

Study reveals why clergy leave their jobs

Lifeway/Facts and Trends with Ellison Research

Nashville, TN--Research results released for the first time in the September/October 2005 edition of Facts & Trends magazine show that it's more common for a pastor to take a job at a different church due to getting a promotion than it is for a pastor to move to a new church because of feeling God's call or leading.

Concerns about whether pastors keep any job long enough are especially common among Southern Baptists (87% of whom feel pastors in their denomination don't tend to stay at one church for enough years); Southern Baptist ministers are also more likely than average to have held multiple positions over their years in the ministry.

- The average American minister has held a paid job in ministry for 19 years, and has spent an average of 15.6 of those years as a senior pastor of one or more churches.
- The average minister has been the senior pastor of his or her current church for 7.7 years.
- Ministers at larger churches tended to have a longer tenure -- an average of 8.7 years in their current position, compared to 7.2 years among small churches.
- The typical minister has been the senior pastor at three different churches during his/her career.
- Thirty-one percent are in their first position as a senior pastor, 24% have pastored two churches, 16% have been with three churches, and 29% have been with four or more churches.
- Among pastors who are part of a denomination, 19% are assigned to positions by their denomination, while 81% are free to choose their own job.
- Denominational assignments are most prevalent within the Methodist tradition, although not exclusive to Methodist churches.
- Being assigned to jobs has a strong influence on how long pastors stay in one position.
- The average length of time with their current church is 8.2 years among those who are free to select their own job, but only 4.9 years among those who are assigned to a church.
- Similarly, pastors who are free to choose their own jobs have led an average of 2.7 churches over their career, compared to an average of 4.1 churches among those who are assigned jobs (even though the length of time they have been in the ministry did not differ between the two groups).
- Only 31% feel the average pastor in their denomination stays as senior pastor of a church about the right amount of time.
- Thirty-three percent believe the average tenure is a little too short, and 26% feel it is much too short.
- Only one out of ten ministers believes pastors tend to stay at the same church for too many years.
- Almost three out of four pastors who are assigned jobs by their denomination (73%) feel ministers do not get to spend enough years at any one church, compared to 57% among those who get to select their own position.
- Methodists also are frequently concerned that pastors don't stay at one church long enough (74%), but most Methodist ministers are assigned to their positions, which in turn means Methodists are among the most likely to have served in multiple churches during their careers.

The study also evaluated the various reasons ministers have had for changing jobs throughout their careers.

- The most common reason for moving from one church to another is a desire to serve in a different type of community or a different region of the country.
- Twenty-seven percent of all Protestant ministers have switched jobs for this reason.
- Other common reasons for changing jobs are getting promoted to a higher position, such as from an associate pastor at one church to the senior pastor of another church (20%), wanting to pastor a larger church (16%), being transferred by their denomination (15%), and leaving to start a new church (15%).
- [Read more](#) (Comparison Charts available at EllisonResearch.com)