

4-1-2023

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Recommended Citation

Moody, E. E. (2023). The Top Ten Challenges Facing Churches in 2023. *Great Commission Research Journal*, 15(1), 19-25. Retrieved from <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/gcrj/vol15/iss1/2>

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The Top Ten Challenges Facing Churches in 2023

Edward E. Moody, Jr.

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Abstract

This article summarizes the results of a study conducted by the Great Commission Research Network seeking to identify the top challenges facing churches in 2023. The results are similar to other recently conducted studies, emphasizing challenges related to evangelism and young adults.

In the fall of 2022, the Great Commission Research Network surveyed pastors to identify what they believed would be the greatest challenges faced by North American churches in 2023, using their own churches as a point of reference. Fifty challenges were listed, and respondents provided answers using five categories: 1) not a challenge, 2) a slight challenge, 3) a significant challenge, 4) a very significant challenge, and 5) a nearly insurmountable challenge.

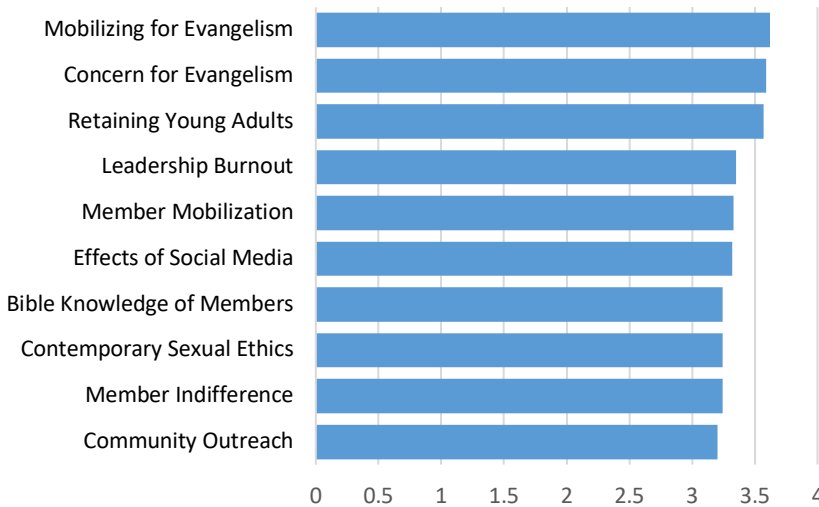
Similar studies with pastors have previously been conducted. Just prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Barna kicked off their State of the Church 2020 Project with a study focused on the concerns of pastors. Half of the Protestant pastors (51 percent) noted “reaching a younger audience” was a major concern for their ministries. Thirty-four percent marked the statement as a top three concern for their churches, and 12 percent as the top concern. “Declining and inconsistent outreach

and evangelism” was a major concern for 50 percent of the pastors. Forty percent indicated it was within their top three concerns, and 14 percent their largest concern. The data was gathered from November 15 to December 17, 2019 (Barna Group, 2020).

A similar study by Lifeway Research about pastors’ concerns was published in 2018. In this survey, the top concern of Protestant pastors was “reaching the next generation” (40 percent). This data was gathered from June 19 to July 2, 2018 (Morgan, 2019).

Interestingly, despite the pandemic, pastors reported similar concerns in the survey conducted by the Great Commission Research Network. Pastors were contacted via email and asked to complete the 5-minute survey. There were 129 respondents, and the data was gathered from September 19 to November 22, 2022. See Figure 1 below for the top ten challenges reported by pastors.

Figure 1: *The Top Ten Challenges for 2023*



Results

The following three challenges clearly emerged in this survey: mobilizing for evangelism (3.62), concern for evangelism (3.59), and retaining young adults (3.57). We will examine the top ten challenges.

1. Mobilizing for Evangelism (3.62)

The top concern for pastors in 2023 is mobilizing for evangelism. Indeed,

pastors view evangelism concerns as the top two challenges facing their churches. This finding is consistent with the Barna (Barna Group, 2020) and Lifeway (Morgan, 2019) research conducted prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Previous research has shown unchurched Americans are open to conversations about the gospel, and though most Americans know Christians, 40 percent indicated they have never had a Christian share with them the benefits of being a Christian (Earls, 2021). Indeed, it appears that many Christians, especially younger Christians, not only do not share the gospel but may even believe it is wrong to share their faith (Kinnaman, 2019).

2. Concern for Evangelism (3.59)

The second most common concern for pastors is the concern for evangelism. It is not a surprise that many pastors are concerned about evangelism since they are struggling with mobilizing for evangelism. It should be noted that, during the time this survey was conducted, Pew Research published their modeling indicating that, if current trends continue, Christianity will be in the minority in the United States by 2070 (Pew Research Center, 2022).

One could also argue that some of the other concerns identified are tied to evangelism. For example, community outreach (3.20), the number ten concern, and to a lesser extent cultural relevancy (3.04), making the gospel attractive (2.64), responding to atheism (2.42), and even hostility from nonbelievers (2.39) can be tied to the evangelism concern.

3. Retaining Young Adults (3.57)

Following evangelism, pastors identified “retaining young adults” as their third highest concern (3.57). Again, this is consistent with the Barna (Barna Group, 2020) and Lifeway (Morgan, 2019) studies. This finding stands largely alone but could tangentially be tied to other concerns like member retention (3.09), youth programs (2.83), and children’s programs (2.74). The concern about retaining and reaching young adults is well-known to the readers of this journal (Comer, 2021).

4. Leadership Burnout (3.35)

Although there is a significant difference between the top three concerns and the rest identified, burnout scored high as the number four concern. Burnout among those in the ministry has been well-documented and appears to be experienced at levels like that of teachers and other helping professionals (Adams, Hough, Proeschold-Bell, Yao, & Kolkin, 2017). This

concern cannot be ignored, especially considering the manner in which the “Great Resignation” has impacted clergy as well as the rest of the United States (Lovett, 2022).

5. Membership Mobilization (3.33)

The fifth concern is membership mobilization. This problem has been exacerbated after COVID-19. In a survey conducted by Lifeway Research last year, 77 percent of pastors indicated developing leaders and volunteers as a top concern (Lifeway Research, 2022). Furthermore, in a 2022 survey, Gallup found 35 percent of Americans reported volunteering for a religious organization. This is down from 38 percent in 2020 and 44 percent in 2017 (Jones, 2022).

6. Effects of Social Media (3.32)

Respondents also reported a high concern about the effects of social media. Although we are unaware of other surveys where pastors have reported this concern, there are examples in the blogosphere where it is discussed. For example, Martin (2022) has written about how social media perpetuates division within the church, takes away from important matters, and tempts pastors to perform rather than to shepherd.

7. Bible Knowledge of Members (3.24)

Bible knowledge of members was tied for the seventh concern. This, too, has been identified in other surveys, particularly the 2022 State of Theology survey by Ligonier Ministries and Lifeway Research indicating a slide in biblical knowledge among Americans and American Christians alike (Ligonier State of Theology, 2022). Also, Barna’s State of the Church survey indicated 29 percent of pastors were concerned about biblical illiteracy (Barna Group, 2020).

8. Contemporary Sexual Ethics (3.24)

Contemporary sexual ethics was also tied for seventh. This is to be expected as attitudes regarding various sexual issues continue to slide in a direction different from biblical Christianity (McCarthy, 2022).

9. Member Indifference (3.24)

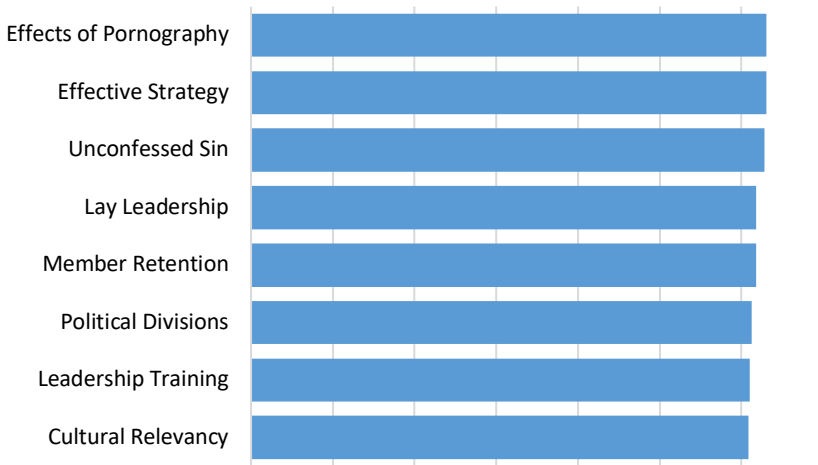
Tied for seventh as well was member indifference. Again, this is consistent with Lifeway’s recent research where apathy was rated as the single greatest concern of pastors in 2022 (Earls, 2022).

10. Community Outreach (3.20)

The tenth concern is community outreach. This is similar to results from Barna’s State of the Church survey mentioned earlier, where 21 percent of pastors indicated they were concerned about their churches “not reflecting the demographic of the community.” (Morgan, 2019).

Table 2 presents the remaining challenges that received a rating of 3.0 or higher.

Figure 2. *Additional Highly Ranked Challenges Faced by Churches.*



Conclusion

Upon examining these results, it is clear pastors are struggling with the same concerns. Most of these concerns have been building, evidenced by trends identified in multiple surveys. Some concerns, like member mobilization, seem to be new and could be a result of the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps these results will help pastors see they are not alone in their concerns and understand we could all benefit from tackling these concerns together for the sake of the gospel.

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About the Author

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