

New Research Reveals Disturbing Trend Among America's Pastors

A landmark new study by Barna Group, conducted in partnership with Pepperdine University, offers a revealing look into the lives of America's pastors. Drawn from interviews with more than 14,000 Protestant pastors from 40 denominations spanning the theological and political spectrum, *The State of Pastors* is both hopeful and troubling, with unexpected bright spots and worrisome levels of struggle for some clergy. The findings are available as a 175-page full-color book that includes the full study data, analysis and infographics.

The bad news for the church is the graying of America's clergy: "As other careers woo millennials and older generations struggle to hand the baton to younger pastors, the median age of pastors has risen from 44 to 54 over the last 25 years." Protestant churches face a massive leadership shortage in the coming decades, similar to that seen in the Catholic Church. The situation appears bleak: seven out of 10 pastors report that it's becoming more difficult to identify promising pastoral candidates.

The good news—one of the report's major findings—is that contrary to conventional wisdom, most pastors are faring well: 91 percent reports a good overall quality of life, and 88 percent describes their spiritual well-being as excellent or good. Still, a troubling number of pastors are at risk of burnout (one in three), and nearly half face relational risks in their marriages, families and friendships.

"Pastors play a vital role in the health and well-being of society," says Barna president David Kinnaman. "We explore how pastors are faring in a culture where attitudes are growing

increasingly skeptical to Christianity. Our goal is for pastors to feel affirmed, challenged and informed to continue the transformative work they do in their churches and communities.”

The State of Pastors is a comprehensive assessment of the mental, physical, financial, emotional and spiritual well-being of today’s pastors. It’s divided into three sections: Self-leadership, which explores pastors’ understanding of their interior lives and feelings about their closest relationships; Congregational Leadership, which probes their everyday experience in ministry; and Cultural Leadership, which considers the influence and engagement of pastors beyond their congregation. Some significant findings include:

- Pastors are not immune to mental health struggles: Almost half have faced depression, while one in five pastors has struggled with an addiction—most commonly, to porn.
- Women now represent nine percent of senior pastors—triple the percentage of 25 years ago—but they frequently lead smaller churches and feel greater scrutiny. Women pastors are more likely than men to say they feel lonely or isolated from others.
- Nearly all pastors say churches play an important role in racial reconciliation—but only half say it is among their church’s priorities. Feelings about racial issues diverge according to denominational lines: nine out of 10 mainline ministers agree that “law enforcement and the judicial system treat people of color and white people differently,” but fewer than six in 10 non-mainline pastors concur—still a majority, but a significantly smaller one.
- Americans don’t want to hear from pastors on social or political issues: Only eight percent of adults are

interested in hearing pastoral teaching on issues such as same-sex marriage/LGBT rights, abortion, gun rights, tax policy, climate change, drug policy or religious freedom. Pastors' influence in broader culture has diminished in general; most U.S. adults express ambivalence about pastors: "Most don't actively hate pastors, they just don't especially care." Pastors perceive the culture's growing indifference; only 22 percent says respect for clergymembers by their community is excellent; seven in 10 say it's merely good or average.

- Pastors experience doubt: one out of every four pastors has experienced a period during their ministry when they significantly doubted their faith.
- Pastors report greater marital and parental satisfaction than the general population, though half say their current church tenure has been hard on their family.
- Pastors don't do as well with friendships. They are more likely than the general population to feel isolated and lonely. Gen-X pastors in particular seem to have a harder time making friends and feeling connected—they're more similar to people their age (30s-40s) in the general population than to their ministry colleagues.

The partnership with Pepperdine University offered the opportunity for Barna researchers to have access to scholars such as Elizabeth Krumrei Mancuso, associate professor of psychology, who developed the Comprehensive Intellectual Humility Scale. Pastors ranked high in respect for others' viewpoints, with more than nine out of 10 agreeing that they welcome different ways of thinking about important topics (92 percent) and that they are willing to hear others out, even if they disagree (99 percent). On the other hand, many pastors seem to struggle with overconfidence. Seven in 10 leaders say

that, when they are really confident in a belief, there is very little chance that belief is wrong (69 percent).

“This unprecedented study by Barna brings issues facing Christian faith leaders to the forefront during a pivotal time,” says Rick Gibson, chief marketing officer and vice president for public affairs and church relations at Pepperdine. “It is important that our community takes the time to examine how the complexity of our era is impacting our pastors and how we can best support them. As a Christian university, Pepperdine is excited to be partnering with Barna on this opportunity to bring congregations closer together.”
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