

Half of pastors say economy is hurting their churches

October 10, 2023

BRENTWOOD, Tenn.—As churches continue to navigate economic challenges in the United States, half of surveyed pastors say the economy is harming their churches as giving fails to keep up with inflation.

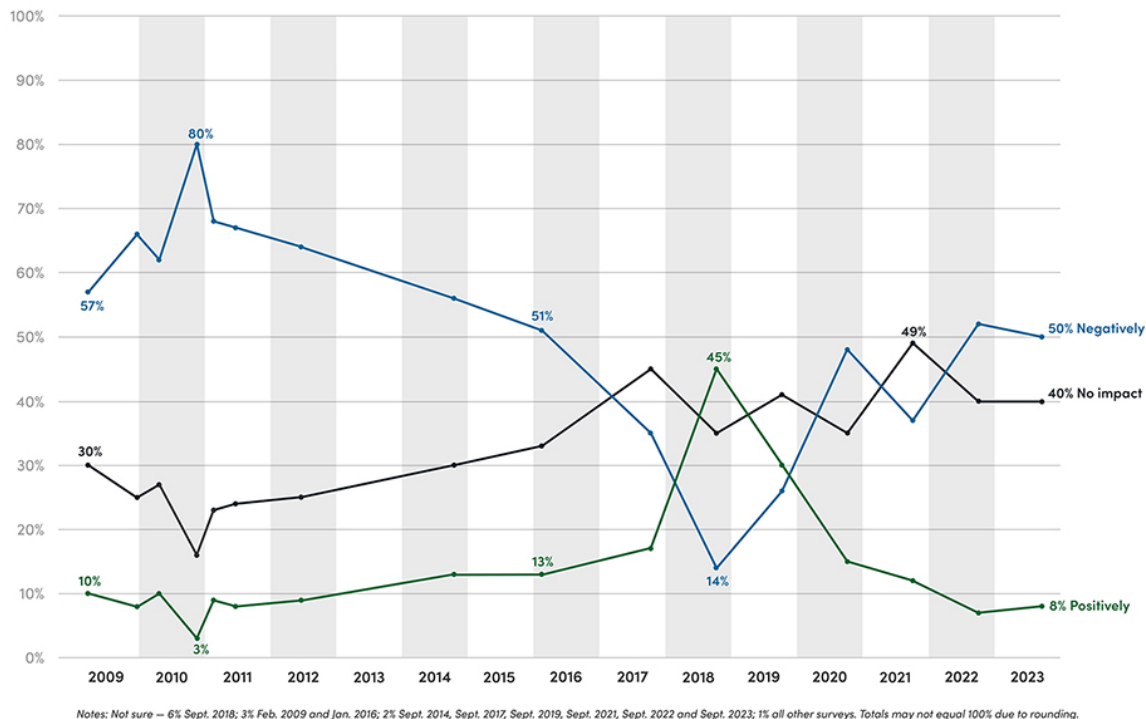
A [Lifeway Research study](#) of U.S. Protestant pastors found 50 percent say the current economy is negatively impacting their churches. Meanwhile, 40 percent say the economic circumstances aren't having an effect. Fewer than 1 in 10—8 percent—say the current economy is a positive factor for their churches.

Last year was the first time since 2016 more than half of pastors felt the economy was impacting their churches negatively and the first time since 2012 fewer than 10 percent of pastors expressed belief the economy was positively impacting their churches.

Only twice in the study's 15-year history—in 2018 and 2019—were pastors more likely to say the economy was having a positive impact than a negative one.

How is the economy impacting U.S. Protestant churches?

Among U.S. Protestant pastors



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“The good news is the economy is not negatively impacting more churches than last year, despite persistent inflation and slower economic growth,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research. “The bad news is that most churches continue to feel pain and discomfort from current economic realities.”

Although pastors continue to report a negative economic impact, churches have maintained stable levels of giving near their planned budgets and comparable to last year’s giving. But in most churches, increases in giving have not kept up with inflation in 2023.

Around 7 in 10 U.S. Protestant pastors say since the beginning of 2023, giving at their church is at or exceeding budget, with 46 percent saying

giving has been about what was budgeted and 22 percent saying it's higher. Three in 10 say giving is below their 2023 budget.

Tough time to set a budget

"This was not an easy year to set a budget, as many predicted a softening in the nation's economic well-being," McConnell said. "Whether churches lowered expectations or not, most are meeting or exceeding their budget."

Compared to last year's actual receipts, 7 in 10 pastors say giving at their churches is at or above 2022 levels, including 38 percent who say it's the same as last year, and 33 percent saying it's above. Fewer than 1 in 4 (23 percent) say offerings are below 2022.

When asked by what percentage their churches' offerings have increased or decreased, more pastors say giving is the same as 2022 or above. More than 2 in 5 (44 percent) say it has remained the same. Twelve percent of pastors say giving has increased less than 10 percent. Thirteen percent say it has increased 10 percent to 24 percent. Four percent say it has increased by 25 percent or more since 2022.

Around 1 in 5 report a decrease in giving, including 4 percent who say offerings are down by less than 10 percent. Twelve percent say they are down 10 percent to 24 percent. Four percent say they have declined by 25 percent or more.

When the income experiences of churches are combined, the average church saw an increase of 0.79 percent in offerings from 2022 to 2023.

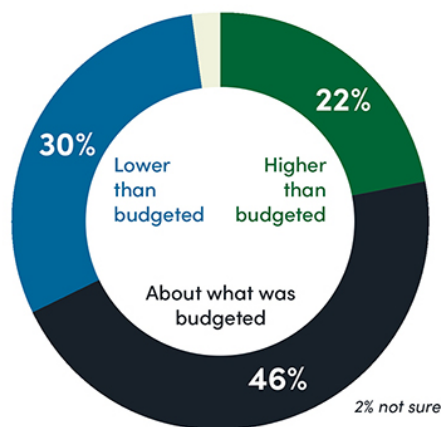
"Finances are not just difficult for those churches in which giving is down," McConnell said. "Most churches are not seeing growth in offerings that keep pace with inflation (currently 3.7 percent annually according to the [Consumer Price Index](#)). So, many churches are still cutting spending and

giving raises that are smaller than their pastors and staff need.”

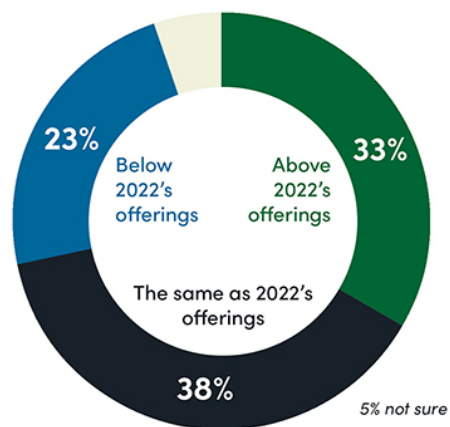
Giving at most churches at or above budget and last year's levels

Among U.S. Protestant pastors

Offerings in 2023 compared to budget



Offerings in 2023 compared to 2022



Note: Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

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Size matters

Although the economy's impact on churches has remained stable compared to last year, small churches are still the most likely to face financial struggles. Small churches were [some of the first to recover](#) pre-pandemic levels of attendance after COVID-19, but many have struggled to face the economic challenges in the years since. Large churches are less likely to be struggling in the current economy.

Pastors at the largest churches—those with 250 or more in attendance—are the least likely to say the economy has somewhat or very negatively impacted their churches this year (34 percent). They are also the most likely to report that giving levels are above those in 2022 (57 percent).

Meanwhile, pastors of churches with attendance less than 100 are among the most likely to say offerings have been lower than budgeted this year and below 2022's offerings.

"In a smaller church, if economic factors hurt even a couple of families, chances are the church feels it," McConnell said. "There is no looking around expecting someone else to step up to cover it. It just hurts."

The phone survey of 1,004 Protestant pastors was conducted Aug. 29 to Sept. 20. The calling list was a stratified random sample, drawn from a list of all Protestant churches. Each interview was conducted with the senior pastor, minister or priest at the church. Analysts weighted responses by region and church size to reflect the population more accurately. The completed sample is 1,004 surveys, providing 95 percent confidence the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 3.2 percent. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.