

# **2022 State of the Church Report:** *“Is there time to turn things around?”*

American Pastors Network

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**INTRODUCTION:** Last year, about this same time, we took a look at where the church was at and where it might be headed in 2022. Obviously, as we started to emerge from the burdens and disruption caused by COVID and other issues in the previous two years, we had hopes for a better 2022. However, the lasting effects of 2020 until now continue to plague the church. And equally sad, those pressures only revealed some major cracks in our foundations and sinkholes in our strategies. Here are a number of key issues that we believe we will continue to grapple with in 2023. This report has been prepared to help pastors and church attenders get a sober assessment of the state of the Church of the Lord Jesus. We do not write as a critic, but as brothers in Christ, heart broken by the state of ministry today. As you will read from our observations and interactions, we believe the church is “adrift” right now and struggling to figure out both who it is and how best to impact the world for the cause of Christ. Throughout Church history there have been times of grappling and drifting and even tremendous apathy. Yet there are some very unique aspects to what the church is facing today. The Apostle Paul warned against – “conflicts from within and attacks from without.” Those words definitely paint a picture of the modern church. Our hope and prayer is that all who name the name of Christ will step back and take a hard look at where their church is presently and where they can make the changes necessary to return to a more Biblical model of ministry. The great question is – “Is there enough time to make the changes needed to move the church towards health, fruitfulness and doctrinal purity?” I can neither answer that question nor take a guess at what the next few years will be like for those who follow Christ. Nevertheless, if we do nothing and ignore these warning signs, we can be assured that many of the churches existing today will either go out of business or end up as the Laodicean church. Neither is a result we desire to see occur.

## **GENERAL ATTITUDE IN THE CHURCH IN 2022**

As we look across the landscape of churches that exalt the Lord Jesus, love the Bible and desire to get the gospel to the ends of the earth, we find three attitudes that keep showing up on our radar – lack of commitment; lack of discernment; and lack of boldness.

When we say commitment, we look to the early church as an example. It was said of the early church that they “were DEVOTED.” They first were devoted to the Lord Jesus; then to the

mission of the gospel and also devoted to the church body. That devotion was one of complete sacrifice. That devotion meant reordering all priorities around the things of Christ and for the sake of the Church. It was also a devotion that was not easily dissuaded, discouraged or derailed. It was a prevailing and persistent devotion. What COVID and other pressures revealed in the past few years is that most believers are NOT devoted to Christ and His church. They were easily distracted and church life became “optional.” Also, most Christians have gotten use to defining their own idea of commitment and when suggestions from leaders, or even examination of what the Bible describes as marks of commitment and true devotion there is a resistance. This lack of undying, unwavering and sacrificial commitment to Christ and His Church will not play well, especially with the possibility of end times like persecution on the horizon.

When we say “lack of discernment” we must first go to the idea of being able to filter everything we are confronted with through a Biblical Worldview. Most Christians have a mixed idea of how they make decisions, how they assess what culture is presenting and even in determining relationships. Yes, the Bible is “a part” of their thinking, but also they blend in some human logic and any other worldly philosophy they have allowed to take root in their minds. Paul warned against having our minds “taken captive by imaginations and philosophies” (2 Cor. 10) and sadly that is what has happened in today’s church. Christians for the most part are vulnerable to any new ideas, fads and emotionally driven appeals. Sadly, those who are discerning and hold to some level of convictions are seen as dogmatic and unloving. With the amount of strange and evil doctrines being pushed in the public square, Christians must be armed with a clear and comprehensive way to discern things in a Biblical manner. Sadly, the church’s ability to critically think and apply a robust apologetic throughout life is absent.

Finally, the New Testament was marked by many amazing qualities but the most consistent was boldness. They had a fearless persona when interacting with both the world and within the church. As they stood up for Christ in the public square, they would not back down when proclaiming the truths of the gospel, the veracity of the Biblical ethic and when the world tried to encroach on the lifestyle of believers. They did not back down or lay down. They stood up. Within the church it was the same. When error or heresy found its way into the church, confrontation was the response. Protecting the soundness of the church was paramount. Those within the church, who were ever so slightly diverting from the truth, were dealt with in love and with grace and given the opportunity to repent. If they refused, their erroneous ways were known by all so that others would not be overtaken. Boldness is a missing commodity in the church today. There is a belief that if we are compliant, appeasing and accepting, even of known and blatant sin, we will be loved by those who are enemies of the cross. This generation has forgotten what Jesus said, “Do not be surprised that the world will hate you – they hated me first!” We must determine to impact the lost world and not just become their friends. The

same is true within the church. Tolerance of a sinful lifestyle, and even encouraging anything less than sanctification as a goal for gathering, is misleading. Sadly, pastors and churches are staging and promoting church events that look no different than what a local pub would host. Again, the key to the early church's impact is that it was bold for Christ.

Commitment, discernment and boldness are the unholy trinity plaguing many churches today. Some believers and church leaders might be confused and surprised by this type of fruit being produced. Nevertheless, as we consider the ten common indicators emerging throughout the church in 2022, we should not be surprised. Attitudes are just one aspect of our assessment. Here are the ten trends or indicators that the church is struggling.

## COMMON TRENDS IN CHURCHES

1) **Pastoral Exodus Continues** – By the end of 2020 upwards of 3,000 pastors had left their churches. These were senior pastors, associates, youth and music ministers. The pressures faced by COVID and political unrest took its toll. A recent survey identified the reasons why pastors were quitting. The largest group had a **change in calling** (37%) as evidenced by most of them still serving in ministry somewhere, though not as a lead pastor. Where they were serving either had conflict or experienced a change in philosophy and the pastor felt the need to leave. Two other common reasons are tied to the pastor's interaction with their church: 26% **left because of conflict** in the church and 13% because they were a **poor fit for that church**. Pastors also leave because of **family** issues (17%), **moral or ethical** issues (13%), **burnout** (10%), personal **finances** (8%), and **illness** (5%). The numbers are still frightening of how many pastors are walking away from their ministries but the biggest concern we see is the "brain drain" of senior and mature leaders. We are losing some of our "seasoned shepherds" and in the midst of change, conflict and spiritual warfare as we are seeing, we need a steady, mature, experienced hand at the helm. Churches are in a vulnerable state right now with untested, young, inexperienced pastors and especially those with untested philosophy of ministry. This is not a time to "try out new ideas" but focus on the tried and true means to growing a believing church.

2) **Post COVID Hangover** – Even though mask mandates have lifted and life is somewhat back to normal, the after effects of COVID continue to linger. Three main issues continue to hurt the church:

- **Attendance** – only 60-70% have come back. Most are saying that the 30% or more is lost. They have found new churches; have given up on gathering and are very comfortable with internet church; they found they don't need church or they have given up because of the botched handling of the crisis.
- **Finances** – recession is now hitting and offerings are starting to decrease. Interestingly, during 2020 when you would discuss the health of a church, pastors

would brag how well they were doing financially. This was primarily due to most churches moving to “online giving.” Plus, congregants were not doing anything nor spending due to lockdowns and they had money to give. Those days are over and it is starting to affect church budgets.

- **Regathering** – We must admit that we undermined the need to meet by pushing online church. Many pastors claimed that you can follow Christ and never gather with God’s people. We believe many pastors thought that once the pandemic was over most would just return. That did not happen and now they have to teach an “apologetic” for gathering in person.

3) **Political Confusion** – We are convinced that many evangelical Christians, because of their hatred for Trump, voted for Biden or just stayed home. Their angst for the former president was solely on his personality and personal behavior. Yet that angst blinded many leaders and Christians to the evil policies being pushed on America by the other political party and the church was silent. This has caused greater tension in the church today and much segregation. Many Christians have “buyer’s remorse” and they are beginning to understand that policy does matter. Yet there is not wholehearted admission nor are pastors helping believers grapple with how to discern political issues. Somehow the church must learn how to speak on cultural and current issues without thinking they are supporting a political party. This falls at the feet of pastors, who continue to avoid and hide on this issue, especially the younger ministers.

4) **Preaching Anemia** – Most of the challenges in the church is because of over a decade long lack of Biblical/Theological exposition. Most believers are Biblically illiterate. Most cannot confidently handle the Word of God in a student-like manner. Many troubling issues today (ie. Women in leadership; gay conflicts; abortion; household income and need for two salaries thus kids raising themselves) could be resolved by teaching the whole counsel of God’s Word. Sadly, many pastors spend more time listening to their favorite podcasts or drafting off the winds of borrowed sermon series. You can troll 20 church websites and look at the sermon tab and find many are preaching on the same topics. What is fascinating is that a year ago Chandler, Greer, Driscoll, MacArthur and other popular preachers did the exact same series. Pastors, for the Biblical sake of their sheep, need to get their nose in God’s Word and start mining their own gold from the treasures of Scripture.

5) **Painful Exit of Gen Z/Young Mills**– This generational spiritual bankruptcy is only getting worse. Ten year-olds to early 40’s are missing from church or do not want anything to do with Christianity. Recently, on Stand in the Gap radio, we interviewed a ministry focused on training godly grandparents, believing that they might be the only way to get the gospel to this generation. Interestingly, much of the budget and staffing in today’s church is focused on this generation but are seeing little results. We need to understand how to reach them. However, we must not compromise the message or sanctificational expectation just to keep

them in the building. 41% of this generation embraces and accepts same-sex relationships. We must speak truth to them without alienating them. This is a difficult place to be.

6) **Prophecy Avoidance** – There has been a lack of teaching on end times and it is leaving the church reeling for answers, overwhelmed with fear and lacking urgency. Again, pastors seem hesitant and resistant to preach on the subject. Obviously, to be competent in teaching on this subject it takes hard work and thorough research. Pastors do not seem to have that kind of work ethic or see the value of it. In addition, a pastor has to have a defined position on eschatology. Most schools and seminaries have abandoned taking a position or they have allowed Reformed Theology to dictate their end times position, leaving a boat load of Amillennialist or Post-Tribulationist leading American’s pulpits. We would challenge that position and believe it will have long term negative effects on the church.

7) **Pressures on colleges and seminaries** – Many evangelical colleges and seminaries are facing conflict and crises throughout their hollow halls of learning. They face attacks for their views on gender fluidity thus making it impossible to keep accreditation. Additionally, fundraising is challenging with the vast number of other ministries asking for support and Christian higher education being seen as a luxury. Finally, finding competent, committed and biblically compatible staff and faculty, who have not gone “woke,” is the most difficult challenge. Many Christian colleges find compromise a better solution than takes a hard stand and fearing the loss of students and supporters to more liberal and progressive schools.

8) **Parental Fears** – After a decade of handing off our kids to the public schools, Christians have found out that many educators are not interested in math, history or English, but in Marxism, raising up radicals, gender confusion and parental authority rebels. Christian school and home schooling are exploding, but kids are still under attack. If anything positive came out of COVID it was the re-engaging of parents in their children’s education. “Mama-Bear” seminars have popped up all over the nation and legions of parents attending school board meetings are becoming a regular event. Yet is the church doing the work of educating parents of what a Biblical Worldview is and how to actually disciple their kids to follow Christ?

9) **Prayerlessness** – Even with all of the crisis, conflict, turmoil and evil swirling around us, the church continues to believe that they can handle these issues without God’s help. In Acts 6, the church faced problems and The Apostles said that they could not be distracted from preaching the word and prayer. Yet that is exactly what has happened with today’s pastors. They are failing on both preaching diligently but even more sad, the church is not pressing into the Lord in prayer! Most churches today give little time to prayer in a Sunday gathering. There are fewer and fewer times of corporate prayer meetings. Not that a certain

program is the answer, but it does speak to the lack of dependency or the discipline to look unto the Lord of Heaven for our help.

10) **Pride** – An inability to admit that we were wrong and thus not able to fully address the issues that continue to plague us. Many believers, even after much evidence, continue to hold on to positions and convictions that have been proven wrong (ie. Wokeness, CRT, Vax, Trump/Biden, philosophy of ministry, etc). Many churches ignore what they said or DID NOT say and refuse to correct their mistakes and admit their inactivity. If we are going to turn things around in the church, a season of Spirit-led soul searching is needed.

## **SO WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

We would be disingenuous to think that we have a simple formula for churches and their leaders to follow to change the course of the church in America. We are also mindful that in the days and weeks ahead there will be other ministry consultants and prognosticators who will lay out their ideas for a better church. We do not want to be one of those talking heads in a sea of commentators. We would ask you to seriously consider what we have been seeing throughout the church in America and with the 100's of encounters we have had in the past years. It may not be that you see all of these indicators, nor is your church showing forth all of the attitudes, but our guess is that you are seeing enough of these concerns to raise a red flag. The question is, what do we do? Here are a few suggestions that we humbly ask you to consider:

- **Discuss these concerns with other like-minded, spiritually mature believers.** You might be a church leader or not, but if you love the church and you see some of these issues emerging in your fellowship, discuss them. NOT as fact – but as possible issues that you should look soberly and seriously at. You will probably be surprised that others feel the same way you do but have not been able to pinpoint their concerns or articulate them.
- **Get back to the Bible and ask what it is the church should be and should do.** A great place to start is the Book of Acts, where it all began. Especially look at Acts 2 and the inception of the Body of Christ. Consider what they were devoted to and how they functioned with each other. Also, what is it that they focused their attention on. You will be surprised that it was the Word, prayer, fellowship, worship, caring for each other and building up each other. They made sure they were growing so that they had something to offer to the unsaved world outside of the church. One of the great mistakes is making the gathering of the church a place for the lost to “feel comfortable.” If that is happening, you are probably failing to adequately challenge and grow the believers in your midst.
- **Call for a day of reflection, repentance and returning to God.** Last year the American Pastors Network initiated “**RETURN TO GOD SUNDAY.**” The day was dedicated for churches to look at their commitment and the direction of their lives and honestly ask – “do I need to

return to God?” We will be asking churches to join us in the venture again in 2023. Sunday January 8, 2023 is the next RTG Sunday. We have produced sample sermons, devotional guides and other resources to help church leaders. Check out our website for those resources.

- **Ask for help and find a seasoned coach to help your church navigate these uncertain times.** No one gets to clarity without help. We all need a mentor, a coach or a guide especially when faced with choppy waters and fog around the ship. It is crucial for churches to have someone who can help leaders sort out, assess, and then give guidance without being emotionally entangled with the church. APN can help you find a competent ministry coach.

Each church must seek after the Lord for their ministry strategy, but we are convinced that churches need to take steps to move back to where God desires his church to be. Is there time to turn things around? We believe so. But there is also no time for neutrality or procrastination. May God help believers and leaders to discover how they are to respond in these challenging days for the church.

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For further research and assistance check out [www.americanpastors.net](http://www.americanpastors.net) and avail yourself of various church-related resources. In addition, check out the vast archived programs from both *Stand in the Gap Today* radio and TV.

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