

# U.S. Protestants' Views Mixed about Extent of Clergy Sexual Abuse

U.S. Protestants offered mixed views when LifeWay Research inquired about the extent of sexual abuse by clergy in local congregations.

When asked if they “believe many more Protestant pastors have sexually abused children or teens than we have heard about,” 37% somewhat or strongly disagreed, 32% somewhat or strongly agreed and 31% were unsure.

Similar numbers resulted when respondents were asked about clergy sexually abusing adults, with 41% somewhat or strongly disagreeing, 30% unsure and 29% somewhat or strongly agreeing that it happens more than they know about.

Respondents had high views of their church’s ability to respond appropriately to allegations and to help in the healing process of abuse victims.

When asked if church leaders would try to cover up abuse claims, only 7% agreed that they would do so, while 83% disagreed.

Similarly, 82% said their congregations would handle abuse claims correctly (even if it proved costly to the church), and 87% said their churches were very or somewhat likely to report abuse to the appropriate authorities.

“Appropriate authorities” was not defined in the survey, but a “select all that apply” question that followed about what respondents would want their churches to do if a pastor was accused of sexual misconduct provided insight into how respondents understood this statement.

While “a careful investigation of facts” was desired by 75% of respondents and 63% would “want the truth to be made known,” only 38% would “want the police involved.”

In addition, 15% said they would “want it dealt with quietly,” 14% would “want the minister protected” (by comparison, 51% would “want the alleged victim protected”), and 11% would “doubt the validity of the accusation.”

Regarding offering a healing environment for victims, 89% agreed that their congregations would do so for child/teen victims of abuse and 90% affirmed this view for adult abuse victims.

The majority (75%) of respondents had not been complimented as a child or teenager by an adult in a way that seemed sexual in nature, while 17% said this had happened to them as a teen and 11% as a child.

Of the 28% who had received such a compliment, 17% said they knew the person from church.

Preaching about sexual abuse was rare in respondents’ churches, with 80% saying they “have not heard a sermon in the last year addressing sexual assault or

sexual violence.”

The survey included only self-identified Protestants who attend church at least monthly, and the margin of error was plus-or-minus 2.9%.

The full report is available [here](#).