

Survey reveals public's skepticism about pastors

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What do pastors think about social or political issues? Americans don't particularly want to know.

Only 8 percent of adults say they are interested in hearing pastors teach about issues such as same-sex marriage, LGBT rights, abortion, guns, tax policy, climate change, drug policy, or religious freedom, according to the Barna Group's *The State of Pastors* report.

The State of Pastors—commissioned by Pepperdine University, an independent Christian university—surveyed more than 14,000 pastors from 40 Protestant denominations across the theological and political spectrum, both online and by phone, according to the full report. It also includes data from surveys of all U.S. adults and of people in the millennial generation, those born between 1984 and 2002.

Only one-quarter of respondents have a “very positive” opinion of pastors, and roughly the same portion have a negative view, according to the study by Barna, a Christian research firm. Nearly half—48 percent—are more indifferent, with a “somewhat positive” opinion.

In a similar vein, a quarter of people surveyed reported that “pastors’ influence is minimal” in their communities, and 40 percent said Christian ministers are “somewhat influential.” Among those who attend church weekly, 37 percent said pastors are very influential.

When it comes to speaking on the “important issues of our day,” 21 percent of all respondents rated pastors as “very credible,” while 25 percent saw pastors as “not very” or “not at all” credible.

One of the study's biggest findings, said Barna president David Kinnaman, is that “there is a huge amount of skepticism and indifference to today's faith leaders.”

At the same time, most of those surveyed like the pastors they know. Two-thirds also believe pastors present at least some benefit to their communities. And 48 percent said their personal experience of pastors was more favorable than the media's portrayal of faith leaders; 33 percent likened the pastors they know to Eric Camden, the pastor-dad on the TV show *7th Heaven*. Fifteen percent compared pastors they knew to Fred Phelps, the founder of Westboro Baptist Church.

Rather than wanting to hear pastors' views on social and political issues, respondents valued teaching on biblical values (26 percent), family issues (21 percent), and the gospel (20 percent).

The study also revealed some of the challenges pastors face: nearly half have struggled with depression, and 20 percent have an addiction, with pornography addiction being the most common. One in three are at risk of burnout. At the same time, 91 percent of pastors responding to the study said they currently have "a good overall quality of life."

Other notable findings:

- The average age of pastors has jumped ten years over the past 25 years, from 44 to 54 years old. "This is a critical issue if we're going to have the ranks of young leaders filling the pipeline of spiritual leadership today," Kinnaman said.
- The number of female pastors has tripled over the past 25 years. They now make up 9 percent of senior pastors, although many lead smaller churches and earn less pay than their male counterparts.
- Nearly all pastors (98 percent of those in mainline Protestant denominations and 97 percent of pastors in nonmainline denominations) say the church plays an important role in racial reconciliation, but only 51 percent list it among their church's top ten priorities.

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