

Majority of Pastors Doubt Global Warming but Recycle at Church

While many churches are acting “green,” the majority of pastors disagree global warming is real and man-made. The percentage of skeptics has dropped since 2010, but the percentage is still higher than in 2008, according to a survey by LifeWay Research.

The October survey of Protestant pastors’ views of environmental issues shows Protestant pastors in the Northeast, older pastors and pastors self-identifying as Democrats tend to be more environmentally active compared to younger, Republicans and counterparts in other regions of the country.

Consistent in the LifeWay Research findings of 2012, 2010 and 2008 is that about a quarter of pastors say they speak on the environment to their churches “several times a year.” The percentage of pastors who say they rarely speak on the environment decreased in 2012 to 34 percent. Fifteen percent of Protestant pastors say they never speak on the environment.

Global Warming

When asked to respond to the statement: “I believe global warming is real and man-made,” 43 percent of pastors affirm the statement (up from 36 percent in 2010 but lower than the 47 percent in 2008), while 54 percent disagree. The percentage disagreeing is higher than in 2008 (48 percent), but lower than 2010, when 60 percent disagreed global warming is real and man made.

The views of pastors also parallel the opinion trend among Americans. According to the Pew Research Center, the percentage of Americans who say the earth is warming because

of human activity has rebounded from the low of 34 percent in 2010 to 42 percent in October 2012 and March 2013, which is still lower than the 2008 total of 47 percent.

Stark differences of opinions are seen between Democrat and Republican pastors, the survey shows.

Pastors identifying as Democrats are the most likely to strongly agree (76 percent) in the validity of man-made global warming, followed by Independents (20 percent). Just 7 percent of Republican pastors strongly agree. Conversely, Republican pastors are the most likely to strongly disagree (49 percent), followed by Independents (35 percent) and Democrats (5 percent).

"Pastor opinions on global warming reflect their own political beliefs," said Scott McConnell, director of LifeWay Research. "The pendulum of public and pastor opinions on man-made global warming is swinging back toward agreement but still lacks a majority. For some, the terminology has shifted, and environmentalists now speak of 'climate change.' However, for consistency and comparison, we have asked the same question multiple times—and pastors are split on the issue—along most Americans."

The survey also reveals pastors age 65 or older put more stock in the validity of global warming over their younger counterparts. This group is more likely (32 percent) than pastors age 45-54 (20 percent) and 18-44 (19 percent) to strongly agree with the statement: "I believe global warming is real and man made."

Other demographic differences include:

- Pastors in large cities (32 percent) are more likely to strongly agree with the statement than pastors in small cities (20 percent) and rural areas (18 percent);
- Southern pastors are less likely (18 percent) to strongly agree with the statement than pastors in the

- Northeast (30 percent) and West (25 percent);
- Self-identified mainline pastors are more likely than self-identified evangelical pastors to strongly agree (35 percent vs. 15 percent) with the statement.

Recycling

According to the LifeWay Research survey, less than half (45 percent) of pastors agree their church has taken tangible steps to reduce their carbon footprint.

Similar to other responses, efforts in reducing carbon footprints are highest among Democrats and those large cities. Democrat pastors are more likely than Republican pastors to strongly agree (34 percent vs. 8 percent). Pastors in large cities are also more likely (22 percent) to strongly agree compared to those in small cities (12 percent) and rural areas (11 percent).

Recycling programs—one of the main ways individuals and organizations attempt to reduce their carbon footprint—is well established among churches. More than 60 percent of Protestant pastors say their church has an active recycling program in place at their church building while a third (34 percent) do not.

“More churches are proactively recycling and reducing carbon emissions in urban areas,” McConnell said. “While this may reflect being attentive to local community needs, it also may simply be a reflection of municipal regulations or the economic pressure on utility bills. Either way, it seems to be good news that churches are caring more about the environment and acting accordingly.”

Responses to the statement “Our church has an active recycling program in place at our church building” show that:

- Pastors in the Northeast are the most likely to strongly agree (52 percent) while pastors in the South are the least likely (30 percent);

- Pastors age 55-64 are more likely to strongly agree (42 percent) than pastors age 45-54 (34 percent) and 18-44 (31 percent);
- Democrat pastors are the most likely to strongly agree (62 percent) compared to Republican pastors (29 percent);
- Self-identified mainline pastors are more likely to strongly agree (43 percent) than evangelical pastors (34 percent).

“‘Saving the world’ may mean different things to an environmentalist than to a pastor,” McConnell noted. “Yet many churches are actively engaged in proclaiming spiritual salvation at the same time they are being environmentally conscious and engaged in creation care.”