

LIFEWAY RESEARCH: Preaching race reconciliation shows drop from 1996 survey

NASHVILLE (BP) – Pastors today are not being prompted as often to address issues of race with their congregations compared to four years ago, according to a study released by LifeWay Research, a division of LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention in Nashville.

Seventy-four percent of pastors agree their congregation would welcome a sermon on racial reconciliation, with 32% strongly agreeing. In a 2016 survey, 90% of pastors believed their congregation would be open to a sermon on the topic with 57% strongly agreeing.

Today, 17% of pastors say their church would not want to hear about racial reconciliation, up from seven percent in 2016.



McConnell

“While most pastors’ teaching is not limited to things their congregation wants to hear, it is helpful to know the reaction pastors anticipate from their congregation,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research. “Instead of a majority strongly agreeing, now only a third of pastors have no hesitation that their congregation would welcome a sermon on racial reconciliation.”

African American pastors (93%) are more likely than white

pastors (73%) or pastors of other ethnicities (74%) to say their church would be open to a sermon on racial reconciliation. Pastors of churches with 250 or more in attendance are the most likely church size to say their congregation would welcome such a sermon (83%).

Denominationally, Methodists (83%), Presbyterian/Reformed (79%), Pentecostals (78%) and Baptists (74%) are more likely than pastors of Lutheran churches (59%) to believe their congregation would like to hear a sermon on the topic.

Sermon feedback

Eighty-three percent say they've preached on racial reconciliation in the past two years, including 70% who say they have not received any negative feedback because of those sermons and 12% who have been criticized.

Four years ago, five percent said they were criticized for a sermon on racial reconciliation compared to 12% today. One in 10 pastors surveyed in 2016 said they had not preached on the topic in the last two years, while 16% say that is the case now.

"The typical pastor is addressing racial reconciliation from the pulpit and without pushback from their congregation," McConnell said. "However, the noticeable increase in pastors avoiding the topic and receiving criticism could signal there are new dynamics emerging."

White pastors (17%) and pastors of other ethnicities (18%) are more than twice as likely as African American pastors (six percent) to say they have not addressed racial reconciliation from the pulpit in the past two years. White pastors (14%) are also more likely than pastors of other ethnicities (three percent) to say they have received negative feedback from sermons on the topic.

Pastors age 65 and older (20%) are more likely than pastors

ages 45-54 (13%) to say they've not talked about the topic from the pulpit in the past two years. Younger pastors ages 18-44 are the most likely to say they've had negative feedback from preaching a sermon related to race (21%).

Lutheran pastors (27%) are twice as likely as Baptist (13%), Presbyterian/Reformed (13%) and Pentecostal pastors (12%) to say they have not addressed the issue in a sermon in the past two years.

Sermon requests

Around one in five pastors say leaders in their church have directly urged them to preach on racial reconciliation, while 77% have not heard such requests. In 2016, a quarter of pastors said they had been asked for sermons on the topic, and 73% said they had not.

"There are many possible reasons fewer churchgoers are asking for sermons on racial reconciliation," said McConnell. "However, you cannot say that fewer Americans are talking and thinking about race today compared to four years ago."

White pastors (79%) and pastors of other ethnicities (77%) are more likely than African American pastors (56%) to say they have not heard such requests. Evangelical pastors (81%) are more likely than their mainline counterparts (63%) to say no leaders in their church have asked them to preach on racial reconciliation.

Pastors in the South (79%) are more likely than pastors in the West (70%) to say they haven't heard such congregational urging. Lutheran (90%) and Baptist pastors (86%) are more likely than Pentecostal (77%), Restoration movement (70%), Presbyterian/Reformed (68%) and Methodist pastors (63%) to say they have not had leaders ask for a sermon on that topic.

For more information, visit LifewayResearch.com or view the complete report.