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## Ten Facts about US Orthodox Christian Churches from 2015 FACT Study

With about 1,900 parishes (i.e. local congregations) and 820,000 adherents<sup>1</sup> nationwide the American Orthodox Christian Churches<sup>2</sup> comprise a relatively small faith community. Yet, they occupy a unique and rather distinct "niche" in America's diverse religious landscape. Orthodox Christian theology, church governance, demographic and the socio-economic "profile" of church members, as well as many aspects at the local, parish-level, church life distinguish Orthodox Christian Churches from both Roman Catholic and various Protestant Churches.

The US Orthodox Christian Churches (represented currently by the "Assembly of the Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America") have been one of the partners in FACT/CCSP research network from its very inception. Accordingly, beginning from 2000, they have participated in all major FACT studies and surveys.

580 Orthodox Christian parishes (or 30% of all US Orthodox parishes) took part in the most recent 2015 FACT survey. The common core questionnaire used in the 2015 FACT study was shortened by about 25% for the Orthodox Christian Churches. This was done for two reasons: a) To exclude questions that were irrelevant for Orthodox Churches; b) To achieve a higher response rate.

Based on the results of the 2015 FACT study, on the following pages we will highlight several features that make Orthodox Christian parishes "different" (besides theology, of course) from the Oldline and Evangelical Protestant congregations and Roman Catholic parishes. Some of these distinctions found in the study are predictable and "expectable," but some are "not so obvious" and even somewhat surprising.

It should be noted that in terms of theology and church administration the Orthodox Christian Churches are much closer to the Roman Catholic Church than to Protestant denominations. Regrettably, the Roman

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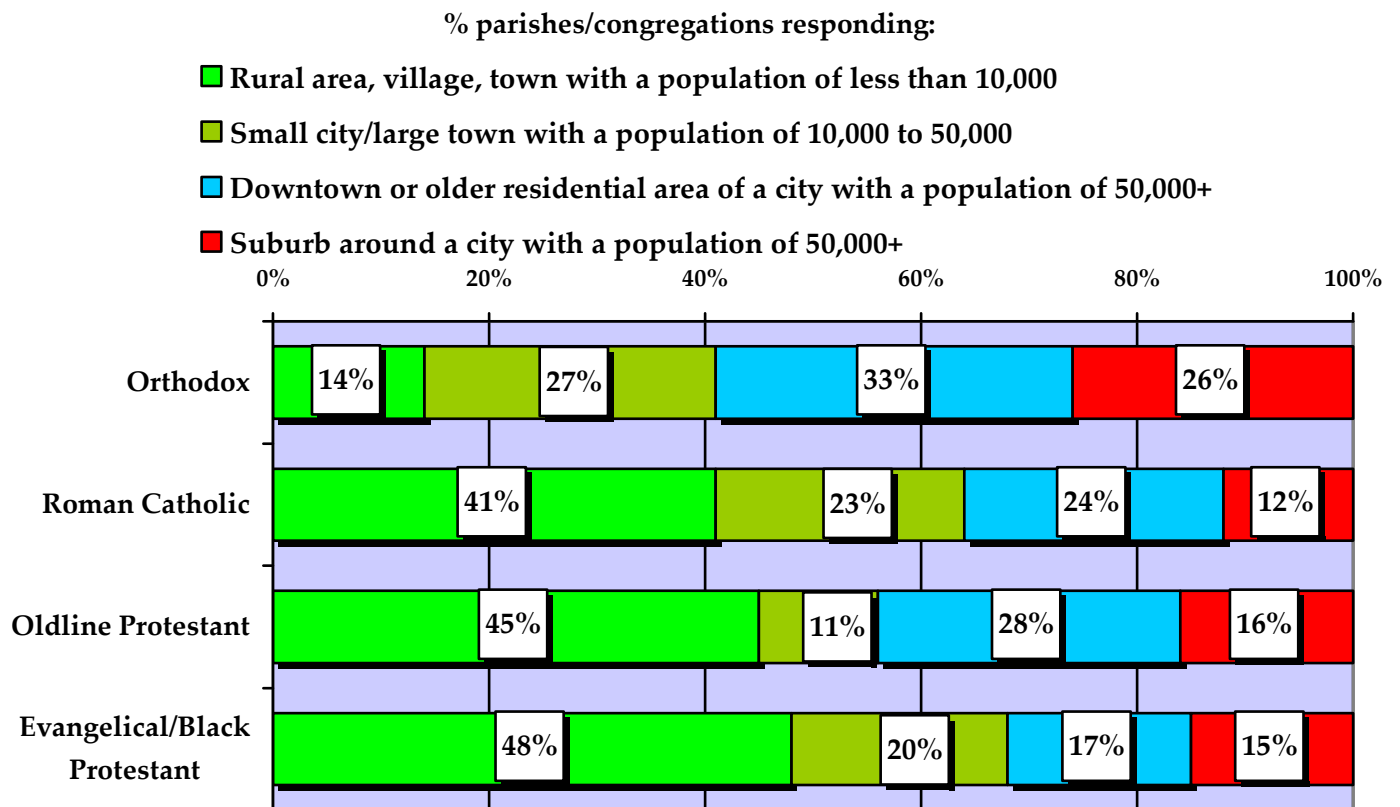
<sup>1</sup> "Adherents" is the most inclusive category of church membership. "Adherents" include everyone who are affiliated with and participate in the local parish life. This includes adults and children, regular and occasional attendees, paid stewards and persons who do not contribute financially

<sup>2</sup> There is no single "American Orthodox Christian Church." Rather the US Orthodox Christian Churches are organized into twelve different Orthodox "jurisdictions" - the word that the Orthodox use to describe national church-bodies somewhat similar to Protestant "denominations." Unlike Protestant denominations, however, all Orthodox jurisdictions have the same theology and follow the same rules and teachings. Therefore, divisions among "jurisdictions" imply solely administrative independence of each jurisdiction and not theological differences.

Catholic Church did not participate in the 2015 FACT survey. However, many of the 2015 survey questions were also asked in the 2010 FACT study. The Roman Catholic parishes had a significant sample in 2010 FACT study and we will use some of 2010 FACT Roman Catholic data in order to have a wider spectrum of denominational "families" to "contrast" with US Orthodox Christian Churches.

**Fact 1.** In their **geographic settings**, compared to Roman Catholic parishes and Protestant congregations, Orthodox Christian parishes are much more "urban" and "suburban." Fig. 1 shows that a strong majority of Orthodox parishes (59%) are situated either in or around cities with population of more than 50,000. Differently, more than half of the Oldline Protestant congregations and about two-thirds of Catholic parishes and Evangelical/Black Protestant churches are located in rural areas, small towns or small cities with population of less than 50,000.

**Fig. 1 "How would you describe the location of your church building?"**

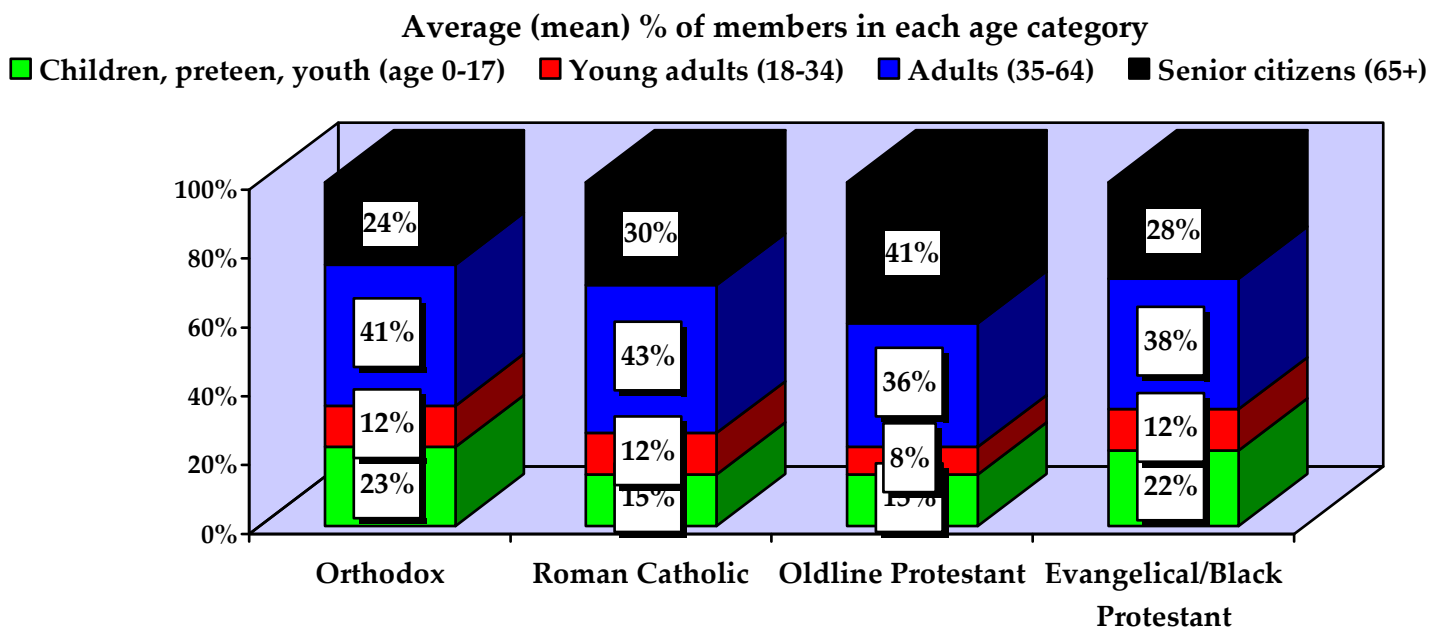


The most likely explanation for this fact is the different history of immigration of Orthodox Christians as compared to Protestants and Catholics. Indeed, the first considerable wave of Orthodox immigration to America occurred in the late 19th-early 20th century: that is, significantly later than among the Protestants and Roman Catholics. Rather than settling in rural areas, homesteading and becoming farmers (as was the

case of the earlier waves of immigration), most Orthodox immigrants moved right away into industrial areas and worked in coal mines, steel industry, auto-making enterprises or opening small city businesses such as cafes and grocery stores.

**Fact 2.** In terms of the demographic composition of church members, Orthodox Christian parishes are significantly "younger" than Roman Catholic parishes and Oldline Protestant congregations. And they are slightly younger than Evangelical/Black Protestant churches. See Fig. 2.

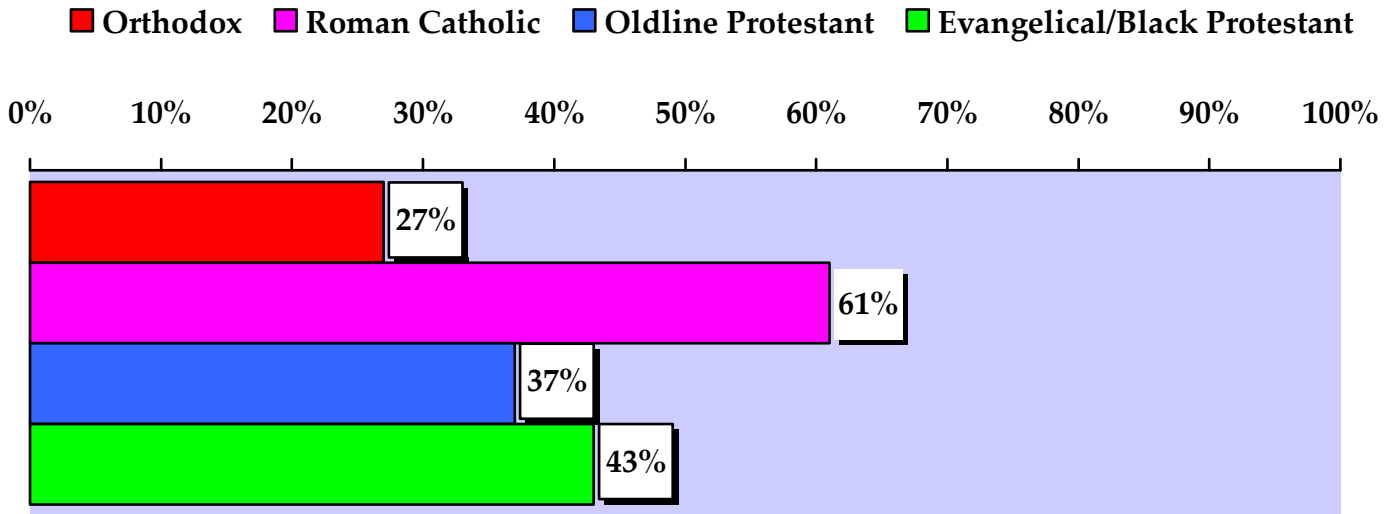
**Fig. 2** "Of your regular participants, please estimate the percentage of the following age categories:"



**Fact 3.** Although difficult to explain, the survey revealed that Orthodox parishes are more likely to have internal conflicts and disagreements among church members than Roman Catholic parishes and Protestant congregations. One of the survey questions asked: "During the past 5 years has your parish/congregation experienced any disagreements or conflicts?" Only one in four (27%) Orthodox parishes replied "NO" to this question, while 37% Evangelical/Black Protestant and 43% Oldline Protestant congregations and 61% Roman Catholic parishes reported that they did NOT experience any disagreements or conflicts during the past five years. See Fig. 3.

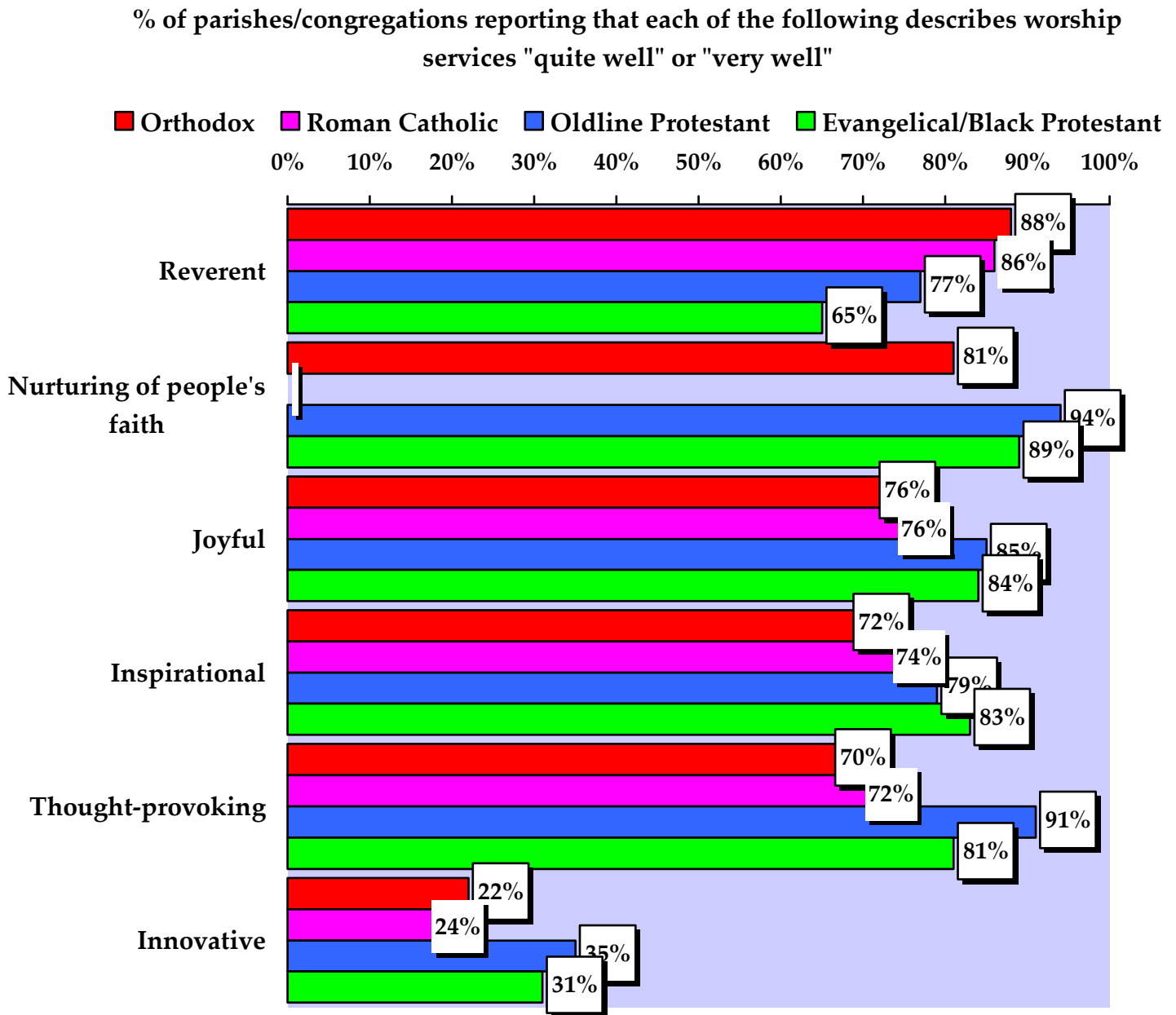
**Fig. 3** During the past 5 years has your parish/congregation experienced any disagreements or conflicts?

% of parishes/congregations reporting that they did NOT experience any disagreements or conflicts during the past 5 years



**Fact 4.** The worship in Orthodox Churches can be described as "liturgical worship." That is, unlike most Protestant denominations, both Orthodox Christian and Roman Catholic Churches have more "formalized" (i.e. following certain established rules and traditions) worship services. Both the Orthodox Liturgy and Catholic Mass (the main worship service in Orthodox and Catholic churches respectively) allow for less "experimentation" or have fewer "options to choose from" than the Sunday worship services in Protestant Churches. This limitation - the need to follow an established pattern of religious services and lesser flexibility in changing the style of worship - has significant influence on various qualitative characteristics of Orthodox versus Protestant worship services. Fig. 4 shows that compared to Protestant congregations, the Orthodox Christian parishes are much more likely to describe their Sunday worship services as being "reverent," but, at the same time, as being significantly less "innovative," "thought-provoking," "inspirational," "joyful" or even "nurturing of people's faith."

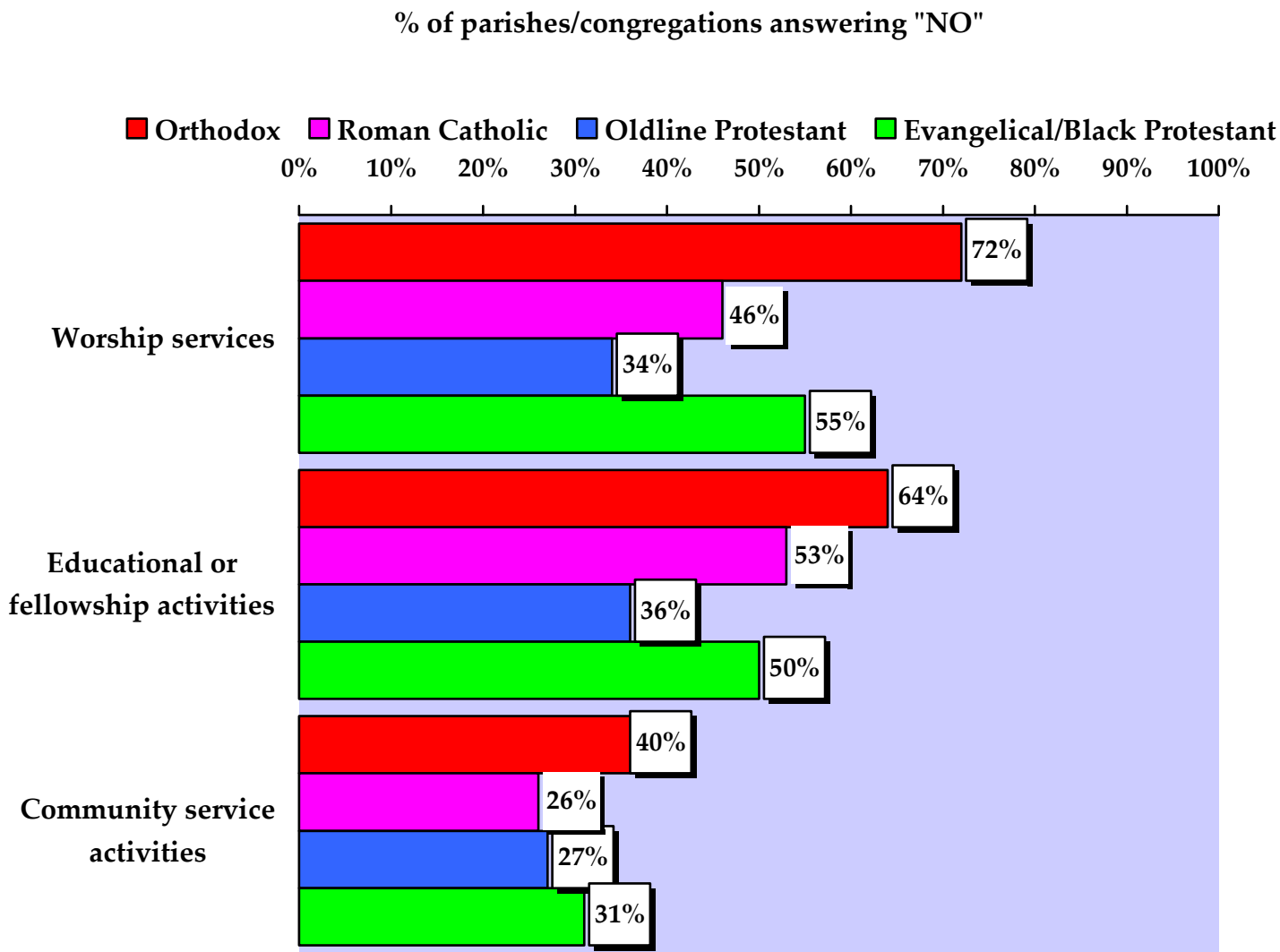
**Fig. 4** How well do the following describe your parish's/congregation regular Sunday worship service?



**Fact 5.** The Orthodox Church's rules generally prohibit or - at best - discourage participation in the **ecumenical** worship services, especially Eucharistic liturgies: that is, the Orthodox Christians are prohibited to receive the Holy Communion in non-Orthodox religious communities. However, this restriction does not extend on interfaith educational, fellowship or community service activities. Nevertheless, compared to Roman Catholic parishes and Protestant congregations, Orthodox parishes engage much less in any forms of contacts and cooperation with "religious other."

One of survey questions asked: "During the past 12 months has your parish/congregation been involved in any of the following ecumenical or interfaith activities: a) Worship services; b) Educational or fellowship activities; c) Community service activities?" Fig. 5 shows that much higher percentage of Orthodox parishes than Protestant congregations or Roman Catholic parishes responded "NO" to this question and not only in case of "worship services" but also with regard to all other areas of interfaith contacts and activities.

**Fig. 5** During past 12 months has your parish/congregation been involved in any of the following ecumenical/interfaith activities?



**Fact 6.** Compared to both Oldline and Evangelical/Black congregations, the lives of Orthodox parishes are **more "worship centered."** That is, Orthodox parishes engage less than Protestant congregations in various activities outside of worship. Answering question "To what extent are your members involved in the parish's/congregation's various programs, committees and service projects outside of worship?", only 44% of Orthodox parishes reported "Quite a bit/A lot" compared to 56% and 54% in the case of Oldline and Evangelical/Black Protestant congregations respectively.<sup>3</sup>

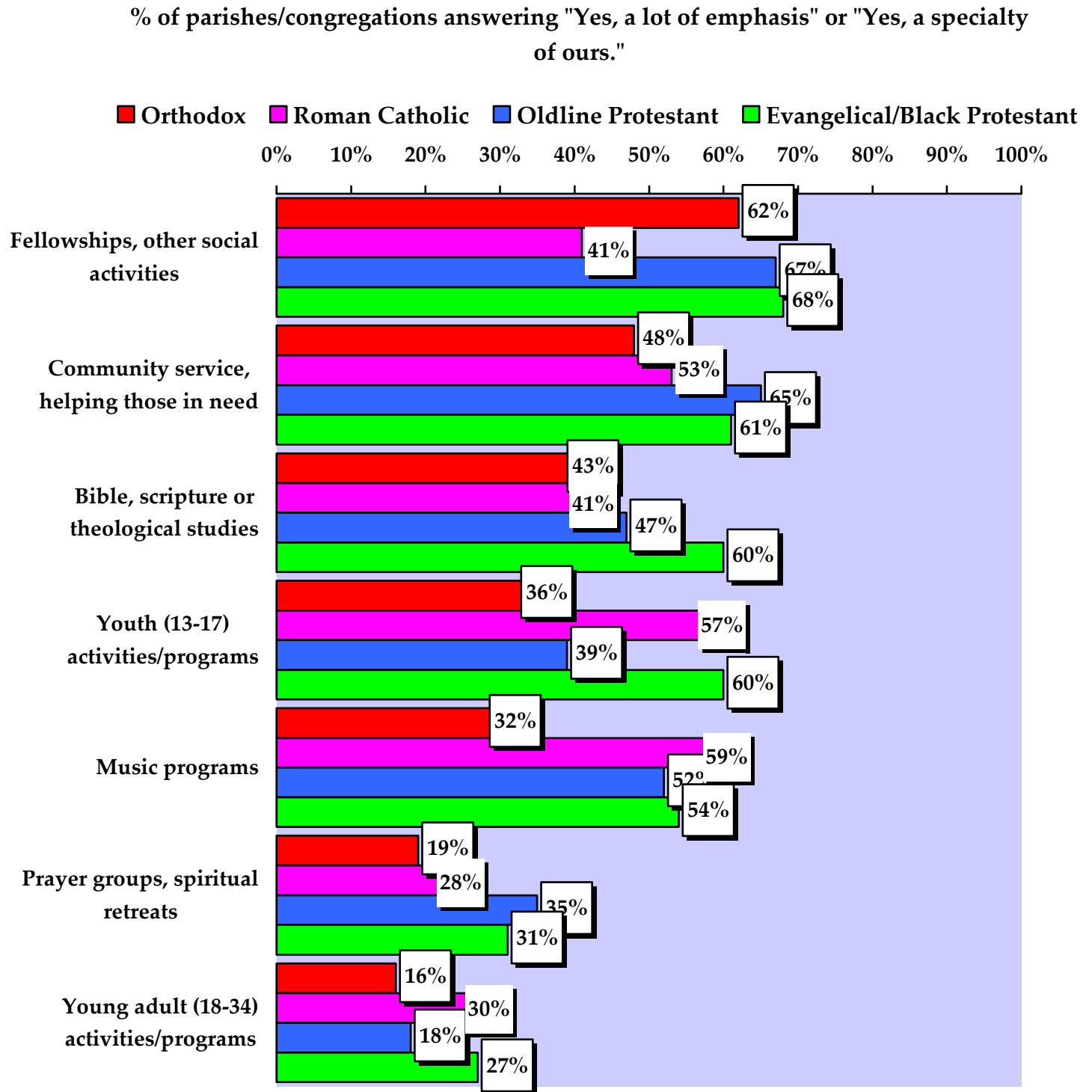
This fact - lesser involvement of Orthodox parishes in various activities outside of worship - was confirmed when the survey asked about having (or not having) in a parish/congregation seven specific types of programs: "Does your parish/congregation have any of the following programs or activities? If yes, how much emphasis is given to each activity?"

Fig. 6 shows that with regard to *all* seven areas of activities/programs fewer Orthodox parishes than Protestant congregations responded that "A lot of emphasis is given" or "This is a specialty of ours." As to comparisons with the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox parishes are more active in only two out of seven program areas: "Fellowships, other social activities" and "Bible, scripture or theological studies (other than Sunday school)."

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<sup>3</sup> This question was not asked in 2010 FACT survey and, therefore, there is no comparable data on the Roman Catholic parishes

**Fig. 6** Does your parish/congregation have any of the following programs and activities? If yes, how much emphasis is given to each activity?



**Fact 7.** Along with worship services, another "corner-stone" in the lives of religious congregations is continuing faith formation and religious education of church members. The 2015 FACT study revealed a

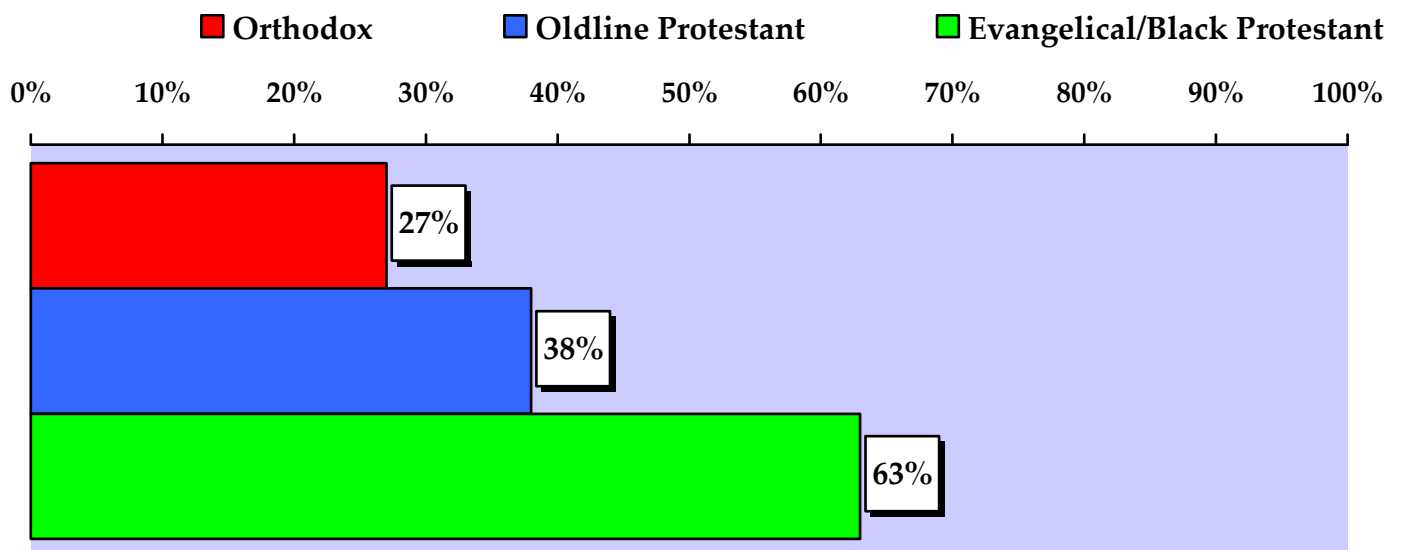


number of differences between Protestant congregations and Orthodox parishes<sup>4</sup> in terms of overall members' involvement into continuing religious education and "who the teachers are" and what is emphasized in religious education classes.

The questionnaire asked about total number of active participants in a congregation/parish ("How many persons - including children - regularly participate in the life of your congregation/parish?") and about number of persons participating regularly in various forms of religious education ("Approximately how many persons - both children and adults - regularly participate in 'Sunday School' and any other religious education program classes?").

Comparing the answers to the first and second questions one can calculate the percentage of church members who are actively involved in various forms of religious education. 2015 FACT data indicated that compared to both Oldline and Evangelical/Black Protestant congregations, significantly lower percentage of Orthodox Church members participate regularly in religious education programs in the local Orthodox parishes. See Fig. 7a.

**Fig. 7a Percentage (%) of Active Church Members Who Participate Regularly in Various Forms of Religious Education Offered in Local Parishes/Congregations**

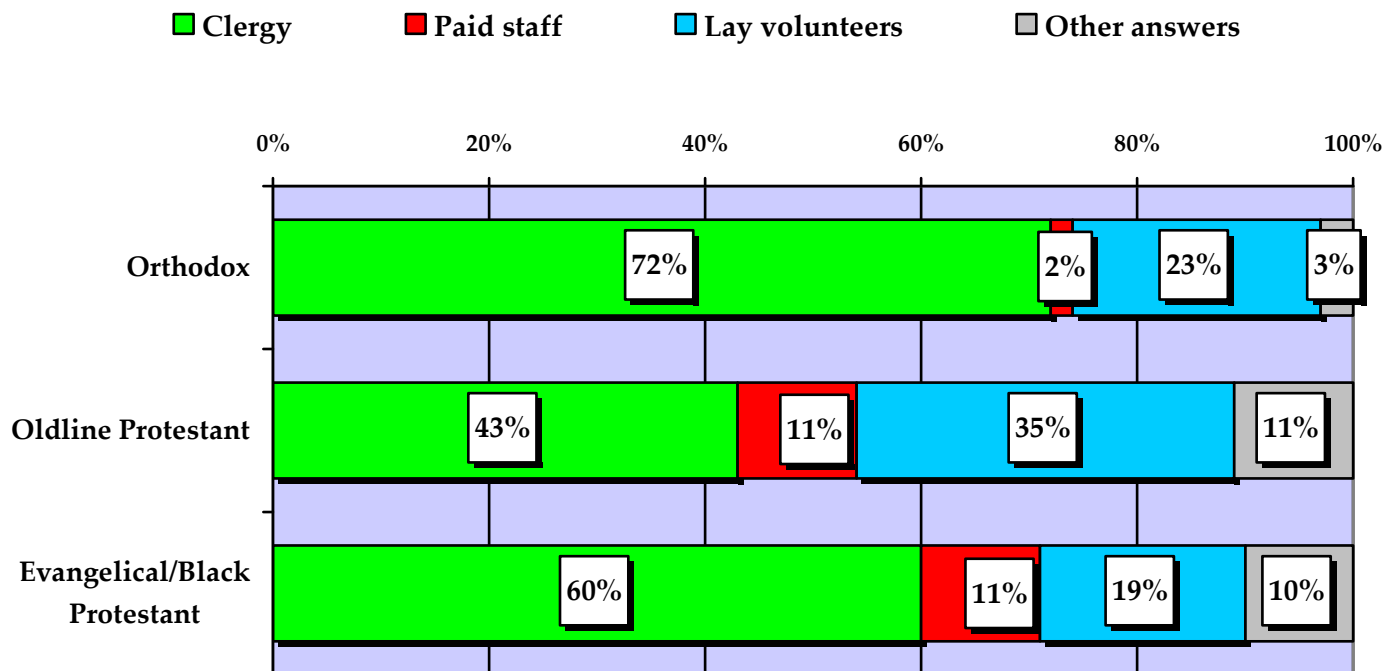


<sup>4</sup> No comparable Roman Catholic data is available on this item.

When it comes to the question of who is responsible for religious education in the local parishes/congregations, clergy play significantly greater role in the Orthodox Churches, while lay people (either paid staff or volunteers) are more likely to be the "key teachers" in the Protestant congregations. See Fig. 7b.

**Fig. 7b "Who has primary responsibility for organizing the educational ministries of the parish/congregation?"**

% parishes/congregations responding:

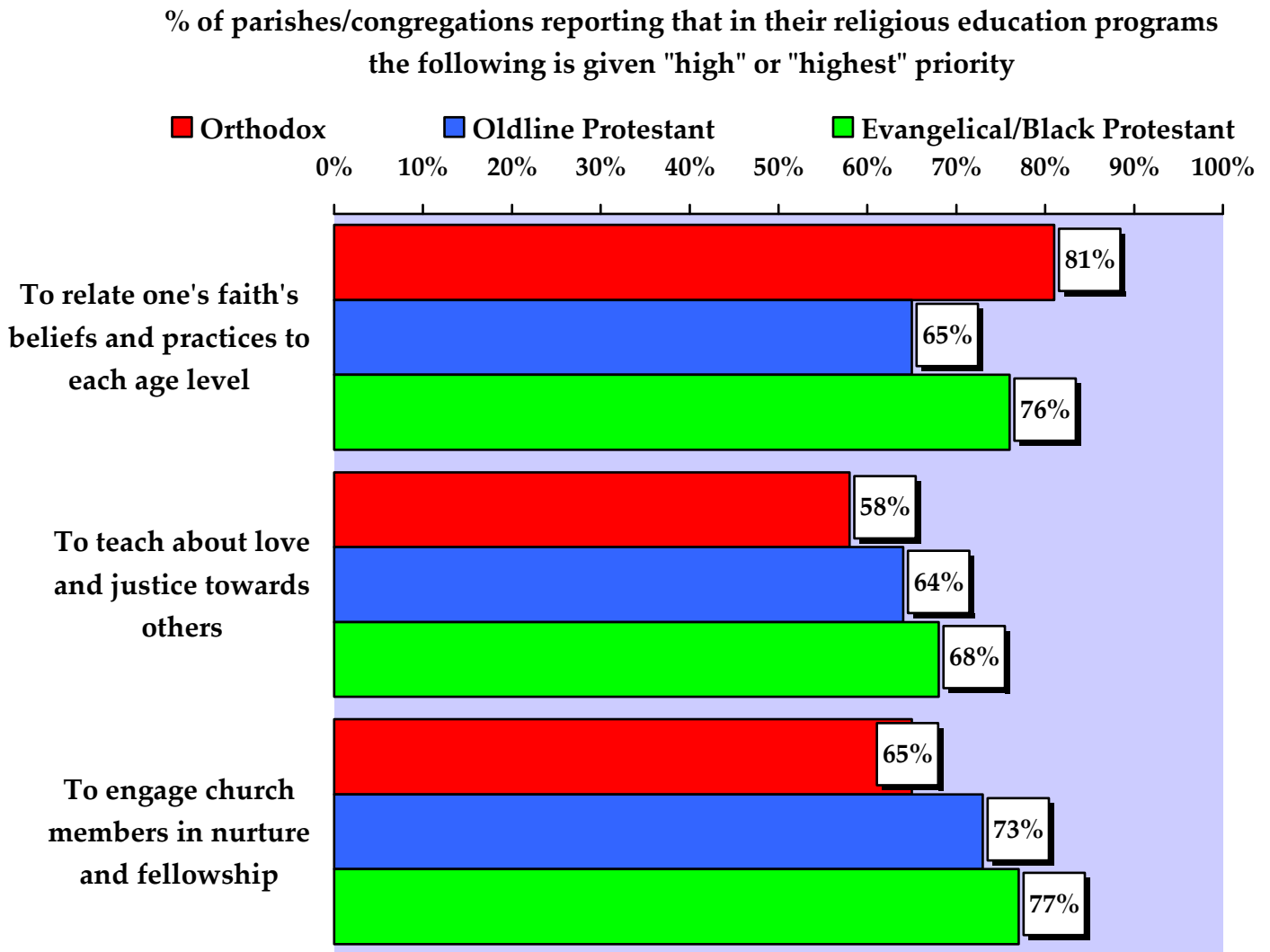


Examining the content and priorities in religious education classes the questionnaire asked "How high or low a priority is each of the following in your religious education programs?"

- ❖ To acquire knowledge of Scripture
- ❖ To teach about love and justice toward others
- ❖ To develop parish/congregation loyalty
- ❖ To relate one's faith's beliefs and practices to each age level.
- ❖ To engage church members in nurture and fellowship
- ❖ To inspire church members to express their faith in life
- ❖ To nurture belief and trust in Jesus Christ

Out of seven possible priorities areas, three distinguish Orthodox parishes from the Protestant congregations. Fig. 7c shows that the Orthodox parishes place greater emphasis on "relating one's faith's beliefs and practices to each age level," while Protestant congregations are more focused on teaching "about love and justice toward others" and "engaging church members in nurture and fellowship."

**Fig. 7c** "How high or low a priority is each of the following in your Religious Education programs?"



**Fact 8.** Based on their varied religious beliefs, local congregations and parishes teach and encourage their members to follow certain **personal and family religious practices**. The 2015 FACT survey examined the importance of six personal and family religious practices:

- ❖ Personal prayer, scripture study
- ❖ Talking with friends and other members of parish/congregations about one's faith (i.e. about religious beliefs, values and commitments)
- ❖ Fasting
- ❖ Keeping the Sabbath day holy
- ❖ Parents talking with children about faith
- ❖ Living out one's faith in all aspects of one's daily life - work, family, civic engagement, etc.

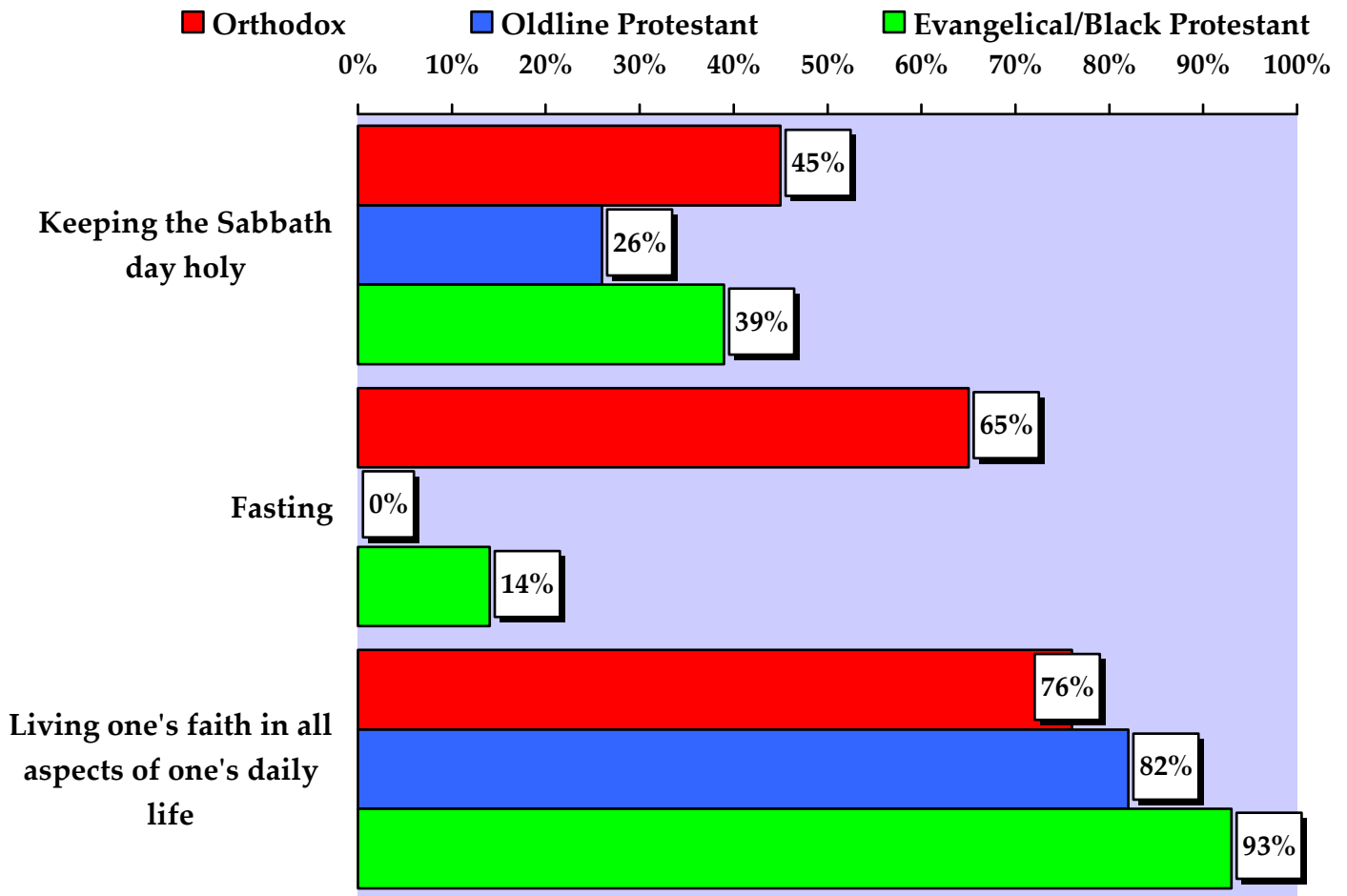
Out of six, three practices distinguish Orthodox parishes from Protestant congregations.<sup>5</sup> Fig. 8 shows that "Keeping the Sabbath day holy" and, especially, "Fasting" is more emphasized in the Orthodox parishes, while Protestant congregations pay greater attention to "Living out one's faith in all aspects of one's daily life - work, family, civic engagement, etc."

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<sup>5</sup> We do not have comparable 2010 Roman Catholic data for this question.

**Fig. 8** How much does your parish/congregation emphasize the following personal and family religious practices?

% of parishes/congregations reporting "Quite a bit" and "A lot"



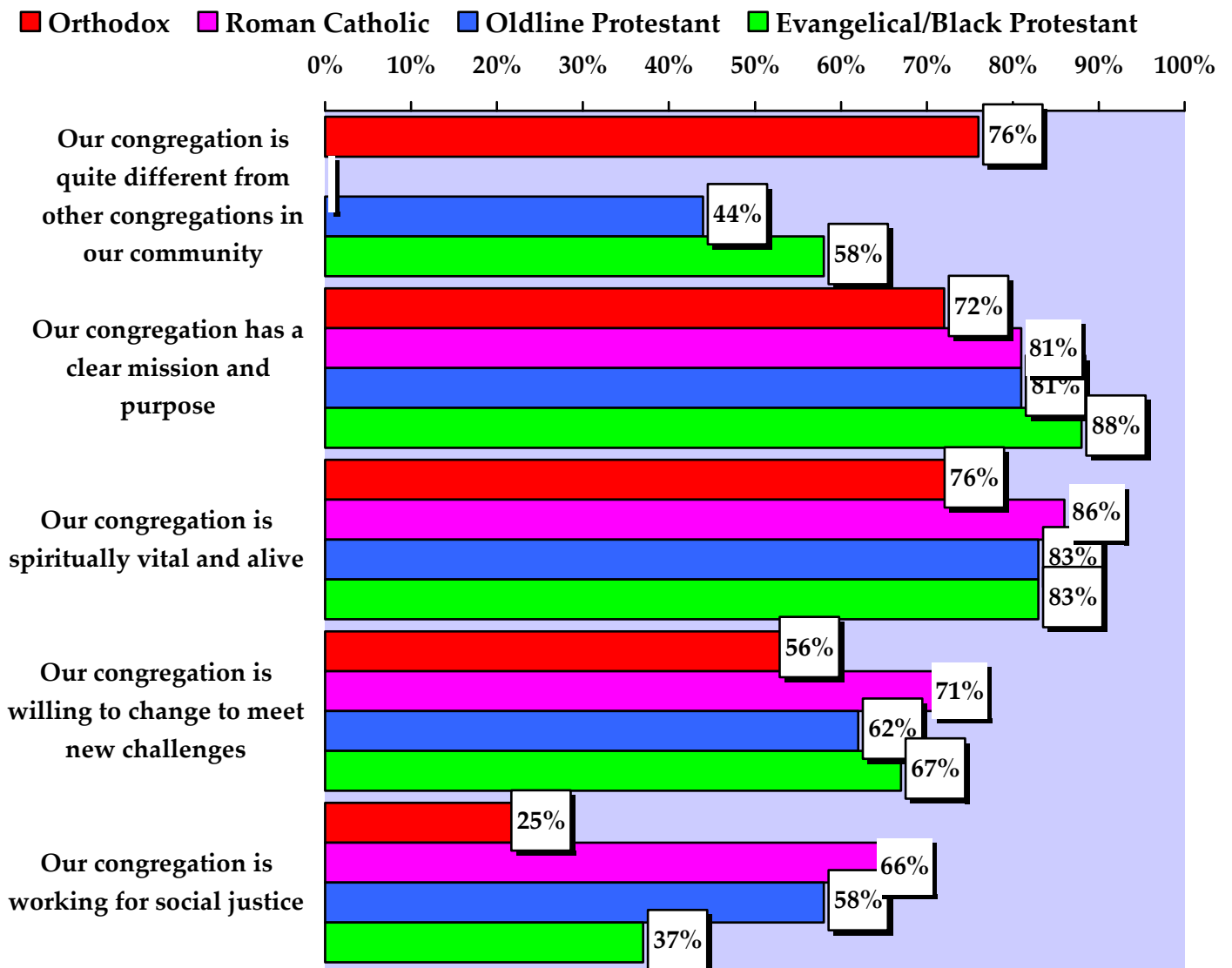
**Fact 9.** Religious congregations participating in the FACT survey were asked to either agree or disagree with a number of statements describing various aspects of their lives. Fig. 9 shows that Orthodox parishes have much stronger "personal identity" than Protestant congregations.<sup>6</sup> Many more Orthodox parishes than Protestant congregations agreed with the statement "Our parish/congregation is quite different from other congregations in our community." At the same time, compared to both Roman Catholic churches and Protestant congregations, fewer Orthodox parishes feel that they "have clear mission and purpose," are "spiritually vital and alive" and "willing to change to meet new challenges." In addition, social justice work has never been a high priority in the Orthodox Church and results of the survey confirmed this fact. Only

<sup>6</sup> There is no comparable Catholic data on this item

25% of Orthodox parishes agreed that they "are working for social justice" to contrast with 66% of the Roman Catholic parishes, 58% Oldline and 37% Evangelical/Black Protestant congregations.

**Fig. 9 Do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about your parish/congregation?**

% of parishes/congregations that "Agree" or "Strongly agree" with these statements



**Fact 10.** Somewhat surprising, but several items in 2015 FACT survey indicated that US Orthodox Christian parishes are more proficient and frequent users of Internet and various social media than both Oldline and Evangelical/Black Protestant congregations.<sup>7</sup>

66% of Orthodox parishes agreed with the statement "Our congregation uses Internet and social media effectively" in comparison with only 48% in the case of Oldline and 54% of Evangelical/Black Protestant congregations.

When clergy were asked about their personal opinions (i.e. positive or negative) about the use of Internet and social media in parish/congregation life, 66% Orthodox priests said that "in today's world, parishes must use modern communication technologies as widely and as well as possible. The percentage of Protestant clergy who have the same view is lower: 57% of Evangelical/Black and 58% of Oldline Protestant pastors share this attitude.

69% of Orthodox parishes reported that they use websites "quite a bit" or "a lot" in their lives, but only 55% of Oldline and 41% of Evangelical/Black Protestant congregation do so. The same applies to email communications: 79% of Orthodox parishes use this tool "quite a bit" or "a lot." This percentage is much lower in the case of Evangelical/Black congregations (57%) and somewhat lower among Oldline Protestant congregations (74%).

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<sup>7</sup> No comparable data for the Roman Catholic parishes on this item