



Bible Engagement in New Zealand

Survey of Attitudes and Behaviour

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY	5
SAMPLE	6
QUESTION 1 – WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOURSELF AS CHRISTIAN?	9
QUESTION 2 – HOW OFTEN DO YOU TYPICALLY ATTEND A CHRISTIAN CHURCH SERVICE?	11
QUESTION 3 – DO YOU OWN A BIBLE?	13
QUESTION 4 – DO THE TEACHINGS OF THE BIBLE INFLUENCE YOUR LIFE?	16
QUESTION 5 – HOW OFTEN DO YOU TYPICALLY DISCUSS THE TEACHINGS OF THE BIBLE WITH OTHERS?	19

INTRODUCTION

This report analyses results from some research The Bible Society in New Zealand undertook in March 2008. The aim was to discover how New Zealander's relate to the Bible.

Christians traditionally understand the Bible as the written Word of God. It has always had a fundamental and essential role in Christianity. It has been described as the "Book of the Church", "the 'sacred text' of the Christian community", and the "starting point for understanding Christian spirituality."

Yet, it appears as though many Christians, particularly in western nations including New Zealand, are not engaging with it.

The mission of The Bible Society in New Zealand is to 'increase the number of people in New Zealand and worldwide who own, use, value and share the Bible with others by translating, publishing, distributing and ***encouraging transformative engagement with the Bible.***'

Simply put, the term Bible engagement means the process of spiritually connecting with God through the act of reading the Bible, thinking about it and applying it to one's life.

There has been very little research regarding Bible engagement within New Zealand. Church Life Surveys in 1997 and 2001 included only one or two questions relating to Bible reading habits. This survey therefore represents the most comprehensive Bible engagement research undertaken in New Zealand in at least 20 years.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Of the total respondents, 46% describe themselves as Christian. This corresponds well to census 2006 data which returned just under half the population as Christians. We can estimate the number of Christians in New Zealand at 1,955,000. The likelihood of someone professing to be Christian increases remarkably with age, with over 74% of 65+ year olds describing themselves as Christian. Those of Pacific ethnicity had the highest rate of Christianity at 68.4% with Europeans at 40.6%.

Results showed that 15% of New Zealanders attend a church service at least once a week. 20% claim they attend at least once a month or more frequently and significantly, 80% of the population has attended a church service even if it was a wedding or funeral. 30% of Christians attend church at least weekly or more frequently and 56% of Christians say they attend church less than five times a year or only on special occasions. We can estimate the total number of Christians attending church at least monthly or more frequently at 760,000.

68% of all New Zealanders own a Bible. Bible ownership increases with age, with 86% of elderly people owning a Bible. The lowest rate of Bible ownership is among 15 – 24 year olds (59%). 5% of the total population read the Bible daily. Of those that own a Bible, 7% read it daily, 9% said they read it weekly and 23% read it at least monthly or more frequently (this includes those who read it daily and weekly). Among Christians, 11% read the Bible daily and 13% read it weekly (24% reading it weekly or more frequently).

25% of respondents stated that the teachings of the Bible do influence their lives. The influence of the Bible on one's life increases dramatically with age, with only 18% of people aged 15 – 24 compared to 41% of people aged over 65 stating the Bible's teachings influenced their lives. 47% of Christians stated that the Bible does influence their life while 39% said that it sometimes influenced their life. Of those that read the Bible daily, 94.6% said it influences their life.

Most New Zealanders rarely or never discuss the teachings of the Bible with others (77%). Only 14% regularly discuss the teachings of the Bible (weekly or more frequently). 26% of Christians regularly discuss the teachings of the Bible (weekly or more frequently) and 60% of Christians rarely or never discuss the teachings of the Bible with others.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

Objectives

The objectives of the survey were to research attitudes and behavior regarding the Bible in New Zealand.

Survey Questions

The survey consisted of the following questions:

1. Would you describe yourself as a Christian?
2. How often do you typically attend a Christian church service?
3. Do you own a Bible?
4. Do the teachings of the Bible influence your life?
5. How often do you typically discuss the teachings of the Bible with others?

Methodology

The survey was undertaken by Ignite Research in March 2008. The questions were emailed to 120,000 New Zealand households via TNS's online panel Smile City. Smile City is an online rewards-based programme.

SAMPLE

Responses: 3,388

Weighting: The data has been weighted in order to fairly represent the general New Zealand population.

Maximum Margin of Error: The maximum margin of error for this survey is +/- 1.7%.

Profile of Responses:

Table 1 - Gender

GENDER	NZ Census %	Survey %
Male	49	48
Female	51	52

Table 2 - Region

REGION	NZ Census %	Survey %
Northland	4	5
Auckland	32	29
Waikato	10	10
Bay of Plenty	6	7
Gisborne	1	2
Hawkes Bay	4	5
Taranaki	3	3
Wanganui - Manawatu	5	5
Wellington	11	10
Tasman	3	4
Canterbury	13	12
Otago	5	6
Southland	2	3

Table 3 - Age

AGE	NZ Census %	Survey %
15 – 24 Years	17	14
25 – 44 years	38	28
45 – 64 years	29	34
65+ years	16	25

Table 4 - Income

HOUSEHOLD INCOME	NZ Census %	Survey %
< \$20,000	20	25
\$20,001 - \$40,000	21	27
\$40,001 - \$100,000	31	39
>\$100,000	9	8
Not Stated	18	-

Table 5 - Ethnicity

ETHNICITY	NZ Census %	Survey %
European	77	76
Maori	14	11
Pacific	6	8
Asian	3	5
Other	1	-
Unknown	-	-

RESULTS

Question 1: **WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOURSELF AS CHRISTIAN?**

Of the total respondents, 46% of people consider themselves to be Christian, 45% answered 'no' and 9% preferred not to respond. This corresponds well to the 2006 Census data. According to the results, 55.6% of the population stated they were Christian. However, Peter Lineham and Alison Fields in *NewVision Volume 3* state that 140,000 New Zealanders described themselves as members of more than one religious group in the census. As a result of this figure, their assessment is that just under half of the New Zealand population consider themselves Christian.¹

Table 6 shows the proportion of Christians per age group. The largest proportion of Christians is in the 45 – 64 age bracket with the smallest proportion in the youngest age bracket of 15 – 24 years.

Table 6 – Proportion of Christians per Age Group

AGE	% of Total Christians
15 – 24 years	14.2
25 – 44 years	27.5
45 – 64 years	33.7
65+ years	24.6

Of the total survey respondents, 33% of those aged between 15 and 24 and 35% of those aged between 25 – 44 consider themselves to be Christian. This is in stark contrast to the over 65 age bracket, where 74% consider themselves to be Christian. Graph 1 shows the proportion of the total respondents that consider themselves Christian. The likelihood of someone being a Christian increases dramatically with age.

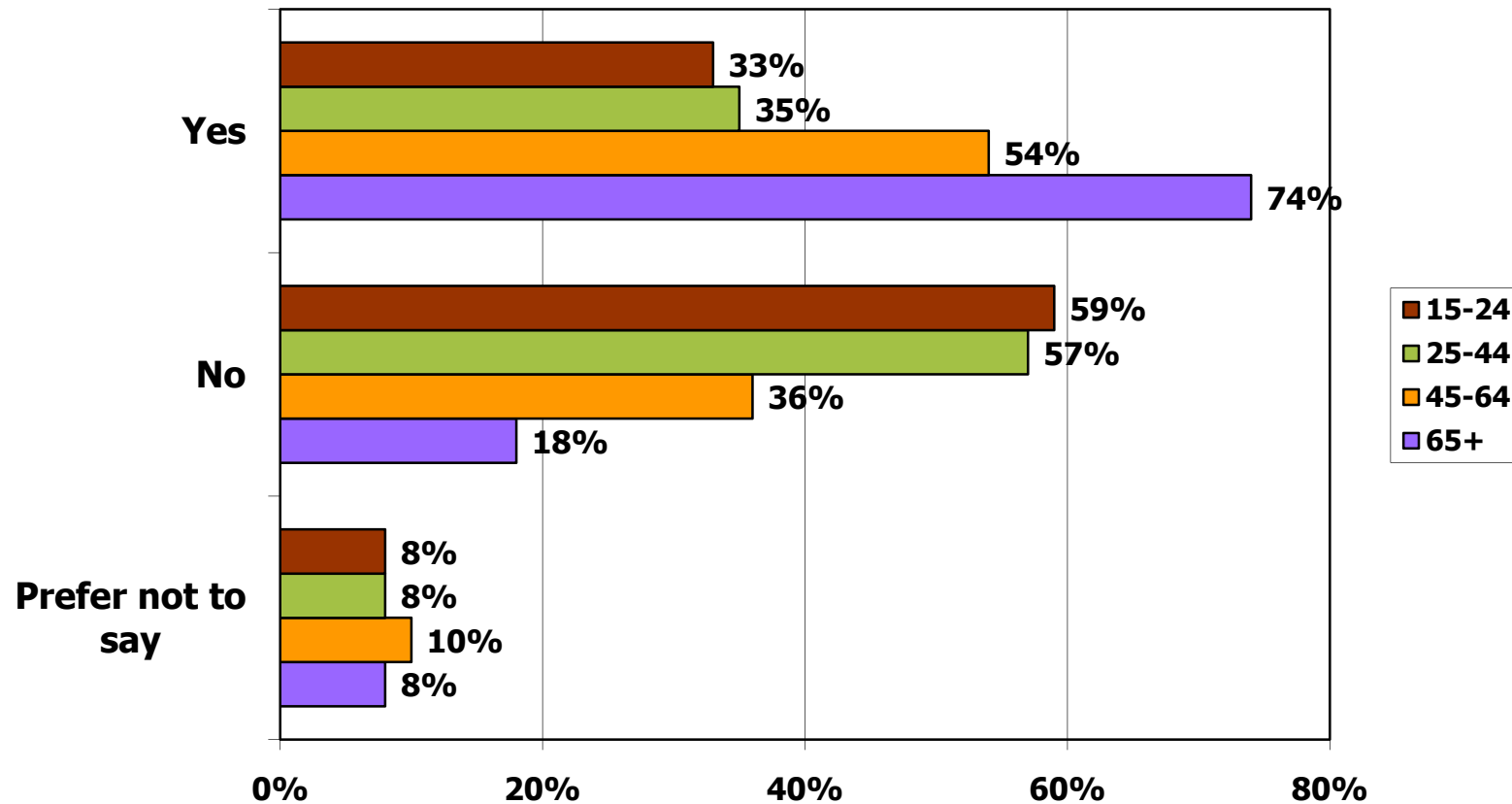
Based on these results, we can estimate the number of people in New Zealand who would describe themselves as Christian at 1,955,000².

¹ **The Current Status of the Church**, Peter Lineham and Alison Fields, *NewVision New Zealand Volume 3* (2008), Page 164

² Based on **Statistics New Zealand** population estimation of 4,250,000

Females (52.5%) are more likely to be Christian than males (47.5%). Those of Pacific ethnicity are more likely to be Christians, with 68.4% stating they were. 48.7% of Europeans and 40.6% of Maori stated they were Christian. The lowest rate of Christianity is in Asian ethnicities, where only 22.9% professed to be of Christian faith.

Graph 1: The percentage of the total survey respondents that consider themselves Christian.



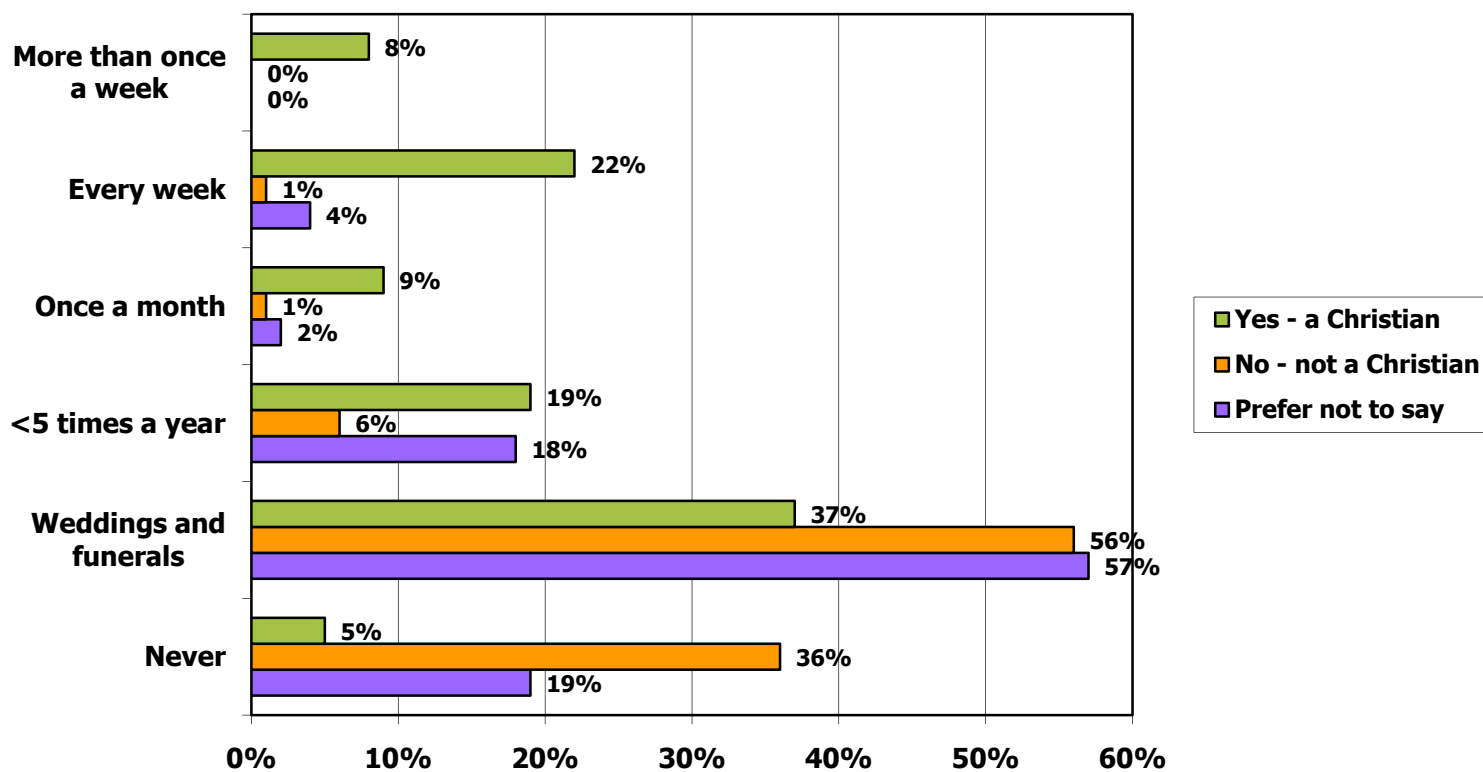
Gisborne has the highest proportion of Christians in the population at 55% followed by Wanganui-Manawatu, Otago, Southland and Waikato. The lowest proportion of Christians in the population is in Nelson-Marlborough.

Question 2: HOW OFTEN DO YOU TYPICALLY ATTEND A CHRISTIAN CHURCH SERVICE?

Results show that 15% of New Zealanders attend a church service once a week or more frequently. 20% claim to attend church once a month or more frequently and a total of 33% said they attend church at least once a year or more frequently. Significantly, 80% have attended church, even if it is at the very least a wedding or funeral.

Graph 2 shows the correlation between Christians and church attendance. It shows that 8% of Christians attend church more than once a week and a total of 30% attend church at least once a week. 56% of Christians said they attend church less than five times a year or only on occasions such as weddings or funerals. 5% said they never attend church. Results also showed that 8% of those who did not profess to be Christian attend church at least once during the year (not including those that visit occasionally for weddings and funerals). If those who attend church only for weddings and funerals are added, then 64% of non-Christians attend church at least occasionally.

Graph 2: Christians attending church



We can therefore take the percentage of the population who profess to be Christian (46%) and estimate the total number of Christians that attend a church service at least once a week at 586,500³. The estimated total number of New Zealanders attending a church service at least monthly or more frequently is approximately 850,000⁴, corresponding well with the State of the Church in New Zealand (2006)⁵ which estimated church attendance at more than 800,000. We can also estimate the number of Christians attending a church service at least monthly or more frequently at about 760,000.

A high of 22% of people in the Bay of Plenty attend church weekly or more frequently with a low of 10% in Wellington and 11% in Gisborne and Canterbury.⁶

The highest rates of regular (weekly or more frequently) church attendance can be found amongst 15 – 24 year olds (17.3% of 15 – 24 year olds attend church) and 65+ year olds (19.1%). The rates of regular church attendance drop in the ages in between with 12.1% of 25 - 44 year olds and 13.8% of 45 – 64 year olds attending church regularly.

Table 7 shows regular (weekly or more frequently) church attendance rates within regions.

Table 7 – Church Attendance rates within Regions

REGION	RATE OF CHURCH ATTENDANCE	REGION	RATE OF CHURCH ATTENDANCE
Northland	13.0%	Taranaki	13.8%
Auckland	16.1%	Manawatu – Wanganui	12.5%
Waikato	18.8%	Wellington	10.1%
Bay of Plenty	21.6%	Nelson / Marlborough	12.2%
Gisborne	11.4%	Canterbury	11.4%
Hawkes Bay	15.1%	Otago	13.1%
		Southland	19.2%

³ Based on **Statistics New Zealand** estimation of population

⁴ This figure will include those that stated they were either 'not Christian' or 'preferred not to say'.

⁵ **State of the Church in New Zealand** (2006), A Report for Challenge Weekly by John McNeil, page 25. The authors also cite a 2004 Herald Digi Poll and a 2005 TV3-Colmar Brunton Poll resulting in the same value of 20% church attendance at least monthly.

⁶ Note that even though Gisborne has the highest proportion of Christians at 55% of any region in New Zealand, it has the second lowest rate of regular church going at only 11%.

Question 3: **DO YOU OWN A BIBLE?**

Results show that 68% of all New Zealanders own a Bible. Bible ownerships increases with age, with 86% of elderly people (65+) owning one. The lowest rate of Bible ownership is in the age range 15 – 44, where 59% own a Bible (Table 8 and graph 3).

Table 8 – Bible Ownership with Age

AGE	BIBLE OWNERSHIP
15 – 24	59%
25 – 44	60%
45 – 64	75%
65+	86%

Of those that said they own a Bible, 7% read it daily, 16.5% read it weekly or more frequently, 22.8% read it monthly or more frequently and 66.6% said they read it occasionally or more frequently. Of the total respondents (population), 5% read the Bible daily, 6.2% read it at weekly, 4.3% monthly and 29.6% read it only occasionally.

Table 9 shows that 9% of Christians in the survey do not own a Bible, and the majority of those (6% of total Christians) are not interested in reading one either. 32% of Christians who have a Bible read it at least monthly or more frequently and 41% of Christians who have Bibles only read them occasionally. It is also interesting to note that 43% of people who are not Christian have a Bible and just under half of these (42%) actually read it occasionally.

Graph 3 – Bible Ownership with Age

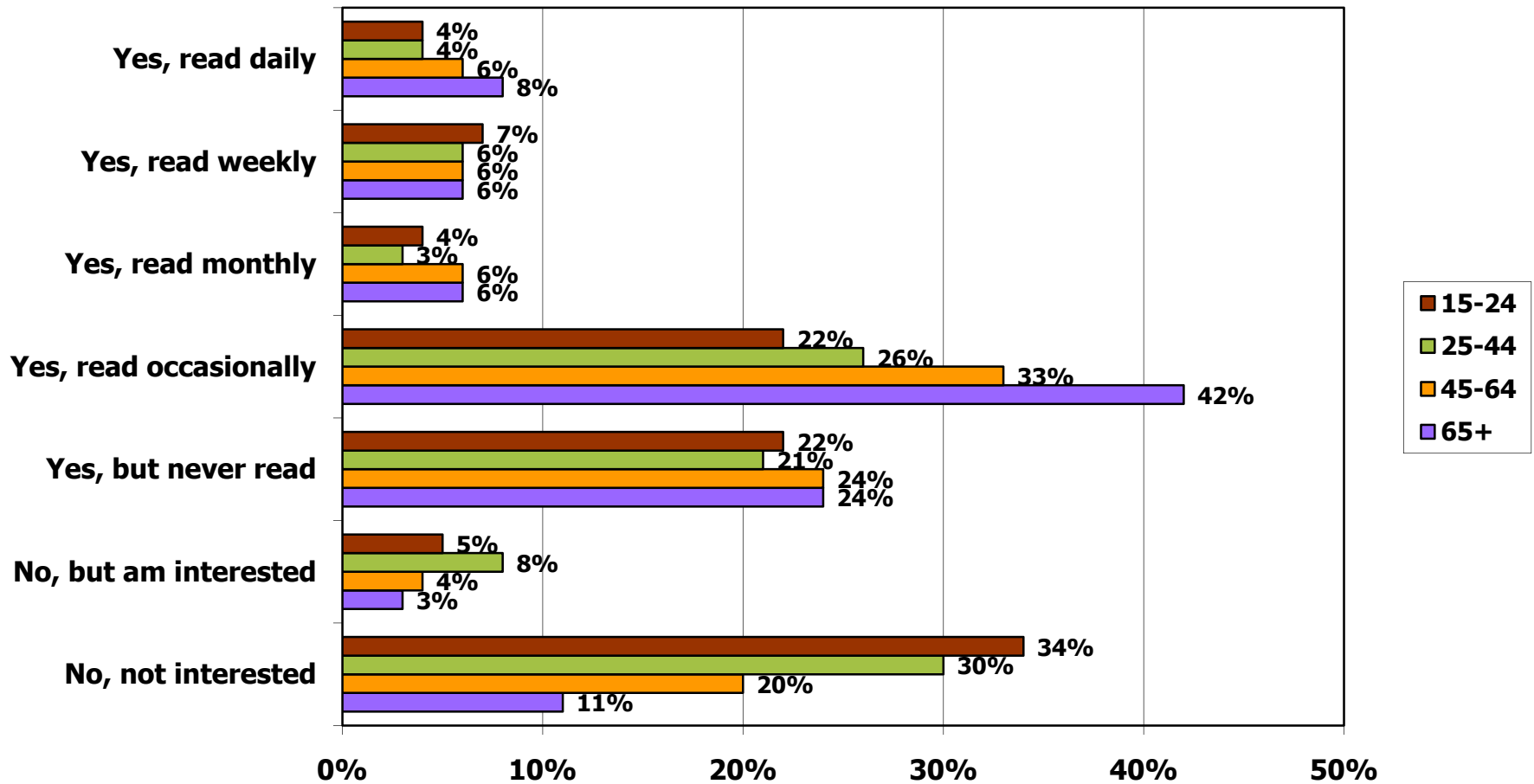


Table 9 – Bible Ownership and Readership Among Christians

BIBLE OWNERSHIP/READERSHIP AMONG CHRISTIANS	%
Yes, and read it daily	11
Yes, and read it weekly	13
Yes, and read it monthly	8
Yes, and read it occasionally	41
Yes, but never read it	18
No, but interested	3
No, and not interested	6

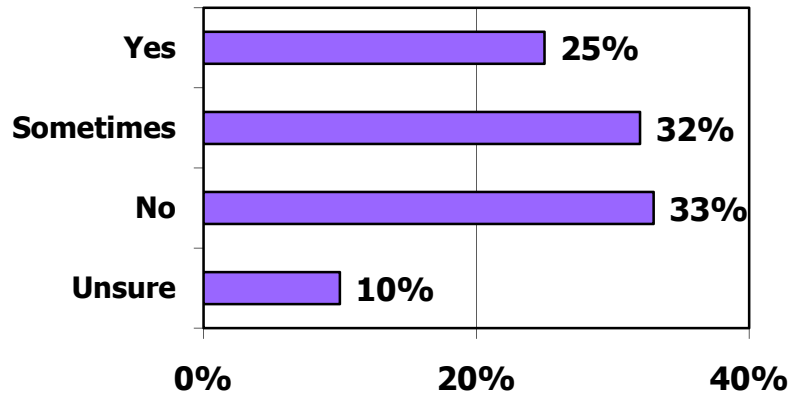
Regional analysis shows that the highest rate of Bible ownership is in Gisborne which is where the highest proportion of Christians are (and the second lowest rate of regular church going).

Pacific peoples are far more likely to read their Bibles regularly with 24.7% reading it weekly or more frequently compared with 10.6% of Europeans and 10.7% of Maori. The lowest rate is among Asians at 8.6%.

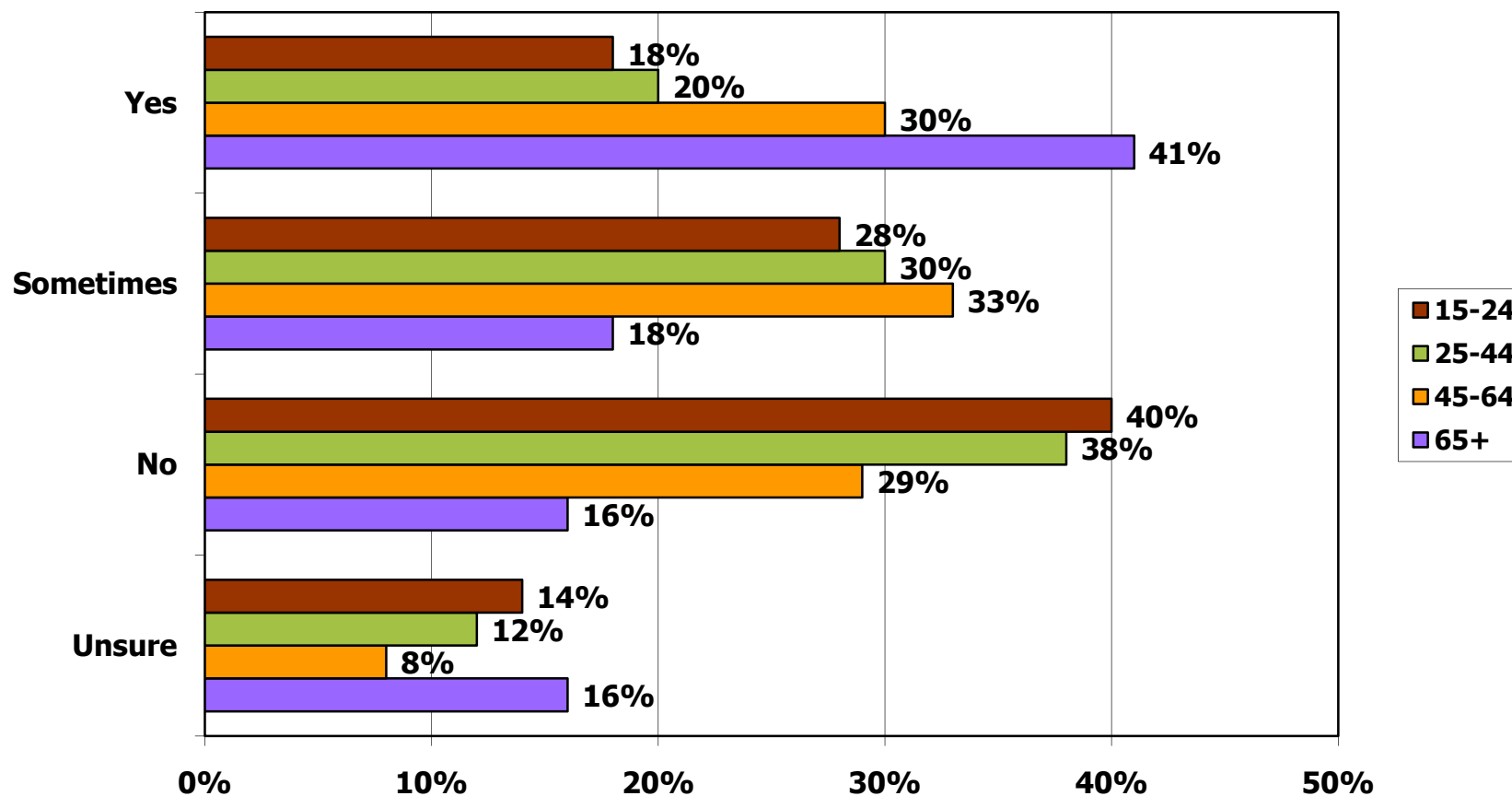
Question Four: **DO THE TEACHINGS OF THE BIBLE INFLUENCE YOUR LIFE?**

Graph 4 shows that 57% of respondents stated the Bible does influence their lives in some way. Broken down by age (graph 5), it is clear that the influence of the Bible on one's life increases with age. 41% of the 65+ age bracket stated they thought the teachings of the Bible influenced their lives.

Graph 4 – Do the teachings of the Bible influence your life?



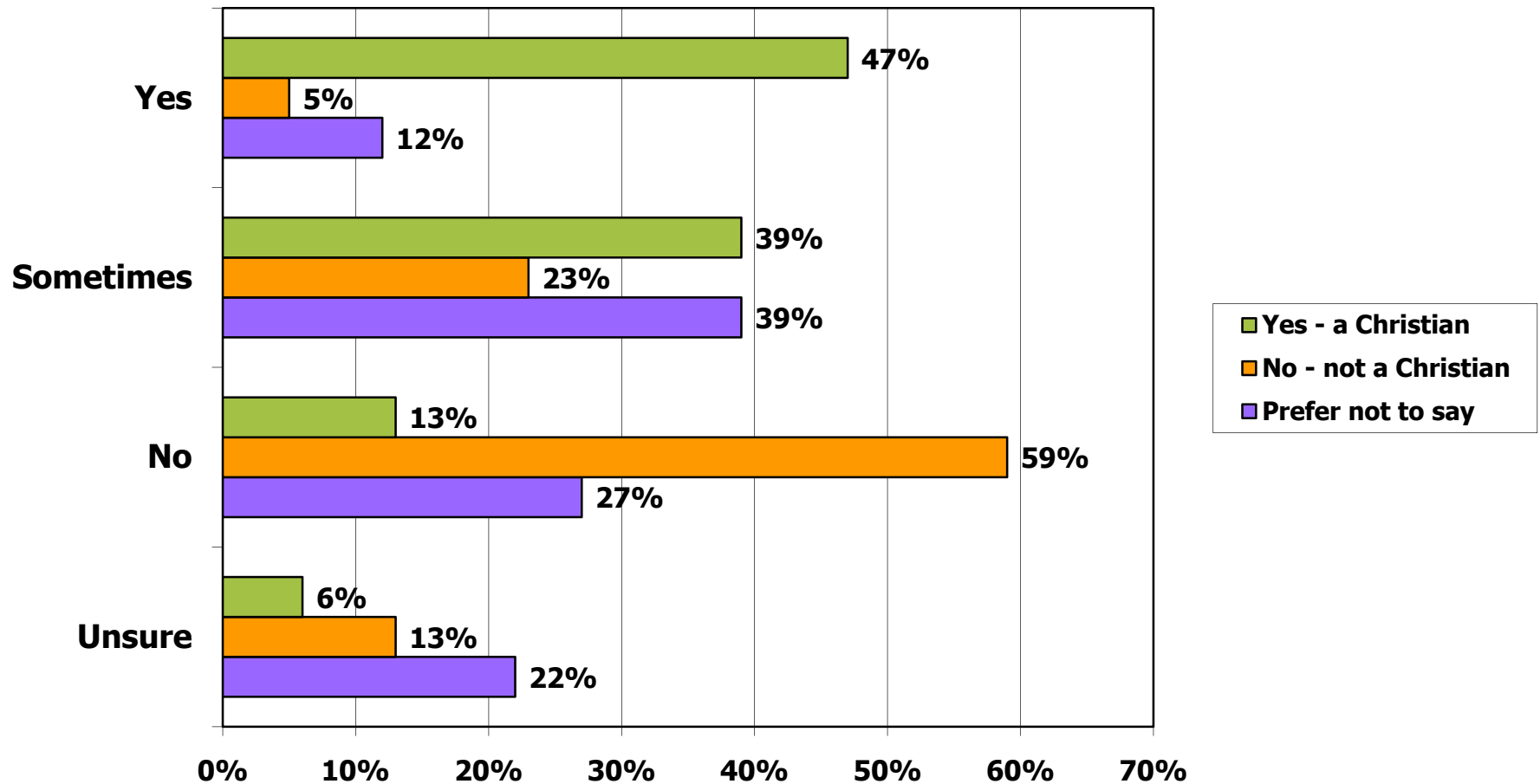
Graph 5 – Influence of the Bible on life by age



Graph 6 shows the correlation between the influence of the Bible’s teachings on life for those that stated they are Christian. 52% of Christians stated that the Bible’s teachings have *some* or *no* influence on their life. Interestingly, 5% of non-Christians said that the Bible’s teachings do influence their lives.

Across ethnicity, Pacific peoples are more likely to be influenced by the Bible in their lives with 38.3% stating they are influenced, compared to 25.2% of Europeans, 23.5% of Maoris and 21.6% of Asians.

Graph 6 – Influence of Bible’s Teachings on Life for Christian and Non-Christian Respondents

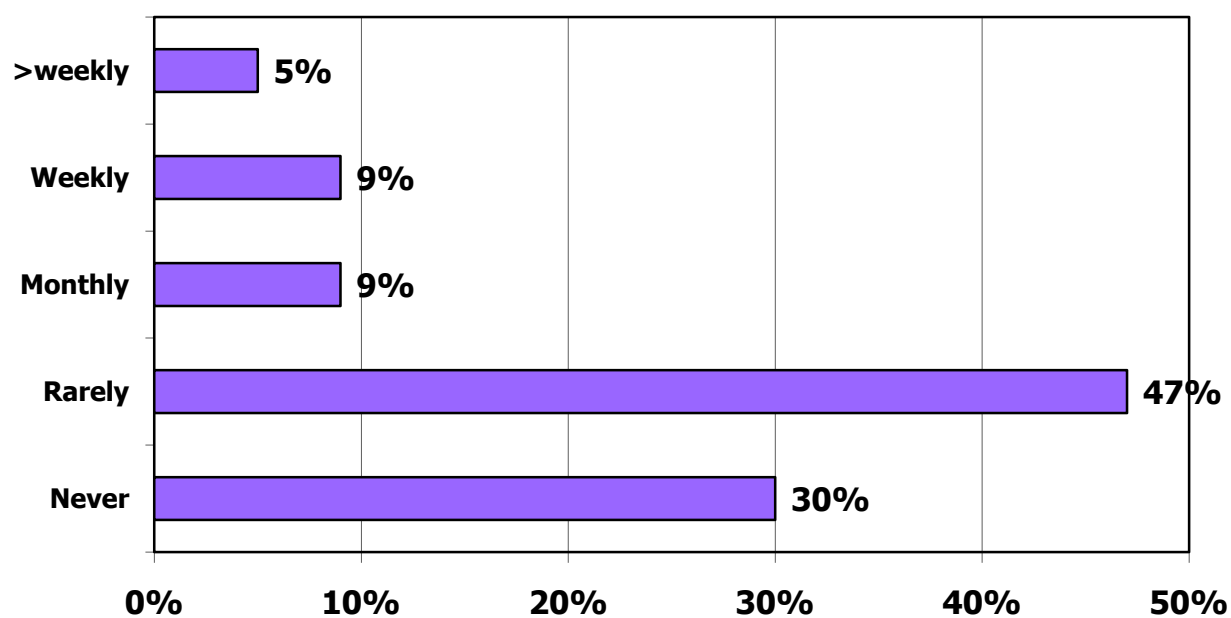


Of all those who stated they own a Bible and read it daily, 94.6% said that the Bible’s teachings influence their life. For those that read it weekly, 77.5% stated that the Bible’s teachings influence their lives. The figure drops to 71.9% for those that read it at least once a month.

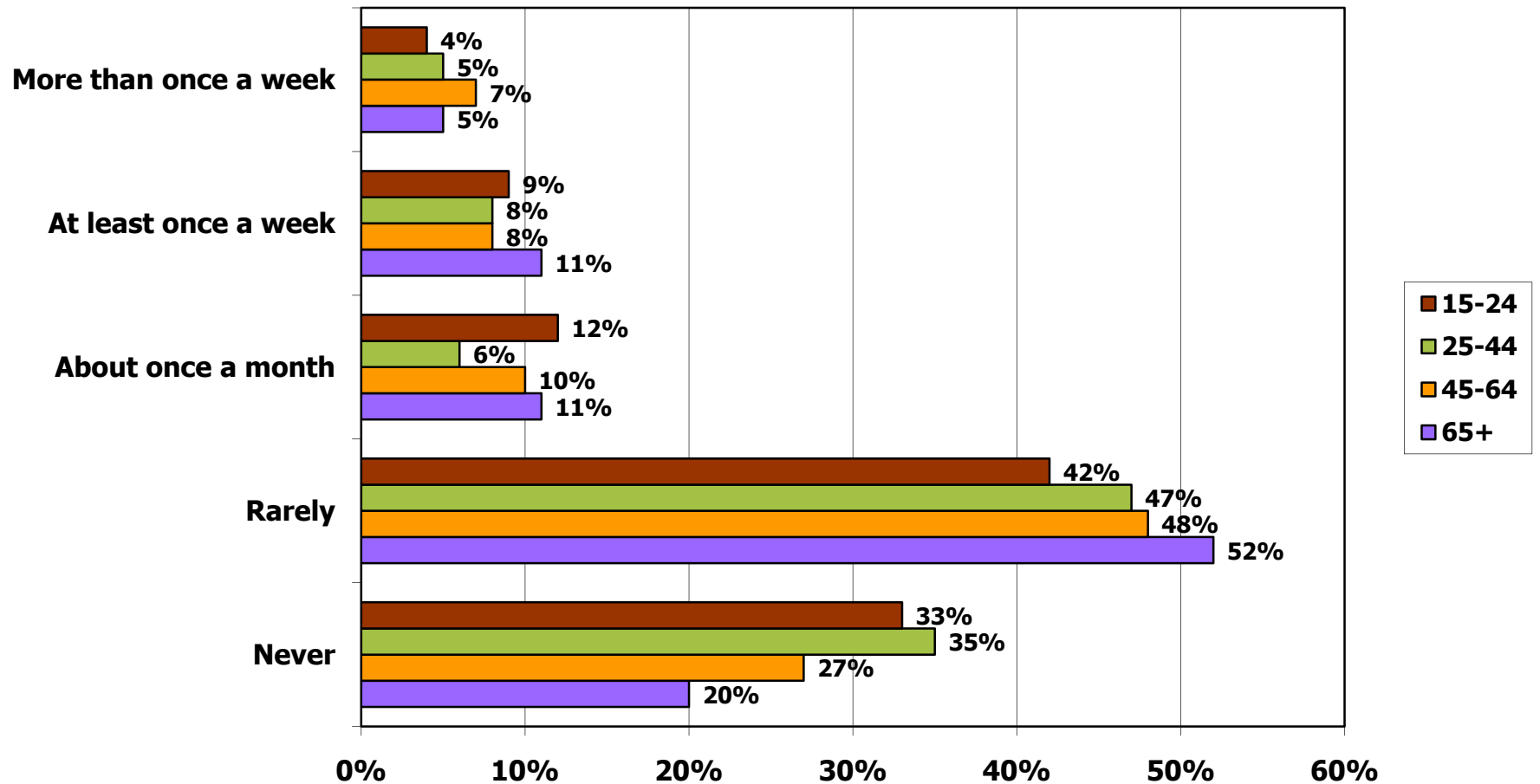
Question Five – HOW OFTEN DO YOU TYPICALLY DISCUSS THE TEACHINGS OF THE BIBLE WITH OTHERS?

Most New Zealanders (77%) rarely or never discuss the teachings of the Bible with others (graph 7). Only 14% of the population discuss teachings with others on a weekly or more often basis. The likelihood of one discussing the Bible's teachings weekly or more frequently remains roughly the same across age groups (graph 8).

Graph 7 – Discussing the Bible's Teachings with Others

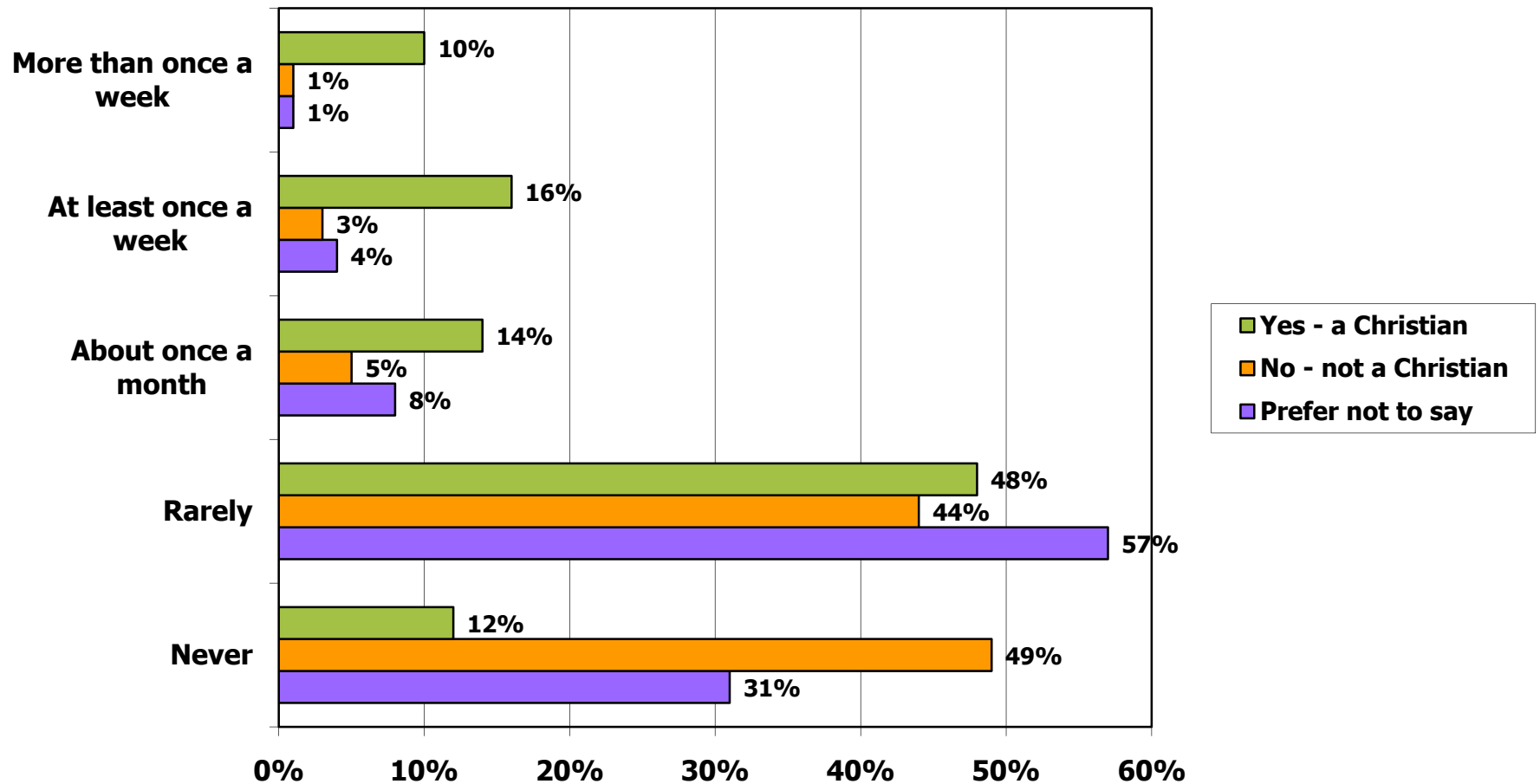


Graph 8 – Likelihood of Discussing the Bible’s Teachings with Age



Graph 9 shows that only 26% of Christians regularly (weekly or more frequently) discuss the Bible’s teachings with others. 40% of Christians discuss the Bible’s teachings monthly or more frequently but 60% of Christians stated they rarely or never discuss the Bible’s teachings with others.

Graph 9 – Christians and Non-Christians Discussing the Bible’s Teachings



Pacific peoples are the most likely to discuss the Bible’s teachings with others on a regular basis (weekly or more frequently) with 26.3% stating they do. Maori are next most likely with 15.1%, followed by Europeans at 12.7% and Asians at 10.7%.