

CONVERGENCE

Research Report: Pastor Turnover during Covid-19

Anna Mitchell Hall

Leading through the Covid-19 pandemic changed the very shape of ministry for most pastors. For some, that precipitated at least a consideration of retiring or resigning from their current position.

A study by the Wisconsin Council of Churches conducted in July 2020, only a few months into the crisis, found that 25% of clergy had seriously considered retiring or resigning because of the stress of doing ministry during the pandemic. A more recent Barna survey in March of 2021 found that 29% of pastors had considered quitting in the past year. William Vanderbloemen, leader of an executive search firm for churches, predicts that 2021 will be marked by clergy turnover. While the true rate of turnover will only be known once we are fully past the pandemic, this level of consideration of a job change seems to be an increase over turnover rates of 1 - 16% reported among clergy across multiple denominations as recently as 2013.

Some of this mirrors the trends we are seeing in the larger working community. Almost 4 million people quit their jobs in April 2021, the most for any month on record. One study found that 52% of workers would look for a new job in 2021. Some of this increase is a correction to a reduction in those leaving jobs in 2020, but the need for workers in many industries is also creating a job seekers market where people can choose better employment situations for themselves. Early retirements are also increasing. Economists report a wave of chosen or forced retirements in 2020 that is nearly double that of 2019, leaving over a million fewer people over 55 in the workforce than expected. Retirement consultants are finding significant numbers of clients inquiring about early retirement as young as 54 or 55, compared with an average of around age 62 pre-pandemic.

Another trend that may contribute to increased clergy turnover is the universal mental health strain of living through a pandemic. Early in the pandemic, multiple studies found significant increases in reports of depression and mental distress. In many people, these early shifts away from mental health resolved themselves over the next few months, with distress returning close to pre-pandemic levels by the summer of 2020. Life satisfaction research conducted by Gallup in 2020 unexpectedly found that people were as satisfied with their lives as in previous, non-pandemic, years. This bounce-back indicated strong levels of resilience in the face of life challenges. However, those who had been previously struggling with mental health challenges saw continued negative impacts on mental health into late 2020. One study found that even pre-pandemic, 23% of pastors acknowledged they had personally struggled with mental illness. For these pastors, worsening distress and depression could instigate a departure.

A third factor that may contribute is the increase in demands of pastoral leadership. Deaths from Covid-19 and other causes required complex pastoral care and ritual leadership when face to face encounters or funerals were dangerous or forbidden. The pandemic and national news events led to elevation of conflict around hot topics in the church, with the very operations of worship and building use becoming polarized around mask-usage and social distancing restrictions. Pew Research Center also found that pastors were addressing complicated and tense topics in their sermons over the past year, with 80% of congregations hearing sermons on the pandemic, the election, and 44% hearing sermons addressing racism. Beyond the mental stress of managing such polarizing conflicts, polarization also leads directly to forced pastoral transitions. The Wisconsin survey found that 10% of clergy had been threatened that they would be fired because of controversial pandemic-safety decisions. Even now, the return to full programming and navigating face to face or hybrid worship in 2021 presents an entirely new challenge after a year of unprecedented challenges. Pastor and author Jenny Smith compares this phase of pastoral ministry to running a second marathon immediately after the finish line of a first. All of this contributes to burnout and possible departure on the part of clergy.

What can churches do to support and retain their pastor? While not all causes of pastor transition are preventable, churches that work to provide excellent working conditions and compensation for pastors will be better off in retaining and/or attracting pastoral leadership. For those pastors who might leave to seek better working conditions, increasing salary and benefits and modifying time demands could make your congregation the better choice. For those pastors in need of care for mental or physical wellness, congregations that provide mandatory sabbatical time and financial and time support for access care could make all the difference in the world. In all churches, lay leaders and members need to take a hard look at how they are treating the pastor and each other. Congregations must find healthy ways of engaging conflict so that the next hot topic doesn't turn into a wildfire that burns out your pastor.

For help with any or all of these areas in your congregation, Convergence offers consulting, coaching and conflict transformation training.

Sources:

"ChurchPulse Weekly Conversations: Glenn Packiam & Andrew Hébert on Pastoral Health & Leading Online - Barna Group." *Barna Group*, n.d. [barna.com/research/cpw-packiam-hebert/](https://www.barna.com/research/cpw-packiam-hebert/).

"How Many Quit? Estimating the Clergy Attrition Rate." *Into Action - From Seminary into Ministry*, n.d. into-action.net/research/many-quit-estimating-clergy-attrition-rate/.

"William Vanderbloemen in Christian Post - Vanderbloemen Predicts High Church Staff Turnover," *Vanderbloemen.com*, December 8, 2020. [vanderbloemen.com/news/high-staff-turnover-christian-post](https://www.vanderbloemen.com/news/high-staff-turnover-christian-post).

Dennison, Kara. "Why The 2021 'Turnover Tsunami' Is Happening And What Business Leaders Can Do To Prepare." *Forbes*, April 27, 2021. [forbes.com/sites/karadennison/2021/04/27/why-the-2021-turnover-tsunami-is-happening-and-what-business-leaders-can-do-to-prepare/?sh=2e57d1b74e6d](https://www.forbes.com/sites/karadennison/2021/04/27/why-the-2021-turnover-tsunami-is-happening-and-what-business-leaders-can-do-to-prepare/?sh=2e57d1b74e6d).

Quinn, Dennis, and Aaron Smith. "Pastors Often Discussed Election, Pandemic and Racism in Fall of 2020." *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, July 8, 2021. [pewforum.org/2021/07/08/pastors-often-discussed-election-pandemic-and-racism-in-fall-of-2020/](https://www.pewforum.org/2021/07/08/pastors-often-discussed-election-pandemic-and-racism-in-fall-of-2020/).

Schwartz, Nelson D., and Coral Murphy Marcos. "They Didn't Expect to Retire Early. The Pandemic Changed Their Plans," *New York Times*, July 2, 2021. [nytimes.com/2021/07/02/business/economy/retire-early-pandemic-social-security.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/02/business/economy/retire-early-pandemic-social-security.html)

Smith, Jenny. "The Second Marathon: A Thought For Pastors On Walking the New Normal." *Jenny Smith Writes*, July 2, 2021. jennysmithwrites.com/post/the-second-marathon-a-word-for-pastors-on-walking-the-new-normal?fbclid=IwAR2iBtXS2xw_QjnpCKP_MN6hpJmfX2tFj4MBzDhz2D7b2O1K15KXG2-B8saq.

Smith, Jonathan. "Falling Seed: Provide Your Pastoral Leaders a COVID Sabbatical." *Baptist Standard*, May 19, 2021. baptiststandard.com/falling-seed/provide-your-pastoral-leaders-a-covid-sabbatical/.

Sullivan, Paul. "For Some People, Working From Home Sped Up Their Decision to Retire," *New York Times*, July 9, 2021. [nytimes.com/2021/07/09/your-money/pandemic-working-from-home-retire.html?smid=url-share](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/09/your-money/pandemic-working-from-home-retire.html?smid=url-share).

Wisconsin Council of Churches. Clergy Survey July 2020: Covid-19 and Ministry Stressors. [Microsoft Word - Clergy Survey - Executive Summary \(wichurches.org\)](#)

Wheaton College. "Resilient Church Leadership Initiative." *Wheaton College*. Accessed July 12, 2021. <https://www.wheaton.edu/news/recent-news/2020/april/resilient-church-leadership-initiative/>.

Xenakis, Christopher. "I Didn't Sign on for This! And Other Things Ministers Say during Covid-19." *Vital Signs and Statistics*, November 30, 2020. carducc.wordpress.com/2020/11/23/i-didnt-sign-on-for-this-and-other-things-ministers-say-during-covid-19/.