

MINISTERS AND CHRISTIAN MEDIA

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If you could walk into your pastor's home, what would you find on television? What magazines would be on the coffee table? What station would be playing over the radio? According to a national study of Protestant church pastors conducted by Grey Matter Research of Phoenix, Arizona, you'd be more likely to find Christian magazines than secular ones, but chances are good you'd find a secular program on the television instead of a Christian one.

The study queried over 500 pastors from all Protestant denominations about their media habits. Sixty-three percent of all ministers said they watch secular television programs almost every day, but only 20% said the same thing about programs or channels that are specifically Christian. And while 9% said they rarely or never watch secular television, 34% said they rarely or never watch Christian television.

Television was the only one of four media in which ministers used Christian options significantly less than secular options. Half of all pastors said they listen to secular radio stations almost every day, compared to 47% who listen to Christian radio daily. Nineteen percent access Christian internet sites on a daily basis, while 24% visit secular sites almost daily. And while only 15% read secular magazines almost every day, 24% read Christian magazines that frequently.

Christian television viewing was especially common among charismatic and Pentecostal ministers. Thirty-seven percent in this group watched daily, while just 16% rarely or never watched. Among evangelical ministers, 18% watched daily, while 32% rarely or never watched. Among mainline ministers (United Methodist, Evangelical Lutheran, Presbyterian Church U.S.A., etc.), 20% watched almost every day, while 47% rarely or never watched Christian television. Mainline ministers watched secular TV more often than did other pastors.

The difference was even more pronounced in Christian radio use. While mainline pastors were the heaviest users of secular radio, just 32% listened to Christian radio almost every day, while 24% didn't listen at all. Among evangelicals, 54% listened almost every day, while 10% rarely or never listened. (The figures for charismatic/Pentecostal ministers were very similar to among evangelicals.)

Given pastors' relatively low viewership of Christian television, one might argue that lack of access to Christian TV could be the reason many pastors aren't watching. But while this might explain some of the lack of viewership, pastors' attitudes about Christian television probably play a larger role.

The study asked pastors to agree or disagree with a number of different statements about Christian television. The findings showed that pastors often aren't proud of what they see on Christian television, and they usually don't feel it's a good representation of what Christianity is like in America.

Just 6% of all ministers agreed strongly that "You're generally proud of what you can see on Christian TV today," with another 33% agreeing somewhat with this statement. Even among pastors who watch Christian television, just half were willing to say they're at least somewhat proud of what's on. Feelings on this subject did not vary substantially according to the type of pastor interviewed: liberal, conservative, mainline, Pentecostal, evangelical, etc.

Only one out of four ministers felt "Christian TV today is a good representation of what Christianity is like in America," including just 3% who agreed strongly with this statement and 22% who agreed somewhat with it.

Pastors were more likely to view Christian television as being able to impact Christians than as being an effective tool for outreach. Six out of ten agreed with the statement "Christian TV today is an effective tool for reaching non-Christians," but just 16% agreed strongly with this, while 44% agreed only somewhat. By comparison, 77% agreed with the statement "Christian TV today is an effective tool for teaching and impacting Christians" (23% agreed strongly and 54% agreed somewhat).

In both cases, ministers from mainline Protestant denominations were somewhat less likely than average to feel Christian television is effective, while pastors from charismatic or Pentecostal churches were somewhat more likely to see it as effective – but the opinion gap was not a large one. For instance, 45% of all mainline Protestants and 30% of all charismatic/Pentecostal pastors felt Christian TV is not effective for reaching non-Christians.

Although the study did not explore why pastors had questions about Christian television, one finding did suggest that at least one of the perceived problems is that "Christian TV tends to put too much emphasis on raising funds and donations." Almost nine out of ten pastors agreed with this statement, including 39% who agreed strongly, and 47% who agreed somewhat.

Since many Christian radio and television operations are donor-supported, pastors were also asked if they had personally contributed any funds to either type of media. Twenty-six percent of all ministers said in the last 12 months they had financially supported a Christian radio station, network, or ministry. Support for radio ministry was particularly likely to come from charismatic/Pentecostal ministers (36% had given in the last year),

and especially unlikely to come from mainline pastors (16% had given), which replicates the difference in listenership between these two groups.

Support of Christian television was far less common. Given pastors’ attitudes about Christian TV, the lack of financial support for this type of ministry is not a surprise. Only 10% of all ministers said they had given a financial gift to a Christian television station, network, or ministry in the last 12 months. Again, support was more common among charismatic/Pentecostal ministers (17%), compared to evangelical or mainline pastors.

Given pastors’ lack of financial support, viewership, and strong positive opinions about Christian television, a legitimate question would seem to be why they feel this way. Although most Christian television isn’t specifically targeted at ministers, they are an influential segment of the Christian community, and their opinions on this topic are important.

Trying to ignore the data or claiming that it doesn’t provide a true picture doesn’t work. The study was very carefully designed to gather the opinions of a representative sample of ministers throughout America, and the responses were tracked by geography, church size, and denomination to ensure a statistically valid and accurate response.

Some might argue that highlighting findings such as these is damaging to Christian TV. Our feeling is that the study didn’t cause these attitudes among pastors – the study simply uncovered them. Suppressing the data doesn’t stop pastors from feeling as they do.

The bigger issue is what is causing such a lack of positive attitudes about Christian television among the clergy. If they’re wrong about Christian TV, and their opinions need to be changed, there are many things television stations, networks, and ministries can do to help reach out to pastors. But if they’re essentially right about Christian television, then the industry as a whole needs to take a careful look at itself and see what needs to be done to address the problems.

PASTORS’ FREQUENCY OF INVOLVEMENT WITH SELECTED TYPES OF MEDIA

Media Type	Almost Every Day	At Least Once a Week	At Least Once a Month	Rarely or Never
Watch secular television	63%	24%	4%	9%
Watch Christian television	20	32	14	34
Listen to secular radio	50	23	8	19
Listen to Christian radio	47	24	13	16
Access secular Internet site	24	29	11	35
Access Christian Internet site	19	32	14	35
Read a secular magazine	15	36	29	20
Read a Christian magazine	24	53	19	5

PASTORS' ATTITUDES ABOUT CHRISTIAN TELEVISION

Statements	Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
Christian TV today is an effective tool for reaching non-Christians	16%	44%	30%	10%
Christian TV today is an effective tool for teaching and impacting Christians	23	54	17	5
You're generally proud of what you can see on Christian TV today	6	33	39	22
Christian TV tends to put too much emphasis on raising funds and donations	39	47	12	3
Christian TV today is a good representation of what Christianity in America is like	3	22	42	33



“I find television very educating. Every time somebody turns on the set, I go into the other room and read a book.”

GROUCHO MARX



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