

Pastors Think They're Keeping Their Sermons Shorter—Churchgoers Disagree

When pastors begin to welcome back their congregations to in-person services, they may want to consider offering them shorter sermons.

A study from Nashville-based LifeWay Research found Protestant pastors' estimates of their sermon lengths are shorter than the estimates of their congregations. Additionally, more than a quarter of churchgoers say their pastor typically preaches longer than they prefer.

"As churches restart in-person worship services and other church activities, many are calling for churches to refocus on the essentials," said Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research. "Prior to the pandemic, that would have meant shorter sermons for some churchgoers."

In the two surveys, conducted in September 2019, churchgoers and pastors have different ideas of how long the sermons run each Sunday.

Pastors' Perspective

When asked how long their typical sermon is, 85% of Protestant pastors say it is less than 40 minutes. The most common lengths of sermons according to pastors are 15 minutes to less than 20 minutes (22%), 20 minutes to less than 30 minutes (26%) and 30 minutes to less than 40 minutes (28%).

Few say they deliver sermons that are shorter than 15 minutes (9%) or more than 40 minutes (14%).

White pastors are more likely to deliver sermons that are shorter than 20 minutes, while African American pastors and

those of other ethnicities are more likely to say their typical message lasts at least 40 minutes.

Pastors with a master's (42%) or doctoral degree (34%) are more likely to deliver a less than 20-minute sermon compared to those with less formal education (10%).

Those with a bachelor's degree or no college degree (24%) are more likely to preach at least 40 minutes than those with advanced degrees (10%).

Mainline pastors (54%) are more likely than evangelical pastors (17%) to say their sermons are shorter than 20 minutes.

Denominationally, Lutheran (86%), Methodist (52%) and Presbyterian/Reformed (47%) pastors are more likely to say their sermons are less than 20 minutes compared to Restorationist movement (18%), Pentecostal (3%) and Baptist (2%) pastors.

The smaller the church, the shorter the sermons, according to the pastors' responses. Those at churches with attendance fewer than 50 (43%) and attendance between 50 and 99 (35%) are more likely to preach less than 20 minutes than those at churches of 100 to 249 (23%) and pastors at churches of 250 or more (21%).

"Pastors have a wide range of styles when it comes to sermon length," said McConnell. "However, the clear differences by denomination and church size indicate many churches themselves have different traditions when it comes to the length of sermons."

Churchgoers' Opinions

While 85% of Protestant pastors say their sermons are shorter than 40 minutes, 66% of Protestant churchgoers say the same.

The largest gap between the perception of pastors and that of

churchgoers lies toward the two extremes.

Protestant churchgoers (11%) are half as likely to say their pastor typically preaches 15 minutes to less than 20 minutes as pastors (22%) are to say their sermons are that length.

Churchgoers (12%) are six times more likely than pastors (2%) to say the typical sermon lasts at least an hour.

“Some sermons feel like they are longer than the pastor estimates,” said McConnell. “Churchgoers report sermons over 40 minutes in both small and large churches, but that could be related to different definitions of what elements of the church service are included in the sermon. For example, pastors may give announcements, do a Scripture reading and conduct an altar call surrounding the sermon, which may lead to congregants feeling as if the message itself is longer.”

Most churchgoers say their sermon length preference falls between 20 and 40 minutes. Around a quarter (27%) say they best like sermons that last 20 minutes to less than 30 minutes. Similar numbers (25%) say their preference is a message that lasts from 30 to less than 40 minutes.

Not many churchgoers say they want sermons shorter than 20 minutes. Close to 1 in 7 churchgoers (14%) say they prefer 15 to less than 20-minute sermons. Few (3%) say their preference is less than 15 minutes.

Some churchgoers, however, say they like longer sermons best. Around 1 in 10 (9%) prefer 40- to less than 50-minute messages, with 5% say their preference is 50 minutes to less than an hour. Close to 1 in 8 churchgoers (12%) want to sit down on Sundays for a message that tops an hour.

Whatever their preference, most churchgoers (55%) say their pastor fits in that time frame.

If congregants want a change to their pastor's sermon length,

it's probably for it to be shorter. Churchgoers are twice as likely to say their pastor's typical sermon is longer than they prefer (27%) than they are to say their pastor's typical sermon is shorter than they prefer (13%).

"Many pastors have likely been preaching shorter sermons while their churches have met virtually," said McConnell. "More than a quarter of churchgoers would prefer such shorter sermons when they return to meeting in person." {eoa}

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