of the opposing ideological voices outside the confines of the church. Hilton writes,

As we judge one another, neither Christian side seeks a truce or reconciliation that could lead to collaboration and shared community. And we ought to note how readily we use the language of two sides about the church. Instead of coming together, as Jesus commanded in John 13:34-35 and prayed 17:20-23, left-and right-wing Christians mostly array ourselves on one side of the chasm or the other and push to widen it. In a nation that is still three quarters Christian, right now, we're the problem.¹⁹

How should pastors and church leaders address IDD if the source is fear? Looking to Scripture, one sees that the antidote to fear is not debate, forcefulness, or persuasion. In a passage relating God's love for his people with their love for each other, John writes, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."²⁰ Rather than falling into the same trap of fearing loss and losing, pastors and church leaders can more effectively address ideologically driven disunity by being people marked by God's love for his people. Pastoral care, personal conversations, and expressions of love within the body of Christ will bring more unity than debate and factiousness.

¹⁸ Labberton, *Still Evangelical?*, 61.

¹⁹ Hilton, *A House United: How the Church Can Save the World*, 30.

²⁰ 1 John 4:18.

Beyond Winners and Losers

Unity in the church is not a matter of winners and losers. It is not based on convincing others of the rightness of our ideological views and the wrongness of theirs. It is based on something much more enduring than a temporary victory that only lasts until the next ideological issue or discussion. Finding unity in the church is an infinite game.

Simon Sinek writes about the difference between finite and infinite games. He draws a distinction between interactions between individuals or groups that have very different outcomes. He writes, “Finite games are played by known players. They have fixed rules. And there is an agreed-upon objective that, when reached, ends the game.”²¹ Sinek contrasts this with an infinite game, writing, “Infinite games, in contrast, are played by known and unknown players. There are no exact or agreed-upon rules. Infinite games have infinite time horizons. And because there is no finish line, no practical end to the game, there is no such thing as ‘winning’ an infinite game. In an infinite game, the primary objective is to keep playing, to perpetuate the game.”²² There are two important aspects to note. First, each of Sinek’s characteristics of an infinite game apply directly to a pastor’s attempt to address ideologically driven disunity. Second, mistaking an infinite game for a finite game “leads to all kinds of problems, the most common of which include the decline of trust, cooperation, and innovation.”²³

Characteristics of an Infinite Game

An infinite game has five characteristics, each of which, when applied to interactions between believers with differing ideologies, will help pastors and church leaders address IDD. In

²¹ Simon Sinek, *The Infinite Game* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2019), 3.

²² Sinek, 3.

²³ Sinek, 5.

the focus group and individual interviews, the researcher found that when project participants shared the things that were most helpful in addressing IDD, they almost entirely fell into one of the five characteristics.

Advance a just cause

The church has the ultimate just cause: glorifying God through fulfilling the Great Commission's charge to make disciples. As stated previously, focusing on fulfilling the Great Commission gives believers with differing ideologies a third, transcendent voice to listen to: the voice of Jesus. In a focus group discussion, Pastor Three²⁴ said that one of the actions that has helped minimize IDD in his congregation was clarifying the mission and vision of the church. Calling it their “cultural DNA,” Pastor Three said clarifying who they are as a congregation and expressing what they believe God is calling them to do gives attenders the ability to join them in advancing their just cause. Pastor One, who leads a church that did not experience much IDD through the COVID-19 pandemic, said that he consistently reminded people of the Great Commission and the church’s calling to make disciples. By not falling into the trap of trying to prove someone else’s viewpoint wrong, but rather inviting them to join the church in fulfilling the Great Commission, Pastor One addressed and minimized ideologically driven disunity.

Build trusting teams

The quantitative results of the Initial Survey and qualitative results of interviews and focus groups clearly show the importance of relationships in addressing IDD. Sinek refers to this

²⁴ For anonymity, participants in interviews and focus groups will be referred to by number. The assigned number for each participant will remain consistent throughout the material.

as “Building Trusting Teams.” He explains the significance of such teams by writing, “There is a difference between a group of people who work together and a group of people who trust each other. In a group of people who simply work together, relationships are mostly transactional, based on a mutual desire to get things done.”²⁵ This is seen in the superficial unity that exists when believers have similar enough foundational ideologies that there is no tension when their particular foundational ideology is not threatened. However, when a stressor arises that challenges their ideology, the transactional nature of working together is not sufficient to overcome the pressure to prevent losing position or significance.

Pastor Four stated that the best thing he has done to address ideologically driven disunity is to have “preemptory conversations” while strengthening relationships outside the work of the church. Their leadership team gathers every other week. During these gatherings, they share a meal together and discuss a wide range of topics, including difficult theological and cultural issues. Through these gatherings, they have come to know each other and appreciate each other’s desire to follow Jesus, although they come from a wide range of backgrounds and ideologies. As they have built trust through these conversations, they are able to work together to advance the just cause of the Great Commission.

Study your worthy rivals

On the surface, this is one aspect of Sinek’s approach that doesn’t seem to have a direct correlation to helping a church leader address ideologically driven disunity. However, as one considers what Sinek is actually saying, its relevance to this discussion becomes clearer. As a pastor or church leader has a discussion with someone with a differing viewpoint, identifying an

²⁵ Sinek, *The Infinite Game*, 105.

aspect that is worthy of appreciation can help reduce the temperature of a difficult conversation. While Pastor Four was thankful for the trusting team that works together at his church, he expressed concern that generational differences threaten to undermine trust and unity. As a result, they will be working to appreciate those generational differences by seeking to understand and appreciate them.

It is tempting to think that an ideological difference or disagreement results in the inability to appreciate anything about the person who holds a different ideology. It would benefit pastors and church leaders, however, to learn to identify admirable aspects of the different ideology. The pastor or church leader can then commend the other person on that aspect without embracing all of his or her ideology. For example, if someone expresses a desire for the church to take more of a stand on a cultural or political issue, the pastor or church leader can commend the desire for positive change while redirecting the conversation to the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Prepare for existential flexibility

The foundational nature of ideologies often leaves a pastor or church leader in the difficult situation of wrestling with his or her personal deeply held beliefs. The natural inclination to view disagreement as a zero-sum game affects pastors no less than the people who raise ideological disagreements. However, to continue advancing the just cause of fulfilling the Great Commission, pastors and church leaders may need to do exactly what they are asking people in their congregation to do: set aside ideological preferences in order to focus on the mission. This may take different forms, from adjusting their ideology if they recognize a faulty aspect to temporarily forgoing a conversation or action for the purpose of building unity. Pastor

Six expressed this as he recounted the things that have been beneficial in addressing IDD. He referred to “having to choose what battles to fight.” This is an important skill for pastors to acquire as they interact with others who hold differing viewpoints.

Demonstrate the courage to lead

Developing the previous four skills enables a pastor or church leader to have more courage as they navigate situations made more difficult by ideologically driven disunity. Advancing a just cause gives a pastor clarity as to what he and the church are called to do. Trusting teams give the support a pastor needs to have difficult conversations outside of the leadership group. Studying a worthy rival gives a pastor a tool to diffuse a tense conversation by establishing a connection based on admiration. Existential flexibility helps church leaders understand that they don’t need to win every ideological discussion, but they can adjust the expression of their own foundational ideology to bring unity. These four characteristics enable a pastor or church leader to lead with courage. Pastor Two identified this trait as one characteristic that helped his church move through the COVID-19 pandemic with little to no IDD. This conservative church in a conservative area followed state guidelines and closed at a point it didn’t need to. This approach would have brought greater ideologically driven disunity to many congregations; however, Pastor Two believes that confidence and courage in communication helped him to lead through this difficult circumstance with minimal IDD.

Moving On

Pastor Three asked, “How do you know when it’s time to ‘pray someone off?’ How do you do that?” Pastors and church leaders often struggle with how to answer this question.

Conversation after conversation and stressful email after stressful email has resulted in little to no resolution or reconciliation. A congregant who is at odds with a decision of the Elders or a strategy of the church staff continues to question, challenge, and at times berate. As the tension is much more ideological than theological, the pastor can never answer questions in a way that satisfies the congregant, leading to more questioning, challenging, and berating. What's the next step for the pastor or church leader? When should that step be taken?

There are no simple answers to these complex questions. The best response is based on so many variables and hypotheticals that a paragraph in a presentation is insufficient to describe it. However, there are some principles that can be applied to help the pastor or church leader take the best next step for everyone involved: pastor, congregant, and congregation. First, pastors and church leaders must realize that they and their congregation have a finite amount of energy, whether that energy is physical, emotional, or spiritual. What they spend on one issue cannot be spent on another. As they consider the next interaction with a congregant stuck in a cycle of IDD, they must weigh the consequences of continuing to expend energy on this situation as opposed to spending energy on their own well-being, that of their family, or that of the rest of the congregation. Second, pastors and church leaders should consider what will increase the congregation's ability to fulfill the Great Commission more, striving to achieve unity with a congregant causing IDD or helping the rest of the congregation see the importance of making disciples. This is often not an easy choice, as it may be a choice between two negative impacts. Additionally, these conversations often are in the context of long-term relationships. Through using the filter of which choice enables the church to fulfill the Great Commission, pastors and church leaders have a clearer framework to guide their decision.

The question as to how to “pray them off” is even less cut and dry. Pastors and church leaders must know the people in their congregation well enough to know how directly the situation can be addressed; some will need to be addressed more directly, while others will require a gentler approach. Whatever the circumstances, there are some things to consider that may be beneficial. First, pastors should look for areas of agreement and admiration. This step can reduce the severity of IDD. Second, reinforce the mission and vision of the church. Using phrases such as, “We would really love to have you join us in what God has called us to do,” places the burden of whether to stay or leave on the one causing IDD. Third, if someone chooses to leave due to IDD, pastors and church leaders should be careful in asking him or her to stay. This can result in a temporary sense of unity that often masks the continued presence of IDD. As foundational ideologies remain, if a congregant will not join in the mission of the church, the stressful interactions are likely to reoccur.

Conclusion

As the God-ordained shepherds of the congregation, pastors and church leaders are not only called to protect the doctrinal integrity of their local church, but they are also called to steward the resources God has entrusted to the church to fulfill the Great Commission. While financial resources are the most easily understood resource, the people within the congregation and the unity of the body are also resources that God desires to use to glorify himself. Pastors and church leaders fulfill their calling when they address ideologically driven disunity.

Questions to Ask When Addressing IDD

What do I hope to achieve?

What is most important in this discussion?

Who has my back?

How can I develop a trusting team?

What am I overlooking in someone who disagrees with me?

What am I willing to give up?

If I win, what do I lose?

Tools Available for Addressing IDD

E Pluribus Una Ecclesia

This three-week devotional helps the reader understand the centrality of the Great Commission, Jesus' prayer for unity, and the impact of disunity on believers and congregations.

Preaching Materials

Available at www.rmcn.org/e-pluribus-una-ecclesia, these sermon outlines give a structure to communicate the thoughts of the devotional in a church gathering.

Unity Covenant

Attached to this document and available on the project website, this covenant may be used during an evening of prayer. It expresses the Great Commission's charge to make disciples, recognizes the impact of disunity, and commits to specific prayer items.

UNITY COVENANT

Knowing that:

- The mission of the church, given by Jesus in the Great Commission, is to make disciples
- Jesus prayed for the unity of the church as the church's unity should reflect the unity within the Trinity
- Jesus prayed for the unity of the church as the church's unity affirms Jesus' mission to glorify the Father through seeking and saving the lost
- Unity in the church empowers it to fulfill the mission to which Jesus called it

I acknowledge and repent of the ways in which I have allowed ideological stances to create disunity within the body of Christ. These may include:

- Finding my identity in ideology rather than in Christ
- Confusing the expression of faith with the foundation of faith
- Rejecting a brother or sister in Christ due to differing political stances
- Placing more value on winning ideological arguments than on loving my brother or sister in Christ

I commit to:

- Praying for the unity of my church
- Praying for the mission of my church
- Praying for the leadership of my church
- Praying for my brothers and sisters who have different ideologies than I do
- Focusing on the mission of the church more than the mission of a political ideology

Today I covenant to keep God's commandments and his testimonies and his statutes with all my heart and my soul (2 Kings 23:3).

Name

Date

Notes

