

Barna: State of the Church

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COVID-19 Conversations: Many Pastors Are Tired, Overwhelmed and Lonely

Articles [State of the Church 2020](#) in [Leaders & Pastors](#) in [State of the Church 2020](#) • May 20, 2020

In the most recent **ChurchPulse Weekly** episode, co-hosts Carey Nieuwhof and David Kinnaman were joined by Tish Harrison Warren and John Mark Comer to discuss how pastors are doing as the nation nears its third month of response to the COVID-19 crisis, with social distancing regulations still in place for most areas.

Recent ChurchPulse Weekly questions asked of Barna's pastor panel covered how church leaders are personally feeling right now in terms of their well-being, mental health and calling, as well as how they are following government guidelines for reopening their churches. We'll summarize their responses in this article. *You can [watch the latest broadcast of ChurchPulse Weekly here](#) or [listen to the most recent episode](#) wherever you get your podcasts.*

Overall, pastors are really tired, but are looking on the bright side.

With social distancing guidelines having been in place for over two months now, church leaders, like so many others, have established new routines when it comes to work and daily life—and some of these changes have taken a toll on their well-being. Three in 10 pastors (31%) say they are currently struggling the most with their emotional well-being, while a quarter (26%) says this about their relational well-being.

When it comes to emotional well-being, there are both positive and negative trends. Despite disruptions, over half of pastors (55%) have primarily felt *happy* in the last week, and other favorable emotions surface too (36% *grateful*, 26% *optimistic*, 16% *content*). Yet another half (51%) admits they were *tired*. Two in five say they primarily felt *exhausted* (41%), *sad* (41%) or *panicked* (39%) last week. Other concerning emotions less commonly felt include a sense of being *powerless* (17%), *angry* (16%) or *indifferent* (5%). There are some signs that leaders could be receiving support, however; over one-third felt *helped* (37%) or *strong* (35%).

Tish Harrison Warren, an Anglican priest and author, notes, “The sense of exhaustion and frustration is very real in this time. ... This is not the way we are intended to do ministry. Human beings are not supposed to live this way. But we need to now in order to love our neighbor well.”

“In all of this, we have to understand is that we're tasting the fall,” continues Warren. “We're feeling what is wrong with the world. It doesn't surprise me that that's exhausting and difficult emotionally. I think the real challenge for pastors is going to be not to shrink away from that or to pretend this is okay, but instead to really learn to step into the grief and the limit of that.”

Most leaders are overwhelmed, and one in five has “frequently” felt lonely within the last month

Taking a longer view of some of the emotions brought on by the pandemic, a majority of pastors (68%) say they have felt overwhelmed regularly in the last four weeks (21% frequently, 47% sometimes), a testament to the effect the crisis is having on church leaders' decisions. One-quarter (23%) says this was a rare feeling, while one in 10 (9%) says they managed to avoid overwhelm in that time.

Social distance has perhaps caught up with over half of church leaders (52%), who admit to having felt lonely within the last month (17% frequently, 35% sometimes). The other almost-half of leaders expressed that loneliness crept in only rarely (28%) or never (20%) within the last month.

Perhaps some of these lonely leaders are also present among the 15 percent who say they do not have a confidant right now. Thankfully, 85 percent of church leaders have someone with whom they are comfortable sharing their feelings and personal stories.

“To do a podcast interview or to chat [over Zoom] works great,” comments John Mark Comer, an author and pastor for Teaching and Vision at Bridgetown Church in Portland, Oregon. “But confession of sin, bearing each other’s burdens, emotionally intuiting where another person is at, hearing from God for another person, it’s really a challenge [to do these digitally].”

Comer concludes, “Of course, God is in it and he’s gracious and kind, but I think there’s an exhaustion there. We’re aching for relationships. We are a gathered people and I miss [physically gathering] a lot.”

One-third of pastors feels more confident in their calling today than when they first entered ministry

In light of how pastors are doing emotionally and mentally, are they feeling discouraged in their role as church leaders? Barna compared how confident pastors say they are in their calling currently versus when they first entered the ministry, and then further analyzed these results in light of responses shared by pastors in research from *The State of Pastors* (2016).

Currently, 32 percent say they are *more* confident in their calling now than before; in 2016, this percentage was nearly doubled (66%). Right now, half of pastors (52%) say they feel about the same level of security in their calling as when they started out in ministry, a percentage that has seen a large increase since 2016 (31%). And while only 3 percent of pastors in 2016 were less confident in their calling than before, this proportion currently sits at 14 percent.

“Back in 2016, two out of three pastors said they felt more confident at that time in their ministry than they did when they first started out,” surmises Kinnaman. “But today, only one in three pastors feel that level of energy, enthusiasm and sense of confidence in what God’s calling them to do.”

Though there are many factors that could impact the sense of calling and certainty of these two samples of pastors in two different periods, Kinnaman notes, “This is a crazy and disconcerting time, and I think it’s okay for us to acknowledge that this has definitely had a huge impact on church leaders’ psychology, emotional health, sense of God working in us and through us.”

Pastors are conflicted when it comes to leading churches in compliance of COVID-19 guidelines

The majority of pastors (89%) agrees that “as a church leader, it is important for me to lead by example and follow *all* local / national government regulations and recommendations regarding the COVID-19 pandemic” (36% strongly agree, 53% somewhat agree). However, in addition, just over half (54%) agrees that “as a church leader, it is more important that I do what is best for my church, even if that means going *against* what local / national government officials are saying” (14% strongly agree, 40% somewhat agree).

Caring for Souls in a New Reality, Barna’s *State of the Church* webcast which took place on May 20, drilled deeper into the knowns and unknowns the Church must navigate at the start of this new and complex decade. Barna researchers and expert guests presented findings related to human flourishing, organizational thriving and effective leadership, primarily focusing on three things church leaders can do as they care for the souls entrusted to their leadership:

Reset: What culture and faith trends have emerged as a result of the

pandemic?

Refocus: How can we leverage the digital landscape to make resilient disciples?

Restore: How is God forming us to be more humble, resilient and dependent on him?

If you missed the webcast, want to watch certain clips or hope to share it with someone else, visit [Barna Access](#)—our new digital subscription service—to [view the replay](#) for a limited time. [Barna Access](#) is also home to our [ChurchPulse tools](#), which can be viewed and utilized with a free membership.

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About the Research

COVID-19 Data: Barna Group conducted these online surveys among 1,759 Protestant Senior Pastors from March 20–May 18, 2020. Participants are all members of Barna Group’s Church Panel. Minimal weighting has been used to ensure the sample is representative based on denomination, region and church size.

Data Collection Dates

Week 1, n=222, March 20-23, 2020

Week 2, n=212, March 24-30, 2020

Week 3, n=195, March 31-April 6, 2020

Week 4, n=246, April 7-13, 2020

Week 5, n=204, April 14-20, 2020

Week 6, n=164, April 21-27, 2020

Week 7, n=167, April 28-May 4, 2020

Week 8, n=165, May 5-11, 2020

Week 9, n=184, May 12-18, 2020

Research for [The State of Pastors](#) was conducted on behalf of [Pepperdine University](#). A total of 900 Protestant senior pastors were interviewed by telephone and online from April through December 2015. Pastors were

recruited from publicly available church listings covering 90 percent of U.S. churches that have a physical address and a listed phone number or email address. Churches selected for inclusion were called up to five times at different times of the day to increase the probably of successful contact. The sample error for this study is plus or minus 3.1 percentage points, at the 95% confidence level.

Minimal statistical weighting was used to calibrate the sample to known population percentages in relation to demographic variables.

Featured image by [Dylan Ferreira](#) on [Unsplash](#).

About Barna

Barna is a private, non-partisan, for-profit organization under the umbrella of the Issachar Companies. Located in Ventura, California, Barna Group has been conducting and analyzing primary research to understand cultural trends related to values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors since 1984.

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Related Research

Five Things We've Learned During the COVID-19 Crisis

In a time of isolation and unprecedented change, the well-being of pastors and their people has been at the forefront of Barna's research. In this article, we'll take a look at some trends that have emerged from the weekly pastor panel surveys, as well as recent data about practicing Christians' well-being—relational, emotional and mental. These research findings and many more will be discussed even further at Barna's State of the Church webcast on May 20 at 1pm ET, a free event for church leaders and their teams to join and learn more about the State of the Church at the beginning of our new decade.



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