

# Pastors say abusive peers should step down permanently

June 22, 2021

NASHVILLE, Tenn.—As Christian groups and denominations debate the proper response to clergy sexual misconduct, most pastors believe those who commit such crimes should leave public ministry permanently.

At the recent Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting, the topic of pastoral sexual abuse and assault dominated much of the conversation and business, including passing a resolution that “any person who has committed sexual abuse is permanently disqualified from holding the office of pastor.”

A [Lifeway Research study](#) revealed a significant majority of U.S. Protestant pastors share that opinion, whether the victim is a child or an adult.

“Most current pastors believe the office of pastor is incompatible with having sexually abused or assaulted another,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research. “This does not convey that they believe these behaviors are beyond God’s forgiveness, but a large majority believe sexual abuse is a permanent disqualification from ministry leadership.”

## Sexual abuse of a child

More than 4 in 5 Protestant pastors (83 percent) say if a pastor commits child sexual abuse, that person should withdraw permanently from public ministry. For 2 percent the time away should be at least 10 years, while 3 percent say at least five years and 3 percent say at least two years.

Few point to a shorter time frame as appropriate—1 percent say at least 1 year, and fewer than 1 percent say either six months or three months. Another 7 percent say they aren't sure how long the time frame should be.

While majorities of every demographic group of pastors support a permanent exit from public ministry for child sexual abuse, some are less supportive than others. Pentecostal pastors (60 percent), African American pastors (67 percent), pastors with no college degree (69 percent), and pastors 65 and older (76 percent) are among those least likely to support permanent withdrawal.

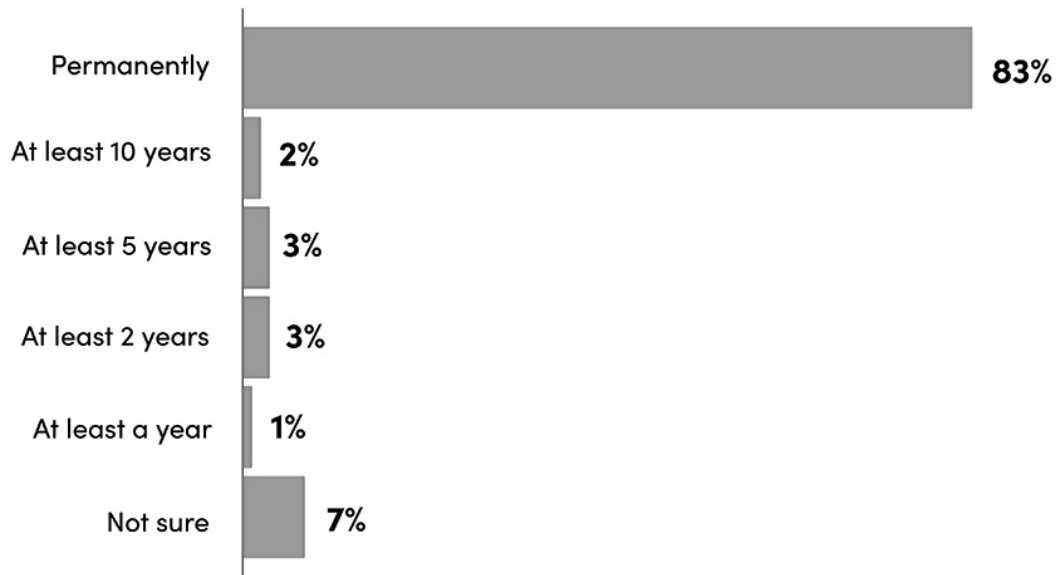
The U.S. Sentencing Commission [reported](#) 98.8 percent of sexual abuse offenders were sentenced to prison and their average sentence was almost 16 years.

“The five years or less time frame, that 7 percent of pastors suggest is appropriate, does not even cover the length of the typical prison sentence for offenders convicted of sexual abuse,” McConnell said.

“In contrast, more than 10 times that number of pastors do not hesitate to say the disqualification from ministry should be permanent for a pastor who commits child sexual abuse.”

## “If a pastor commits child sexual abuse, how long, if at all, should the pastor withdraw from public ministry?”

*Among U.S. Protestant pastors*



*Notes: less than 1% said at least 6 months, less than 1% said at least 3 months*

**Lifeway**research

Source: Lifeway Research survey of 1,007 U.S. Protestant pastors conducted Sept. 2 - Oct. 1, 2020

## Adult sexual abuse/assault

A sizable majority of Protestant pastors (74 percent) also supports a permanent withdrawal from public ministry for any pastors who commit sexual assault and abuse of any adult member of the congregation or staff. One in 20 say the time away should be at least 10 years (5 percent), at least five years (5 percent), and at least two years (5 percent).

Again, few pastors back shorter time frames, with 2 percent saying at least a year, 1 percent at least six months, and fewer than 1 percent at least three months. Fewer than 1 percent say the pastor does not need to

withdraw at all. Almost 1 in 10 (9 percent) say they're not sure.

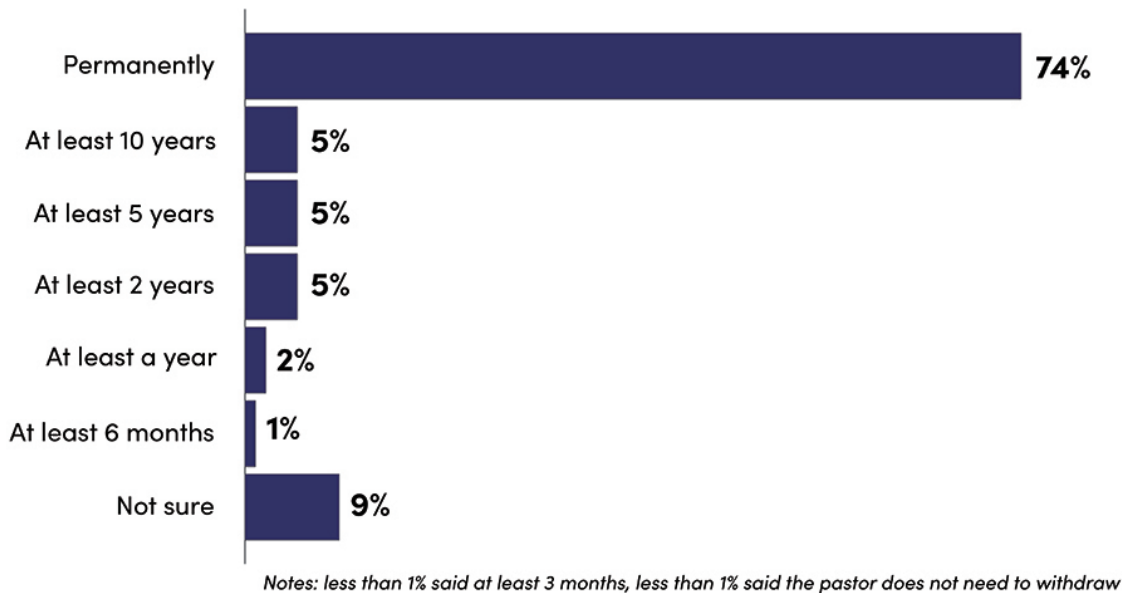
Pentecostal pastors (44 percent) are the only demographic in which a majority do not support permanent withdrawal from public ministry for pastors who commit sexual assault of adults under their care and supervision in church. Other demographics are also less supportive of the pastor stepping away permanently, including African American pastors (58 percent), pastors without a college degree (63 percent), and pastors 65 and older (69 percent).

"When someone sexually assaults an adult, it is both a violent sin and a crime. It is the opposite of the love, care and respect toward another the Bible teaches," McConnell said.

"The role of pastor has incredibly high standards in the Bible, including that the overseer of those in the church be above reproach or beyond criticism. Seventeen percent of pastors think someone could move beyond reproach in this matter given enough time."

**“If a pastor commits sexual assault and abuse of an adult member of the congregation or staff, how long, if at all, should the pastor withdraw from public ministry?”**

*Among U.S. Protestant pastors*



**Lifeway**research

Source: Lifeway Research survey of 1,007 U.S. Protestant pastors conducted Sept. 2 – Oct. 1, 2020

A [2019 Lifeway Research study](#) found many Protestant churchgoers believe there are additional undisclosed instances of Protestant pastors sexually abusing children or teens (32 percent) or sexually assaulting adults (29 percent).

In that same study, 3 in 4 churchgoers (75 percent) say they want a careful investigation of the facts if someone accused a pastor at their church of sexual misconduct. Few (14 percent) say their reaction would be to want to see the minister protected.

Compared to their perspective on abuse, pastors are much more divided over the proper response to adultery, according to an additional [2019](#)

[Lifeway Research study.](#)

## What about adultery?

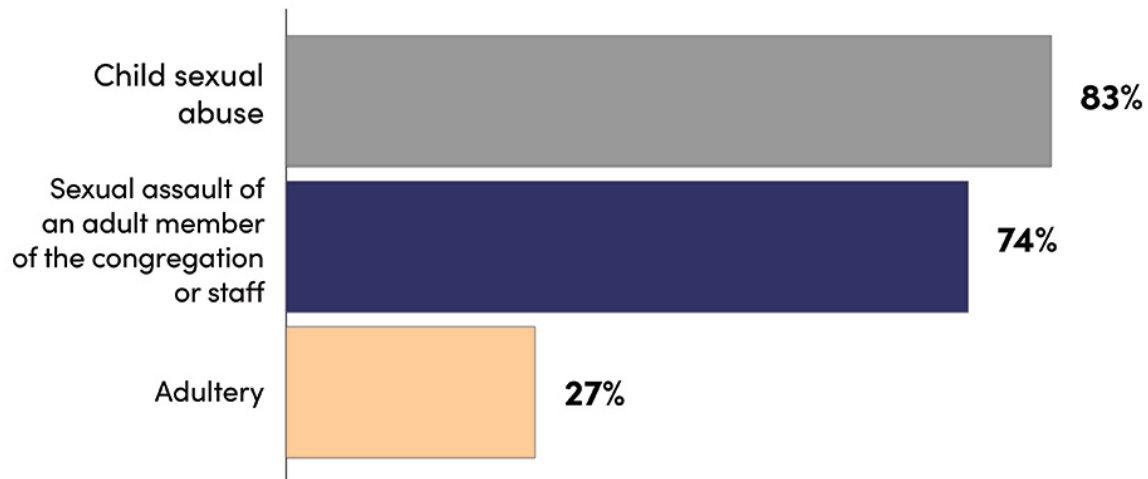
While clear majorities say pastors who commit child sexual abuse or sexual assault should withdraw permanently from ministry, only 27 percent believe that should be the result of a pastor committing adultery. A plurality (31 percent) is not sure.

“While adultery implies a consensual affair, it is not such a simple distinction for those serving in the role of pastor, as indicated by the 31 percent who were not sure in the previous survey,” McConnell said.

“For a pastor who holds a position of trust and spiritual authority over those in their congregation, an adulterous relationship with one of them, where an imbalance of power exists, would still constitute [sexual assault](#).”

*Among U.S. Protestant pastors*

## Pastors should permanently withdraw from public ministry if they commit ...



**Lifeway**research

Sources: Lifeway Research surveys of 1,007 U.S. Protestant pastors conducted Sept. 2 - Oct. 1, 2020 and 1,000 U.S. Protestant pastors conducted Aug. 30 - Sept. 24, 2019

The mixed mode survey of 1,007 Protestant pastors was conducted Sept. 2 - Oct. 1, 2020 using both phone and online interviews. Each survey was completed by the senior or sole pastor or a minister at the church. Analysts weighted responses by region and church size to reflect the population more accurately. The completed sample is 1,007 surveys (502 by phone, 505 online). The sample provides 95 percent confidence the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 3.4 percent. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.