

Are Rural Clergy Worse Off?: An Examination of Occupational Conditions and Pastoral Experiences in a Sample of United Methodist Clergy

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Scholars have shown that clergy work can be stressful, and that these occupational strains can lead to negative physical and mental health outcomes. Despite the fact that nearly one-third of all congregations in the United States are rural, little work has examined how occupational conditions and clergy experiences might vary systematically by geographical context. This study uses recent data from United Methodist Church clergy in North Carolina to test extant depictions of rural ministry, which typically portray rural churches as challenging occupational settings. It finds that although rural clergy face several unique challenges (such as multichurch ministry and lower salaries), they report lower levels of several stressors and more positive experiences. These differences disappear once controls are added, suggesting that rural ministry per se is neither particularly harmful nor beneficial when compared with ministry in other settings.

Key words: Rural churches; Clergy/Ministers/Religious Professionals; United States of America; Protestant Christianity.

Research over the past several decades has demonstrated that clergy, like many professionals, face a great deal of job-related stress. Studies have shown that clergy often face high demands on their time, a lack of privacy, pressures from frequent relocation, and criticism from church members (Carroll 2006; Frame and Shehan 1994; Gleason 1977; Noller 1984). Additionally, they

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frequently must balance multiple roles which can lead to various types of role strain (Kay 2000; Kuhne and Donaldson 1995). Such stressors can lead to physical and mental health problems if clergy do not have sufficient social and personal resources to manage them effectively (Pearlin 1989; Pearlin et al. 1981). Indeed, scholars have shown that stress and burnout are persistent problems among pastors (e.g., Dewe 1987; Francis et al. 2004).

Of course, not all pastoral work is the same. Clergy serve in churches of varying sizes, in various locations, and minister to people with unique cultures, personalities, and problems. This diversity leads to differences in occupational demands, which in turn can influence the types and intensities of stressors that pastors face and can offer clergy different resources with which to manage these challenges (Pearlin 1989).¹ Understanding the patterns of stressors and resources in pastoral work is an essential first step in creating healthy work environments for clergy.

One aspect of pastoral work that seems likely to show systematic occupational differences is whether or not clergy work in rural churches. Rural life is different from life in suburbs and cities economically, culturally, and in a variety of other ways (e.g., Howard and Piliavin 2000; Rural Poverty 2010), which suggests that rural ministry might be different as well (Francis and Lankshear 1997; Giese 2002; Lankshear 2004). Determining the extent and nature of these differences is essential for addressing the needs of clergy, for nearly one-third of churches in the United States are located in predominately rural areas.² Unfortunately, work to date does not allow for an easy examination of clergy experiences in rural churches—particularly in the United States—for three main reasons.

First, writings on rural churches, clergy, and ministry are divided between “pastoral” and “empirical” works. By “pastoral,” we mean those books and articles that are intended primarily as guides to improving rural ministry rather than rigorous scholarly analyses of it. These are written for pastors, and give largely anecdotal accounts of rural ministry. In contrast, “empirical” treatments are those that rely on established social scientific methods such as in-depth ethnographies, survey-based data collection, and statistical analyses. Empirical work describes both the occupational setting of rural ministry and the experiences of clergy engaged in it. The pastoral/empirical distinction is admittedly artificial—works can fall to varying degrees in both categories (e.g., Farley et al. 2005)—but allows us to distinguish between the many untested claims that have been made and those that have received some empirical validation.

¹The idea of stressors and resources interacting to produce outcomes is taken from stress process theory (Pearlin 1989; Pearlin et al. 1981).

²The percent of rural churches is obtained from the 2006–2007 wave of the National Congregations Study which is a nationally representative survey of congregations in the United States. To be more precise, the data indicate that 33.2 percent of Christian congregations are located in a predominately rural census tract (data weighted at the congregation level).

Second, most work on rural ministry—especially empirical work—comes from England and describes English clergy and congregations, particularly those in the Anglican tradition. Although recent writing on American rural ministry exists, it is comparatively rare and composed almost entirely of pastoral accounts, suggesting that the academic literature on rural ministry is predominately a literature of rural clergy and churches in England. This fact cautions against untested generalizations to the United States.

The third reason to examine the rural pastoral experience is that rurality in both England and the United States is changing, and has been for some time. Thus inherited notions of what the rural church is like may no longer be accurate.

This paper aims to advance research on clergy well-being by empirically examining the occupational conditions and experiences of clergy in an American sample. We first examine both pastoral and empirical writings in order to construct a portrait of ministry conditions in rural churches. As will be seen below, many writers suggest that rural churches can be difficult places to work. Several also suggest that these challenges are more severe for female clergy. We assess the validity of these depictions by comparing them with data from a recent survey of United Methodist Church (UMC) clergy in North Carolina (NC), and from public church records.

THE RURAL CHURCH: PASTORAL AND EMPIRICAL ACCOUNTS

Pastoral Literature

The clearest claims about the occupational conditions of rural ministry are found in pastoral writings. Both American and English pastoral works are almost invariably written by clergy who serve in rural churches and who have an obvious—and often openly stated—love for rural ministry. Their tone is almost always positive and emphasizes the possibility of successful and rewarding ministry. Nonetheless, authors acknowledge that rural churches are a unique occupational environment that comes with its own set of challenges. Because most pastoral authors largely agree in their portrayals, we do not distinguish between English and American works below (although these distinctions will become more important when reviewing empirical literature).

Pastorally oriented writers note that rural churches can be places with strong culture and deep-rooted traditions, and although this can be inspiring, at times it can also be a source of great stress for clergy. Farris (2000), for instance, observes that rural communities tend to be close-knit and hence a newly arrived clergy person can be seen as an outsider. Jane Millikan, a pastor from Minnesota, notes that this division can persist for many years. Writing after 11 years of rural service, she concludes that she “will always be something of an outsider . . . [n]ot in the sense of not being respected or included, but

because [she] is a child of a different culture” (Millikan 2002:34). In rural communities, isolating social boundaries can be strictly defined and traditional ways of behaving may be hard to dislodge even when pastors see a compelling need to do so (Bowden 1994; Farley et al. 2005; Farris 2000; Hassinger et al. 1988). Such challenges may generate stress as pastors try to change persistent patterns of thought and behavior and counsel those who have run afoul of local norms. Anthropologist Sonya Salamon (Salamon 2003) notes that high rates of (sub)urban to rural migration can spark changes in community priorities and a loss of local identity. These transformations can spur conflicts that may be played out not just in city halls but in congregations as well, as established local families who are used to “running the show” vie with new members for control of programs, worship styles, and other church functions (Farley et al. 2005; Farris 2000; Giese 2002; Jung et al. 1998).

In addition to cultural difficulties within a congregation, stressors may also arise simply from the realities of living in a rural area. Pastors in small towns, for instance, are more visible and likely in greater contact with parishioners day to day, which in turn can make it more difficult for them to separate their personal from their professional lives (Farris 2000; Jung and Agria 1997; Russell 1993). A smaller population base often translates into smaller congregations and decreased church revenue and clergy salary (Farley et al. 2005). This in turn means that rural clergy almost invariably work alone, an arrangement that requires them to perform a variety of ministerial and administrative functions ranging from house visits to budget oversight. Although some pastors enjoy this diversity, others find it taxing (Jung and Agria 1997). These pressures multiply if rural clergy are assigned to care for multiple congregations, each of which may have its own traditions and interpersonal conflicts to which clergy must be sensitive (Bowden 1994; Farley et al. 2005). Small budgets and salaries can be especially challenging when paired with economic crises and the rising cost of rural living (Bowden 1994; Hassinger et al. 1988). Indeed, several authors comment on the economic challenges created in rural communities as small farms and industries falter in the face of competition by large corporations, causing impoverished locals to turn to the church for help (James 2004; Jung and Agria 1997; Jung et al. 1998). Faced with economic difficulties and unsettling changes in the larger culture, some rural congregations either lose hope or enter a survival mode in which they stubbornly resist change (Farris 2000; Jung and Agria 1997; Langrish 2004). Of course, not all rural communities are declining; many are prospering, but often in response to inward migration that can generate local tensions, as noted above (Bell et al. 2009; Salamon 2003).

From pastoral writings, then, we gain a picture of rural churches as places where local cultures combine with the realities of rural living in various ways to create challenging environments for clergy.

Empirical Literature

By far the most active empirical researchers of rural ministry have been pastors and scholars of the Church of England, although a few researchers have also examined other denominations in both England and the United States. Their work indirectly supports several of the claims made in pastoral writings.

Several studies support the idea that rural churches are declining. Using data from the Church of England, [Lankshear \(2004\)](#) finds that in rural churches, the number of candidates presented for confirmation (per thousand who attend services at Easter) between the 1950s and 1990s declined 60 percent compared with a decline of 47 percent in urban areas. [Roberts \(2005\)](#) and [Roberts and Francis \(2006\)](#) also document Anglican church closures and loss of membership in rural England, and [Burton \(2007\)](#) discovers the same pattern in one Methodist district. Although [Roberts \(2005\)](#), [Roberts and Francis \(2006\)](#), and [Burton \(2007\)](#) do not control for possible changes in the overall rural population that may confound their results, [Lankshear \(2004\)](#) notes that from the 1950s through the 1990s both rural and mixed rural/urban dioceses throughout England have grown, suggesting that loss of membership and churches is not due to a declining population base. The evidence is sparser with regard to the United States, but a recent study of rural churches in Missouri suggests a more complicated picture. Researchers note that while some Missouri churches are dying, others are adapting to changes and thriving, thereby making it difficult to speak of rural decline in any general sense ([Farley et al. 2005](#); [Neitz 2009](#)). Unfortunately, the Missouri project focuses exclusively on rural churches, making comparisons to nonrural growth and decline impossible. Taken together, these studies support the idea that many rural congregations are disappearing, though perhaps to a lesser extent in the United States. Such decline could influence the ability of church members to maintain hope as suggested in pastoral accounts, and influence clergy perceptions of their own occupational competency.

Research also lends support to depictions of rural congregations as community-minded places inclined toward traditional forms of church life. A study of clergy in the Church of Wales reveals that rural clergy report more inclusive (i.e., community-minded) attitudes toward baptism and confirmation practices than pastors in other areas ([Littler 2006](#)). With regard to the traditional bent of rural congregations, the most direct evidence comes from the Missouri Rural Churches Study, in which interviews with clergy and church leaders indicated that traditional mindsets that resist change are one of the 10 major challenges of rural ministry ([Farley et al. 2005](#)). Two studies offer indirect evidence, finding that rural Anglican clergy are higher in social conformity: the authors suggest that this is consistent with the idea that rural congregations are more traditional, and their clergy must therefore be more willing to adapt to established customs than might be the case in an urban setting ([Francis and Lankshear 1998](#); [Francis and Rutledge 2004](#)). Adherence to traditional mindsets is not unflinchingly negative, however, for it can also

prompt the higher levels of member involvement found among rural members. [Davies et al. \(1991\)](#), for instance, find that a greater proportion of a church's members attend services in rural versus nonrural congregations. Another study finds that rural members of one Church of England diocese participate in the church more than their nonrural counterparts, but that in exchange they seem to expect a higher level of personal service (in the forms of private baptisms and other such rites) from their ministers ([Francis and Lankshear 1992](#)). The traditional bent of rural congregations might therefore act as both a resource and a stressor, leading to member involvement and support as well as increased member demands.

Limited support is also found for the idea that rural ministry might lead to social isolation for clergy. Based on data gathered from rural clergy throughout England, [Davies et al. \(1991\)](#) report that many rural clergy avoid forming close friendships with their congregants. At times they feel conflicting loyalties between parish work and their home life, suggesting that rural occupational demands can also interfere with family relationships.

Empirical findings about the workload of rural clergy are inconclusive. [Davies et al. \(1991\)](#) find that rural clergy, even those serving multiple churches, work hours are comparable to those of clergy in other areas, and [Francis and Lankshear \(1992\)](#) report that rural clergy in one diocese have less work to do, with fewer parishioners to care for and fewer midweek meetings to hold. [Davies et al.](#), however, suggest that rural clergy might still experience greater pressure due to both a lack of lay assistance and the grueling pace that performing services in multiple churches can require. They further indicate that rural clergy generally do not take sufficient time off. Thus, working limited hours each week might not translate into less stress if the stressors are more intense, and if rural clergy are less likely to take a break from them.

Although much of the pastoral and empirical literature suggests that rural churches might be particularly challenging occupational environments, few studies explicitly examine the effects of rural ministry on clergy well-being. One study indicates that rural clergy suffer from burnout—a stress-related syndrome (see [Maslach et al. 2001](#))—and suggests that this leads to lower levels of personal prayer and worse performance in the roles of pastor, counselor, church administrator, and educator ([Rutledge 2006](#)). Only one study that we are aware of, however, explicitly looks for *differences* in stress effects between rural and nonrural churches. [Francis and Rutledge \(2000\)](#) assess burnout in a random sample of Anglican full-time stipendiary male parochial clergy. They find that although rural clergy score slightly lower in feelings of personal accomplishment, they are no different than nonrural clergy in levels of emotional exhaustion or depersonalization. Although no comparable work on American clergy exists, one study indicates that rural clergy in Minnesota report being satisfied with their congregations and with rural ministry more generally, though it does not draw any comparisons with nonrural clergy ([Barker 1991](#)). Still, there seems to be little indication that the well-being of pastors suffers as a result of

service in a rural church, despite the empirical evidence that rural ministry is unique.

Taken together, pastoral and empirical accounts paint a picture of rural ministry against which we can compare our data.³ They suggest that rural clergy face a number of difficulties that could potentially function as occupational stressors, yet the limited evidence to date provides little support for the idea that well-being is lower among rural clergy. This seeming contradiction, combined with the sparsity of empirical studies of American rural clergy, suggests the need for further testing.

Female Clergy

Since the upswing in women's ordination during the last several decades, scholars have been paying increasing attention to experiences of female pastors. Although the literature is too expansive to review here, the evidence to date suggests that women continue to face discrimination in the ministry. Even though many congregations overwhelmingly approve of their women pastors (Dudley 1996; Royle 1982), women can face discrimination in initially finding positions (Fobes 2001; Royle 1982). Studies also suggest that employed women pastors might encounter a number of unique challenges such as lower opinions of their sermons among male congregants (Maybury and Chickering 2001), and cultural and bureaucratic barriers to high-level positions, a pattern that seems to hold both in the United States and internationally (Cameron and Jackson 2008; Malogne-Fer 2008; Schmidt 1996).

For our purposes, the question of interest is whether these stressors are different for women serving in rural congregations. Jung and Agria (1997) suggest that the normal challenges of rural ministry are intensified for women pastors, and that they face additional gender-based difficulties as well. Logically, there are reasons to support this line of thinking. As noted above, rural congregations can be bastions of traditional thought and resistant to change, both of which could contribute to negative attitudes toward female clergy. These characteristics might also make it difficult for women pastors to preach on topics that they feel are important, such as tolerance and rights, including gay rights (Olson et al. 2000). Unfortunately, little data on the experience of women pastors in rural churches have been published. One exception is Shirley Teig's brief summary of themes emerging from a series of conferences aimed at women in rural ministry. Teig (2002) reports that in addition to the usual

³This unified picture of the rural church, of course, brushes over a great deal of diversity. Several American writers emphasize this point, noting that demographic, social, and economic changes in rural areas of the United States have created several types of rurality, each of which influences how churches must function in order to survive (Farley et al. 2005; Farris 2000; Jung et al. 1998; Neitz 2005, 2009; Salamon 2003). Given the current lack of empirical research on ministry in the United States, we avoid the complexities of rural diversity in the present work and instead focus on the broad themes outlined above in order to provide a foundation on which future research can build.

challenges of rural ministry, these women pastors—all of whom come from churches in South Dakota or Minnesota—at times face various forms of sexism, such as when church members resist having a woman perform certain pastoral services or operate with gendered ideas of what women are capable of. At times they also feel a lack of acceptance in their communities. Logically and based on this limited evidence, then, we have reason to suspect that rural service will be more stressful for female pastors than for males.

DATA AND VARIABLES

The data used in the following analyses come predominately from the Duke Clergy Health Initiative, a recent survey-based study of the health of UMC clergy in NC conducted by Duke Divinity School. Participation was offered to all clergy serving in the NC and Western NC UMC conferences ($N = 1,820$). The study was administered in the late summer and fall of 2008 by Westat, a contract research organization. Duke University and Westat Institutional Review Boards approved all procedures. Of the 1,820 clergy offered participation, 1,726 participated (a 95 percent response rate). For the purposes of this paper, those not serving in a church (such as district superintendents) or those missing data on key variables are dropped from the analyses, for a total of 1,373 respondents. The survey data are supplemented by information about each congregation from the public records of the NC and Western NC conferences.

Rurality

Respondents are coded rural if they indicated that the setting of their primary church is “rural or open country.” Other response options were: “[in a] town or village of less than 10,000 people; in or around city of: 10,000–49,000; in or around city of: 50,000–249,000”; and “in or around city of: 250,000 or more.”⁴ Realizing that self-reported data can be suspect, we ran extensive analyses in order to test this measure’s validity and found it to be superior to any of the more complicated measures available. This may be because these measures are based on U.S. Census data that, in 2008, were nearly a decade old. These measures also differ in their level of specificity, with some classifying rurality at the ZIP code (Weeks et al. 2006) or county level (Litaker et al. 2005). County-level classifications in particular can mask differences in population density and in resources that exist within the specified area, and they fail to account for the proximity of urban areas that may lie just across county lines. In contrast, our self-report measure focuses attention on the areas immediately surrounding the churches in which clergy work, and

⁴These items were taken from the Faith Communities Today project, 2005 questionnaire (see <http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/fact-2005-survey-methods>).

reflects conditions as they existed at the time the survey data were collected. In order to avoid bias, any pastors serving in the same church who disagreed as to whether or not it was rural are dropped from the analyses ($N = 40$). This leaves 39 percent of the sample classified as rural ($N = 535$).

Occupational Conditions: Stressors, Experiences, and Resources

The first group of variables measures the potential stressors of rural ministry. *Salary* reports respondents' yearly salaries, and *Day off* is a dichotomous variable that records whether respondents regularly take a day off each week. *Conflict in congregation* refers to the amount of perceived conflict in respondents' primary congregations during the past six months (1, No conflict; 2, Minor conflict; 3, Major conflict; 4, Major conflict with leaders or people leaving). Two dichotomous variables address the issue of having multiple congregations, the first of which, *Multiple points*, reports whether a respondent serves multiple churches. The second, *One pastor/multiple points*, records whether or not a clergy person works *alone* in ministering to multiple churches. *Congregational morale* is a two-item scale that ranges from 1 to 4 and captures the level of morale that clergy perceive in their congregations ($\alpha = 0.826$). The two items asked clergy to rate their agreement with the following statements: "The current morale of my primary congregation is high" and "Members of my primary congregation have a sense of excitement about the congregation's future," with response options of "disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree," and "strongly agree." Two scales are taken from the Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness/Spirituality (BMMRS) to assess the positive and negative aspects of support from respondents' congregations (Fetzer Institute 1999; Idler et al. 2003).⁵ The first is *Negative interaction*, a two-item scale composed of items measuring perceived frequency of negative interactions with congregation members during the last year ("During the past year, how often have the people in your congregation . . ." (1) ". . . made too many demands on you?" (2) ". . . been critical of you and the things you have done?" 1, Never; 2, Once in a while; 3, Fairly often; 4, Very often; $\alpha = 0.632$).

The second scale taken from the BMMRS measures an occupational resource rather than a stressor. *Anticipated support* is based on two items measuring respondents' perceptions of the willingness of people in their congregations to assist them in times of need ("If you were ill, how much would the people in your congregation be willing to help out?"; "If you have a problem or were faced with a difficult situation, how much comfort would the people in your congregation be willing to give you?" 1, None; 2, A little; 3, Some; 4, A great deal; $\alpha = 0.862$). This measure is dichotomized in order to correct for skewness,

⁵Previous work has shown that the Negative Interaction and Anticipated Support scales represent unique factors, with higher α scores Anticipated Support, as is the case in our data (Idler et al. 2003).

with those clergy reporting that they anticipate a great deal of support coded as 1. Social support resources are measured with *Social support*, a general item assessing how often clergy receive the “social and emotional support [they] need (1, Never; 2, Rarely; 3, Sometimes; 4, Usually; 5, Always), and with *Confidants*, a count variable reporting the number of people with whom respondents discussed matters important to them during the past six months.⁶

Four variables measure the experiences of clergy, the first two of which assess stress levels. *Financial stress* is a dichotomous measure of stress over a pastor’s current financial situation, with those reporting a “very” or “extremely” stressful situation coded as 1, and those reporting moderate, slight, or no stress coded as 0. *Stress from congregational challenges* refers to the item, “Over the past year, how often have you experienced stress because of challenges you have in this congregation?” with reverse-coded response options: 1, Never; 2, Once in a while; 3, Fairly often; 4, Very often. The final two variables capture two other possible outcomes of the challenges associated with rural ministry. *Lonely in work* reports how often clergy have felt lonely in their work over the past year (1, Never; 2, Once in a while; 3, Fairly often; 4, Very often). *Life chaos* is a measure of how stable and predictable respondents’ lives are, and is assessed using Wong et al.’s (2007) chaos scale. This scale asks respondents to rate their agreement on a scale of 1–4 (1, Strongly agree; 2, Slightly agree; 3, Slightly disagree; 4, Strongly disagree) with six statements, and these are then summed to give a total life chaos score with possible values ranging from 0 to 24. The six statements are “My life is organized” (reverse-coded), “My life is unstable,” “My routine is the same from week to week” (reverse-coded), “My daily activities from week to week are unpredictable,” “Keeping a schedule is difficult for me,” and “I do not like to make appointments too far in advance because I do not know what might come up.”

Control Variables

Controls are included for basic demographic variables and the size of the congregations that clergy work in. The variables *Female*, *Black*, and *Married* are coded 1 if the named characteristic applies and 0 otherwise. *Bivocational* is also dichotomous and indicates whether clergy have another job in addition to their pastoral appointment. *Hours worked/week* gives the self-reported average number of hours clergy work each week, while *Age* reports their age in years. *Education* is an ordinal variable with the levels 1, “Grades 1 through 8,” 2, “Grades 9 through 11,” 3, “Grade 12 or GED,” 4, “College: 1 year to 3 years,” 5, “College: 4 years of more,” 6, “Master’s degree,” 7, “Doctoral degree.” *Years*

⁶Although it seems that self-reported social support and number of confidants reported would be highly correlated, a polyserial correlation between the two measures of .13 indicates that their relationship is modest at best. Both are therefore included in order to more fully capture the various aspects of social support.

TABLE 1 Sample Characteristics of Rural and Nonrural UMC Clergy

	Rural	Nonrural	Difference
Local pastor	43.7%	17.0%	26.8%***
Retired pastor	9.7%	3.5%	6.3%***
Female	23.6%	24.5%	-0.9%
Black	6.4%	7.0%	-0.7%
Married	83.4%	86.6%	-3.3%
Bivocational	20.2%	9.2%	11.0%***
Hours worked/week	43.1	50.8	-7.7***
Education	5.4	5.8	-0.4***
Age	53.6	51.1	2.5***
Time in ministry	12.0	16.4	-4.3***
Congregation size	123.9	382.9	-259.0***

$N = 1,373$; Total sample = 39.0% rural.

Significant at * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; two-tailed significance tests.

in ministry reports the number of years respondents have served as clergy, and *Congregation size* gives the number of members in respondents' congregations.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics on these variables. Compared with other clergy, rural pastors are older, slightly less well educated, more likely to be bi-vocational, have had shorter pastoral careers, and work fewer hours each week in smaller congregations. We control for these variables in the analyses that follow to avoid confounding their effects with those of the rural church environment.

An important feature of our data is that UMC clergy can be one of a variety of ordination statuses. The three primary statuses of interest are elders (the seminary-educated main professional body of the church); local pastors (unordained clergy who often work on a part-time basis); and retired clergy (elders or local pastors who have been called back from retirement in order to serve a church). Table 2 indicates that the experiences of these clergy are significantly different from one another, and table 1 reveals that they are more prevalent in rural areas, and so we control for ordination status as well. These statuses are dichotomously coded in the variables *Local pastor* and *Retired pastor* which use nonretired elders as their reference category.

PLAN OF ANALYSES⁷

The goal of these analyses is to test the portrait of rural ministry sketched above by comparing the occupational conditions and experiences reported by

⁷All statistical analyses were performed in R v 2.12.2 (R Development Core Team 2011), with particular use of the packages *foreign* (R-core members et al. 2008), *multilevel* (Bliese 2008), and *car* (Fox 2009) for data management and analyses.

TABLE 2 Unadjusted Differences in Pastoral Experiences by Ordination Status

	Local vs. elders	Local vs. retired	Retired vs. elders
Financial stress	-6.1%*	9.8%*	-15.8%***
Anticipated support	6.9%*	-17.1%**	24.0%***
Day off	-13.9%***	-18.5%**	4.6%
Multiple points	20.9%***	12.8%*	8.1%
One pastor/multiple points	19.6%***	13.4%*	6.2%
Salary	-1.29***	0.51***	-1.64***
Social support	0.25***	-0.37**	0.62***
Confidants	0.24	1.11	-0.91
Lonely in work	-0.35***	0.62***	-0.94***
Life chaos	-0.13*	0.54***	-0.69***
Congregational morale	0.12*	-0.18	0.29*
Conflict in congregation	-0.21***	0.60***	-0.78***
Negative interaction	-0.60**	0.02	-0.63*
Stress from congregational challenges	-0.53***	0.63***	-1.14***

Note: Semistandardized differences presented for non-dichotomous variables (difference/SD)

Total *N* for elders (nonretired) = 934; local pastors (nonretired) = 430; retired pastors = 91.

Significant at **p* < .05; ***p* < .01; ****p* < .001; two-tailed significance tests.

rural and nonrural UMC clergy. We first examine the unadjusted means and proportions of reported stressors, resources, and experiences for these two groups, and assess the statistical significance of observed differences with *t*-tests and Pearson's χ^2 tests, respectively.

Of course, testing differences in unadjusted means can tell us only if significant differences exist; it cannot tell us if those differences are due to rural ministry per se. As noted, table 1 indicates that rural UMC clergy are different from nonrural clergy in several ways. In order to avoid confounding experiences tied to rural ministry with those of being bi-vocational, serving in a small church, and so on, we also present the differences in means and proportions once they have been adjusted for the variables listed as controls above.⁸

⁸A few technical details are in order. In order to more accurately capture statistically significant differences using *t*-tests, a number of variables were corrected for skewness prior to analyses by either logging or taking their square root. The choice of operation depended on which produced a more approximately normal distribution of the data. For the sake of brevity, we do not list which variables were transformed here, but we will provide that information upon request. All figures were returned to their original scale for presentation in the tables. Adjustments were made using ordinary least squares and logistic regression (for continuous and dichotomous variables, respectively) which included all control variables as covariates. All adjusted differences corrected for heteroskedasticity using a version of

TABLE 3 Means and Percentages for Pastoral Experiences by Rural Status, with Unadjusted and Adjusted Differences

	Rural	Nonrural	Difference	SD ^a	Adjusted (SD) ^{a,b}
Financial stress	14.2%	15.9%	-1.7%	-	1.1%
Anticipated support	58.7%	56.4%	2.3%	-	1.3%
Day off	65.8%	72.0%	-6.2%*	-	-0.6%
Multiple points	35.7%	9.3%	26.4%***	-	0.1%***
One pastor/multiple points	34.0%	8.6%	25.4%***	-	0.2%***
Salary	\$32,068.91	\$49,019.20	-\$16,950.29***	-0.74***	-0.02
Social support	3.94	3.84	0.10*	0.12*	0.03
Confidants	6.95	6.97	-0.02	-0.04	-0.01
Lonely in work	2.20	2.40	-0.20***	-0.22***	-0.13*
Life chaos	13.70	13.60	0.09	0.03	0.07
Congregational morale	3.10	3.03	0.07	0.08	0.17**
Conflict in congregation	2.00	2.20	-0.20***	-0.24***	-0.07
Negative interaction	1.61	1.63	-0.02**	-0.17**	-0.04
Stress from congregational challenges	6.23	7.82	-1.60***	-1.95***	-0.08

$N = 1,373$; significant at * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; two-tailed significance tests.

^aSemistandardized differences presented for non-dichotomous variables (difference/SD).

^bAdjustments to dichotomous variables made using logistic regression; OLS used for all others.

The final section compares adjusted means and proportions for males and females and uses ordinary least squares models that include a rurality by gender interaction term to test whether women's experiences are worse in rural areas.

RESULTS

The first four columns of table 3 allow us to answer the question of whether rural UMC clergy face different occupational conditions and have different experiences than their nonrural colleagues. The first two columns

White's robust standard errors that accounts for data clustering (i.e., the clustering produced by having some clergy in our sample that work in the same church).

present means and proportions (displayed as percentages) for rural and nonrural clergy, and the third column gives their differences and whether they are statistically significant. In order to give a better sense of which differences are substantively meaningful, we also present the differences in means in a semistandardized form in the fourth column. These numbers give the magnitudes of the differences in terms of how many standard deviations of their respective variables they represent.

Rural clergy report both higher and lower exposure to stressors compared with their nonrural colleagues. In terms of higher exposure, fewer rural pastors take a day off each week (-6.2%), perhaps because they are much more likely to have responsibility for multiple congregations ($+26.4\%$) and to shoulder that burden alone ($+25.4\%$). Rural clergy on average are also paid \$16,950 less than their nonrural colleagues, a difference that corresponds to 0.74 standard deviations in the total distribution of salaries in the sample. On the other hand, rural pastors are not more likely to service in congregations with lower morale, report lower levels of conflict in their congregations (-0.24 SD), and report fewer negative interactions (-0.17 SD). With regard to resources, they report slightly higher levels of social support (0.12 SD), but show no advantages in terms of number of confidants reported or anticipated support from church members. In terms of experiences, they report comparable levels of life chaos and financial stress, and experience less loneliness (-0.22 SD) and much less stress from organizational challenges (-1.95 SD). Taken together, these findings suggest that while rural clergy may face some unique challenges, they also enjoy a number of benefits, particularly with regard to the congregations they serve in. More importantly, they do not exhibit lower levels of well-being; in fact, they report experiences that are comparable or more positive than clergy in other locations.

The next question is whether the differences reported by rural UMC clergy are tied to rural ministry per se. To assess this, we adjust for the influence of the control variables listed above and re-evaluate the differences. The fifth column of table 3 presents these results, again with mean differences given in terms of standard deviations. These adjustments eliminate almost every difference between rural and nonrural pastors, with only four exceptions. The first two are that *Multiple points* and *One pastor/multiple points* remain significantly different for rural clergy, but the differences are vanishingly small in both cases and cease to be of substantive interest. The last two exceptions are that after adjustments rural clergy are slightly less likely to feel lonely in their work (-0.13 SD) and somewhat more likely to report serving in congregations with higher morale (0.17 SD). These two differences indicate that, if anything, rural ministry is slightly *less* challenging than pastoral service in other locations. Nonetheless, these differences are minor, and the other 12 measures of stressors, resources, and experiences reported in the fifth column of table 3 evidence surprising similarity between rural and nonrural clergy.

TABLE 4 Adjusted Differences in Pastoral Experiences by Gender

	Adjusted difference ^{a,b}
Financial stress	4.9%
Anticipated support	-2.6%
Day off	1.4%
Multiple points	-0.1%
One pastor/multiple points	-0.2%**
Salary	-0.25***
Social support	-0.15*
Confidants	0.13*
Lonely in work	0.28***
Life chaos	0.12
Congregational morale	-0.20**
Conflict in congregation	0.14*
Negative interaction	0.02
Stress from congregational challenges	0.18**

$N = 1,373$; significant at * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; two-tailed significance tests.

^aSemistandardized differences presented for nondichotomous variables (difference/SD).

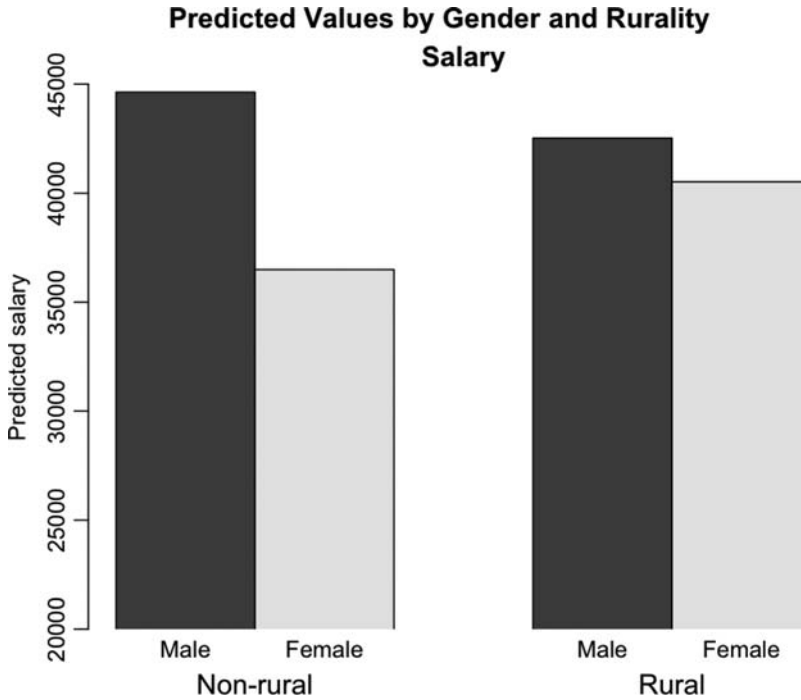
^bAdjustments to dichotomous variables made using logistic regression; OLS used for all others.

Women in Rural Ministry

Consistent with prior literature on the experiences of female clergy, women in this sample report more negative experiences than male clergy. Table 4 reveals that after controls UMC female pastors report significantly lower salaries (-0.25 SD), social support (-0.15 SD), and congregational morale (-0.20 SD), and higher feelings of loneliness (0.28 SD), congregational conflict (0.14 SD), and stress from organizational challenges (0.18 SD). These findings do not, however, reveal whether these negative experiences are *worse* if women are engaged in rural ministry. To assess this, we repeat these analyses and include the cross-product of gender and rurality.

Only the model for salary produces a significant interaction, and the direction of the effect is surprising. Figure 1 presents the predicted values from this model holding all control variables constant at their means. Although female UMC clergy have lower salaries than male clergy, the difference is *smaller* in rural areas than in nonrural ones (Nonrural: \$36,492 versus \$44,635; Rural: \$40,522 versus \$42,528). The overall lack of significant interactions indicates that rural ministry does not exacerbate the negative experiences of female clergy, and in the case of salary rural service puts women pastors on more equal footing with their male colleagues.

FIGURE 1. Predicted Values by Gender and Rurality Salary. *Note:* Nonrural/Rural Differences in Male/Female Salary Are Significant at the .05 Level.



DISCUSSION

Rural ministry is a vastly understudied phenomenon, especially in the context of the United States. Although studies do exist, many lack strong empirical support. This paper takes the first step toward addressing this deficiency. We began by stitching together the portrayals of the rural church found in both pastoral and empirical literature which allowed us to distill a portrait of rural ministry against which we could compare the experiences of our sample of UMC clergy. Extant literature indicates that rural churches might require clergy to deal with stressors such as traditional mindsets, varied work requirements, and the responsibility for multiple churches. On the other hand, they might also offer resources like social support. These stressors and resources could interact to produce challenging work environments, negative experiences, and lower clergy well-being.

Our analyses allowed us to test this depiction on two levels. At the purely descriptive level (i.e., without adjustments), we found that rural UMC clergy report higher levels of a number of stressors, namely more frequent participation in multichurch ministry, less frequently taking a day off each week, and lower salaries than nonrural pastors. Contrary to expectations they also report

similar levels of congregational morale, and lower rates of congregational conflict and negative interaction with church members. In terms of resources, rural clergy have slightly higher levels of social support, although they do not report having more confidants. Rural experiences are also different, with rural clergy reporting lower levels of loneliness and stress from organizational challenges, although levels of financial stress and life chaos are comparable to those of nonrural pastors. These findings suggest while rural clergy experience higher levels of some stressors, overall they have *better* experiences than nonrural clergy.

The second level of analysis moves beyond the purely descriptive level and asks where these observed differences in occupational conditions and experiences come from. Are they a feature of rural ministry, or are they related to something else? We assessed this by controlling for relevant demographic characteristics, bi-vocational status, and congregation size and found that the rural/nonrural differences almost entirely disappeared. This indicates that observed differences are predominately *not* due to features unique to rural ministry.

What factors, then, are driving observed rural/nonrural differences in UMC occupational conditions and pastoral experiences? Although a full answer to this question is beyond the scope of this paper, we offer two possibilities. The first is that observed differences are due to the unequal distribution of different types of clergy (e.g., local pastors), who in turn have experiences that are significantly different from one another. Tables 1 and 2 lend support to this hypothesis. Table 2 indicates that local pastors, retired clergy, and elders in the UMC report a number of substantial differences in occupational conditions and pastoral experiences, and table 1 reveals that these clergy are unequally distributed between rural and nonrural churches. The second possibility is that observed differences are tied to church size. Rural churches tend to be much smaller than suburban or urban churches, and it is plausible that size rather than location plays the major role in determining clergy salary, density of congregational social networks, intensity of demands, and so on (see Mueller and McDuff 2002). Although not made explicit above, our analyses presented in table 3 support both of these possibilities. In supplemental analyses (available upon request), we find that ordination status and church size are the control variables predominately responsible for the elimination of significant differences between rural and nonrural clergy.

This finding [i.e., that ordination status and church size are influential control variables] raises the question of why ordination status and church size have so pronounced an effect. The answer to this question necessarily depends on the outcome under consideration. We provide a few possible explanations to guide future work. With regard to salary, differences are likely explicable in terms of the compensation structure of the UMC. Elders, the main professional body of the church, are guaranteed a base compensation comprising a minimum amount (set annually) plus increments for years of service (*Book of*

Discipline 2008). Churches are responsible for providing this compensation, and have the option of supplementing this amount with additional funds. The net result is that more experienced pastors tend to serve in the large suburban and urban churches that can more easily afford their salaries, while small rural churches receive less experienced clergy with lower compensation requirements. The outcome of stress from congregational challenges may be tied church size as well. Larger churches come with a greater administrative burden, and require clergy to tailor their ministry to the needs of larger and more diverse constituency, both of which could increase stress levels. Congregational challenges might also be tied to ordination status. For instance, both local and retired pastors frequently work on a part-time basis, and consequently church members might expect less of them, which in turn could reduce clergy stress levels and the potential for conflict in the congregation. Additionally, local pastors are more likely than elders to serve congregations in areas with which they are familiar, and so may have local knowledge that facilitates positive interactions with church members, while retired clergy may have greater experience in effectively dealing with challenges. These same characteristics might also reduce the probability that local and retired clergy experience negative interactions with church members. Future research should seek to empirically assess the validity of these explanations as well as explore the contributions that church size and ordination status make to the other occupational conditions and health outcomes measured in this study.

We also tested the hypothesis that the negative experiences of female pastors are intensified for women who engage in rural ministry. Although our analyses do reveal gender-based disparities in pastoral experiences, they provide no support for the idea that they are worse for female clergy in rural areas. In fact, rural UMC women enjoy a smaller salary gap vis-a-vis their male colleagues, although the reason for this finding is unclear. One possibility is that the gender disparity is small largely because rural churches cannot afford to pay anyone, male or female, a large salary. Equity in compensation might therefore have more to do with a cap on male salaries than with a glass ceiling for females. Future research could profitably be applied to explore this hypothesis.

Of particular importance is the fact that our findings regarding stressors and experiences are consistent with the results of Francis and Rutledge (2000), whose study is the only other work we are aware of that explicitly compares rural/nonrural levels of stress-related outcomes among clergy. Just as Francis and Rutledge found that rural and nonrural Anglican clergy differed little in their rates of burnout, we find that rural ministry among UMC pastors is not associated with higher levels of stressors or stress-related outcomes. Taken together, these analyses have practical implications for clergy. Although pastoral depictions of the rural church often describe it as a challenging ministerial environment, and despite the fact that seminaries may not emphasize training for rural ministry (e.g., Francis 1994), we see no indication that pastors, male or female, have any reason to fear working in a rural church.

Similarly, our data give us no reason to suppose that rural ministry is unusually stressful, and consequently no reason to suppose that it unduly contributes to clergy burnout or other health problems.

Although these analyses represent a major step forward in terms of providing empirical analyses of rural ministry in the United States, they are not without their limitations. Rural areas are diverse, and pastoral experiences likely reflect that diversity. Our analyses do not take this diversity into account; they aggregate experiences over all rural and all nonrural clergy, and so may miss important variation or patterns. Nonrural areas are also diverse. Significant evidence suggests that certain nonrural areas, particularly the inner-city, suffer extreme poverty and can be linked to cultural views that perpetuate disadvantage (Small and Newman 2001; Wilson 2010). These conditions might generate challenges for clergy that parallel those created by the small budgets, loss of hope, and traditional mindsets that sometimes are found in rural churches. Future research should explore the extent to which characteristics attributed to rural churches are similar to those of churches in other locations. Another limitation is that our data assess clergy experiences in their primary congregations, and so may not capture ways that stress may aggregate for clergy who work in multiple churches. Additionally, our conclusions are based on a sample of UMC clergy in NC. Just as studies of rural Anglicanism in England cannot be applied directly to the American context, we cannot generalize these findings to other areas of the United States—nor to other denominations—without additional empirical research.

Fortunately, some evidence already exists along these lines. A comparison of studies on clergy work, for instance, reveals that clergy roles, time use, and job demands are similar across a number of denominations and geographical locations (Carroll 2006; Dewe 1987; Frame and Shehan 1994; Gleason 1977; Kay 2000; Kuhne and Donaldson 1995; Noller 1984; Proeschold-Bell et al. 2009).⁹ Like the UMC, other denominations also have different types of clergy, each with unique responsibilities and experiences (Nesbitt 1993). To the extent that ministry and clergy-type are similar across denominations and in different geographical contexts, the present analyses might inform our understanding of the experiences of rural clergy more generally.

This paper demonstrates the need for further study of rural ministry. Our findings indicate that scholars of American religion cannot be content to rely on pastoral depictions of clergy occupational conditions, for these suggest a uniquely challenging rural environment for which we find no evidence. Researchers should also be cautious in generalizing empirical findings based on

⁹Denominations captured by these studies include Baptists, United Methodists, Uniting Church clergy, and Roman Catholics, as well a number of samples of mixed Protestant clergy (e.g., Gleason describes his sample as being from “several mainstream and evangelical Protestant denominations” [1977: 249]). Geographic areas include England and Wales, Hong Kong, Queensland, New Zealand, Florida, and NC.

English churches to churches in the United States. An accurate understanding of clergy work in all of its various contexts is essential if we want to correctly identify the stressors that pastors face, and the resources that are available to them for maintaining their health and well-being.

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