

Scripture Engagement in New York City

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Executive Summary

Through a project sponsored by the American Bible Society, New York City Leadership Center, and Back to the Bible, more than 3,000 congregants from 70 New York City churches participated in a spiritual life survey. This racially and ethnically diverse group identified their church's strengths, their level of engagement in scripture, the challenges they face in their spiritual lives, and what would help them most in growing spiritually.

Key findings include:

- Bible-based teaching and preaching is the most common church strength. Three-fourths (72.3%) of respondents identified proclamation of the Word as one of their church's top strengths.
- Respondents identified "Accepting and welcoming people" and "Worship" as the second and third top strengths.
- Most congregants communicate with God through prayer and engaging scripture between Sundays. Almost nine out of ten pray on most days of the week. A smaller percentage, 62.8%, read or listens to the Bible most days as well. A minority (7.4%) does not engage scripture at all.
- Less frequent attenders hear from God through His Word. The majority of people who attend church less than weekly engages scripture infrequently, with 19.5% not reading or listening to the Bible at all in a typically week.
- Despite the fact that most congregants are long-time Christ-followers, the majority (59.5%) has never read the entire Bible.
- A significant minority (41.7%) of all New York City congregants and the majority of less frequent attenders (63.9%) does not have a well-established Bible engagement habit. Most who have not been engaging scripture regularly plan to start in the next 30 days (17.8%) to six months (9.7%).
- Most commonly people say they feel they are too busy or they don't make scripture a priority. Notably one out of three congregants who has yet to establish a Bible engagement habit is hindered by uncertainty about what to read or difficulty understanding the text.
- Both a strong desire to grow spiritually and feeling stalled in that growth are common among New York City congregants. On average, the typical churchgoer feels stalled 3 to 4 months out of the year.

- Respondents say they daily face about three temptations to have or do something they should avoid. Worry, anger, and criticizing others are the most common temptations for women. Among men, temptations typically relate to lust, anger, and worrying.
- At least once a month, most congregants struggle with fear or anxiety, unkind thoughts about others, and/or discouragement.

Congregants say their churches can help them most by encouraging them in their spiritual growth. Help in finding an accountability partner, in identifying their spiritual gifts, and in strengthening their prayer life were also common choices.

Scripture Engagement in New York City

In the fall of 2010, the American Bible Society, New York City Leadership Center, and Back to the Bible partnered to assess the state of scripture engagement among New York City churches. This ambitious effort involved surveying several dozen churches throughout the metropolitan area. Together the thousands of responses to the survey provide a picture of spiritual life and specifically, Bible engagement among the Christian community in New York City.

Who participated in the survey?

In general, when evaluating research you need to consider the size of the sample, who was included in it, & who did not respond. The larger the sample, the more accurate the data will be. Also the findings most closely represent those who are similar to sample respondents.

A total of 3,462 congregants completed the spiritual life survey.

About 7 out of 10 (69.0%) survey respondents are women.

Congregants are racially diverse with 39.7% African-American, 24.9% Caucasian, 16.3% Hispanic, and 11.3% Asian.

Survey responders range in age from 13 to 89, with an average of 43.

On average, congregants have been Christ-followers for 23 years.

Less than one out of ten (7.2%) is a new believer who has been following Christ for three years or less.

The vast majority (87.4%) attends church weekly

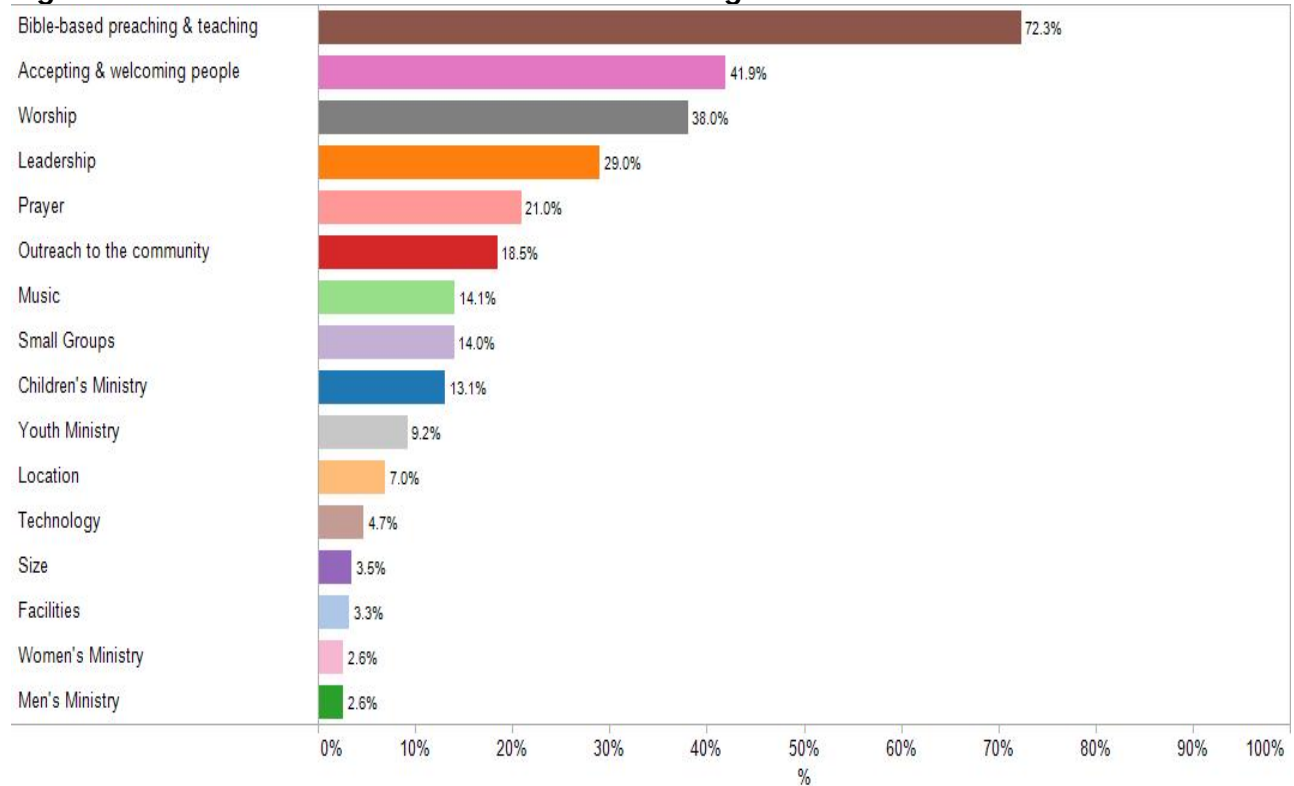
Figure 1. Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents.



Church Strengths

- By far, congregants view “Bible-based preaching & teaching” as one of their church’s greatest strengths. Three-fourths (72.3%) chose this as a strength.
- “Accepting and welcoming people” and “Worship services” are the next most commonly identified strengths.

Figure 2. What Are Your Church’s Greatest Strengths?



Congregants' Spiritual Practices

- Prayer is part of the fabric of most churchgoers' lives between Sundays. Nine out of ten (87.6%) congregants pray on most days in a typical week.
- Scripture plays a more minor role for many respondents. About three out of five (62.7%) hear from God through reading or listening to the Bible most days of the week. Three out of ten (30.4%) do so on 1 to 3 days and 6.9% do not at all.
- People who attend church less than weekly are significantly less engaged in scripture. For example, three-fifths of less frequent churchgoers do not read or listen to the Bible on most days of the week, with 17.6% not engaging scripture at all in a typical week.
- The majority of congregants (59.5%) have never read or listened to the entire Bible.

Figure 3. In the past week, how many days did you pray and read/listen to the Bible?

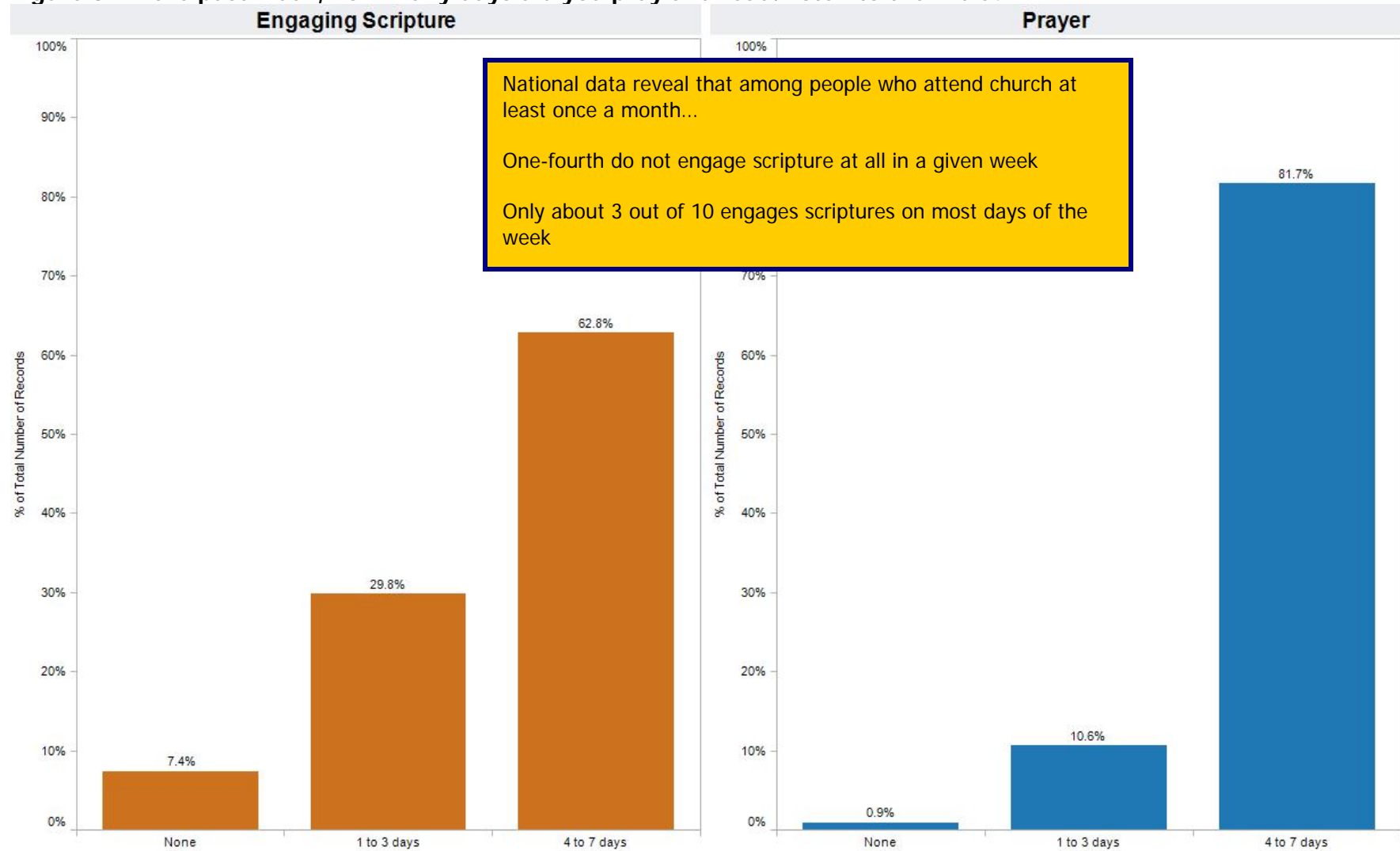
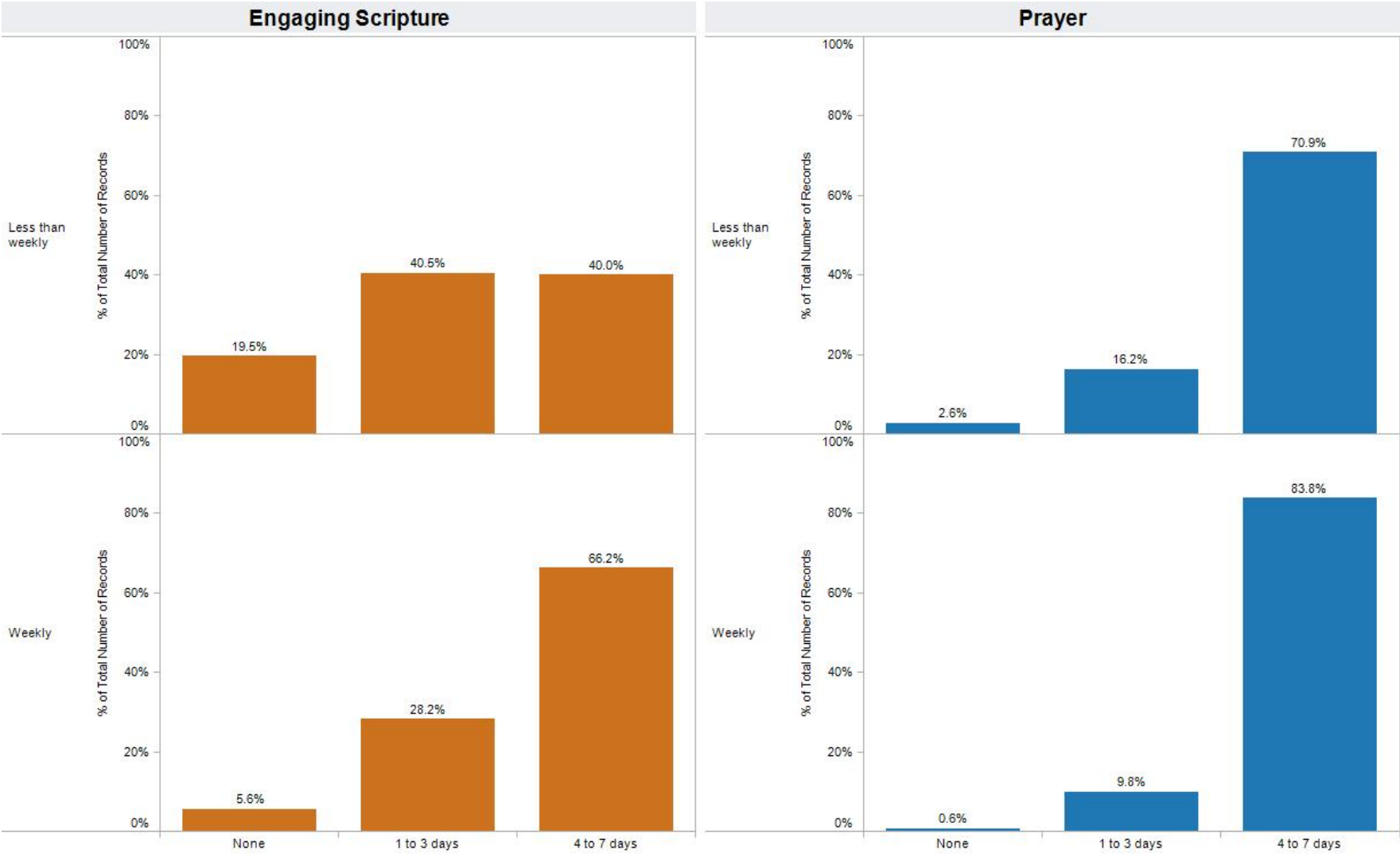


Figure 4. Prayer and Scripture Engagement by Church Attendance.



Spiritual Growth

- A strong desire to grow spiritually is nearly universal among congregants.
- Nine out of ten felt stalled in their spiritual growth at some point in the past year. Congregants reported feeling spiritually stalled for 3 to 4 months of the year.
- More than one-quarter (27.2%) felt spiritually stalled at the time of the survey.
- On a typical day, congregants face 3 temptations to have or do something they know they shouldn't.
- The most common temptations for women are
 - Worrying, identified by 45.1% of women
 - Anger (35.8%)
 - Criticizing others (25.3%)
- More than half of women struggle with fear or anxiety (65.2%), unkind thoughts about others (58.7%), and discouragement (51.5%) at least once a month.
- For men, common temptations include:
 - Lust, identified by 45.0% of men
 - Anger (35.5%)
 - Worrying (31.3%)
- In a typical month, 55.3% of men struggle with unkind thoughts about others, 54.8% deal with fear or anxiety, 49.8% feel spiritually stagnant, & 48.8% feel like they can't please God.

In national studies...

People report feeling spiritually stalled for 3.5 months out of the year, on average

Two-fifths of men who attend church regularly say they struggle with pornography at least every few months.

Figure 5. Most Frequent Temptations in the Past Month.

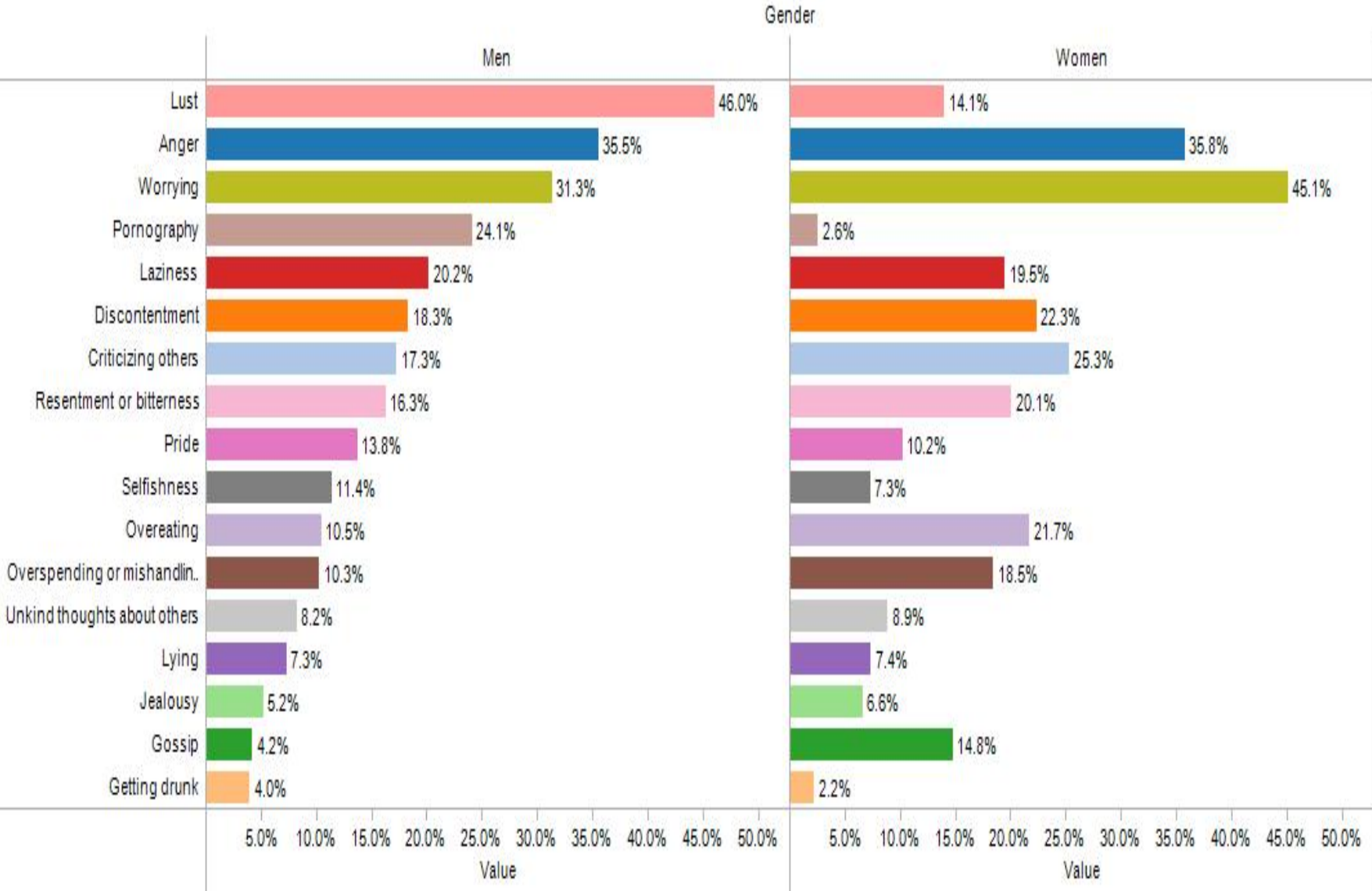
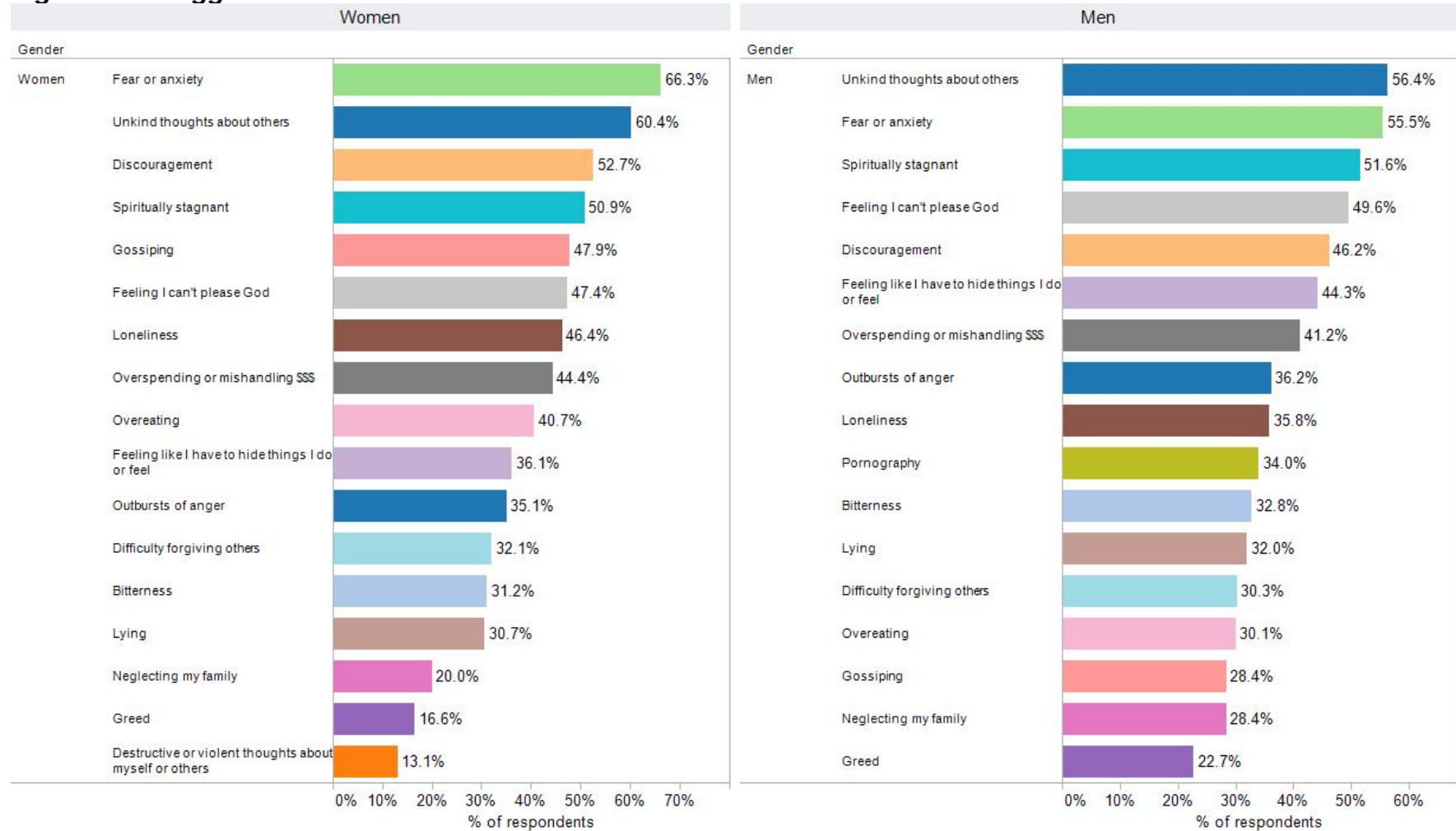


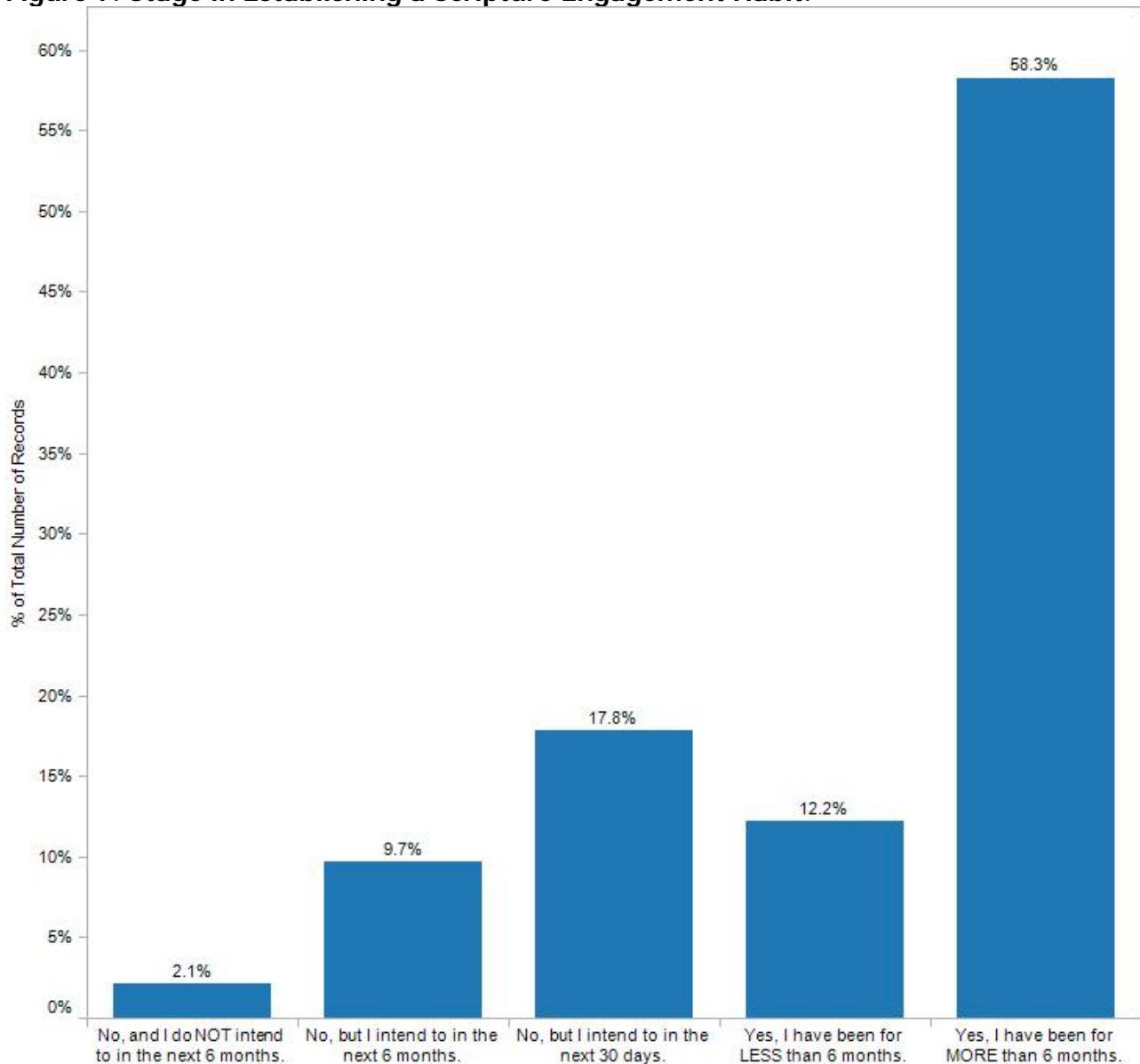
Figure 6. Struggles With This At Least Once A Month.



Scripture Engagement

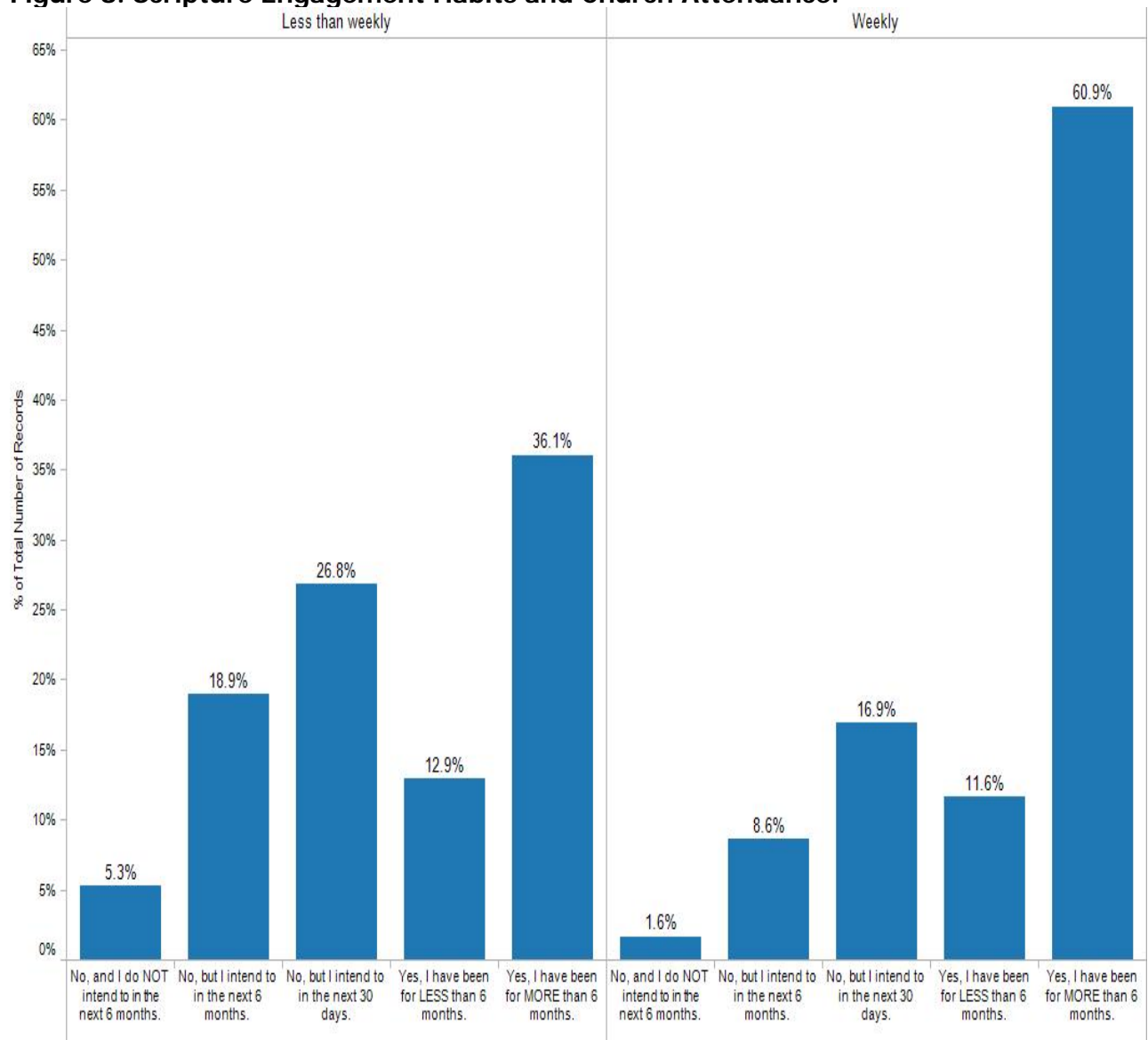
Research demonstrates that true spiritual growth for Christ-followers comes through engaging scripture on most days of the week (Cole & Ovwigho, 2009; Ovwigho & Cole, 2010). However, a significant minority of New York City congregants do not have a well-established Bible engagement habit. As shown in the figure below, 58.3% have regularly read or listened to the Bible most days a week for at least six months. A little more than one out of ten (12.2%) is in the process of establishing a scripture engagement habit. Almost three out of ten are planning to start in the next 30 days (17.8%) to six months (9.7%).

Figure 7. Stage in Establishing a Scripture Engagement Habit.



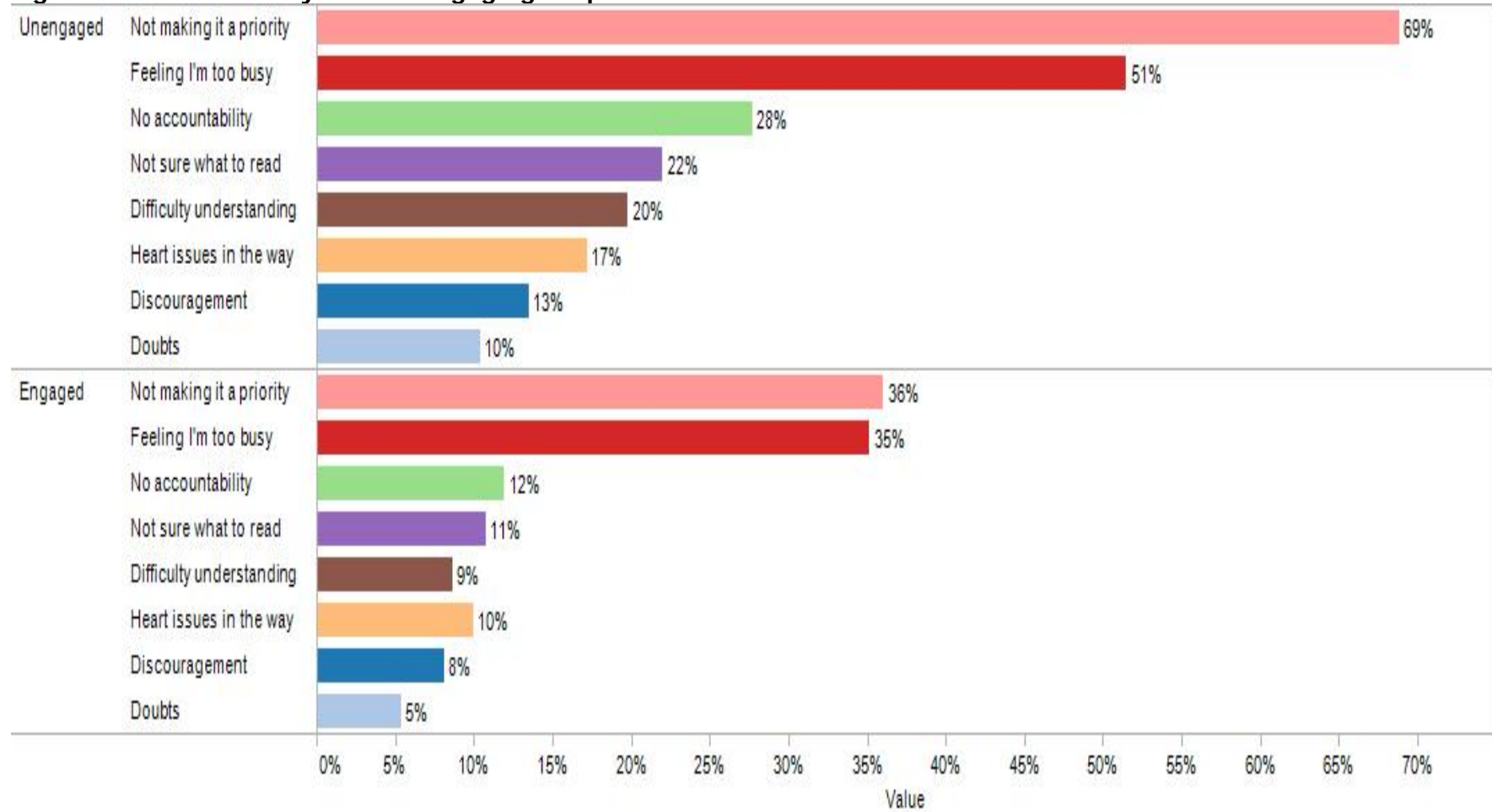
It's important to note that most people who attend church less frequently are not regularly engaged in scripture. Only 36.1% of congregants who attend church less than weekly have an established Bible engagement habit. Almost half intend to start engaging scripture in the near future.

Figure 8. Scripture Engagement Habits and Church Attendance.



Understanding what hinders people's efforts to engage scripture regularly provides valuable information for churches and ministries desiring to help them. The most common responses, especially among those who do not have a well-established habit, are not making scripture engagement a priority and feeling too busy. Being uncertain of what to read and having difficult understanding the text are hindrances as well for about one out of five survey respondents, including one-third of less frequent attenders.

Figure 9. What hinders you from engaging scripture?



Helping NYC Congregants Grow Spiritually

Congregants identified a variety of ways that their church can help them grow spiritually. For both men and women, “Encourage me in my spiritual growth” was the top choice, with about two out of five choosing that response.

Among women, at least a third also chose:

- Help me strengthen my prayer life
- Help me find an accountability partner
- Help me identify my spiritual gifts
- Teach me how to study the Bible on my own

Among men, popular choices were:

- Help me find an accountability partner
- Help me strengthen my prayer life
- Help me identify my spiritual gifts
- Offer more in-depth Bible studies
- Help me connect with others

References

- Cole, A., & Ovwigho, P.C. (2009). *Understanding the Bible engagement challenge: Scientific evidence for the power of 4*. Lincoln, NE: Center for Bible Engagement. Available online: http://www.centerforbibleengagement.org/images/stories/pdf/Scientific_Evidence_for_the_Power_of_4.pdf
- Ovwigho, P.C., & Cole, A.R. (2010). Scriptural engagement, communication with God, & moral behavior among children. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 15, 101-113.

Figure 10. How can the church help you grow spiritually?

