

Retired pastors happy but see room for improvement

October 29, 2019

NASHVILLE, Tenn.—Most retirement-age pastors and missionaries say their current life is close to ideal, but some who have entered retirement say they could've been better prepared.

In a [survey](#) sponsored by [Shepherd's Fold Ministries](#), LifeWay Research asked 2,451 pastors, ministers and missionaries who were retired or at least 67 years old about their life, health, relationships, reflections on ministry and how they've adjusted to their current life stage.

"The results of this study show specific ways retired ministers can experience genuine higher well-being related to social, spiritual, physical and financial health," said Brent Van Hook, director of Shepherd's Fold Ministries.

Out of those ministers or missionaries surveyed, eight in 10 (81 percent) currently are retired or mostly retired. Around half (52 percent) have been in ministry 40 years or longer, with 35 percent serving 40 to 49 years and 17 percent serving 50 years or more.

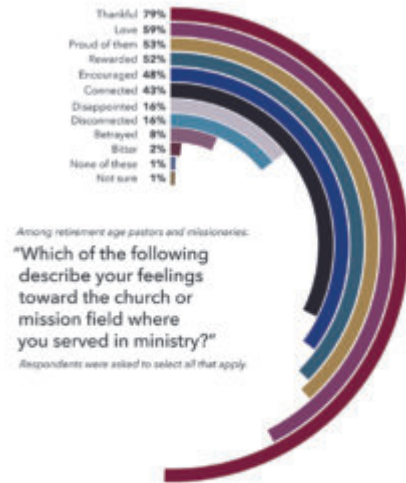
Generally satisfied

The vast majority think fondly about their previous ministry. More than nine in 10 (92 percent) say they are satisfied with their ministry efforts before retirement, with 59 percent saying they are very satisfied.

When asked about their feelings toward the churches or mission field where they served, around eight in 10 (79 percent) say they feel thankful.

More than half say love (59 percent), proud of them (53 percent) or rewarded (52 percent). Slightly fewer say encouraged (48 percent) or connected (43 percent).

Few retirement age pastors or missionaries say they feel disappointed (16 percent), disconnected (16 percent), betrayed (8 percent) or bitter (2 percent).



When asked to think about their overall life today, including relationships, spiritual health, finances and physical health, three in four (74 percent) agree their life is close to ideal in most ways.

Similar numbers describe their current life conditions as excellent (76 percent), while more than eight in 10 (86 percent) say they are satisfied with their life today.

"These three questions were used to create a life satisfaction score," said Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research. "Analysis revealed the characteristics that predict higher life satisfaction include being in better health, satisfaction with ministry efforts, positive feelings about where they served, financial stability for retirement, and current relationships."

Physical health

In describing their overall health, 72 percent say they are active and healthy, while 14 percent say they have physical disabilities that limit them, and 12 percent say their spouse has such limitations.

Fewer retirement age ministers say their spouse has been diagnosed with a mental illness like depression, dementia or Alzheimer's (5 percent), they spend a significant amount of their time caring for the health of someone with disabilities (5 percent) or have been diagnosed with a mental illness themselves (3 percent).

Around four in 10 (41 percent) agree having more help with their own health or the health of someone they care for would help at least a little.

Retirement-age ministers are most likely to say information, tips and best practices for maintaining good health would help the most (25 percent), along with financial assistance (21 percent), and Medicare supplementary insurance (19 percent).

"While many retire from ministry in good health, aging brings with it healthcare needs for pastors and missionaries," McConnell said. "Some are sidelined by health needs, and others could use financial help for medical care."

Relationships

Emotions of current retirees

Among those who are currently retired or mostly retired:

"I feel like I lack purpose now that I am retired from ministry."



"I struggled adjusting to being retired."



"I have had to rethink my sense of value and worth since I have retired from ministry."



"Retirement forced me to think about my value to God."



LifeWay

Note: Due to rounding, percentages may not equal 100%. | LifeWayResearch.com

Most older pastors, ministers and missionaries say they have close relationships that allow them to share problems, but some may be facing loneliness.

Among those who currently are married, 93 percent say their spouse is very satisfied with their marriage.

When asked about meeting with someone at least once a month to openly share struggles, 61 percent of those surveyed say they talk with their spouse. A third (33 percent) meet with a close friend, 19 percent talk to a Bible study group in their church, and 3 percent meet with a counselor.

A quarter (26 percent), however, say they don't regularly meet and share with any of these.

Around seven in 10 (69 percent) say they have at least three close friends they see or speak with at least once a month, with 17 percent saying they have 10 or more.

Still, 21 percent say they see or talk to one or two friends, and 10 percent say they don't have any friends outside of family that they meet with at least once a month.

The vast majority say they have continued to make new friends in recent years (86 percent) and have many close relationships at their current church (68 percent). Still, 29 percent say they often feel lonely or isolated.

Most (58 percent) say they currently live near their children, 42 percent live near most of their friends, but 22 percent say they don't live near either.

Around half (48 percent) agree if they had more help connecting with new friends it would help improve their overall well-being at least a little. A quarter (25 percent) say it would not help at all.

More retirement-age ministers say they would benefit from making friends who have had a similar experience in ministry (25 percent), making friends who live near them (23 percent), and relating to a church in which they are not in leadership (20 percent).

"Retirement sometimes means separation from past friends," McConnell said. "It's important to continue to invest in new relationships."

Finances

Three-quarters (76 percent) of retirement-age ministers are confident they will have enough money to live comfortably through retirement, with 31 percent saying they are very confident.

Still, almost half (47 percent) say they are often concerned about the financial security of their family, and 27 percent say their physical needs or those of their spouse have caused significant financial strain.

More than half (55 percent) say their household's current annual income is less than \$60,000. Slightly more than a third (36 percent) have less than \$100,000 in retirement savings.

Virtually all retired ministers (94 percent) receive Social Security benefits. Around three in five (59 percent) have a pension plan with their current or former employer.

Four in five (81 percent) say they currently live in a residence they own, while 10 percent rent, 3 percent live in a residence provided by a church or ministry, 3 percent live with family and 1 percent live in an assisted-living facility.

Three in five (59 percent) say they currently have some form of debt, the most common being a mortgage (37 percent), a car loan (27 percent) or credit card debt (20 percent).

Of those with a mortgage, 42 percent have 20 years or more left on the loan. Around three in 10 (29 percent) say they have 10 to 19 years. The same (29 percent) say they have nine years or less.

Those who have debt were asked how much debt their household has outside of their mortgage. A quarter (25 percent) say they have no non-mortgage debt, and an additional 53 percent say they have less than \$30,000, including 28 percent having less than \$10,000.

Some retired pastors, however, say they have substantial non-mortgage debt. Around one in seven (15 percent) say they have at least \$30,000 in debt, including 4 percent saying theirs is at least \$100,000.

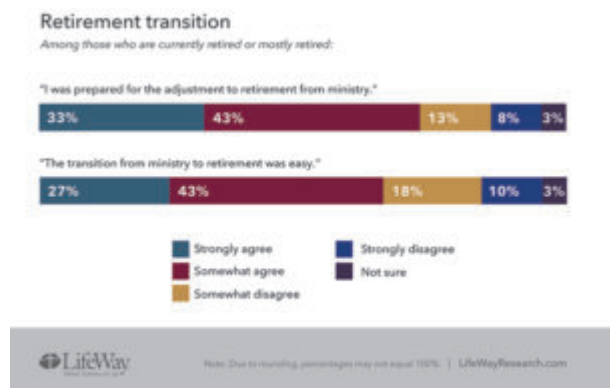
Almost three in five (58 percent) say if they had help with their finances it would improve their overall well-being at least a little.

Retirement-age pastors and missionaries are most likely to say they need help managing retirement funds (22 percent), finding work suitable for retired ministers (17 percent) or learning how to stretch their current resources (16 percent).

“The fact that most pastors and missionaries feel financially ready for retirement doesn’t negate the fact that a quarter are not in a good position,” McConnell said. “Health issues have complicated the financial picture for many of those with financial strains.”

Preparation for retirement

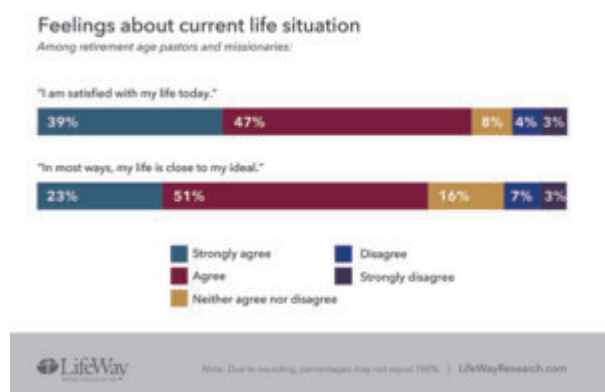
Among those who currently are retired, 76 percent say they were prepared for the adjustment to retirement. Seven in 10 (70 percent) say the transition was easy.



The most common approaches to preparing for the transition were speaking with others who had retired (46 percent), reading articles on the topic (42 percent), or attending a retreat or conference for those nearing retirement from ministry (26 percent). One in five (20 percent) say they did not prepare for the transition at all.

Still, 33 percent say they have struggled with the adjustment, and 28 percent feel they lack purpose since they retired from the ministry.

Almost two in five (39 percent) say they have had to rethink their sense of value and worth since retiring, and 27 percent say retirement forced them to think about their value to God.



When asked an open-ended question about what advice they would give those retiring from the ministry in the future, those currently at retirement age most frequently said to save and plan financially (13 percent), plan ahead (10 percent), enjoy and embrace retirement (8 percent), be prepared (7 percent), find opportunities to volunteer or serve

(6 percent), stay active (4 percent), trust God (4 percent), pray (4 percent) and develop interests or hobbies (3 percent).

“We learned that just a little bit of action goes a long, long way toward increasing long-term well-being,” Shepherd’s Fold Ministries’ Van Hook said. “You’re in this ministry for the long haul, why not invest in your long-term well-being? Momentum builds quickly, so do something today.”

Retirement age ministers also volunteered some ways ministries can best help those like themselves, such as opportunities to serve or minister (16 percent); a pension or retirement plan (7 percent); financial planning or assistance (5 percent); offer seminars, workshops or retreats (4 percent); opportunities to stay active (4 percent); keep in touch with them (4 percent); offer encouragement (3 percent); show appreciation or recognize them (3 percent); and provide resources (3 percent).

For churches and ministries looking to serve retired and retiring pastors and missionaries better, Van Hook said there are two primary ways they can reach out.

“The first way is to partner with the growing number of ministries and resource centers that exist to help retired ministers,” he said. “Secondly, simply communicate with retired ministers and listen. Those actions will go a long way to making them feel appreciated.”

The online survey of retired Protestant pastors, ministers and missionaries was conducted June 11-July 23. Quotas and slight weights were used to balance denominational/organizational affiliation based on the number of eligible retirees. The completed sample is 2,451 surveys.