

Survey: Slow Economy Continues to Weigh on Pastors

Pastors say the economy continues to have a negative impact on their churches despite stabilized giving, according to a survey by LifeWay Research.

The survey of 1,000 Protestant pastors asked respondents, "How is the economy impacting your church?" Almost two-thirds responded negatively, with 56 percent indicating somewhat negatively and 8 percent very negatively. One quarter of the pastors surveyed said, "The economy has had no impact on my church," while 9 percent indicated a positive impact on their churches.

"Pastor views on the economy are similar to many economic outlook surveys," says Scott McConnell, director of LifeWay Research. "We weren't surprised the current perspective of economic impact on churches is predominantly negative."

However, there is some good news. LifeWay Research found that while the sluggish economic recovery has translated into flat or reduced giving for many churches, the trend continues of fewer churches reporting declines in giving.

- 23 percent of churches had lower giving in 2010 than 2009.
- 19 percent of churches had lower giving in 2011 than in 2010.
- Through May 2012 giving for 15 percent of churches has been below 2011.

Similarly, fewer churches are failing to meet budget expectations. Through May 2011, giving for 27 percent of churches was below budget. At the same time in 2012, only 22 percent of churches reported giving below budget—a 5 percent decrease from the year before.

The trend seems to indicate a stabilization of giving rather than widespread increases in giving. Through May 2011, 36 percent of churches saw giving the same as 2010. And through May 2012, 40 percent of churches saw giving the same as 2011.

“Many people refer to the ‘new normal’ of tighter consumer spending, but it appears there has been no adjustment in economic expectations,” says McConnell. “Pastors and Americans in general are still disappointed when they experience a lack of consistent or increasing growth.”

According to the survey, a larger percentage of pastors serving in large cities and the suburbs (72 percent in both areas) cited a negative impact on their church from the economy in 2012 than those serving in small cities (63 percent) and rural areas (61 percent).

Also, a higher percentage of pastors in the West (71 percent) said the current state of the economy was having a negative impact on their churches compared to churches in the Northeast, South and Midwest (all at 63 percent).