

LifeWay Research: Pastors' long work hours can come at the expense of people, ministry

Written by Mark Kelly

NASHVILLE, Tenn., 12/28/09 – Protestant pastors in America are working long hours, sometimes at the expense of relationships with church members, prospects, family and even the Lord.

A telephone survey of more than 1,000 senior pastors indicated a full 65 percent of them work 50 or more hours a week – with 8 percent saying they work 70 or more hours. Meetings and electronic correspondence consume large amounts of time for many ministers, while counseling, visitation, family time, prayer and personal devotions suffer in too many cases.

The results of the LifeWay Research study “How Protestant Pastors Spend Their Time” show the typical pastor works 50 hours a week. Scott McConnell, associate director of LifeWay Research, pointed out, however, that this average actually understates the number of hours because it takes into account bivocational pastors (11 percent of survey participants), part-time senior pastors (5 percent of survey participants), and volunteer pastors (2 percent of survey participants) – the majority of whom work, by design, less than 40 hours for their church each week.

“Since the phone survey went to church offices, it was pastors who were at the church office and more likely to take the phone call who are included in the survey,” McConnell explained. “But, of the bivocational pastors who participated, the median number of hours bivocational and part-time pastors work for their churches each week is 30 hours.

“Bivocational pastors often follow the apostle Paul’s example of ‘working night and day’ in Thessalonica as they hold a job outside the church in addition to their job as pastor.”

When factoring out those who are not full time, the median number of hours full-time senior pastors work for their churches each week is 55 hours, with 42 percent working 60 or more hours.

Among ministry activities, pastors spend the most time on sermon preparation. Half of them spend five to 14 hours in sermon preparation. Nine percent say they spend 25 hours or more in sermon preparation each week, and 7 percent report they spend less than five hours preparing to preach.

Ministry-related meetings and electronic correspondence drive the number of hours worked even higher. More than 70 percent of pastors say they spend up to

five hours a week in meetings, and 15 percent put their meeting load at 10 hours or more. E-mail and other electronic correspondence eat up between two and six hours a week for half the pastors, while 14 percent indicate they spend at least 10 hours a week in electronic correspondence.

Many pastors, however, find it difficult to make time for two primary ways of relating to church members and prospects: counseling and visitation. While 24 percent say they spend six hours a week or more in counseling ministry, the same percentage reports spending an hour or less. By the same token, while 12 percent of pastors say they spend 11 or more hours a week in hospital, home or witnessing visits, 12 percent also indicate they spend an hour or less. Forty-eight percent say they spend between two and five hours a week in visitation.

Time with family rates as a priority for many pastors, but some find alarmingly little opportunity to be with their spouses and children. While 30 percent of the pastors report spending 20-29 hours with their families each week – and 16 percent indicate spending 40 or more hours with them weekly – almost 10 percent say they spend nine hours a week or less with family members. At the same time, 24 percent say they watch 10-14 hours of television each week, and 13 percent put their TV time at 15 hours or more.

The amount of time spent in prayer and personal devotions raises questions about the vitality of many pastors' spiritual lives. While 52 percent report spending one to six hours in prayer each week, 5 percent say they spend no time at all in prayer. Furthermore, while 52 percent say they spend two to five hours a week in personal devotions unrelated to teaching preparation, 14 percent indicate they spend an hour or less in personal devotions each week.

“In the early church, the apostles recognized the need to focus their time on prayer and studying the Scripture, as evidenced in Acts 6:4, for instance,” McConnell said. “They shared other ministry tasks – even pressing issues – with qualified believers. Pastors' top two uses of their ministry time today show this same priority in sermon preparation and prayer.

“While the priorities are right, they may need better protection.” McConnell continued. “The total hours pastors work in addition to these biblical priorities shows that more of the other ministry tasks need to be shared. Jesus Christ designed the work of the church to be done by believers together in unity.”

The research also turned up some interesting contrasts between evangelical pastors and those who serve churches in mainline denominations:

- 30 percent of evangelical pastors say they spend 20 or more hours a week in sermon preparation, contrasted with 20 percent of mainline pastors.
- 49 percent of evangelical pastors report they spend three hours or less each week

in ministry related meetings, while 38 percent of mainline pastors report the same number; 62 percent of mainline pastors report spending five or more hours a week in meetings, contrasted with 52 percent of evangelical pastors.

– 39 percent of evangelical pastors indicate spending less than four hours a week in personal devotions unrelated to teaching preparation, contrasted with 47 percent of mainline pastors.

Methodology: LifeWay Research conducted the telephone survey of 1,002 randomly selected Protestant pastors Oct. 13-29, 2008. Responses were weighted to reflect the geographic distribution of the churches, and the sample size provides 95 percent confidence that sampling error does not exceed ± 3.2 percent.

Read more research at www.lifewayresearch.com.