

Why Are So Many Pastors Leaving Ministry? New Report Reveals Top Reasons

A new Lifeway Research report reveals that many pastors step away from the pulpit not because of retirement, but due to challenges such as conflict, burnout, and shifts in their personal sense of calling. The findings shed light on the difficulties clergy face in leading congregations and the toll ministry can take on their lives.

As reported by The Christian Post, Lifeway surveyed 730 former pastors from four Protestant denominations and found that around one-third pointed to either burnout or church conflict as reasons for leaving. The study noted that while some pastors remain in ministry in a different role, many left the pastorate earlier than expected due to significant struggles.

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“The lead stated reason was a ‘change in calling,’ with 40% of respondents citing this as the cause of their departure,” the report said. “Other cited reasons included family issues (10%), personal finances (10%), illness (6%), being a poor fit with a church (6%), denominational issues (4%), and the church closing due to the COVID-19 lockdowns (3%).”

Conflict proved to be a particularly damaging factor. According to the survey, 87% of pastors experienced conflict at some point in their last congregation, with nearly half (49%) reporting a “significant personal attack.” Additionally, 56% said the disputes arose from proposed changes within the church.



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Lifeway also found that many pastors had relatively short tenures. "Forty-three percent reported leaving their positions as pastor after serving just one congregation, while another 43% reported serving as a senior pastor for 10 years or less before leaving," the report explained.

Despite these difficulties, over half of former pastors remain in ministry in other capacities. "Lifeway also reported that, despite leaving the position of pastor, 53% of respondents said that they continue to work in ministry, though in a different capacity," the report noted.

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The study also drew comparisons to a similar 2021 survey, showing both consistencies and shifts in the top reasons pastors step away:

- 2024 study: 40% change in calling, 18% conflict, 16% burnout
- 2021 study: 32% change in calling, 18% conflict, 13% burnout

The broader context shows these struggles are not isolated. The Hartford Institute for Religion Research reported that 53% of clergy had seriously considered leaving ministry at least once since 2020, citing the strain of shepherding congregations through the pandemic and other challenges.

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As the church continues to face cultural and spiritual pressures, this report showcases the need for prayer and

support for pastors. Christians are called to lift up those who serve, asking God to strengthen, encourage and sustain them as they lead His people.

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