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## **Pastors battle skyrocketing burnout amid politics, pandemic: 'Wearing on the soul'**

By Jon Brown | Fox News

A staggering 42% of pastors have considered quitting full-time ministry, according to a recent study. Bitter divisions over politics and the pandemic have seeped into churches and led to increasing rates of job burnout among pastors, multiple clergy members and those who counsel them. "Our faith does not exempt us from anxiety, depression, temptation or COVID, so that's to be expected," said David Ferguson, executive director of the Great Commandment Network, which provides counseling initiatives to help pastors. "But in addition to that, we obviously are in a real divided, polarized, politicized world, where sadly at times pastors feel the pressure to take positions on every imaginable topic."

A study of Protestant pastors conducted in March by the faith-based research organization Barna Group suggested that unprecedented numbers are thinking about quitting the ministry. The poll showed that rates of burnout among pastors have risen dramatically during the past year, with a staggering 42% of ministers wondering if they should abandon their vocation altogether. That number marked an increase of 13 percentage points since Barna's similar poll in January 2021, when just 29% felt that way. Such pastors named stress (56%), loneliness (43%) and political divisions (38%) as the top reasons they have wearied of the job, as well as the toll it has taken on their families (29%). Ferguson, who has served in ministry himself, said "there's no doubt" rates of clerical burnout are increasing. The pastorate has always presented pressures potentially detrimental to relationships and mental health, he explained, but the cultural rifts that have deepened in recent years over politics and the pandemic "have pressed pastors to not stay in their lane, which is focusing on our faith and spiritual life."

Richard White, who has served 33 years as a pastor at a Presbyterian church in Montreat, North Carolina, said he and his staff first experienced "a flood of energy" as they scrambled to adjust to COVID-19 protocols they thought would only last for two weeks. They did their best to navigate the pitfalls of livestreams, cameras, uploading to the church website and other technical issues. When the pandemic began to drag on indefinitely amid the nation's political firestorm, that energy waned and was replaced by what White described as "a grinding spirit" that settled over him. About eight months in, he began to experience "decision fatigue," which he defined as fearing that "no matter what decision you make, there's a group that's not happy and is vocal." "We have had people leave our church because we had to wear masks," White said. "And I've had people leave our church or contemplate leaving our church because we didn't wear masks, or we were inconsistent with mask-wearing and COVID protocols. And so here I am trying to navigate the course through this, and it's just wearing on the soul." Many of his friends in ministry have expressed similar feelings to him. Of the 20 or so other pastors he has had conversations with, White said, "there isn't a one of them who hasn't taken a look at their retirement package and begun wondering, 'Do I have enough? How long can I last in this?'"

While relieved things have largely settled, White noted lingering anxiety that the pandemic's chaos could return. "It's like dry tinder, and it can flare up at any moment," he said. He credited his survival to God's presence and the prayerful encouragement of his staff and church elders, who he said were burdened with him beyond their strength and forced to "press into the Lord" to sustain them. A strong spiritual support network is crucial for clergy struggling with burnout, Monsignor Stephen J. Rossetti, a Roman Catholic priest of the Diocese of Syracuse and a research professor at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., told Fox News. Rossetti, a licensed psychologist who specializes in the psychological and spiritual wellness of Catholic priests, pointed to his own yet-unpublished research showing that while rates of depression and anxiety rose among priests during the pandemic, they remained lower than the CDC rates among the general population. He attributed this statistic to several factors intrinsic to the priesthood. "One is a strong personal network of friendships and personal support," Rossetti explained. "One is a strong community of faith; another is one's own strong religious beliefs. One also involves having a life that is personally rewarding and fulfilling, and priests as a group have this." Even so, Rossetti acknowledged that parishioners can sometimes lay demands on their pastors that prove too burdensome for one person. "Some people are very supportive of their clergy, but people can be very demanding too, and sometimes they can have expectations that can be unrealistic," he said.

Drake Caudill, senior pastor of a Baptist church in Carmi, Illinois, told Fox News that too often pastors are expected to perform more like the CEO of a church rather than its spiritual leader, which he said "is not a biblical approach to shepherding a congregation." "I think the expectation should start from Scripture and using what Scripture expects from the pastor or pastors," said Caudill, who was moved to pen an article about pastoral burnout for Baptist Press in April after seeing pastors and their families struggle in his community. "I would see pastors out in the back of a pickup truck, holding church services or adjusting video cameras and livestreaming their services," he said. "They were doing all that they could to try to inspire hope and bring about some normalcy. But at the same time, I was seeing them just get tired and exhausted. Their families were getting tired and exhausted."

Mark Dance, another Baptist, has spent 35 years in the ministry and discerned that many pastors burn out because they also expect too much from themselves. Now the director of pastoral wellness at the faith-based financial company GuideStone, Dance was serving as an interim pastor when the pandemic hit. He counted himself among the clergy who strained to juggle politics and social issues while performing their other duties. "The most unrealistic expectations come from us trying to be proficient in someone else's profession, especially in the last two years," he told Fox News Digital. "People want us to chime in on politics, on a pandemic and things we're not qualified to do. We're not economists. If we focus on what God's called us to do — pastoring, preaching, serving — we are less likely to face some of the challenges that are making pastors want to quit." "We have to wake up every day and remember what John the Baptist said: 'I am not the Christ.' That takes a lot of pressure off when we're not trying to solve every problem," he added.