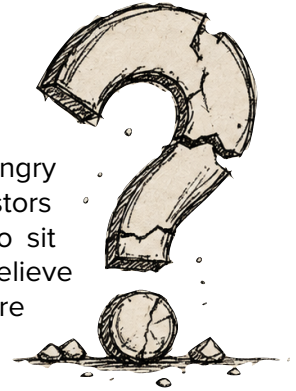


A QUESTION FOR PASTORS

There is a question I would love to ask pastors. Not pastors who are angry with the Church. Not pastors who have abandoned their calling. Not pastors standing at the door with a resignation letter in hand. I would love to sit across the table from pastors who still love Jesus, still love people, still believe deeply in the Church, and still carry that stubborn sense that somewhere along the way Jesus called them to give their lives to this.



I would pour another cup of coffee and ask them one question:

If you were starting over, would you do it this way again?

I don't mean, "What would you change?" Pastors are constantly being asked some version of that question. What would you improve? What would you stop doing? What would you add? What would you restructure? What would you do differently next year? I mean something much more unsettling. Knowing what you know now about people, ministry, yourself, the Church, and Jesus, if you could go all the way back to the beginning, would you start the same way?

Imagine there is no building to maintain. No congregation expecting next Sunday to look something like last Sunday. No staff structure, programs, budget, sermon waiting to be written, worship service to plan, or children's ministry to staff. There are no committees, annual events, denominational expectations, or ministries that have existed so long nobody remembers exactly why they started. Nobody is asking you what time the Christmas Eve service will be. Nobody is comparing this year's attendance with last year's. Nobody is waiting for you to produce something.

There is simply you, Jesus, and a community filled with people He loves. Then Jesus looks at those people and says what He said two thousand years ago: "The harvest is plentiful."

Where would you start? And would you start the same way again?

I WONDER HOW MANY PASTORS HAVE QUIETLY ASKED THIS

I have enormous compassion for pastors. Most pastors I have known did not enter ministry because they dreamed about budgets, buildings, personnel issues, board meetings, attendance reports, volunteer shortages, strategic plans, or trying to figure out why the livestream stopped working five minutes before the service. They followed a calling. They loved Jesus. They loved people. They wanted their lives to matter for the Kingdom of God. Somewhere along the way, many inherited an entire way of doing ministry along with that calling.

Then the years began moving. Sunday after Sunday. Sermon after sermon. Meeting after meeting. Christmas followed Easter, and Easter eventually became Christmas again. People came and people left. Staff changed. Programs launched and programs disappeared. Budgets grew or

shrank. Families fell apart. Babies were born. Funerals were preached. People found Jesus. Other people walked away. Through all of it, the pastor kept showing up.

That is why I don't think this question should be asked as an accusation. I think it should almost be whispered. After everything you have seen, everything you have learned, everything ministry has cost you, all the people you now know who would never walk through the doors of your church, and everything you now understand about Jesus, His Kingdom, and His harvest, if you were starting over, would you do it this way again?

THE DATA MAKES THE QUESTION EVEN MORE INTERESTING

Something surprising is happening among senior pastors in America. In 2026, Barna found that pastors were doing better in several areas of emotional health. Feelings of inadequacy had fallen. Exhaustion had declined. Energy for ministry had improved. Confidence in calling, which had fallen during the pandemic years, had climbed back substantially. Fifty-eight percent of senior Protestant pastors said they were more confident in their calling than when they entered ministry. Barna's 2026 pastor research

That sounds like very good news. Then comes the number I cannot get past. In 2015, 72 percent of senior pastors described themselves as very satisfied with their vocation. In 2026, only 52 percent did. Satisfaction with ministry at their current church tells a similar story: 53 percent were very satisfied in 2015 compared with 43 percent in 2026. Barna describes an emerging picture in which emotional health and confidence have improved while deep vocational satisfaction has not recovered with them.

Think about that combination: Confidence in the calling is returning. Satisfaction with the vocation is not.

That fascinates me because it raises a possibility worth exploring. What if some pastors are not questioning whether God called them? What if they are questioning the way they have been expected to live out that calling? Barna does not prove that conclusion, and I don't want to make the data say something it doesn't. But Barna's analysis does raise questions about the pastoral "job description," including whether responsibilities align with pastors' gifts and strengths and whether they have enough ability to delegate. Maybe the problem is not the calling. Maybe what deserves another look is the container they inherited for expressing it.

Maybe we should spend less time asking how pastors can become better at carrying everything they inherited and start asking what they would carry if they were free to start again.

AND THESE ARE THE SENIOR PASTORS

There is something about this research that leaves me wanting another study. Barna's 2026 data come from 507 U.S. senior Protestant pastors, using a panel designed to represent Protestant churches by denomination, size, and region. That makes the findings useful, but it also tells us exactly whose voices we are hearing.

We are not hearing from all pastors. I would love to hear from associate pastors, youth pastors, worship pastors, children's pastors, discipleship pastors, campus pastors, and the thousands of other men and women serving inside these same systems, often carrying many of the same expectations with far less authority to change them.

What would they say? Would they describe the same gap between calling and satisfaction? What would they tell us about the pressure to produce? What would they stop doing? What would they never start? What have they learned about people that their ministry training never prepared them for? And if we asked them the same question, what would happen?

We don't have the data. But someone should be asking.

HERE IS ANOTHER NUMBER THAT STOPPED ME

In March 2022, Barna asked senior pastors how willing they were to consider new ways of conducting church ministry. Ninety-five percent were at least somewhat willing. More than half, 51 percent, said they were very willing, while another 44 percent were somewhat willing. Barna's research on new approaches to ministry

That is extraordinary. But then Barna asked pastors how willing they thought their congregations would be. Only 12 percent believed their congregation would be very willing to consider new methods. Sixty-two percent thought their people would be somewhat willing, while 26 percent anticipated some level of unwillingness. Those numbers reflect the pastors' perceptions, not direct responses from their congregations, but the perceived gap itself matters.

Imagine living inside that tension. You are ready to explore. You suspect something needs to change. You aren't convinced the people you lead are ready to go with you. Meanwhile, Sunday is still coming. The sermon still needs to be written. The worship set still needs to be planned. Someone still needs to serve in the nursery. The budget still needs to balance. The board still needs to meet. Christmas is still coming. Easter is still coming.

The thing you are wondering about is also the thing you are responsible for keeping alive.

That has to be an incredibly difficult place to lead from. Perhaps this is why so much church innovation becomes remodeling. We are trying to imagine something new while carrying responsibility for everything that already exists.

THERE IS ALSO AN ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Ask pastors what matters most and you will hear beautiful answers: discipleship, relationships, prayer, transformation, mission, people, following Jesus. And I believe them. In fact, Barna found something remarkable. Only 8 percent of pastors identified attendance and size as good

measures of church success. The other 92 percent emphasized depth of engagement and commitment when considering impact. Barna's State of Pastors research

I love that. But I also know what happens in the real world. Monday morning arrives, and questions about attendance, giving, growth, baptisms, volunteers, year-over-year performance, and the church across town have a way of finding their way back into the conversation. The aspiration and the measurement do not always tell the same story.

Pastors live in a world of conferences, networks, denominations, podcasts, books, leadership gatherings, and social media. We hear about the church that exploded in growth, the campus that launched, the building that filled, the thousands who attended Easter, and the ministry everybody suddenly wants to imitate. None of those things are bad, but comparison enters almost unnoticed.

And comparison is a ministry killer.

The question slowly changes from “Jesus, where are You leading us?” to “How are we doing compared with them?” Those are very different questions because what happens if Jesus leads somewhere that doesn’t look impressive? What happens if following Him produces something smaller, simpler, and far more relational? What happens if followers of Jesus become so deeply embedded in the lives of people outside the Church that they have less time to maintain activities inside it? What happens if the most significant Kingdom activity in your congregation never appears on your church calendar?

What happens if attendance decreases while the Kingdom moves outward? Would we recognize that as success? Would the congregation? Would the denomination? Would the other pastors in town? Would the pastor?

That is where aspiration collides with reality.

AND THEN THERE IS THE HARVEST

This may be the number that surprises me most. In 2015, 63 percent of pastors said their churches were at least somewhat effective at reaching people Barna categorized as “unchurched.” By 2022, that number had fallen to 39 percent. Barna's research on churches reaching people outside the Church

Barna later reported an even more startling measure. In 2015, 13 percent of pastors described their churches as very effective at reaching unchurched people. By 2023, that figure was 1 percent. Barna's State of Pastors research

One percent.

I have a hard time reading that number and immediately moving on, especially when Jesus says the harvest is plentiful. The harvest did not suddenly become scarce. Yet pastors’ confidence in their churches’ ability to reach people outside them has fallen dramatically.

That should make us curious. Not ashamed. Not defensive. Curious.

What if the harvest is still plentiful, but the way we have been taught to approach it needs another look? What if people are not rejecting Jesus as much as our models keep expecting them to enter a world they have little interest in entering? What if we have spent decades asking how to make the Church more attractive to the harvest when Jesus told His followers to enter the harvest?

Those questions deserve room.

SO WE REMODEL

A pastor senses something isn't working. They attend a conference and hear about a church doing something exciting. They read the book, listen to the podcast, meet the consultant, attend the breakout session, and come home with notes filling a notebook and something they haven't felt for a while: hope. Maybe this is it.

A new program begins. A new process. A new pathway. A redesigned service. New language. New technology. A new discipleship strategy. A new outreach initiative. There is energy for a while.

Then six months pass. The gravitational pull of everything that already existed begins dragging the church back toward everything it was already doing. So we remodel again. The rooms change. The furniture moves. The front door gets redesigned.

But the house remains.

Underneath nearly every attempt at change sits an assumption we rarely question: The thing we already have is the thing we need to make work.

What if that is the assumption worth questioning?

WHAT IF YOU REALLY COULD START OVER?

Imagine Jesus dropped you into a community of ten thousand people tomorrow. You know almost nothing about them. You don't know what they believe. You don't know their stories, wounds, fears, hopes, questions, or spiritual histories. You don't know what they think about Christians or Jesus. You don't know where they gather, whom they trust, what keeps them awake at night, or what they secretly hope their lives might become.

You have no building, launch team, mailing list, worship leader, children's ministry, equipment trailer, or demographic report telling you what kind of church these people might attend.

There is only Jesus, you, and the harvest.

Now what? Would your first instinct be to decide what to build, or would you go meet the people?

JESUS SAW THE HARVEST

Matthew tells us that Jesus looked at the crowds and saw people who were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said, *“The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.”*

And what happens next matters. He sends His followers.

Jesus does not tell the disciples to make the harvest more interested in coming to them. He sends them into it.

That direction changes everything. What if we started there again?

DON'T BUILD ANYTHING YET

I would love to see what would happen if a group of church leaders entered a community and, for six months, refused to decide what they were going to build. No launch, branding, service, predetermined ministry calendar, or answer yet. Just curiosity.

Walk the neighborhood. Sit in coffee shops. Eat with people. Learn names. Listen to stories. Discover what people fear. Notice what they hope for. Pay attention to their relationships. Listen for spiritual curiosity. Notice pain. Watch for where Jesus appears to be moving.

Become a student of the harvest before becoming an architect of ministry.

Something happens when we do this. Demographics become people. Surveys become stories. Needs acquire names. Outreach becomes relationship. Eventually something begins to emerge.

What?

I don't know. That's the point.

YOU CANNOT KNOW THE EXPRESSION BEFORE YOU KNOW THE HARVEST

This sits at the heart of Harvest Forward: We don't enter the harvest knowing what we are going to build. We enter attentive to Jesus, curious about people, and willing to discover what expression of His Kingdom might emerge among them.

That sounds wonderfully freeing until you realize what it requires us to surrender: control. We want the strategic plan, the model, the five-year vision, the organizational chart, the measurements, and the destination. We want to know what we are building before we begin. We want to know whether it will work before we risk our time, reputation, resources, and relationships on it.

But what if knowing the answer before entering the harvest is part of the problem?

We have become remarkably skilled at entering communities with answers to questions we haven't asked yet. We arrive with a picture of what success should eventually look like, then begin working backward to make it happen. The form has already been decided before we know the people.

Harvest Forward reverses that direction. The harvest comes before the expression.

Abraham left without knowing where he was going. The disciples followed Jesus long before they understood where He was taking them. The seventy-two were sent ahead of Him into towns and villages. The early Church repeatedly discovered Jesus at work among people they had not expected and in places they had not planned.

The Kingdom kept appearing beyond the edges of their maps.

Maybe that is the invitation for pastors who would not do it the same way again. You don't have to immediately replace the old answer with a new one. You don't need another model waiting in the wings. You don't have to know what comes next.

Enter the harvest first.

See what is there. Meet the people. Pay attention to Jesus. Let what you discover challenge what you assumed. Then allow the expression to emerge from the reality of the harvest rather than forcing the harvest into a form you chose before you arrived.

Perhaps our insistence on knowing what we are building before entering the harvest has prevented us from discovering what Jesus intends to form there.

WHAT IF IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE CHURCH?

Maybe what emerges is a dinner table where people who would never attend church begin talking about Jesus. Maybe it is nurses discovering the Kingdom together in a hospital. Maybe it is international students gathering in an apartment. Maybe neighbors begin eating together. Maybe construction workers begin talking about Jesus over lunch. Maybe it is artists, teachers, retirees, bartenders, college students, or one follower of Jesus who simply becomes deeply present among the people already around them.

Would those things count?

That question matters because if our imagination begins with Sunday, buildings, programs, platforms, attendance, budgets, and scale, some of those expressions might look insignificant. But if our imagination begins with Jesus, His Kingdom, and His plentiful harvest, we might see something entirely different.

We might see life.

MAYBE PASTORS DON'T NEED ANOTHER ANSWER

One more piece of data deserves to sit beside everything else. In January 2026, 24 percent of U.S. senior Protestant pastors told Barna they had seriously considered leaving full-time ministry during the previous year. That is a significant improvement from the pandemic-era peak, but nearly one in four is still a lot of pastors. Barna's 2026 research on pastors considering leaving ministry

I don't think they need another person standing outside their world telling them everything they are doing wrong. I think we should listen to them. I think we should give them room to imagine again.

Nearly every solution offered to pastors arrives with an answer already attached. Here is the model. Here is the strategy. Here is the system. Here is the program. Here is the process. Here is the pathway. Here are the seven things the successful church is doing that your church should start doing too.

What if, for once, we didn't give them the answer? What if we gave them permission to become curious again? What might pastors imagine if they were free from comparison, free from the pressure to reproduce somebody else's success, free from predetermined outcomes, and free from having to know what the finished thing will look like before they begin?

Maybe pastors don't need another answer yet. Maybe they need permission to enter the harvest without already knowing the answer.

I know my purpose. I know my direction. I know whom I am following. I know it is good and for Jesus' glory. But I have no idea where following Him will take me next.

I have come to love that because that is where following Jesus becomes an adventure again.

IF YOU WERE STARTING OVER...

So imagine it one more time. Forget what you have to maintain. Forget what churches are supposed to look like, what pastors are expected to produce, the church across town, the conference speaker, the attendance graph, and what worked ten years ago. Forget what everyone might think if what emerges is smaller, stranger, simpler, more relational, or harder to measure than what you have now.

There is Jesus. There is you. And everywhere you look, there are people He loves. A plentiful harvest.

Now ask the question again: If you were starting over, would you do it this way again?

And if the answer is no, resist the temptation to immediately decide what you would do instead. That might be the most important part because the next thing doesn't have to begin with another model. It can begin with a name, a story, a conversation, a dinner table, a question, a person.

Go see what Jesus is doing.

Don't start with the model. Start with the harvest. Then follow Jesus from there.