

Threat of divorce hard to spot among churchgoing couples, survey shows

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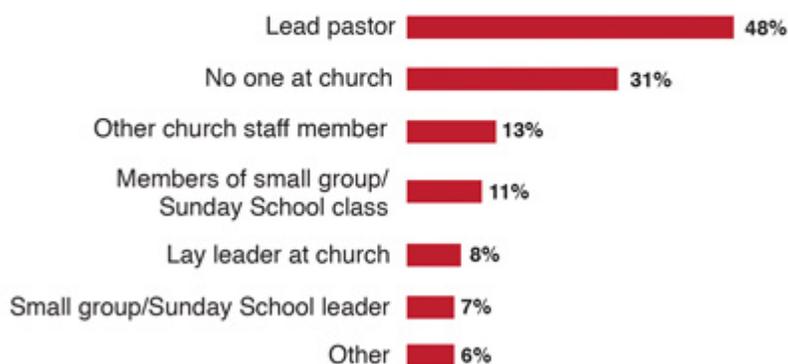
NASHVILLE, Tenn.—Before a divorce, churchgoers in troubled marriages look a lot like their happily married counterparts at church—participating, serving and leading at similar rates.

After a divorce, the differences can be stark. Twenty percent drop out of church entirely. In many cases, their children stop attending, too. A third give less to the church than they did before. Their churches report leadership voids and fractured relationships.

MARRIAGE & DIVORCE

Who do couples seek for help with marital problems?

AMONG CHURCHGOERS WHO DIVORCED



Note: Respondents could select all that apply.

But pastors may have difficulty helping couples save their marriages, because churchgoers on the brink of separation often keep quiet at church about their marital woes.

Those are among the findings of a new study by Nashville-based [LifeWay Research](#). The survey, sponsored by [Focus on the Family](#), examined Protestant pastors, churchgoing Americans in healthy marriages and churchgoing Americans who divorced in the past five years.

The research points to a problem with church culture, said Scott McConnell, LifeWay Research vice president. If couples are unwilling to discuss marital struggles at church, they don't get the help they need.

Many couples also may not realize help is available. While most pastors say their churches offer counseling referrals and other marriage aids, fewer churchgoers agree.

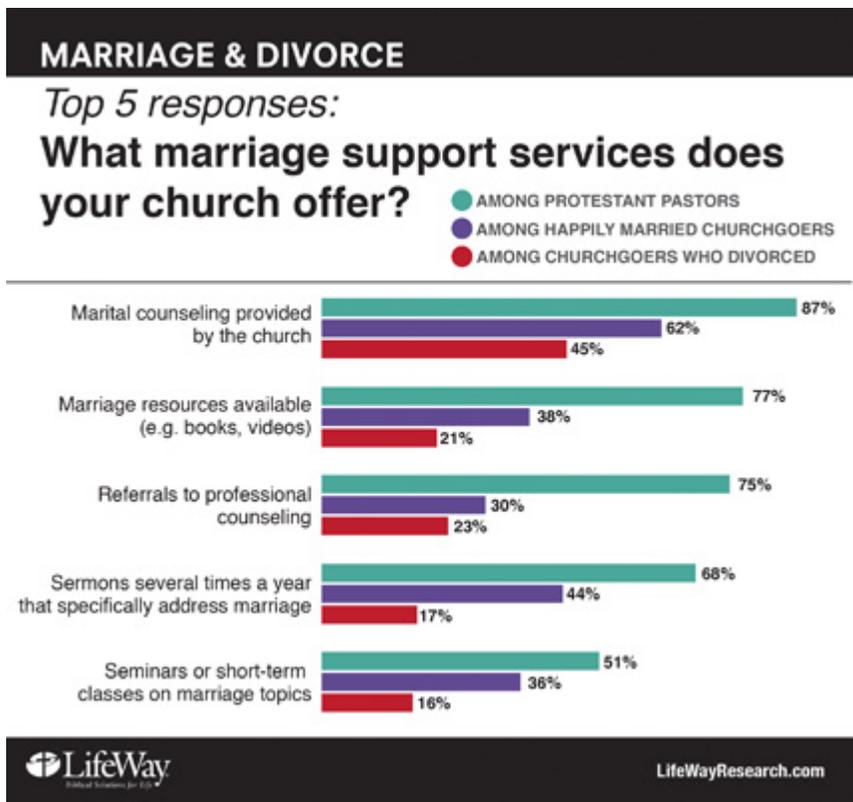
"Either pastors are overstating what they're doing, or not everybody is noticing what their church is doing," McConnell said. "There are clearly gaps in communication when people don't even know help exists."

A widespread issue

Divorce is a widespread issue for Protestant churches. Forty percent of pastors say at least one couple in their church separated or divorced in the past year.

Yet among regular churchgoers—those who attend once a month or more—church involvement offers few clues to distinguish troubled marriages from healthy ones. Three months before their separation, seven in 10 regular churchgoers who divorce attend church once a week or more. For those in healthy marriages, the rate is 87 percent.

The two groups also report similar levels of involvement in small groups at church (46 percent for those who divorce vs. 41 percent for those in healthy marriages), serving in community ministries (34 percent vs. 31 percent), and positions of responsibility at church (39 percent vs. 45 percent).



“Many of the people who end up divorcing are average churchgoers,” McConnell said. “You’re not always going to see it coming.”

He noted one exception—regular churchgoers whose spouses do not attend. Eighteen percent of those who divorced say their former spouses never attended church three months before their separation. In contrast, just 2 percent of those in healthy marriages say their spouse never attends.

“It is courageous and often uncomfortable for a married individual to attend church alone, but it is also an indicator they’re going two different directions in their lives,” McConnell said.

After divorce, eight in 10 still look like average churchgoers. They may switch churches, but they’re as involved as ever.

20 percent of divorced leave church

Twenty percent, though, no longer attend church—and the loss among their children is even higher. Among those with children who attended church before the separation, 35 percent say at least one child no longer attends.

Nearly half of those who divorce (47 percent) leave the church they attended before their separation. Rarely will both members of a couple remain at the same church after a divorce (10 percent), McConnell said. He suggested helping spouses find new places to worship so they don't step away from church entirely.

A third of those who divorce (32 percent) say they give less to their local church than they gave before their separation. More than a quarter of this group stops giving at all.

Repercussions affect others

Pastors say the repercussions of divorce affect others as well. Thirty-one percent say divorce has fractured other relationships in the church, and 16 percent say it created leadership voids. About one in 10 say divorce has hurt the church's reputation (11 percent), halted its momentum (10 percent) or disbanded an adult small group or Sunday school class (9 percent).

Nearly 8 in 10 churchgoers—and 94 percent of pastors—say their church is a safe place to talk about marital difficulties.

Experience, however, tells a different story. Among those who divorced, only 48 percent discussed their marriage problems with the lead pastor. Even fewer talked to anyone else, such as another staff member (13 percent) or a member of a small group or Sunday school class (11 percent).

Thirty-one percent told no one—a troubling sign of church culture, McConnell said.

A wake-up call for the church

“If churches are dogmatic and not realistic about relationships, then those who have trouble in their marriage are never going to tell anybody,” he said. “That’s a wake-up call to the church.”

Pastors say their churches offer a wide range of marriage-support services, including resources such as books and videos (77 percent) and referrals to professional counseling outside the church (75 percent).

Many churchgoers, however, seem unaware of the services. Just 38 percent of those in healthy marriages and 21 percent of those who divorced believe their church offers books and videos about marriage. Thirty percent of those in healthy marriages and 23 percent of those who divorced think their church refers people to outside counselors.

Churches can be more effective by being more proactive, McConnell said. He pointed out two-thirds of pastors say their church has no lay leader responsible for marriage ministry, and 43 percent have no written plan.

“As much as churches already do things to help with marriage, there is still a huge opportunity to do more and to do it better,” he said. “I think the typical pastor would check the box and say, ‘We’re already doing this.’ And yet when we look deeper, there’s so much more that could be done.”

Survey methods

Researchers conducted the online survey of individuals who are divorced July 23-Aug. 21. They used a demographically balanced sample from a national online panel. Analysts used quotas and slight weights to ensure the sample being screened matched national totals for gender, age, ethnicity, region and education. This sample was screened to include only adults who have been divorced within the past five years and who attended worship services at a Christian church once a month or more three months prior to

separating from the former spouse. The completed sample is 1,000 surveys, providing 95 percent confidence that the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 3.8 percent. This margin of error accounts for the effect of weighting. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.

Researchers conducted the online survey of individuals who are in healthy marriages July 23-28. They used a demographically balanced sample from a national online panel and applied quotas and slight weights to ensure the sample being screened matched national totals for gender, age, ethnicity, region and education. This sample was screened to include only married adults who attend church once a month or more and whose responses to the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale were “very satisfied” or “extremely satisfied” for all three questions: (1) How satisfied are you with your marriage? (2) How satisfied are you with your husband/wife as a spouse? (3) How satisfied are you with your relationship with your husband/wife? The completed sample is 1,000 surveys, providing 95 percent confidence the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 4 percent. This margin of error accounts for the effect of weighting. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.

Researchers conducted the phone survey of Protestant pastors July 15-29. The calling list was a stratified random sample drawn from a list of all Protestant churches with phones. Callers conducted each interview with the senior pastor, minister or priest of the church called. Analysts weighted responses by region to reflect the population more accurately. The completed sample is 1,000 surveys, providing 95 percent confidence that the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 3.2 percent. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.