

For some pastors, the past year was a sign from God it was time to quit

by [Bob Smietana](#) in the [June 3, 2021](#) issue



(Photo by Diana Polekhina on Unsplash)

Jeff Weddle, a wisecracking, self-deprecating, Bible-loving, self-described “failing pastor” from Wisconsin, was already thinking of leaving the ministry before COVID and the 2020 election.

After two decades as a pastor, he was, as he put it, fed up with church life.

Then feuds about politics and the pandemic put him over the edge. People at church seemed more interested in the

latest social media dustup and online conspiracy theories—one church member called him the Antichrist for his views on COVID—than in learning about the Bible.

Sunday mornings had become filled with dread over what could go wrong next.

He eventually decided, "I don't need this anymore." Weddle stepped down as pastor, walked out the door, and hasn't looked back.

The last 18 months or so have been difficult for pastors like Weddle. Already stretched with the day-to-day concerns of running a congregation at a time when organized religion is on the decline, they've increasingly found that the divides facing the nation have made their way inside the walls of the church.

Clergy also felt a sense of isolation, cut off from contact with their congregations and unable to do the kind of in-person ministry that drew them to the pastorate. Instead of preaching and visiting the sick, they had to become video producers and online content creators.

A recent survey of Protestant pastors by the research firm Barna Group found that 29 percent said they had given "real, serious consideration to quitting being in full-time ministry within the last year."

Kerri Parker, executive director of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, whose member organizations include some 2,000 churches and a million Christians, has been concerned about the stresses clergy have been under since 2020.

Last summer, the council surveyed clergy and found that about one-quarter said they were considering retiring or leaving the pastorate due to the stresses

of ministry during COVID. In a recent

follow-up survey, said Parker, about a third of respondents said they were considering their options or thinking about leaving.

Parker said that unlike with past crises, like floods, tornadoes, or other disasters, pastors won't be able to escape the fallout from COVID-19 once the pandemic is over. If there's a flood, she said, a pastor could stay at their church, help them clean up and rebuild, and then at some point move to another church that hadn't been through that disaster.

But COVID affected everyone.

"So where do you go?" she said. "Out of the church."

Emily Reeves Grammer served as pastor of several United Methodist congregations in the Nashville area for a decade before leaving the pastorate in 2019. Grammer, who has two children, said balancing the demands of ministry and family life proved daunting.

She loved being a pastor. But she worried about the long-term sustainability of her calling, given that the United Methodist Church seems headed for a schism.

“I am really concerned about the ability of a lot of United Methodist churches to keep supporting full-time clergy people,” she said.

While thinking about the future, she talked with older pastors who felt it was too late for them to change careers. The advice she got: if you are going to leave, do it now. So she resigned from her church and went back to school to become an English teacher.

“What I love most about being a pastor is gathering people together around a text and making meaning together out of that text,” she said. Teaching literature, she said, will allow her to do the same thing.

Charlie Cotherman, who directs the Project on Rural Ministry at Grove City College, said that most of the pastors he works with have done pretty well during the pandemic. Some had the advantage of being in small communities with low COVID infection rates, so they were able to return to in-person services quickly.

Still, he said, COVID has taken a toll. In some churches, members, especially families, left when services went online and just haven’t come back.

“Some of these small churches in rural areas have a couple of young families,” he said. “For them to lose even one of them has been a really tough thing.”

Before he left the ministry, Weddle began a blog at FailingPastor.com, detailing some of his concerns about the ministry. Weddle said he gave the ministry his best for 21 years. But being a pastor proved an almost impossible task.

“Ultimately, you want people to grow in Christ—to be caring, making sense of the Bible and applying it to their life,” he said. “And, you know, for thousands of years it’s been very difficult to get people to do that. So, the job is inherently frustrating.”

Leaving the ministry has been a relief.

“I’ve been going to church,” he wrote recently. “I don’t have to do anything at a church for the first time in 21 years. I don’t have to worry about who isn’t there, or why, or who will be mad next. I don’t have to have regrets all afternoon and evening about how I messed up my sermon.” —Religion News Service