



# Outside Influences Inside Congregations

By Abbey Chambers

*If you could wave a magic wand and cause something to happen in your church only related to politics, what would it be?*

Over the course of our 18-month research phase, the Congregations and Polarization Project research team sometimes got creative in how we asked pastors about polarization within their churches, broader communities, and the nation at large. One month, we asked pastors, this “magic wand” question. One clear theme rose to the top of concerns: the prominent role of social media and cable news.

A liberal-leaning Marion County pastor responded, “I would eliminate political memes,” which he called “very divisive.” When asked for further explanation, he said he thought “they just make a point that serves to sort [people] into camps,” and they do not encourage people to engage in meaningful dialogue with each other.

A conservative pastor at a Central Indiana suburban church said:

*I just wish that there was a way, if I could wave that magic wand for my members, to put filters on all their televisions and cable boxes, that they couldn't access those things [cable news networks] because [...] they're so distracted by all of that. And then, replace that, with, you know, devotions and prayer and with some good service, and, you know, the spiritual discipline.*

In small group discussions throughout the duration of the project, pastors shared sentiments like these. A

conservative northeast Indiana pastor explained his perspective, saying, “They’re much like sheep, following what they’re being told to believe and think on that issue [of immigration], just because we don’t face it in my community, hardly at all. And so, I think they’ve latched onto a perspective that they feel like they should have based on the way that their camp or their tribe, politically, would look at it.”

A moderate pastor from northwest Indiana, wanting to speak openly about his experiences, but not wanting to offend, approached his comments cautiously, saying, “I hope nobody views me as being too demonizing to a group of people,” then he continued:

*...but what has happened on one side of the political aisle, particularly the conservative side of the political aisle, is they've weaponized certain words that the church uses, for instance, words like justice. And so we've had members of our congregation who have heard from different conservative pundits that if your church talks about justice, then they are essentially an enemy. And so, I've had multiple conversations with people just about the words that we use, because, for them [...] they've heard and have been taught that these are trigger words to things that ultimately are harmful for people.*

He explained that he has tried to “reinterpret words” to put them back into a biblical—rather than political—context. However, he said, “what has happened more often is people will leave [the congregation] because what’s crazy is political pundits will have more influence on their religious and ecumenical preferences than

their actual pastors or church leaders.” He described the situation as “really, really sad for me to watch.”

In a time when congregational participation is declining in the United States, pastors point toward social and cable news media as something that makes their jobs more difficult. A conservative pastor from southeast Indiana asked rhetorically, “What is disciplining our people?” Then he answered his question, “It’s not always the pulpit, the Word itself. Too often, it’s social media, the whatever news, wherever they find their news. That’s what’s disciplining a lot of our people, and trying to counter that [...], I think, is a challenge for all of us.” But this pastor was encouraged because his participation in

the CAP Project made him realize he was “not alone in this.” He discovered that this was an unresolved issue that many pastors were continuing to face.

Pastors in our small group discussions consistently conveyed their desire to see their members choosing to have their worldviews and opinions shaped by what they read in the Bible or heard from the pulpit, rather than what they saw online or heard on the news. They wanted their members to seek less black-and-white and more nuanced and empathetic worldviews that might better align with the Christian values that the pastors were preaching. They hoped it would not require a magic wand to make this a reality.



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