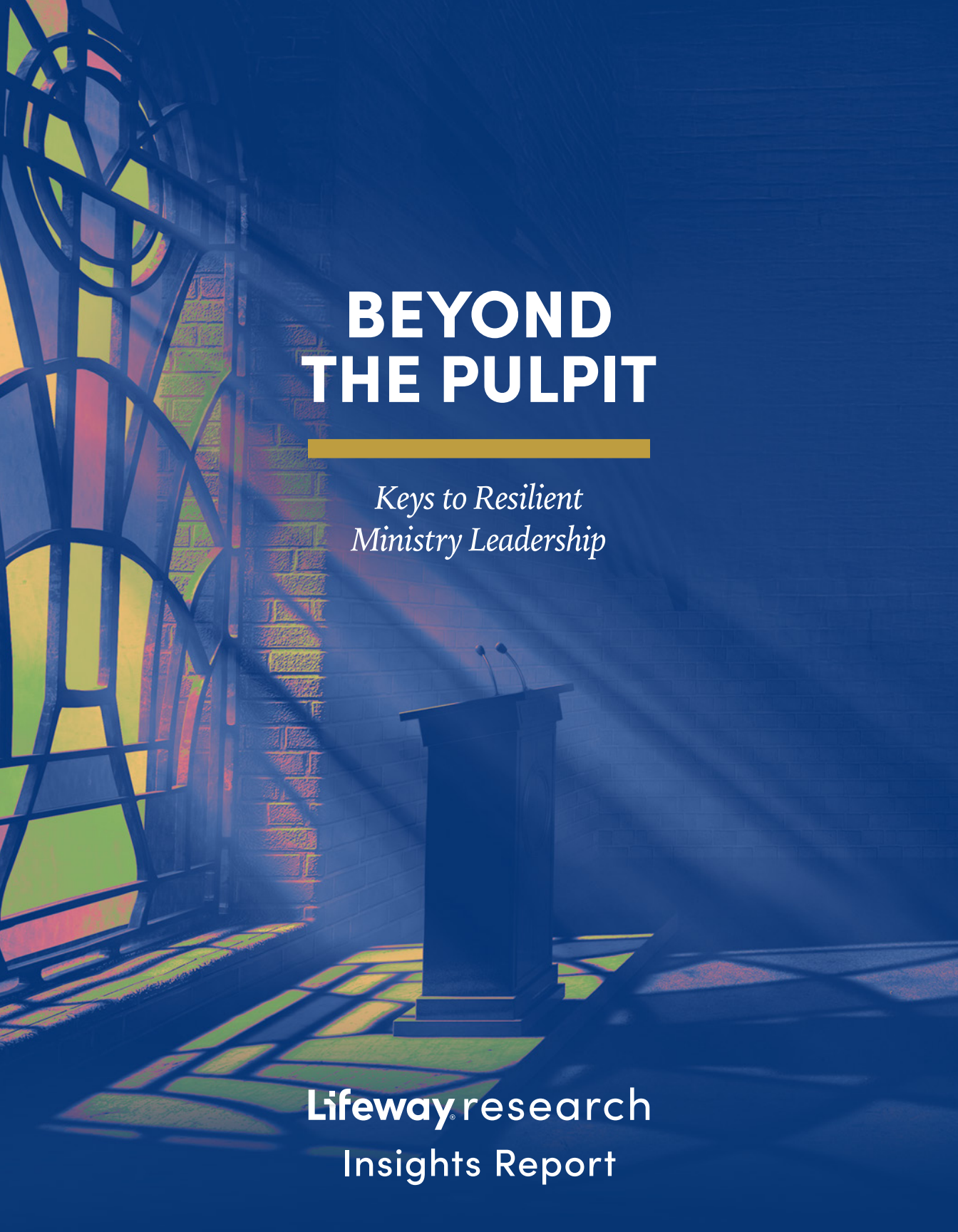




BEYOND THE PULPIT

*Keys to Resilient
Ministry Leadership*

Lifewayresearch
Insights Report

The call to pastoral ministry is both a privilege and a weight. In this Insights Report, we set out to tell your stories carefully—both the resolve that keeps you serving and the pressures that can wear you down. The data paints a nuanced picture: Despite frequent strain, very few pastors step away each year. Only around 1 in 100 pastors leave the ministry annually, a remarkably steady and low rate. Most departures are related to a change in calling, but conflict and burnout also play notable roles. Those findings remind us that endurance in ministry is possible—and the environments we create play a crucial role in sustaining it.

The 2025 Lifeway Research study, sponsored by Houston's First Baptist Church and Richard Dockins, an occupational medicine physician concerned about pastoral attrition, surveyed more than 1,500 current Protestant pastors and more than 700 former Protestant pastors.

Many pastors report feeling “on call” around the clock and frequently overwhelmed. Yet we also see healthy rhythms that foster perseverance. Most pastors unplug weekly for Sabbath rest, many churches provide clear expectation documents, and a large majority of pastors feel free to say “no” when expectations become unrealistic.

Pastors overwhelmingly prioritize their spouses and children when time conflicts arise. And intentional practices—protecting time with family, planned time away, and periodic sabbaticals—appear to strengthen both the pastor's home and the local church.

The research also reveals pastors' complicated relationship with counseling. Compared to a decade ago, pastors have less training in counseling but are more hesitant to refer church members to professionals. At the same time, pastors are sharing personal struggles with trusted peers less frequently. But analysis suggests structured support significantly improves a pastor's likelihood of staying in ministry.

We pray these findings will help you and your church pursue wise, practical steps to clarify expectations, invest in family, maintain rhythms of rest, cultivate transparent relationships, and engage trusted counseling resources. May the Lord use these insights to strengthen your endurance and joy as you shepherd His people.

Scott McConnell,
Executive Director of Lifeway Research

Key Findings

- » **Pastoral attrition remains low.**
Only 1.2% of pastors leave the ministry each year, showing remarkable stability over the past decade.
- » **Burnout and conflict are among the leading causes for pastors leaving ministry.**
Among former pastors, the most common reasons are a change in calling (40%), church conflict (18%), and burnout (16%).
- » **Family prioritization supports longevity in pastoral ministry.**
Four in 5 pastors (80%) say they consistently put their family first when time conflicts arise. Prioritizing family over ministry demands is a key factor in sustaining long-term pastoral service.
- » **Financial concerns are common.**
Financial stress remains a significant challenge for many pastors, as nearly half (46%) are often concerned about their families' financial security.
- » **Counseling training is declining.**
Compared to a decade ago, fewer pastors have formal counseling education or attend counseling conferences.
- » **Pastors express reluctance to refer people to professional counselors.**
Pastors are less likely than they were a decade ago to refer church members to professional counselors (72% v. 76%) or maintain referral lists (52% v. 67%).
- » **Unrealistic expectations drive departures.**
Over half of former pastors (53%) felt their church had unrealistic expectations of them.
- » **Conflict is nearly universal among those who leave ministry.**
Nearly 9 in 10 former pastors (87%) experienced conflict in their last congregation.
- » **Clear expectations and documentation matter.**
Pastors with a document outlining church expectations are 2.7 times more likely to remain in ministry.
- » **Supportive relationships reduce isolation.**
Pastors who regularly share struggles with lay leaders (2.2 times) or Bible study groups (3.9 times) are significantly more likely to stay in ministry.

Pastoral Commitment to Ministry

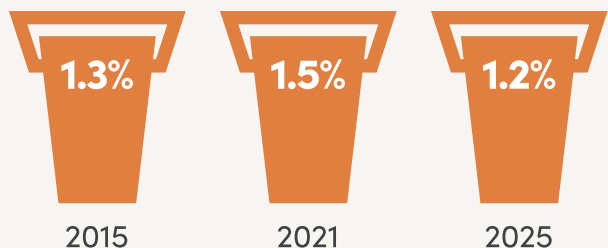
“Many of those leaving the pastorate feel they are moving at God’s direction to another role of ministry. However, it’s easy for those outside and those inside the church to fixate on those who leave because of conflict, burnout, or moral failure. Speculation always overstates these cases, yet these are the outcomes churches can seek to prevent.”

—Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research

Pastors face unique challenges in their roles and often feel overwhelmed, but few decide to step away from the pulpit and pursue another career.

Only around 1 in 100 pastors leave the ministry each year. The percentage of pastors who leave for reasons other than retirement or death has remained statistically unchanged over the past decade: 1.3% in 2015, 1.5% in 2021, and 1.2% in 2025.

RATE OF PASTORS LEAVING THE PULPIT EACH YEAR REMAINS UNCHANGED IN THE LAST DECADE



In the past decade, 7% of pastors left and began working in another ministry role other than pastor, 3% work in a non-ministry role, and 2% are involved in something that is not ministry-related and are not retirement age. These groups that leave the pastorate before retirement reveal a current annual attrition rate of 1.2% among evangelical and Black Protestant pastors. This means that in any given year since 2015, slightly more than 1 in 100 pastors walked away from the pulpit.

The 1.2% annual attrition rate is remarkably low, especially considering the demands of the pastoral role. Two in 3 pastors (67%) feel they must be “on-call” 24 hours a day. Another 57% say their role is frequently overwhelming.

Around half (47%) of pastors often feel the demands of ministry are greater than they can handle. A third (34%) feel isolated as a pastor. One in 5 (19%) say their church has unrealistic expectations of them.

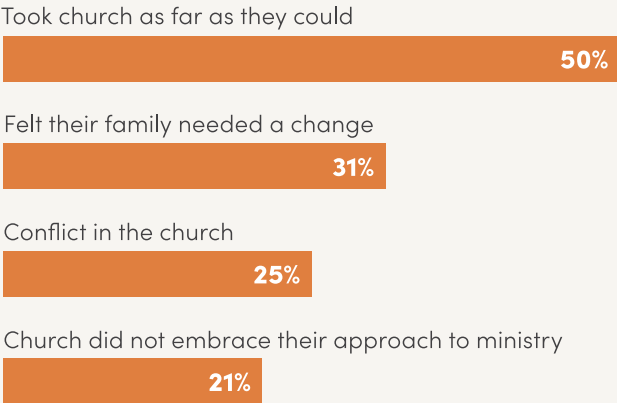
Many congregations seek to avoid issues with their pastor by having a document that clearly communicates the church’s expectations of the pastor (72%). Still, around 1 in 5 pastors (21%) don’t believe their church accurately described the congregation before they arrived.

When current pastors were asked why the previous pastor left the ministry, the most common reasons were a change in calling (37%), conflict in a church (23%), and burnout (22%). Others left because of a poor fit with a church (17%) or family issues (12%). Few were forced to step away because of moral or ethical issues (7%), an illness (5%), or personal finances (3%). Another 4% left because they weren’t prepared for the job.

While few pastors left ministry completely, some felt they needed to transition to a new congregation. Among the current pastors who previously served at another church, most left their previous congregations of their own volition. Half (50%) say they left because they took the church as far as they could. Three in 10 (31%) felt their family needed a change. A quarter (25%) left due to conflict in the church, while 21% walked away because the church did not embrace their approach to ministry.

Fewer say they left their previous church because the congregation had unrealistic expectations of them (17%), they were not a good fit for the church (17%), or another reason like feeling God called them elsewhere or to a new opportunity (13%). For some, the decision to leave was made for them, as 13% were reassigned and 8% were asked to leave the church.

CURRENT PASTORS ON WHY THEY LEFT THEIR PREVIOUS CHURCH



Although only a quarter of pastors say they left their last church due to conflict, most pastors who previously led a different church had some conflict in their previous congregation (65%). More than a third say there was conflict over proposed changes (37%) or with lay leaders (35%). Similarly, 35% say they experienced a significant personal attack.

Around a quarter felt conflict over their leadership style (27%) or expectations about the pastor's role (24%). Fewer clashed with their previous congregation over doctrinal differences (18%) or national or local politics (9%). Around a third (35%) say they didn't experience any of these conflicts in their earlier church.

4 WARNING SIGNS YOU'RE APPROACHING BURNOUT

1. FRUSTRATION WITH PEOPLE

If you feel you're continually mad or frustrated with people, you're quickly approaching burnout. You're in this for people. It's foolish to knock out tasks in perpetual frustration with the people you're ultimately here to serve.

2. DIFFICULTY FOCUSING

If you sense you're mentally having a difficult time focusing or are slowing down mentally, you're likely exhausted.

3. PHYSICAL SIGNS

Intense stress will often manifest itself in your body somehow. From random eye twitches, to neck pain, to something else, stress will impact your body. Listen to your body.

4. FEELING EXHAUSTED

If you're a pastor and you used to feel rested from preaching by Monday afternoon, but now it's Wednesday or later (or never) before you feel rested, you're spiraling into burnout.

5 PRINCIPLES FOR MANAGING MINISTRY CONFLICT

1. ANTICIPATE CONFLICT.

Being proactive means taking steps to inform and educate people about conflict before it happens, not reactively waiting until it happens. It also means solving small problems before they become large ones—preventing little fires from raging out of control and causing irreparable damage.

2. ADDRESS CONFLICT INTENTIONALLY.

While no one really enjoys addressing conflict, wise leaders know they must take initiative to deal with it. It seldom goes away on its own. Dealing with conflict requires leaders to go where angels fear to tread. Addressing conflict within an organization requires dealing directly with opponents (and/or helping them face each other).

3. RESOLVE CONFLICT APPROPRIATELY.

When leaders resolve conflict appropriately, they reach the best decision possible, not necessarily one that makes everyone happy. The goal of conflict resolution, particularly conflict related to major change, is advancing the organization's mission as it aligns with God's mission.

4. ACCEPT MIXED OUTCOMES.

When a conflict is successfully resolved, particularly in a large organization, some people will be pleased, others will be disappointed, some will stay fully engaged, and some will leave for other opportunities. Leaders who cannot accept mixed results are doomed to a perpetual sense of frustration with themselves and the people they lead.

5. MOVE ON.

Once every effort has been made to resolve a conflict, regardless of the result, leaders must move on. Stop revisiting, talking about, and thinking about the conflict. The key to moving on from unsatisfactory conflict resolution is refocusing on accomplishing your mission.

Pastors and Their Families

“There’s no such thing as ‘neutral’ in marriage. You’re either moving forward or moving backward. But you can’t coast to a healthy marriage; you’ve got to intentionally invest in it.”

—Andrew Hébert, lead pastor of Mobberly Baptist Church

The pastor’s role can compete with their family for attention. When they do, however, pastors say they choose home life over church life.

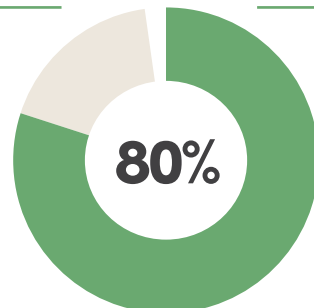
The study found 90% of pastors are married. Far fewer are single and never married (3%), divorced or separated (3%), or widowed (3%).

Among married pastors, 9 in 10 (89%) say their spouse is enthusiastic about their life in ministry together.

For evangelical and Black Protestant pastors, 4 in 5 (80%) consistently put their family first when they have time conflicts, while 18% disagree and 2% aren’t sure.

**PASTORS MAKE
FAMILY THEIR
PRIORITY**

4 in 5
consistently put
their families first
when they have
time conflicts.



Among married pastors, 96% believe their spouse is very satisfied with their marriage today. Few disagree (3%) or aren't sure (1%).

Those beliefs of satisfaction may stem from pastors saying they're prioritizing time and attention for their spouses and families. More than 4 in 5 (82%) say in the past year they prayed regularly with their spouse for each other. A similar percentage (80%) took a vacation with their family for at least a week away from church in the past year.

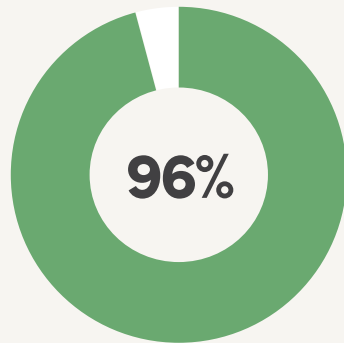
Many pastors are also seeking to invest in their marriage. Two in 3 (66%) planned a date night alone with their spouse at least once a month during the last year. More than 1 in 5 (22%) attended a marriage retreat or conference with their spouse. Some (7%) attended marriage counseling with their spouse.

A [2017 Lifeway Research study of U.S. Protestant pastors' spouses](#) found they often agree about the health of their marriage. Four in 5 (80%) say they are extremely or very satisfied with their marriage. Seven in 10 (70%) spend quality time alone with their spouse, like a date night, at least once a month.

While only a third of evangelical and Black Protestant pastors (32%) say their congregation has an encouragement group that invests in the well-being of the pastor's family, pastors feel encouraged by their churches. Almost 9 in 10 (89%) say their families regularly receive genuine encouragement from their congregations.

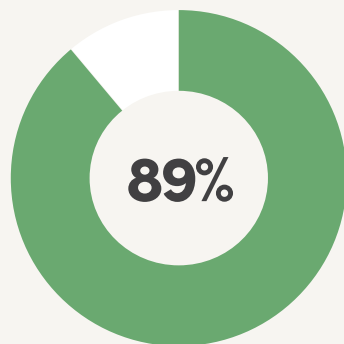
That doesn't mean pastors aren't dealing with some issues related to family and ministry. Almost half (46%) say they are often concerned about their families' financial security. While 54% disagree, only 31% strongly disagree, which means around 7 in 10 (69%) pastors have some worries about their families' finances.

PASTORS FEEL CONFIDENT THEIR SPOUSE IS ENJOYING MARRIAGE AND MINISTRY



**More than
9 in 10**

say their spouses are
very satisfied with their
marriages today.



9 in 10

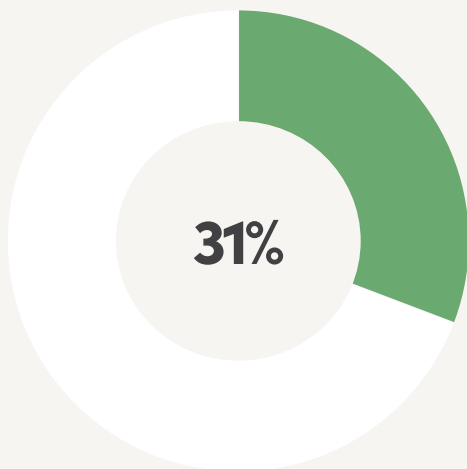
say their spouses
are enthusiastic
about their life in
ministry together.

Around 3 in 4 pastors (74%) report sharing their struggles with their spouses at least once a month, but this is down from 90% in 2015. Additionally, 3 in 10 pastors (31%) say the demands of ministry keep them from spending time with their families. This may be why 16% of pastors feel their families resent the demands of pastoral ministry.

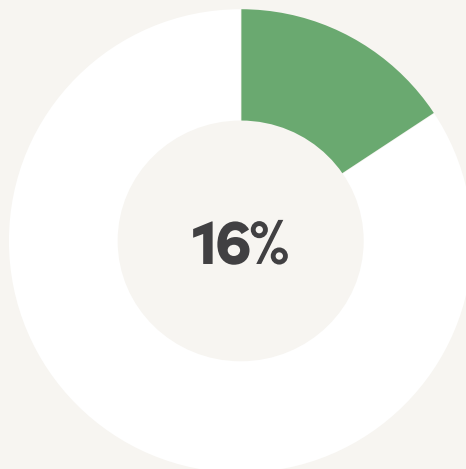
According to the [2017 Lifeway Research study of pastors' spouses](#), few share resentments toward the ministry, but they are more likely than their spouses to experience ministry and familial conflicts. Protestant pastors' spouses are around twice as likely to say they often resent the demands of ministry on their families as evangelical and Black Protestant pastors are to say their families resent those demands (35% v. 16%).

Additionally, spouses are around twice as likely to say congregational demands interfere with their families' free time together during the week as pastors are to say the demands of ministry keep them from spending time with their families (59% v. 31%).

FEW PASTORS FEEL A CONFLICT BETWEEN MINISTRY DEMANDS AND THEIR FAMILIES



3 in 10
say the demands of ministry
keep them from spending time
with their families.



1 in 6
feel their family resents the
demands of pastoral ministry.

9 THINGS TO DO WHEN YOUR FAMILY RESENTS YOUR MINISTRY

1. REMEMBER YOUR FAMILY IS YOUR PRIMARY MINISTRY.

Your family is your first responsibility. That doesn't mean you're beholden to their every whim and wish, but you cannot callously overlook or ignore them either.

2. REMEMBER YOU ARE CALLED TO LEAD YOUR FAMILY.

You're called to cast the vision for what kind of family you want to be, where you're going as a family, how you'll enjoy Jesus together, and how you'll serve Jesus together. This includes making clear and compelling the reasons why the local church will be central in your family's life, as part of God's design.

3. ACKNOWLEDGE THAT MINISTRY IS HARD ON KIDS AND COSTLY TO FAMILIES.

Pastoral ministry comes at a cost to the family in time, emotional expenditure, exposure, and many other ways. Talk with your kids about this. Acknowledge their discomforts and frustrations and admit yours.

4. CONSIDER THE STAGE YOUR KIDS ARE IN AND THE COST OF MINISTRY FOR THEM.

Wisdom and the memory of our own younger days tell us different stages of childhood and adolescence come with different challenges. And some kids are burdened with particular struggles. Pay attention to these things and consider how your role in ministry is affecting them for good, ill, or otherwise.

5. TAKE YOUR KIDS' CHALLENGES TO YOUR FELLOW LEADERS FOR PRAYER AND CARE.

You need fellow leaders who care for your kids deeply and want their best, those who will seek to protect them and their well-being. You are not tattling on your kids. You're not making a report. You are asking fellow believers for prayer and counsel.

6. CONSIDER YOUR HOME AND FAMILY DYNAMICS.

This is a diplomatic way of saying, "Look in the mirror." Is there anything in the relational patterns and culture of your home that exacerbates the pressures of ministry on your kids?

7. CONSIDER YOUR CHURCH'S RELATIONAL AND CULTURAL DYNAMICS.

If, as you consider these dynamics, you begin to recognize cultural problems within the church that are burdening your family, you are then faced with the difficult question of how to respond. But you must respond. Will you boldly address the problems, quietly seek to adjust them over time, acquiesce to the prevailing culture at the expense of your family, or will you leave? Seek God's wisdom on how to respond.

8. FIND OUTLETS FOR RELIEF.

You and your family need outlets to relieve the pressures and disappointments of ministry when they come. You need Sabbath days away from ministry weekly, and you need vacations annually. It doesn't need to be lavish or expensive, but it does need to be away. You likely need a sabbatical rhythm, especially if you have been in ministry for any length of time.

9. CONSIDER STEPPING AWAY FROM MINISTRY.

If staying in the ministry is destroying the soul of your child, quit. If all conversations, counseling, rest rhythms, and prayer aren't relieving the burden on your child, quit. Maybe it's a temporary leave, or maybe it's a career change. But either way, it's an announcement to your child that you love them and that the well-being of their soul doesn't depend on your success in ministry.

4 WAYS TO INVEST IN YOUR MARRIAGE AS A PASTOR

1. OBSERVE WEEKLY SABBATH.

Once a week, you need to pull back and invest in the health of your own soul, the relationships that matter most to you (such as your marriage), and your walk with God. There is freedom in what this day looks like, but one day a week, you need to stop working and enjoy the opportunity to rest, pray, play, and enjoy your family—especially your spouse.

2. ENGAGE IN FREQUENT CONVERSATION ABOUT THE THINGS THAT MATTER MOST.

Setting aside time for intentional conversation with your wife about the things that matter most is important to your marital health. It's more important to date after you get married than before you get married. You need to be a student of your spouse and continue to invest in them emotionally.

3. TAKE ALL YOUR VACATION DAYS AND GET AWAY REGULARLY.

Dream big with your spouse about where you'd like to go. Work to make those trips happen. And don't feel guilty for getting away together. Your marriage (and as a result, your church) will benefit greatly.

4. INVEST IN HOBBIES TOGETHER.

Healthy pastors develop an identity apart from the work they do. You are not, first and foremost, what you do. Investing in hobbies, even if you feel guilty in doing so, helps you maintain an identity apart from your job so you can lead from a healthy soul. Beyond that, hobbies are wonderful opportunities to do things together as a couple.

Pastors and Counseling

“When a pastor attends to their own emotional and spiritual health, they model something powerful for their congregation. They show that maturity includes humility, wisdom includes asking for help, and faith includes using the means of grace God has provided—including the wise counsel of others.”

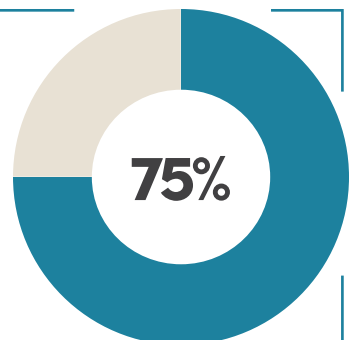
—Jesse Masson, licensed professional counselor

Compared to a decade ago, pastors have less training in counseling but are more hesitant to refer church members to professionals.

When counseling church members of the opposite sex, 75% of pastors have another staff member present, while 14% do not. Another 6% say they don’t counsel anyone, and 3% don’t counsel members of the opposite sex. The percentage who counsel with another staff member present dropped slightly from 78% in both 2015 and 2021.

MOST PASTORS DON'T COUNSEL MEMBERS OF THE OPPOSITE SEX ALONE

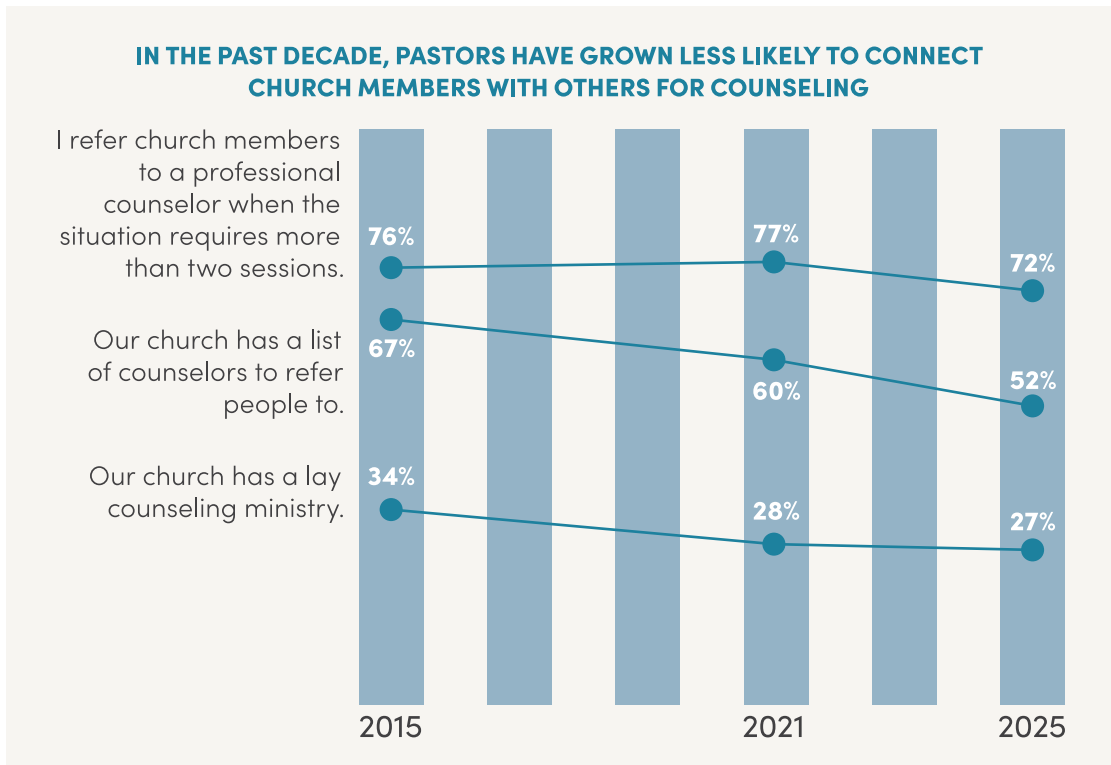
3 in 4 have another staff member present when counseling members of the other sex.



Most pastors follow best practices and refer a member to a professional counselor if the situation requires more than two sessions. Almost 3 in 4 (72%) say they refer someone after a couple of visits, but that's down from 2015 (76%) and 2021 (77%).

Additionally, the number of pastors maintaining a list of counselors to whom they can refer people has steadily dropped over the past decade. In 2015, 2 in 3 pastors (67%) had such a list, but that fell to 60% in 2021 and down to almost half (52%) in 2025.

Compared to 10 years ago, churches are also less likely to have a lay counseling ministry. In 2015, 34% of congregations had this. That dropped to 28% in 2021 and remains at 27% today.



Despite being less likely to send people to professional counselors beyond their church and have lay counselors within their church, evangelical and Black Protestant pastors have less counseling training than they did a decade ago.

Few pastors (9%) have a graduate degree in counseling, a percentage that has remained steady over the past decade. But fewer pastors are gaining counseling knowledge in other ways.

In 2015, most pastors (52%) had at least taken graduate school courses in counseling, but that has fallen to 46% in 2025. While few pastors with no college degree (19%) or only a bachelor's degree (30%) have taken such classes, even many of those with additional formal education skipped counseling courses. Around 3 in 5 pastors with a master's degree (61%) and 2 in 3 pastors with a doctoral degree (66%) say they've had those courses during their schooling.

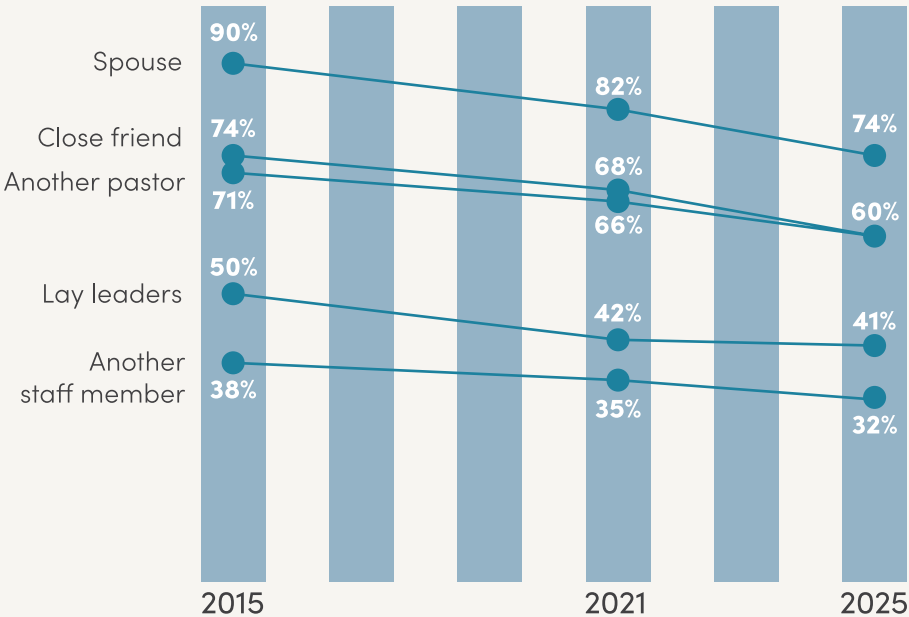
Beyond formal educational training in counseling, fewer pastors are attending conferences or even reading books on the subject. In 2015, around 2 in 3 pastors (64%) attended a counseling conference. That fell to 58% in 2021 and is less than half (48%) in 2025. The percentage of pastors who have read several books or articles on counseling has dropped from 90% in 2015 to 87% in 2021 and 81% in 2025.

In terms of their own mental health, fewer evangelical and Black Protestant pastors say they feel isolated—38% in 2021 and 34% in 2025—but fewer are sharing their struggles with others.

A vast majority of pastors say they are meeting with someone else to share their struggles at least monthly. The most likely person that pastors share with are their spouses (74%), another pastor (60%), and a close friend (60%). Fewer pastors regularly confide in lay leaders in their church (41%), a mentor (41%), another staff member (32%), or a Bible study group in their church (29%). Only 1 in 10 (9%) say they meet with a counselor once a month to share struggles.

However, pastors are less likely than they have ever been in the past decade to share with many of these individuals and groups. The percentage who regularly share their struggles with their spouse has steadily declined over the last 10 years (90% in 2015, 82% in 2021, and 74% in 2025). The same type of decline has occurred concerning pastors sharing with a close friend (74%, 68%, and 60%) and another pastor (71%, 66%, and 60%). Pastors are also less likely in 2025 than they were in 2015 to share with lay leaders (50% v. 41%) and another staff member (38% v. 32%).

PASTORS GROW LESS LIKELY TO SHARE STRUGGLES WITH SEVERAL PEOPLE



3 CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING MALE PASTORS COUNSELING WOMEN

1. PASTORS ARE PRIMARILY EQUIPPERS, NOT COUNSELORS.

The pastor's job is to find women the counseling help they need, not to be the counseling help they need. A male pastor should meet only once with a female member to assess the situation (with his spouse or someone else in the room or outside his open door). After this first and only meeting, he should connect her with either a female church member for encouragement or with a Christian counselor.

2. HELP BOTH SPOUSES OR NEITHER.

When either spouse wants to talk to you about the other, they're often looking for a referee, not a pastor. Meeting with only one spouse about a marriage problem will often close the door on helping the other spouse later. Talking to only half the team makes it look like you've chosen sides. Helping only one person in a marriage is like treating only half of a sick body.

3. PRACTICE COUNSELING POLICIES CONSISTENTLY.

Make your position clear from the pulpit. There may be numerous opportunities to make an exception, but it's probably not a good issue to decide on a case-by-case basis.

8 REASONS PASTORS RESIST GOING TO COUNSELING

1. THEY'RE UNCOMFORTABLE WITH THE ROLE REVERSAL.

Pastors are accustomed to being the counselor, not the one being counseled. For some pastors, reversing roles in a counseling office is not only unfamiliar but uncomfortable, because it means giving up some measure of control and being vulnerable.

2. THEY'RE SUPPOSED TO BE THE EXPERTS.

Pastors are accustomed to giving answers, not asking for them. You'd think a professional counselor would readily recognize the need for his own therapy and promptly schedule an appointment. But this isn't always the case.

3. THEY'RE CONCERNED ABOUT CONFIDENTIALITY.

It's more than a fear the counselor won't keep the confessed struggles a secret, but the fear of running into a church member or community member in the waiting room or being seen going in the front door of a counseling center. This fear is connected to pastors' suspicions that their church expects them to be "super shepherds"—inspiring role models who are a few notches above the average human.

4. THEY DISTRUST PSYCHOLOGY.

Some pastors and ministry leaders seem to have a suspicion about psychology and view it as a humanistic and secular enemy of biblical truth.

5. THEY OVER-SPIRITUALIZE MENTAL HEALTH.

Pastors who've internalized the message "Counseling is a poor substitute for discipleship" or "Needing counseling is an indication of spiritual weakness," often fail to get the help they need.

6. THEY CAN'T IDENTIFY THE RIGHT COUNSELOR.

In densely populated communities, there are often hundreds of trained counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists. For pastors in these areas, the challenge isn't finding any counselor but finding the right counselor.

7. THEY HAVE LIMITED ACCESSIBILITY TO A TRAINED LISTENER.

For many pastors who live in rural settings, the availability of experienced professional counselors is often limited. However, most counselors now offer their services via phone sessions or online video calls. This development greatly expands access to licensed counselors.

8. THEY HAVE LIMITED BUDGETS.

When it comes to professional counseling, the question of cost always looms. While counseling is an investment in your mental and/or marital health, affordability is an undeniable factor for most people.



Why Pastors Leave the Pulpit

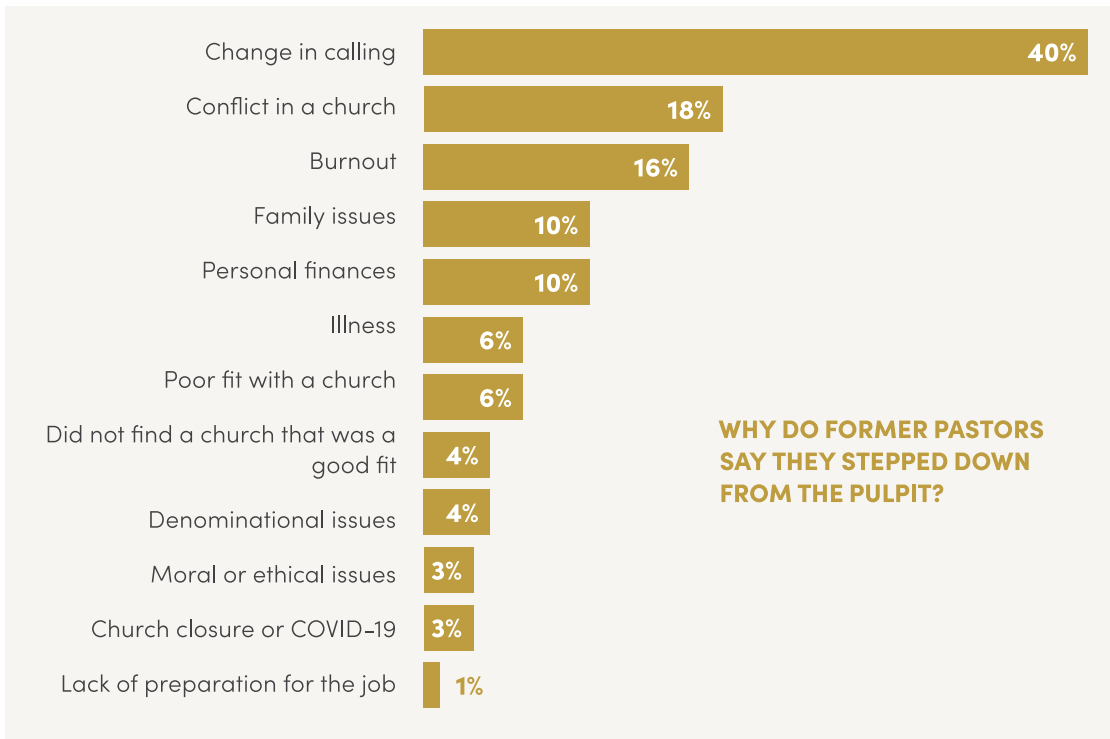
“Preach the Word; love the people; live the faith. Keep your eyes on Jesus and the prize before you. Don’t get discouraged. This too will pass.”

—a former pastor’s advice to current pastors

Few pastors leave the pulpit each year, but those who do mostly say it was a personal decision.

Among pastors from four denominations who stepped down, 2 in 5 (40%) say it was related to a change in their calling.

Other leading causes are conflict in a church (18%), burnout (16%), family issues (10%), and personal finances (10%). Some point to an illness (6%), being a poor fit with a church (6%), not being able to find a church that was a good fit (4%), denominational issues (4%), or the church closing or issues related to the pandemic (3%). Only 1% blame a lack of preparation for the job. While pastors stepping down for a moral or ethical issue garners the most headlines, only 3% are connected to that. Some say another reason (6%) or none of these (3%).

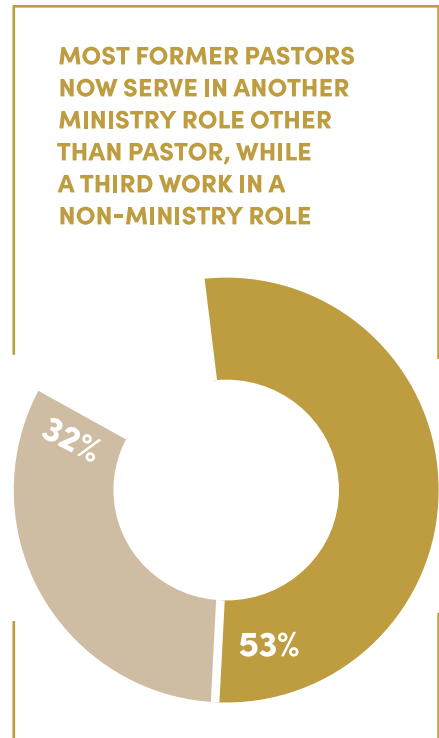


Despite stepping away from the pulpit, half (53%) of former pastors are still working in the ministry, just in a role other than pastor. A third (32%) work in a non-ministry role. Few took early retirement (7%), disability (3%), are currently looking for work (2%), or have some other employment situation (2%).

Conflict, the second-leading reason pastors become former pastors, is a reality in many congregations, but for some leaders, it becomes too much.

Almost half (45%) of former pastors say they experienced significant conflict in their church during the last year they served as pastor. Additionally, 9 in 10 (87%) faced conflict at some point in their last congregation, most commonly over changes they had proposed (56%).

However, it's not as though former pastors were blindsided by the existence of conflict. Nine in 10 (92%) say they expected there would be a need to confront conflict in their church. Almost as many (86%) say they consistently listened to people in their church for signs of conflict. Similarly, 84% invested in processes and behaviors to prevent conflict.



One in 10 former pastors (10%) say family issues contributed to their leaving the pulpit, but most tried to prioritize family life.

More than 2 in 3 (68%) say they consistently put their family first when time conflicts arose. Still, 50% believe the demands of ministry kept them from spending time with their families, and 41% believe their families resented the demands of pastoral ministry. Additionally, 3 in 4 (73%) were often concerned about the financial security of their families.

As former pastors reflected on their time in the ministry, they highlighted many areas of concern. Many felt pressure from the congregation. Most (53%) felt the church had unrealistic expectations of them. And around a third (35%) didn't feel free to say no when expectations of them were unrealistic.

Four in 5 (80%) felt they had to be "on-call" 24 hours a day. Most (53%) often felt the demands of ministry were greater than they could handle, while almost 2 in 3 (64%) frequently felt overwhelmed with the role of pastor. More than 2 in 5 (42%) don't feel the search team or leaders accurately described their last church before they arrived.

As this pressure built on former pastors, more than 1 in 3 (37%) frequently became irritated with people at their church. More than 2 in 3 (68%) felt isolated as pastors.

Looking back on their time in the pulpit, former pastors have some suggestions for current pastors and their congregations.

When asked what advice they have for current pastors to help them thrive in ministry, former pastors are most likely to tell those still leading churches to prioritize marriage and family (20%), spend time with God and read His Word (16%), and remember their calling and trust God (14%).

Even among former pastors, just 2% tell current pastors to leave the ministry.

When offering advice to churches on how they can best help their pastor thrive in ministry, former pastors give fewer options.

At least 1 in 10 say congregations should love and respect their pastor's family (14%), pray for their pastor (14%), give them time off and protect it (12%), encourage and care for them (11%), be supportive (10%), and have clear and realistic expectations (10%).

FORMER PASTORS HAVE VARIED ADVICE TO HELP CURRENT PASTORS THRIVE IN MINISTRY

Prioritize your marriage and family

20%

Spend time with God/
Read God's Word

16%

Remember your calling/
Trust God

14%

Pray

9%

Keep a Sabbath/Take a
sabbatical and/or vacation

8%

Surround yourself with
trustworthy people/friends

8%

Love God/Love others

8%

Put God first

8%

Care for yourself

7%

Meet with a mentor

7%

Connect/meet
with other pastors

6%

Don't go it alone

4%

Meet with a counselor

4%

9 GLANCES THAT COULD SAVE YOUR MINISTRY

1. LOOK UP.

No one can be an effective pastor if they aren't constantly looking to God. If pastors want to remain in the ministry, they must stay connected to the source and purpose of the ministry.

2. LOOK AROUND.

When you look around you right now, who's closest to you? Pastors caring for their families and spending time with their friends are not shortchanging the church. Those activities enable the pastor to better serve the church.

3. LOOK BACK.

Pastors shouldn't look back to think of what they've left behind as they've served in the ministry, but they can look back to when God called them. Thinking back to when a pastor first felt God's call on their life can help them continue to live out that calling.

4. LOOK IN.

Pastors need to look inside themselves to make sure they stay in a position to serve others as best they can. Many pastors can wrongly assume all self-care is negative. But an emotionally unhealthy pastor will not be able to lead their congregation as well as they should.

5. LOOK BESIDE.

One of the ways pastors may care for themselves is by finding people who can stand beside them through the tough seasons. Do you have trustworthy people around you, particularly some who know the inherent difficulties of ministry, with whom you can honestly share your concerns?

6. LOOK DOWN.

Pastor, as you look down at your feet, are they always moving? Do they ever stop to rest? Everyone needs rest. Pastors can demonstrate their trust in God by taking a break from their work or stepping away for a week or longer.

7. LOOK OUT.

Despite all the precautions a pastor may take, they will face hardships in ministry. Most often, those hardships will come from the people they're trying to serve. People are broken, and broken things cut.

8. LOOK THROUGH.

Even as pastors are cautious, they still must look through the problems to the heart of the people they're trying to serve and to the character they hope to display. It's not enough to simply blame everyone else.

9. LOOK FORWARD.

As much as we want every pastor to stay in ministry as long as God calls them to be there, a day will come when they will need to step down from the pulpit. Pastors need to look forward and prepare themselves and their congregations for that day.

5 SIGNS A PASTORS NEEDS TO TAKE A SUNDAY OFF

1. YOU PRETEND YOU DON'T NEED SLEEP.

Living your life like it's finals week may be necessary sometimes, but the long-term effects are destructive. God designed our batteries to need a full recharge—to get daily rest from the work.

2. YOU INCESSANTLY SCAN YOUR EMAIL.

Living out of your inbox is no way to go. While it requires incredible discipline, the practice of responding to all your emails at once is far more effective than changing gears all day long.

3. YOU OBSESS OVER PUBLIC OPINION.

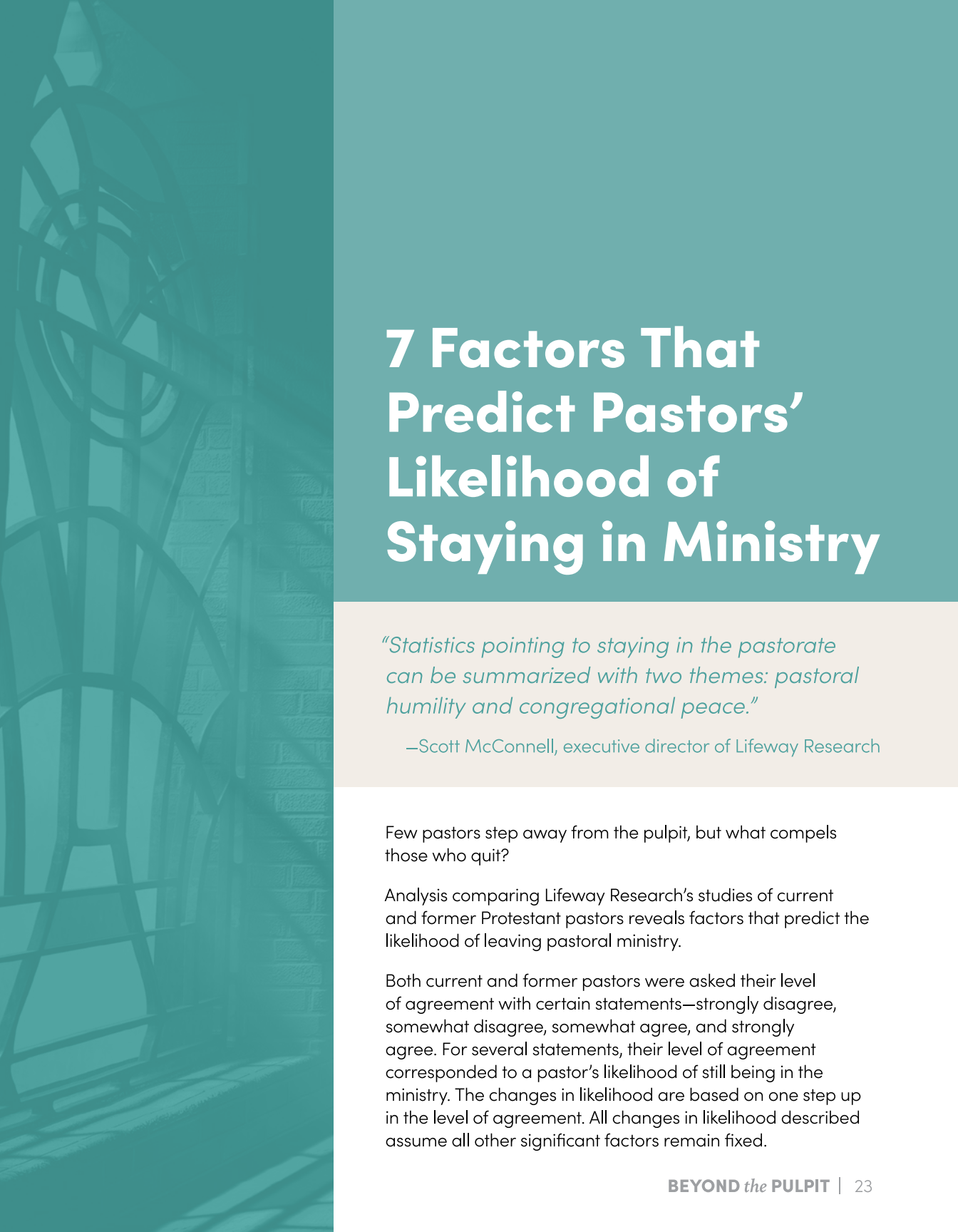
When we're not resting in the Lord's power, we're consumed with constant anxiety that catastrophe is coming in the near future. Our critics (and we all have them) are the loudest voices in our ears.

4. YOU OVERLOOK THE PEOPLE RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOU.

Refusing to find rest in Jesus weakens our connection to others. We become like a worn-out piece of Velcro, incapable of bonding to anything. It means at home we're physically present but emotionally vacant.

5. YOU DEVALUE YOUR MARRIAGE.

Sadly, our spouses often pay the heaviest price when our walks with the Lord are weak.



7 Factors That Predict Pastors' Likelihood of Staying in Ministry

"Statistics pointing to staying in the pastorate can be summarized with two themes: pastoral humility and congregational peace."

—Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research

Few pastors step away from the pulpit, but what compels those who quit?

Analysis comparing Lifeway Research's studies of current and former Protestant pastors reveals factors that predict the likelihood of leaving pastoral ministry.

Both current and former pastors were asked their level of agreement with certain statements—strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, and strongly agree. For several statements, their level of agreement corresponded to a pastor's likelihood of still being in the ministry. The changes in likelihood are based on one step up in the level of agreement. All changes in likelihood described assume all other significant factors remain fixed.

1. FAMILY INVESTMENT

Pastors who prioritize their families and bring them into ministry are more likely to find ministry longevity. Pastors who more strongly agree they put their family first when time conflicts arise are 1.7 times more likely to still be in pastoral ministry.

Negatively, the pastor who feels his family resents the ministry is less likely to continue in the pastorate. Among former pastors, 41% feel their families resented the demands of ministry, while only 16% of current pastors feel the same. With each level of agreement with that statement, a pastor is 1.3 times less likely to still be a pastor.

2. ACCURATE PICTURE AND CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Judging by their descriptions, current pastors and former pastors faced drastically different expectations from their churches. More than 2 in 3 (68%) current Protestant pastors say their church was accurately described to them before they arrived. Around 3 in 4 (72%) have a document that outlines what the church expects from them. And just 19% say their congregation has unrealistic expectations of them.

Among former pastors, 49% say their last church was accurately described to them. Only a third (32%) had a document that clearly communicated the church's expectations of them. Most (53%) say their church had unrealistic expectations of them.

Pastors who more strongly agree the search team or leaders who invited them to the church accurately described the congregation before they arrived are 1.4 times more likely to still be serving in the ministry. Having a document that communicates expectations makes it 2.7 times more likely a pastor is still behind a pulpit.

On the other hand, the more a pastor feels their church has unrealistic expectations of them, the less likely they are to still be in ministry (1.6 times).

3. COUNSELING EXPERIENCE

As pastors face challenges within their congregations, it helps to have counseling tools at their disposal. Pastors who have a lay counseling ministry in their church (2.6 times), have taken graduate school courses in counseling (1.9 times), or have attended conferences on counseling (1.7 times) are more likely to still be in the ministry.

4. CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH

Unsurprisingly, conflict can contribute to the likelihood a pastor decides to step away. Pastors stating their churches have a process for church discipline are 2.5 times more likely to still be serving. But pastors who agree they have experienced significant conflict within the past year are less likely (1.6 times) to still be serving. Specifically, pastors who say they have had conflict over national or local politics are less likely to still be behind the pulpit (2.5 times).

5. KEY RELATIONSHIPS

While 68% of former pastors felt isolated in their role, only a third of current pastors feel that way. Pastors who form connections and avoid isolation are more likely to have ministry longevity.

The more a pastor feels isolated in their position, the less likely they are to still be a pastor (1.7 times).

Analysis also found two specific relationships within a congregation that are important for a pastor's endurance. Pastors who say they meet at least once a month and openly share their struggles with lay leaders in their church (2.2 times) or a Bible study group in their church (3.9 times) are more likely to still be serving behind the pulpit.

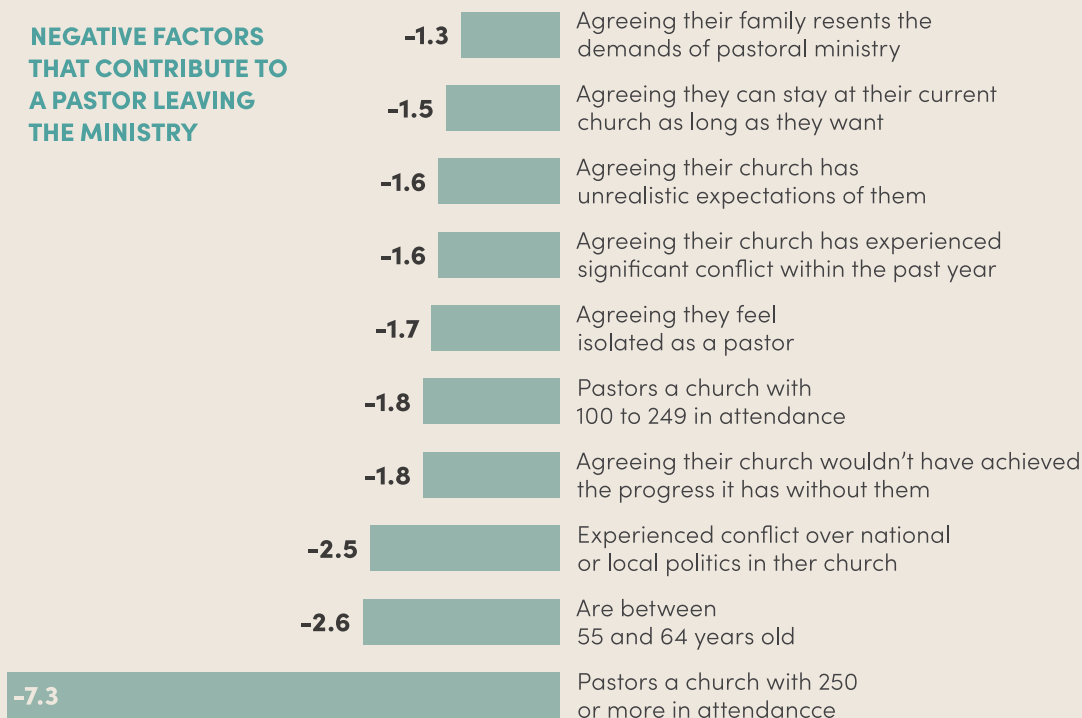
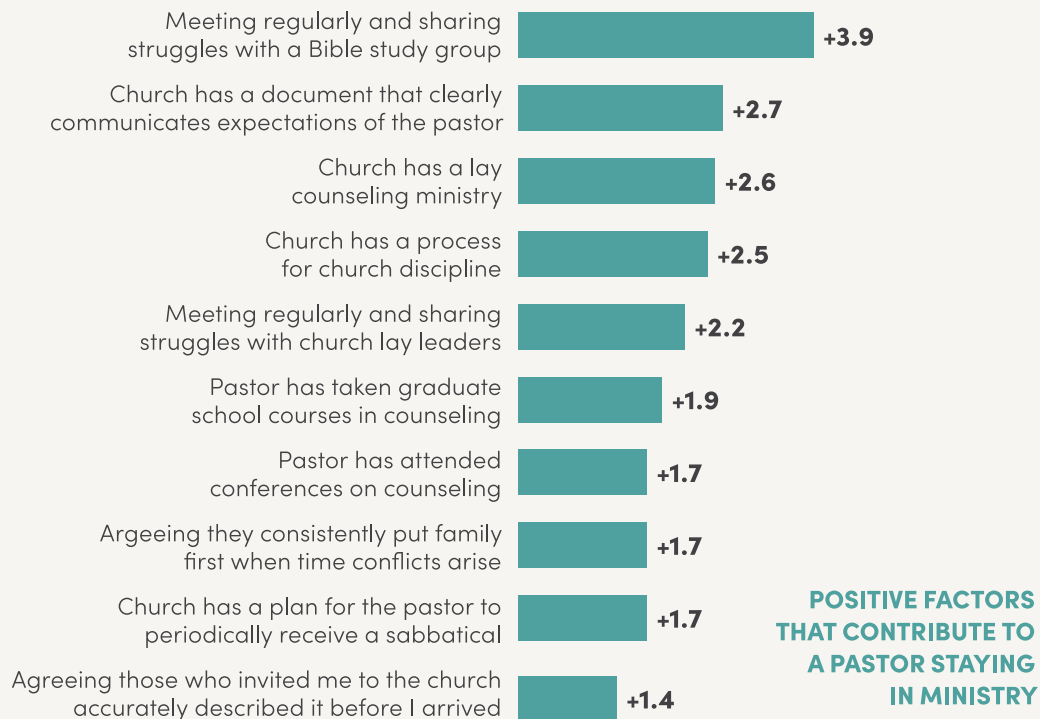
6. PASTORAL PRIDE

Pastors who feel as if they have it all together may be the ones most likely to quit. Around 2 in 5 (39%) of current pastors believe their church would not have achieved the progress it did without them. Among former pastors, almost 7 in 10 (68%) say that about their last church.

The more a pastor attributes their church's progress to themselves, the less likely they are to still be in the ministry (1.8 times). Additionally, for each step up in agreement, those who are sure they can stay at their church as long as they want are 1.5 times less likely to be in the pastorate at all.

7. SABBATICALS

Pastors who can take time away from the everyday busyness of ministry are more likely to stick around. Those who say their church has a plan for the pastor to receive a sabbatical are 1.7 times more likely to remain in the ministry.



5 STEPS TO YOUR FIRST SABBATICAL

1. SET REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS.

You should come back refreshed and refocused. Jesus regularly pulled away from the field for rest after heavy seasons of ministry, as did many leaders in the Old Testament. God uses sabbaticals to sharpen our focus and vision for the next season of ministry.

2. WALK PATIENTLY THROUGH THE PROCESS.

Start by finding an advocate to champion your sabbatical for you. Be careful to make sure you both understand and respect the appropriate channels of approval. If your church already has a sabbatical process, follow that process respectfully and improve it later, if necessary.

3. ARTICULATE THE PURPOSE.

Sabbaticals need to be more than ministry vacations, or they will build more resentment than momentum. Referring to it as a “ministry project” may be helpful. Make it easy to understand since people associate sabbatical with sabbath, which simply means “to stop; cease striving.” Clarify the obvious wins for you and your church.

4. CLARIFY SPECIFIC GOALS.

Communicate your specific goals during the sabbatical application process, then afterward come back and share how you achieved those goals. Much of what happens on a sabbatical is not goal-oriented or measurable, but do your best to communicate what you are hoping to accomplish and why.

5. EXPRESS GENUINE APPRECIATION.

For those fortunate enough to get a sabbatical, you should realize you received a gift, not a reward. Don't say you deserve it, because the Bible doesn't require it. Instead, be intentional to say “thank you” before, during, and after the sabbatical. This will help guard your heart from entitlement.

4 COMMON PASTOR CANDIDATE MISTAKES

1. NOT DOING ENOUGH HOMEWORK

If the church is serious enough to meet with you in person or even over a Zoom call, ask them to send you a copy of their church constitution and bylaws if they're not available online. You deserve to know how they view your prospective role, as well as the roles of other leaders. The other important document you need to get is their budget.

2. NOT NEGOTIATING SALARY AND BENEFITS

The motivation behind this mistake is often a fear of sounding greedy and/or scaring the search team off. If fear is a factor, it needs to be addressed internally before you say yes to any ministry position. GuideStone and Lifeway partner every other year to give you the latest [benchmarks on salary and compensation](#), as well as other helpful information for both candidates and committees.

3. NOT REACHING OUT TO FORMER PASTORS/STAFF

Perhaps this should wait until after you've met with the search team in person—but not too much longer. Also reach out to a leader of a network, convention, or association the church is involved with.

4. NOT ASKING HARD ENOUGH QUESTIONS

Politeness on the front end can sometimes lead to disappointment and disillusionment on the back end. Shooting straight doesn't have to be rude, so when you get to a face-to-face level in this conversation, ask for clarity on important issues like Sabbath/sabbaticals, preaching, deacons/elders, vacation, polity, and family expectations.

The Bottom Line on Pastor Wellness

The journey of pastoral ministry is marked by both profound rewards and significant challenges. This report has illuminated the realities pastors and church leaders face, offering a nuanced understanding of what sustains ministry over time and what threatens its continuity. While the pressures of leadership, expectations, and emotional demands are ever-present, the resilience pastors demonstrate is both encouraging and instructive (2 Corinthians 4:1).

One of the most consistent themes throughout this research is the importance of clarity—both in expectations and communication. When pastors and congregations share a mutual understanding of roles and responsibilities, the likelihood of thriving together increases. Likewise, the presence of supportive relationships—whether with family, church leaders, or trusted peers—serves as a vital safeguard against isolation and discouragement (Galatians 6:2).

The findings also underscore the significance of intentional rhythms of rest and renewal (Matthew 11:28–30). Pastors who prioritize Sabbath, invest in their families, and take time away from daily demands are better equipped to serve with endurance and joy. These practices not only benefit the individual pastor but also strengthen the broader church community.

At the same time, the report highlights areas for growth. The decline in counseling training and hesitancy to seek or offer professional support suggest opportunities for churches to invest more deeply in the well-being of their leaders. Addressing financial concerns and fostering environments where pastors feel free to set boundaries are also crucial steps toward long-term health.

Ultimately, pastoral wellness isn't just a personal matter. It's a shared responsibility. Churches that cultivate clear expectations, encourage healthy rhythms, and provide genuine support help ensure their leaders can serve faithfully for years to come (Hebrews 13:17). May these insights inspire ongoing conversations and practical steps toward flourishing in ministry together.

■ Learn more about our findings, trends, and recommendations for navigating ministry at LifewayResearch.com/PastorWellness.

About the research

The study of current pastors was sponsored by Houston's First Baptist Church and Richard Dockins, MD. The mixed-mode survey of 1,516 evangelical and Black Protestant pastors was conducted April 1–May 8, 2025, using both phone and online interviews. Phone: The calling list was a random sample, stratified by church membership, drawn from a list of all churches in all evangelical and Black Protestant religious traditions except Southern Baptists. Online: The email list was a random sample drawn from all Southern Baptist congregations with an email address. Invitations were emailed to the pastor by Lifeway Research, followed by two reminders. Each survey was completed by the senior pastor, minister, or priest at the church contacted.

The completed sample is 1,516 surveys (1,010 phone, 506 online). Responses were weighted by region, church size, and denominational group to reflect the population more accurately. The sample provides 95% confidence that the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 2.7%. This margin of error accounts for the effect of weighting. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups. Comparisons are made to two previous surveys conducted by Lifeway Research:

- A study using the same methodology of 1,576 evangelical and Black Protestant pastors conducted August 17–September 15, 2021, sponsored by Houston's First Baptist Church and Richard Dockins, MD.
- A phone survey of 1,500 evangelical and Black Protestant pastors conducted March 5–18, 2015, sponsored by the North American Mission Board and Richard Dockins, MD.

The study of former pastors was sponsored by Houston's First Baptist Church and Richard Dockins, MD. The online survey of former senior pastors was conducted May 6–July 6, 2025. The sample lists were created and invitations sent by four Protestant denominations: Assemblies of God, Church of the Nazarene, The Wesleyan Church, and Southern Baptist Convention. Each survey was completed by an individual who has served as a senior (or sole) pastor but stopped serving as senior pastor prior to age 67. The completed sample is 730 former pastors.

About Lifeway Research

Lifeway Research is a Middle Tennessee-based, evangelical research firm that specializes in surveys about faith in culture and matters that affect churches. Our work has been covered by national and international media, (Religion News Service, *Christianity Today*, NPR, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, and many others) and translated into multiple languages.

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