

Pastors identify spiritual needs for life and ministry

March 28, 2022

NASHVILLE, Tenn.—Churchgoers may think their church leaders have it all together spiritually, but pastors admit they have room to grow.

In the latest release of Lifeway Research's 2022 [Greatest Needs of Pastors study](#), most U.S. Protestant pastors say they need to personally invest in seven different spiritual needs.

One in 20 pastors (5 percent) say their own spiritual needs is the area most challenging for them or the one that requires the most attention compared to the six other categories covered in the Greatest Needs of Pastors study.

While each of the other categories has more pastors who say that category is the most challenging for them today, spiritual needs is the only category in which most pastors agree every issue raised is one that's important for them to invest in.

"It's not surprising that over the past two years, the sight of sparse rooms, the sting of snarky emails and the departure of people thought to be loyal have caused pastors to realize the depth of their spiritual needs," said Ben Mandrell, president and CEO of Lifeway Christian Resources. "These factors have not only changed the size of their churches but affected the size of their faith."

To determine the greatest needs facing U.S. Protestant pastors today, Lifeway Research interviewed 200 pastors who identified 44 issues they face in their roles. A thousand additional pastors were surveyed to determine which needs were most prevalent. All the unique needs were divided into seven categories: ministry difficulties, spiritual needs, mental

challenges, personal life, self-care, people dynamics and areas of skill development.

Within the category of spiritual needs, pastors identified seven specific issues. For each one, at least 3 in 5 pastors say it is an important area needing investment in their life.

Spiritual disciplines vitally important

More than 7 in 10 pastors (72 percent) say consistency in personal prayer is important, which also makes it one of the top needs of pastors overall. Similar percentages of pastors say it's vital in their lives to invest in friendships and fellowship with others (69 percent) and to focus on consistency of Bible reading not related to sermon or teaching preparation (68 percent).

Around 2 in 3 U.S. Protestant pastors say it's important for them to trust God (66 percent), invest in relationships with other pastors (64 percent) and practice consistency in taking a Sabbath (64 percent). More than 3 in 5 pastors (61 percent) say they need to invest in confessing and repenting from personal sin. Few (4 percent) say they don't consider any of those issues important investments for their life as a pastor.

"Some churchgoers may be surprised to find that spiritual disciplines don't always come easily for pastors," said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research. "Yes, they know how to do these things, but achieving consistency takes time and effort. It is not automatic."

Investing in relationship with God

Younger pastors, those between the ages of 18 and 44, are among the most likely to say many of the spiritual needs are areas in need of attention in

their lives. They are the most likely to say they need to invest in friendship and fellowship with others (79 percent) and relationships with other pastors (73 percent).

Pastors under 44 are also more likely than pastors over 55 to say they need to focus on consistency of Bible reading not related to sermon or teaching preparation (75 percent) as well as confessing and repenting of personal sin (69 percent). They're also more likely than those over 65 to say it's important they invest in consistency in personal prayer (78 percent).

When asked which of those spiritual needs are the most important for them to invest in right now, a quarter of pastors (24 percent) say consistency in prayer. Slightly fewer point to trusting God and consistency in taking a Sabbath (18 percent each).

In a 2021 Lifeway Research study, 86 percent of pastors say they do have at least one day a week to rest and unplug from ministry work. Additionally, a 2017 study from Lifeway Research found 56 percent of churchgoers believe the biblical command to take a day of Sabbath rest each week still applies today.

Fewer pastors say their top priority among spiritual needs are consistency of Bible reading outside of their sermon and teaching preparation (15 percent), friendships and fellowships with others (9 percent), relationships with other pastors (8 percent) and confessing and repenting from personal sins (3 percent).

"There is a constant pressure in ministry to try to function by your own strength and do one more thing or help one more person," McConnell said. "But that pressure runs counter to the relationship with God you want to point people to. Investing in your relationship with God means slowing down and spending time with him and enjoying him. That's hard for many pastors."

White pastors are among those most likely to say they need to give attention to developing a consistency in taking a Sabbath (18 percent). Mainline pastors (26 percent) are also more likely than evangelical pastors (14 percent) to say Sabbath consistency is most important for them.

African American pastors are among the most likely to say they need to place a priority on trusting God (28 percent). Older pastors, those 65 and older, are the age demographic most likely to say trusting God is the most important priority for them (29 percent).

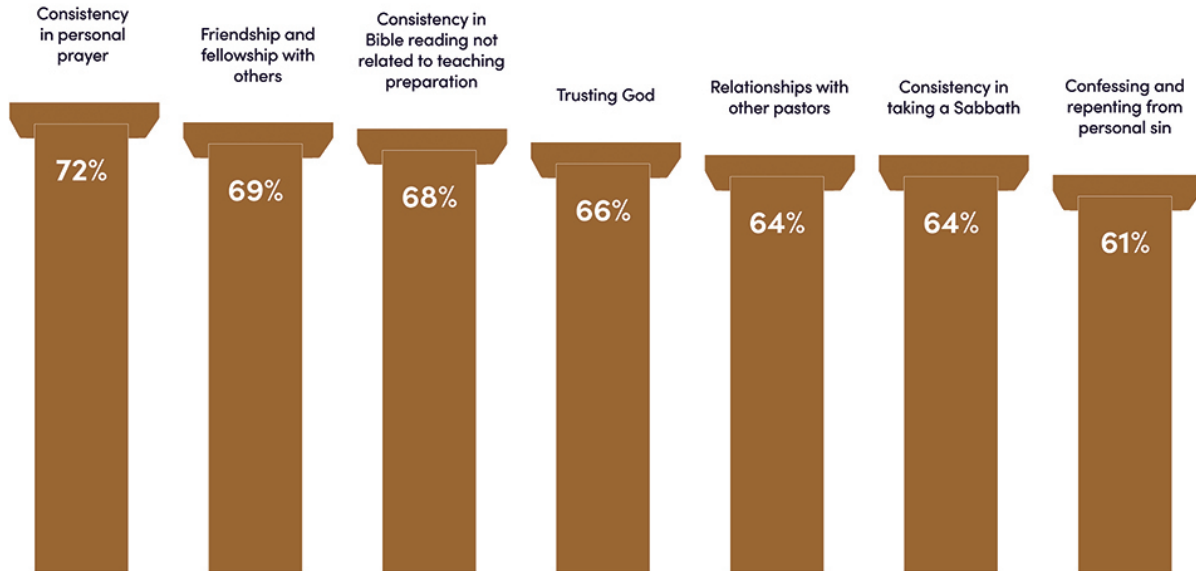
Pastors of larger churches, 250 or more for weekend worship services, are more likely than pastors of the smallest churches, those with less than 50 in attendance, to say consistency of Bible reading not related to sermon or teaching preparation is their most important spiritual need (21 percent vs. 11 percent).

Mandrell said he's optimistic about the future ministry of those who recognize their spiritual needs.

"I'm hopeful pastors will have increased spiritual depth as they commit to personal prayer, seek out healthy friendships with other leaders, and lean into the Sabbath rest necessary to fuel them for the call on their lives," he said.

What spiritual needs do pastors say are important and need personal investment?

Among U.S. Protestant pastors



Notes: Pastors were asked: "Which of the following spiritual needs are important in your own life to invest in as a pastor? (Select all that apply.)" 4% say not sure.

Lifeway research

Source: Lifeway Research phone survey of 1,000 U.S. Protestant pastors conducted March 30–April 22, 2021

The phone survey of 1,000 Protestant pastors was conducted March 30 to April 22, 2021. The calling list was a stratified random sample, drawn from a list of all Protestant churches. Each survey was completed by the senior or sole pastor or a minister at the church. The completed sample is 1,000 surveys, providing 95 percent confidence the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 3.1 percent. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.