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# The Top Ten Challenges Facing Pastors in 2024

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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 pastors in 2024. The results are similar to a study conducted last year examining concerns of churches (Moody, 2023). While both studies highlighted challenges related to evangelism and young adults, this study revealed additional, pastoral concerns.*

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In the fall of 2022, the Great Commission Research Network surveyed pastors to identify what they believed would be the greatest challenges faced by churches in 2023 (Moody, 2023; Dunaetz, 2023). Concerns centered around evangelism and retaining young adults. However, in this most recent study, pastors were surveyed about their personal concerns. Whereas the previous survey of churches' concerns included 50 challenges, this survey addressed 79 challenges. 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.

Do pastors think differently, or have different challenges from others in the church? The *Barna Group* (2023a) reported on a study that

compared what pastors, non-Christians, and Christians who are not pastors believe the role of the church should be. Pastors believe that the church's role is as follows: tell others about Jesus (84 percent), help Christians grow (75 percent), practically assist those in need (64 percent), provide hands-on help to people in need (57 percent), teach/serve children (55 percent), care for the elderly and widows (52 percent), form close-knit community for Christians (38 percent), offer counseling and care (31 percent), host family-friendly events for the whole community (31 percent), and advocate or enact local social reform (18 percent).

On the other hand, non-Christians' view of the church's role in a community is as follows: provide hands-on help to people in need (39 percent), offer counseling and care (38 percent), practically assist those in need (38 percent), help Christians grow (32 percent), tell others about Jesus (30 percent), form a close-knit community for Christians (29 percent), teach/serve children (26 percent), host family-friendly events for the whole community (23 percent), care for the elderly and widows (20 percent), and advocate or enact local social reform (13 percent) (*Barna Group*, 2023a). Note the much lower percentages for all categories indicating lower expectations of the church by non-Christians. However, there also appears to be an opening for engagement since the top expectations were hands-on help, offering counseling, and providing practical assistance.

Furthermore, Christians (who are not pastors) were asked about their opinion of the church's role in a community. The results are as follows: help Christians grow (62 percent), tell others about Jesus (58 percent), offer counseling and care (52 percent), provide hands-on help to people in need (51 percent), practically assist those in need (46 percent), teach/serve children (46 percent), care for the elderly and widows (38 percent), form a close-knit community for Christians (35 percent), host family-friendly events for the whole community (26 percent), and advocate or enact local social reform (16 percent) (*Barna Group*, 2023a).

Each group has a different view for the church, but the number one role for pastors is to tell others about Jesus. "Help Christians grow," the second most important role of the church from the pastor's perspective (79 percent), also appears to be a major challenge.

In another *Barna Group* study, fifty-four percent of pastors disagreed with the statement "my church puts a significant priority on training and developing the next generation of leaders," which was a 22 percent increase from a 2015 study. Seventy-nine percent of pastors agreed that "churches aren't rising to their responsibilities to train up the next generation of Christian leaders." In the same study, pastors reported

concern about finding a successor. Seventy-one percent at least somewhat agreed with the statement “I am concerned about the quality of future Christian leaders” (*Barna Group, 2023b*).

Another *Barna Group* study broke down pastors’ concerns about church giving. While they noted that 34 percent of pastors felt that older congregants are extremely effective at demonstrating generosity, only 5 percent of pastors said the same about younger congregants (*Barna Group, 2023c*).

Pastors have much on their minds, and another *Barna Group* study indicates many carry these concerns alone. Barna compared survey results obtained in 2022 to those gathered in 2015 regarding loneliness and isolation. Forty-seven percent of pastors said that, during the past three months, they had sometimes felt lonely or isolated (compared to 28 percent in 2015). Further, 18 percent reported feeling lonely and isolated in the last three months (compared to 14 percent in 2015) (*Barna Group, 2023d*).

As we examine the results of this study, we will see how previous research informs the findings. In this study, pastors were contacted via email and asked to complete the five-minute survey. There were 347 respondents, and the data was gathered from September 2023 to December 2023. See Figure 1 below for the top ten challenges reported by pastors (which contains 11 challenges because two were tied for tenth place).

**Figure 1:** A Research Framework for Ethnoscopic Analysis



## Results

Three clusters of challenges emerged in this survey: concern about evangelism, retaining young adults, and concern about training. Concern about evangelism is seen throughout the results: effectively evangelize people who have never visited my church (3.30) and effectively evangelize people contacted through outreach efforts (2.95). Other challenges are likely related to pastors' concerns about evangelism: getting members to put their faith into practice (2.98), mobilizing members for ministry (2.94), and reaching out to the community to develop new relationships (2.89).

The second cluster of challenges is in the area of retaining young adults (3.18). This concern likely led to other top challenges faced by pastors such as running high quality youth programs (2.95) and high quality children's programs (2.91). It is likely many of these pastors saw these programs as a key to keeping young adults.

The last cluster of challenges centered around training and discipleship. Finding high quality pastoral and intern candidates tied for the seventh highest concern (2.94), followed by increasing small group participants (2.90), and recruiting lay leaders (2.90), which tied for the tenth concern. "Training leaders" came in as the number 15 challenge (2.86) faced by pastors.

It is important to note that in a previous study, pastors were asked to indicate the top concerns they anticipated their churches facing in 2023 and the ratings were higher. The highest rating for that study was 3.62 (Moody, 2023), and the highest for this study is 3.3. This decrease in most scores may reflect a less challenging situation in 2024 as the pandemic becomes more distant compared to recent years. The decrease may also be due to the pastors' greater confidence that they personally can face these challenges compared to their confidence that their church as a whole can face them. We will examine the top ten challenges.

### **1. Effectively Evangelizing People Who Have Never Visited the Church (3.30)**

The top concern for pastors in 2024 is effectively evangelizing people who have never visited the church. This is consistent with the most recent *Barna Group* (2023a) study where 84 percent of pastors believe the most important role of the church is to tell people about Jesus. Similarly, a *Lifeway Research* study conducted in 2021 indicated that 76 percent of protestant pastors said they needed to focus more on fostering connections with the unchurched (Earls, 2022a).

Only 39 percent of pastors feel their churches are at least somewhat effective in community outreach. This is down from 63 percent who said their churches were effective at reaching the unchurched in a 2015 survey (*Barna Group, 2023a*).

## **2. Mobilizing for Evangelism (3.27)**

This was the top concern for churches in 2023 (Moody, 2023). This concern hints at a discrepancy between what pastors believe should be the main role of the church and that of Christians who are not pastors. In the Barna Group 2023a study, while pastors said the most important role of the church was to tell others about Jesus (84 percent), 58 percent of Christians who were not pastors rated that role as important. Pastors are struggling to mobilize congregations to do evangelism.

## **3. Retaining Young Adults (3.18)**

This was also the number three concern for churches in 2023 (Moody, 2023). Retaining young adults is on the minds of pastors. Most pastors know that Generation Z is the least churched generation in American history (Burge, 2023). Pastors are also aware that many young adults who attended church as youth have stopped attending. For example, one Lifeway Research study has indicated that 66 percent of American young adults who attended a Protestant church regularly for at least a year as a teenager say they also dropped out for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22 (Lifeway Research, 2019).

## **4. Getting Members to Put Their Faith into Practice (2.98)**

Whether it is sharing their faith or ministering to others, pastors are struggling to help their members put their faith into practice. Perhaps this is also linked to giving. Fifty-six percent of pastors said that younger congregants are “somewhat” effective in this area, and 18 percent went so far as to say that younger congregants are “not very” effective in generosity. Put another way, 51 percent of pastors were “very concerned” about younger Christians not financially supporting the church, and 43 percent were “somewhat concerned” (*Barna Group, 2023c*).

## **5. Effectively Evangelizing People Contacted Through Outreach Activities (2.95)**

The top concern of pastors is evangelism. They often lead their church to engage in outreach activities. A major concern is if these people will be effectively evangelized.

In one study, 65 percent of American Christians endorsed the statement, “Sharing with a nonbeliever how they can become a Christian is the most loving thing I can do for them.” However, 42 percent of the same sample said, “Sharing with a nonbeliever how they can become a Christian is scary.” Only 30 percent of the sample reported sharing how to become a Christian with a stranger, and 38 percent with a friend in the previous six months (Earls, 2022b). Effectively evangelizing people is a legitimate concern which also relates to “getting members to put their faith into practice.”

### **5. Running High Quality Youth Programs (2.95)**

No doubt this concern is connected to the retaining young adults concern and the high number of youth who have reportedly left the church. Many pastors have limited budgets, but the good news is they can partner with parents to address this concern. Smith and Adamczyk (2021) have found three factors that are key to whether an adult child remains in their faith past high school. Those factors include whether the family attends church at least once a week, whether the parents reported that their religious faith was “extremely” important, and how often they have conversations about religious matters. Youth groups partnering with parents have the strongest impact on lasting faith (Anderson, 2023).

### **7. Membership Mobilization (2.94)**

This was the fifth highest concern for churches in the previous year as churches struggled with a reduction in volunteers (Moody, 2023). In addition to working on current church programs, a mobilized membership will have many opportunities. Barna’s findings about the views non-Christians have about the role of the church are informative. At a time when fewer people are attending church, many non-Christians may be looking for hands-on help, counseling, and care, as well as practical assistance (Barna Group, 2023a). A mobilized membership might be able to use these activities to better reach their community.

### **7. Finding High Quality Pastoral and Intern Candidates (2.94)**

The shortage of pastoral candidates is tied for the seventh highest concern of pastors. In the *Barna Group* study cited earlier, the average pastor said they were about 17 years away from retiring, and one-quarter of pastors indicated they would like to retire within the next seven years (Barna Group, 2023b). There is a great concern about a lack of leaders to whom to pass the torch of leadership.

## **9. Running High Quality Children’s Programs (2.91)**

This concern is likely rated high based on the same concern for having “High Quality Youth Programs.”

## **10. Increasing Small Group Participation (2.90)**

Nineteen percent of protestant churches indicated that 75 percent or more of their worship attendees were involved in small groups. Thirty percent of the churches said that 50 percent to 74 percent of their worship attendees were involved in small groups. Twenty-seven percent said that 25 percent to 49 percent of worship attendees participated in a small group. Twenty-four percent said that less than 25 percent of their worship attendees were participating in a small group. By comparison, in 2008, only 17 percent of pastors reported that less than 25 percent of worship attendees participated in a small group (Lifeway Research, 2022).

## **10. Recruiting Lay Leaders (2.90)**

Even before the pandemic, there was an understanding of a leadership crisis in American churches (Sanchez, 2020). Pastors are well acquainted with this challenge. In one study, 38 percent of pastors said developing a leadership pipeline is a “top personal priority.” Furthermore, 40 percent said they had thought about the need for a leadership pipeline but “have too many other ministry concerns.” Another 14 percent said they have delegated the job of training leaders to others (*Barna Group*, 2023b). Pastors know this is a problem but struggle to address it.

## **The Rest of the Challenges**

After looking at the top ten concerns (eleven because two tied for number ten), there are a few more notable challenges pastors faced. Coming in at number 12 was “accomplishing all my responsibilities” (2.89). No doubt all of these challenges leave pastors often feeling overwhelmed. Similarly, number 21, “meeting the demands of my schedule” (2.73), number 23, preventing leadership burnout (2.71), and number 26, managing my time (2.66) indicate that self-care is important and why it is difficult for pastors to prioritize these challenges.

Tied at number 12, “reaching out to the community to develop relationships” (2.89) is related to evangelizing concerns. Number 14, “increasing salaries to keep pace with inflation” (2.86) is not a surprise considering the economic conditions during the time the survey was taken. “Training leaders” (2.86) rounds out the top 15 and points to the training and discipleship concerns of pastors.

Interestingly, the mental health issues were not rated as major



concerns: “dealing with personal anxiety” (2.19) at number 63, “maintaining my mental health” (2.19) at number 64, and “dealing with loneliness” (2.11) at number 68. For pastors who are struggling with their mental well-being, these issues are often extremely challenging, but such concerns are not at the forefront of the challenges that most pastors face.

## Conclusion

Pastors are concerned about reaching people with the gospel, keeping people in the fold, and passing the faith baton to the next generation. We are all in this together. May we work together to successfully meet these challenges for the sake of the gospel.

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