The general inability to “get along” is again at the root of the top five reasons staff members in Southern Baptist churches are terminated from their positions, according to a recently completed study by LifeWay’s pastoral ministries department.

Relational issues top the list for the 10th consecutive year, according to Bob Sheffield, pastoral ministries specialist. The top five are:

1) control issues (who’s going to run the church)
2) poor people skills
3) churches’ resistance to change
4) pastor’s leadership style being too strong
5) churches already in conflict when the pastor arrived

“The interesting thing since we began doing this study in 1996 is that the top five have been the top five every year,” Sheffield said. “The only difference is in their order from year to year. We consistently see the inability to develop and maintain healthy relationships within the church as the reason for dismissals.”

The study is compiled in cooperation with state Baptist convention church ministry relations teams and directors of missions. Sheffield tabulates the data. Twenty-nine conventions participated this year – the highest total in the study’s 10 years.

A total of 1,302 staff members were dismissed in 2005: 314 bivocational, 655 full-time pastors and 333 full-time staff. The totals for full-time and staff represent the highest totals during the 10 years, but
Sheffield said the numbers could be slightly skewed because the highest number of conventions reporting in any one year in the past was 26 (1998, 1999 and 2003).

“The other thing to consider is that this just represents the best data we can gather on forced terminations,” he said. “It doesn’t include those who were pressured out.”

**Other reasons for dismissals**

Sheffield said that a pastor’s administrative incompetence (No. 8) and sexual misconduct (No. 9) cracked the top 10 for the first time and ethical misconduct (mismanaged monies, dishonesty, etc.) makes it into the top 20 for the first time at No. 11.

“Most people would probably think that ethical issues or sexual misconduct would have been one of the leading reasons for dismissals,” Sheffield said. “Although I am glad they are not, I am disappointed to see sexual misconduct creeping higher on the list, and ethical issues making the top 20. Let’s face it, this is not an uplifting list to begin with, but I’d love to see those numbers decline.”

Another first in the top 20 is disagreement over doctrine (No. 12). “It is difficult to know exactly what that means from the way the question is asked on the survey,” Sheffield said, “so I won’t begin to speculate about what that means, but it has never been this big of an issue before.”

Sheffield observed that much of the conflict that results in dismissal could be averted if pulpit committees and pastors interacted better during the interview process. Recognizing the current discussion taking place within the denomination regarding pulpit committee-pastor interview process, Sheffield offered some tips that could curb the number of dismissals.

“Pastors ought to ask hard questions,” he said. “They should ask to see the minutes from the last several business meetings. They ought to check the [church’s] constitution and bylaws and the annual reports to the association and state. They should talk to area pastors about the perception of the church. They should ask if there have been previous terminations, the tenure of the previous three or four pastors and why they left.”

**Research church on the front end**

“Pastors should do their due diligence, and as with the pulpit committee, both should be looking for the right match,” Sheffield said. “Bottom line, however, is that if God is calling a pastor to a particularly difficult situation and he knows that going in, he should go into it with his eyes open, understanding it might be difficult. Obedience to God should always be the overriding factor.”

Pulpit committees, Sheffield said, ought to represent the full church but that’s not always the case.

“They often represent the more progressive segment of the church and what it wants to see happen, and not necessarily what the whole church wants to
see happen,” he said. “Some people will say a pastor’s search committee was dishonest. That is sometimes the case, but I believe more often the people on the committee are communicating what they’d like to see happen and not necessarily what is happening in a church.”

Sheffield said pulpit committees should check a pastor’s references beyond what is given and can even ask other pastors in the community where the pastor is located for references. Sheffield also recommended two resources available through the pastoral ministries department to guide search committees: information at www.lifeway.com/pastors and the Pastor’s Search Committee Handbook, Revised.

We recommend
- *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* by John Piper
- *Ministerial Ethics* by Joe E. Trull and James E. Carter
- *The Peacemaking Pastor* by Alfred Poirer

These and other resources are available through customer service at www.lifeway.com and (800) 458-2772 and from LifeWay Christian Stores at www.lifewaystores.com and (800) 233-1123.

An Inside LifeWay podcast interview with Sheffield and Barney Self, licensed counselor with LifeWay’s pastoral ministries area, is available at LifeWay.com/InsideLifeWay.