

Barna survey: Pastors sensing increase in isolation, decrease in support

NASHVILLE (BP) – A growing percentage of Protestant pastors report experiencing increased feelings of loneliness and isolation while simultaneously feeling a decreased sense of support from people close to them, according to research by the Barna Group.

According to the 2022 survey of more than 500 pastors, 47% of pastors reported they “sometimes” felt lonely or isolated in the past three months, while 18% said they “frequently,” experience these feelings.

This total of pastors reporting these feelings – 65% – is an increase compared with 42% of pastors who reported the same in a 2015 survey, where 28% answered “sometimes” and 14% answered “frequently.”

Mark Dance, director of pastoral wellness for GuideStone Financial Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention in Dallas, said the COVID-19 pandemic may have played a role in the increase in feelings of isolation but the issue has been around for ages.

“I’m not sure that isolation is unique to the ministry. I just think isolation is a challenge for everyone,” Dance said. “What makes it unique is that pastors are surrounded by people constantly and so in my opinion, isolation and loneliness are among the most preventable challenges a pastor has.”

Dance said one factor in the survey data may be a younger generation of pastors who are more willing to be transparent about their feelings or ask for help. He even wonders if some of the percentages may actually be higher.

“I wonder if the other percentage are being honest with themselves,” Dance said. “It is very normal to sometimes feel isolated. Some times are better than others. I would expect them to say sometimes they are lonely.”

The same survey showed 49% of pastors reported they frequently felt “well-supported by people close to you,” within the past three months. This is a noticeable decrease compared with 68% who answered such in the 2015 survey.

Dance said he often challenges pastors that feeling isolated starts with them, and they need to take an active role in seeking out people both inside and outside of their church who can “refresh” them in their ministry.

“When I speak to pastors, which is almost every week, I remind them of how dangerous isolation can be but also challenge them to embrace the responsibility to change that,” he said. “Isolation is downright dangerous, but it is avoidable.

“The pain of isolation exceeds the awkwardness of church friendships, whether it’s staff friendships, member friendships, or other pastors in your community. As Southern Baptists, we’ve got associations and state conventions that would absolutely fall over themselves if you called them or showed up for one of their events.

“We have people cheering us on from every corner of our convention, so if we are feeling isolated, make sure that we are not isolating ourselves because it is one of the most preventable challenges out there,” he said.

To view the Barna survey, [click here](#).