

Prepare Yourself: More Sexual Abuse Allegations Are About to Come From Congregations Big and Small

In recent months, churches have been rocked by high-profile accusations of sexual misconduct among clergy.

While the Catholic church's continued abuse scandal has dominated the headlines, Protestant churches have also seen high profile pastors accused of sexual misconduct.

More accusations are likely to come—from congregations big and small.

One in 8 Protestant senior pastors says a church staff member has sexually harassed a member of the congregation at some point in the church's history. One in 6 pastors says a staff member has been harassed in a church setting.

Two-thirds of pastors say domestic or sexual violence occurs in the lives of people in their congregation. And many pastors believe the #MeToo movement has made their churches more aware of how common sexual and domestic violence are.

More pastors say they are addressing these issues from the pulpit. Still, half say they lack training in how to address sexual and domestic violence.

Those are among the findings of a new study on pastors' views on #MeToo and sexual and domestic violence in churches from Nashville-based LifeWay Research. The study, sponsored by IMA World Health and Sojourners, is a follow up to a 2014 survey.

Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research, says the #MeToo movement—and more public discussion of sexual and

domestic violence—seems to have gotten pastors' attention.

"Pastors are starting to talk about issues like sexual harassment and domestic abuse more than in the past," McConnell said. "They don't always know how to respond—but fewer see them as taboo subjects."

Most Aware of #MeToo

For the study, LifeWay Research conducted a phone survey of 1,000 Protestant senior pastors earlier this year—then compared the results to a similar survey in 2014.

Researchers also asked additional questions specifically about the #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements.

Eighty-five percent of pastors in the survey say they have heard of the #MeToo movement. Fewer pastors (16 percent) have heard of the #ChurchToo movement, which focused specifically on sexual harassment and abuse in the church. Eighty-four percent have not heard of #ChurchToo.

Three-quarters of pastors (76 percent) say they know someone who has been sexually harassed. Mainline pastors (82 percent) are more likely to say they know someone who has been harassed than evangelical pastors (71 percent).

Twelve percent of Protestant pastors say someone on church staff has sexually harassed a congregation member at some point in the church's life. Eighty-five percent say no staff member has been found to have done so. Three percent don't know. Pentecostal (94 percent) and Baptist (89 percent) pastors are more likely to say there has been no harassment found. Christian/Church of Christ (79 percent) and Presbyterian/Reformed (79 percent) pastors are less likely.

Sixteen percent say a staff member has experienced sexual harassment in a church setting. Eighty-two percent say that has not happened. Two percent don't know. Mainline pastors (22

percent) are more likely to say a staff member has been harassed than evangelical pastors (11 percent).

Eighty percent of pastors say their church has a policy for sexual harassment allegations against staff. Nineteen percent say they don't have a policy. Two percent don't know.

A few pastors have firsthand knowledge of abuse. One in 5 pastors says they personally have experienced domestic or sexual violence. Four out of five say they have not.

#MeToo Leads to Action, Confusion

The #MeToo movement has prompted some pastors to action. It also appears to have led to some confusion among pastors and their congregations.

Forty-one percent of Protestant senior pastors who have heard of #MeToo say they are more inclined to preach about sexual and domestic violence in response to the movement. Forty-eight percent say they are inclined to speak about the issues about the same amount as they had in the past. Twelve percent say they are less inclined to speak as a result of #MeToo.

Methodist (57 percent) and Presbyterian/Reformed (52 percent) pastors are more likely to say they will preach more about sexual and domestic violence. Fewer Lutheran (37 percent), Church of Christ/Christian (36 percent), Baptist (30 percent) and Pentecostal (24 percent) pastors say they are now more inclined to preach on those topics.

Forty percent of those who have heard of #MeToo say they understand issues of sexual and domestic violence better because of the movement. Twenty-one percent say their understanding of the issues has not changed. Thirty-nine percent say they now have more questions.

Congregation members also have questions, according to pastors.

A third of pastors (32 percent) who have heard of #MeToo say their congregation is more confused about sexual and domestic violence. Sixty-two percent say their congregation has more empathy for victims. Fifty-eight percent say their congregation is more aware of how common sexual and domestic violence is.

A few (14 percent) say their congregation has become callous toward the issue.

Among other findings about pastors who have heard of #MeToo:

- 49 percent of mainline pastors are inclined to preach more about domestic and sexual violence.
- 32 percent of evangelical pastors are inclined to preach more about domestic and sexual violence.
- 48 percent of mainline pastors say they understand more.
- 32 percent of evangelical pastors say they understand more.
- 70 percent of mainline pastors say their churches have become more empathetic.
- 57 percent of evangelical pastors say their churches have become more empathetic.
- 44 percent of Christian/Church of Christ ministers say their churches have more confusion.
- 27 percent of Methodist pastors say their churches have more confusion.
- 18 percent of Baptist pastors say their churches are callous.
- 10 percent of Presbyterian/Reformed pastors say their churches are callous.

“We are encouraged that more and more pastors are speaking out and seeking training to make their churches safer sanctuaries for survivors of violence, but the results also show that we—as a Christian community—still fall short,” said Sojourners President and Founder Jim Wallis.

“If we believe that how we treat the most vulnerable is how we treat Christ, we must be in deep solidarity with the women and men who experience domestic or sexual abuse at some point in their lives,” Wallis said. “If we believe we are all created in the image of God, we cannot tolerate that only half of pastors feel prepared to respond to domestic and sexual violence situations.”

Domestic Abuse Less Taboo

For the study, LifeWay Research asked Protestant pastors a series of detailed questions about how they handle the topics of sexual and domestic abuse.

Three-quarters (77 percent) say they speak about domestic violence at least once a year. That includes 26 percent who speak about it once a year and 51 percent who speak about it more than once a year.

By contrast, only 34 percent of Protestant senior pastors spoke about domestic violence more than once a year in a similar study in 2014.

Many pastors (75 percent) who address sexual or domestic violence at least once a year or more say they do so because they have seen the impact of such violence firsthand. Eighty-seven percent say sexual or domestic violence is an issue in their community. Ninety-six percent know of resources to help victims.

Only 1 in 5 (18 percent) say they address domestic or sexual violence because it is an issue in their congregation. Almost half (46 percent) speak about it because they have been trained in domestic violence issues.

Almost half (46 percent) of pastors who don't address sexual or domestic violence say it is not an issue in their congregation. Twenty-nine percent say other topics are more important. Nineteen percent say they don't know the issue well

enough. Nineteen percent also say it is not an issue in their community. Sixteen percent say it is not appropriate to address domestic or sexual violence publicly.

“Despite the widespread public conversation, 1 in 5 pastors don’t feel compelled to address domestic or sexual violence,” McConnell said.

Action Steps

LifeWay Research found that pastors often take action when they learn about cases of domestic and sexual violence.

Pastors believe victims need help from outside of their families when abuse occurs in the home. Eighty percent say in cases of domestic or sexual violence that occur in the home—including physical violence, child abuse or marital rape—outside intervention is needed. Nine percent say such violence should be resolved primarily within the family. Eleven percent don’t know.

In cases of domestic violence, 82 percent of Protestant senior pastors say they would counsel a victim to seek support from a domestic abuse expert. Eight percent say they would tell a victim to try and improve the relationship with their spouse. Ten percent don’t know what they would counsel a victim to do.

Sixty-four percent of pastors agree that sexual or domestic violence occurs in the lives of people in their congregation—including 24 percent who strongly agree. Thirty percent disagree—including 13 percent who strongly disagree. Sixty-two percent say their church has taken action against domestic or sexual abuse at least once a year.

Ninety-six percent of pastors say they have a responsibility to ask church members about possible abuse if they see signs of domestic or sexual violence. Three percent disagree.

When responding to a case of domestic or sexual violence, 81

percent of pastors say they have provided a referral to an agency that assists victims. Seventy percent have provided marriage or couple's counseling. Forty-six percent provided counseling for the abuser. Forty percent did a safety risk assessment for the victim.

Despite their willingness to help, many pastors still feel ill-prepared according to the study.

Only about half (55 percent) of pastors say they are familiar or very familiar with domestic violence resources in their community. And half say they don't have sufficient training to address sexual or domestic abuse.

"Pastors want to care for victims of domestic and sexual violence," McConnell said. "And they are often called to care for victims. But they don't always know what to do."

And some of the ways they respond can cause more harm than good according to experts, said McConnell.

Domestic violence experts, for example, say providing safety for victims should come first. Yet less than half of pastors have done an assessment. And many pastors provide couples counseling in response to violence, something experts say can put victims at risk, said McConnell.

"We know caring faith communities respond to need. But in responding to abuse and harassment, we have much work left to do," said Rick Santos, president and CEO of IMA World Health. "Our next generation of faith leaders need to be prepared to preach about prevention from the pulpit, create a safe space within their churches and lend their voices to the movement for lasting change in our society." {eo}

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For more information on this study, visit or view the complete survey report PDF.