



Duke | CLERGY
HEALTH INITIATIVE

CLERGY HEALTH TRENDS: SPIRITUAL WELLBEING 2008-2023

Findings from the Statewide Clergy Health Survey of
North Carolina United Methodist Clergy



Duke Clergy Health Initiative
Duke University
clergywb@duke.edu
clergyreligionresearch.duke.edu
Spiritedlife.org
Funded by The Duke Endowment

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Health Trends is a series of reports that provides the health and wellbeing-related trends among United Methodist Church clergy. Each report contains data from the years of 2008 to 2023.

This document is the Health Trends Spiritual Wellbeing report. In this report, readers will find trends on 3 dimensions of Spiritual Wellbeing: spiritual wellbeing in daily life, spiritual wellbeing in ministry, and satisfaction with one's ministry life.

As hard as it is to measure spiritual wellbeing, we have carefully attempted to do so specifically for UMC clergy. When we first launched the Statewide Clergy Health Survey, we collaborated with UMC Bishop Kenneth Lee Carder to develop and evaluate a new assessment tool, the Clergy Spiritual Wellbeing Scale, which separately measures Spiritual Wellbeing in Daily Life and Spiritual Wellbeing in Ministry (Proeschold-Bell et al., 2014). Findings from these measures, alongside spiritual practices, are provided in this report.

The Mission

The Duke Clergy Health Initiative (CHI) identifies, tests, and promotes evidence-based practices to support the health and wellbeing of United Methodist clergy in North Carolina.



Executive Summary

The Duke Clergy Health Initiative has tracked the spiritual wellbeing, ministry satisfaction, occupational distress, and spiritual practices of United Methodist Church (UMC) clergy in North Carolina for 15 years. Here are the key findings:

Spiritual wellbeing in daily life has improved over the past two years, with nearly two-thirds of clergy reporting that they *frequently* or *always* feel the presence and power of God. Spiritual wellbeing in ministry has remained stable over the past two years, with 42-80% of clergy in 2023 indicating that they *frequently* or *always* felt the presence and power of God during various ministry tasks. Even in 2021 when many mental health measures indicated worse scores for clergy, spiritual wellbeing in daily life and in ministry remained constant.

At the same time, there are a few chinks in the armor. Certain items, like the percentage of clergy who *frequently* or *always* “feel that you have a vital relationship with God” have decreased from a high of 71% in 2014 and 2016 to just 63% in 2023. Similarly, *frequently* or *always* “feeling that events were unfolding according to God’s intent,” has decreased from a high of 60% in 2014 to just 46% in 2023. However, the other four items in the spiritual wellbeing in daily life measure have remained stable since 2008, making the average score of the full measure stable.

Ministry satisfaction has increased slightly since 2008, with statistically significant increases in satisfaction with one’s overall ministry effectiveness and spiritual life, as well as the pastor’s quality of ministry conducted in person.

Occupational distress has remained relatively stable since 2014, with some fluctuations in specific areas, such as feeling lonely or isolated which in 2023 are improved, although 37% of clergy in 2023 reported feeling fairly often or very often lonely or isolated in their work.

Spiritual practices, including prayer, Bible reading, and Sabbath-keeping, have shown varying trends. Both prayer time and Bible-reading frequency have decreased since 2008. Sabbath keeping has increased since 2021, with a large percentage—over half—of clergy reporting they currently keep intentional Sabbath.

Spiritual direction and coaching have significantly increased from 6% in 2021 to 9.3% in 2023. The percentage of clergy with a spiritual director only has increased to 15% in 2023, partially reversing a previous decline. (The percentage of clergy with a spiritual director was 19% in 2008 and 11% in 2021.) Engagement in vocational coaching has remained stable, with slightly less than one-third of clergy currently participating.

In sum, these findings in trends over time indicate good news for UMC clergy in North Carolina. UMC clergy are doing well in terms of spiritual wellbeing in daily life and ministry! This is important for many reasons, including that spiritual wellbeing appears protective against future depression symptoms for clergy (Milstein et al., 2019). We will note with interest in 2025 what happens to reports of feeling a vital relationship with God and feeling that events were unfolding according to God's plan because these specific items decreased in 2023.

The results suggest a degree of concern for clergy feeling fairly often or very often lonely and isolated in their work, which, at 37%, has improved since the 40% of 2021, but is still notably higher than the 31% of 2014 and 2016. Identifying ways to decrease loneliness at work may be broadly beneficial.

Increases in ministry satisfaction indicate a trend toward a return to pre-pandemic levels. Many clergy find value in coaching and spiritual direction, with 37% currently participating in at least one of them. Support for these activities may continue to sustain ministry satisfaction.



Study Overview

The United Methodist clergy of North Carolina have given each other and researchers a treasure trove of data on their physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing. What started as a single, hour-long survey in 2008 has been repeated nearly every 2 years, providing 8 snapshots of clergy wellbeing across 15 years.

All United Methodist clergy with a current appointment, and many with a previous appointment, are invited to participate in the survey. The survey's measures include validated, standard health measures for comparison to non-clergy groups, as well as many other items tailored to clergy.

Clergy have responded to the survey at impressively high rates, even in 2023, such that we can be confident in the generalizability of the findings for United Methodist clergy in North Carolina. Besides the high response rate, we have been able to keep a large sample size over all waves of this study. This allows us to examine trends in clergy health against the backdrop of the general population to see if there are unique pathways or patterns among clergy and to identify points of potential intervention.

The longitudinal nature of this survey allows us to compare clergy to themselves over time. If we see changes across time in clergy health and wellbeing, they could be due to resources directed at clergy, new behaviors among clergy, or societal events (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic). We are excited to share and compare pre-pandemic to 2021 and 2023 clergy health data. Of course, other events have also been affecting United Methodist clergy, including political polarization and policies around sexual orientation. It is not possible to know with certainty what causes changes in clergy health and wellbeing between waves, but having many waves of data allows us to detect changes and patterns.

A grant from The Duke Endowment enables us to conduct the survey again in 2025, for 9 time points and over 13,000 surveys across 17 years (2008-2025).



Table 1. Response rates and sample size by survey year

Survey Year	Sample Size	Response Rate
2008	1,726	94.8%
2010	1,749	87.1%
2012	1,777	81.3%
2014	1,788	75.1%
2016	1,802	72.7%
2019	1,452	72.7%
2021	1,461	72.2%
2023	1,080	69.5%

Compared to other survey studies, the response rates of the Statewide Clergy Health Survey have remained enviously high over the years.

Surveys are given to all currently appointed United Methodist Church clergy in North Carolina. Using ID numbers, we are able to follow individual clergy across the years to see changes in health and wellbeing over time.

Benchmarks

In the current report, we use the Clergy Health Initiative data of North Carolina UMC (NC-UMC) clergy from 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2019, 2021 and 2023. Across the survey items, we compare 2021 to 2023 data. For some items, we also describe significant changes between an earlier wave of data and 2023.

When the data are available, we compare this NC-UMC clergy data to:

National UMC clergy data (US-UMC). The UMC benefits provider—Wespath Benefits & Investments—conducts a health survey on a demographically representative sample of US-based United Methodist clergy. In 2023, the US-UMC clergy survey invited a random sample of 4,000 clergy and had a response rate of 28%. In 2023, 5,000 clergy were invited and a 25% response rate was achieved. A response rate of 25% is typical of online surveys. Although many respondents are missing, the findings may still be representative of the whole (Groves, 2006). The survey covers physical, mental, social, and financial wellbeing, using many of the same items that the Clergy Health Initiative uses because we were consulted in its construction.

For comparisons between prevalence rates of health diagnoses between NC-UMC clergy and US-UMC clergy, we conducted tests of proportions. For more details on Wespath's data, please access: <https://www.wespath.org/health-wellbeing/health-well-being-resources/clergy-congregational-resources/clergy-well-being-research>

Abbreviations & terms

NC-UMC – North Carolina United Methodist Church

US-UMC – United States United Methodist Church clergy

Health professional – a physician, nurse, or other credited health professional

Study Findings

In this report, we offer findings from the Statewide Clergy Health Survey for UMC clergy in North Carolina with a current appointment. Our inclusion criteria were having an appointment at the time of the survey, which could mean being appointed in parish ministry or in extension ministry (broadly defined to include district superintendents and bishops), and that appointment could be full- or part-time. Our exclusion criteria were being fully retired, inactive, disabled, on leave, or having left UMC vocational ministry when surveyed.



Table 2. Aggregate-level trends over time among NC-UMC clergy with a current appointment

Spiritual Wellbeing	Trend 2008 (or first year available) to 2014	Trend 2014 to 2019	Trend 2019 to 2021	Trend 2021 to 2023	Trend 2008 (or first year available) to 2023
Spiritual wellbeing in daily life	Increasing	Stable	Stable	Stable	Increasing
Spiritual wellbeing in ministry	Increasing (2012-2014)	Stable	Stable	Stable	Increasing (2012-2014)
Ministry satisfaction and distress					
Ministry satisfaction	Increasing	Stable	Decreasing	Increasing	Increasing
Occupational distress	Increasing (improvement)	Stable	Stable	Stable	Increasing
Morale				Increasing	Increasing (2021-2023)
Spiritual Practices					
Prayer	Decreasing	Stable	Decreasing	Stable	Decreasing
Bible Reading	Decreasing	Decreasing	Stable	Stable	Decreasing
Sabbath Keeping Frequency			Stable	Increasing	Increasing (2021-2023)
Meeting with a Spiritual Director	Decreasing	Decreasing	Stable	Increasing	Decreasing
Member of a Covenant/Peer Group	Stable		Stable	Stable	Decreasing
Coaching			Stable	Stable	Stable

Note. Grayed cells indicate data was not collected. Cells with colored font indicate a statistically significant change, with green indicating improvements and red indicating worsening.

This is a trend analysis for the population of all UMC clergy in NC. For those who are interested, we provide here the details of what that means.

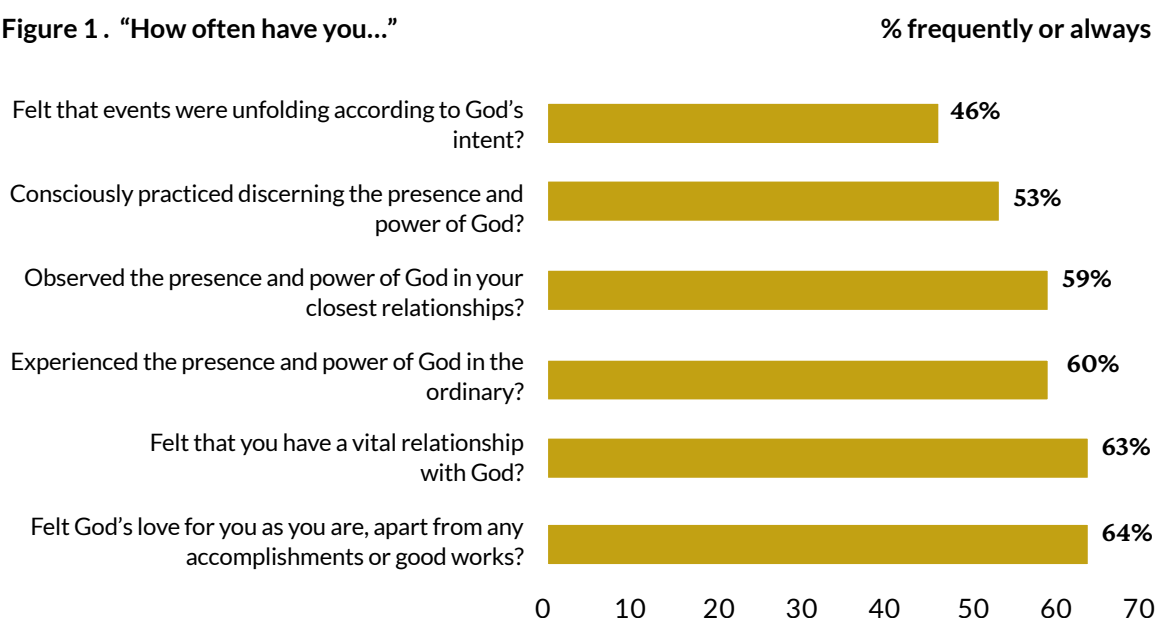
- There are many ways to compare data over time. For this table, we ran the analyses to look at the scores of the entire population of UMC clergy in NC at two time points (e.g., 2019 vs. 2021) or across multiple time points (e.g., 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014). This informs us on how clergy as a whole are doing. For example, the interpretation of the Bible reading findings where the table indicates 'decreasing', suggests that, on average, the entire UMC clergy population in NC is spending less time reading the Bible.
- There may be other ways that people would like to understand changes, such as how individual clergy change over time. While not shown here, using a different kind of analysis we found that when considering clergy individually (not as an entire sample group) the amount of time they spend reading the Bible has stayed stable and is not decreasing; this seemingly different finding may be explained by cohort effects—for example, by older clergy reading the Bible more minutes per week and their Bible reading practice staying stable, even while younger clergy enter the population and read the Bible less. The same was true for minutes of prayer.
- In addition, in the columns that indicate findings across multiple time points (e.g., 2008-2014 and 2008-2023), the findings point to trends and not a direct comparison between the first year (e.g., 2008) and the last year (e.g., 2023). The finding we indicate can be conceptualized as drawing a line between the mean population score for each time point, and this line may end slightly above or below the mean of the last year. You can find the exact scores for each year in the many tables in this report.

► Spiritual Wellbeing in Daily Life

Main takeaway

- Nearly two-thirds of NC-UMC clergy in 2023 reported that during the past six months, they *frequently or always* “felt God’s love for you as you are, apart from any accomplishments or good works.”
- The percentage of the whole clergy population *frequently or always* experiencing that “events were unfolding according to God’s intent” peaked in 2014 at 60%. This percentage gradually declined to 55% in 2019. A notable decline occurred between 2019 and 2023, with the percentage dropping to 46%—a statistically significant change.
- Likewise, *frequently or always* experiencing “that you have a vital relationship with God” has decreased from a high of 71% in 2014 and 2016 to just 63% in 2023, also a statistically significant change.
- When comparing the same clergy’s responses over time, and not considering clergy turnover, all items measuring spiritual wellbeing in ministry were stable from 2021 to 2023.
- We also tested differences among all clergy in 2021 versus all clergy in 2023, even though the makeup of the UMC population changed during that time. One variable— “felt that you have a vital relationship with God”—significantly decreased when evaluated using this method.

Figure 1 . “How often have you...”



Note^a. Data from NC-UMC 2023.

Note^b. The Spiritual Wellbeing in Daily Life Scale asks participants to indicate the frequency (*never, sometimes, often, frequently, always*) of each one of the above items in the past 6 months.

Table 3. Spiritual Wellbeing in Daily Life

% Frequently or always	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2019	2021	2023
Experienced the presence and power of God in the ordinary?	59%	55%	58%	59%	64%	63%	62%	60%
Observed the presence and power of God in your closest relationships?	55%	57%	60%	60%	62%	62%	60%	59%
Consciously practiced discerning the presence and power of God?	47%	49%	53%	55%	57%	55%	56%	53%
Felt God's love for you as you are, apart from any accomplishments or good works?	63%	62%	67%	69%	67%	68%	67%	64%
Felt that events were unfolding according to God's intent?	54%	56%	58%	60%	59%	55%	50%	46%
Felt that you have a vital relationship with God?	69%	70%	70%	71%	71%	69%	68%	63%

Note^a. 2008 to 2023 NC-UMC Trends

Note^b. Any differences between 2021 and 2023 were not statistically significant, when responses from clergy that were surveyed in both years were

Table 4. Spiritual Wellbeing in Daily Life – NC-UMC & US-UMC

% Frequently or always	2023 NC-UMC	2023 US-UMC	US-UMC 2021 vs. US-UNC 2023
Experienced the presence and power of God in the ordinary?	60%	64%	+3%
Observed the presence and power of God in your closest relationships?	59%	64%	+4%
Consciously practiced discerning the presence and power of God?	53%	63%	+2%
Felt God's love for you as you are, apart from any accomplishments or good works?	64%	71%	+5%, statistically significant
Felt that events were unfolding according to God's intent?	46%	52%	+1%
Felt that you have a vital relationship with God?	63%	78%	+4%, statistically significant

Note. The numbers in color indicate that differences between NC and US-UMC clergy in 2023 are statistically significant: numbers in red are lower, while numbers in green are higher.

Other points

- In 2023 for NC-UMC clergy, spiritual wellbeing in daily life was negatively and significantly correlated with both depression and anxiety symptoms.
- In previous research, we have found that high spiritual wellbeing appears to protect against depressive symptoms two years later (Milstein et al., 2020).
- NC-UMC clergy across the items saw a decrease of 1-4 percentage points from 2021 to 2023, whereas the US-UMC clergy during the same time period saw across the board an increase of 1-5 percentage points.
- Some of these items may have been affected by disaffiliation, which was a difficult time for NC-UMC clergy. The impacts of disaffiliation across the US varied by UMC conference, with some conferences having very few churches disaffiliating. While we do not know for sure, this may explain the better scores of the US-UMC clergy.

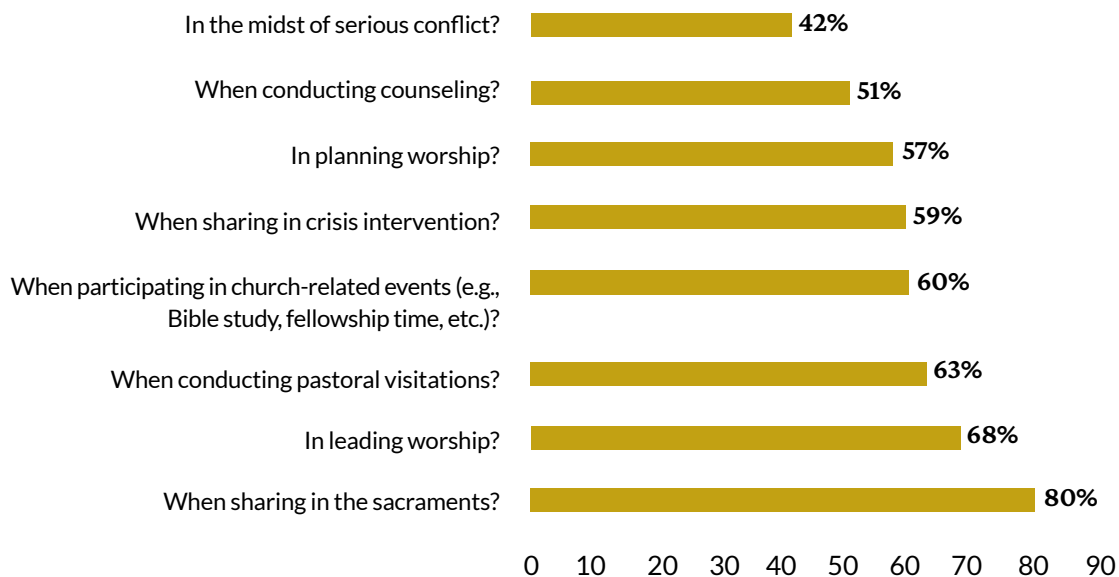


► Spiritual Wellbeing in Ministry

Main take-away

- When comparing the same clergy's responses over time, and not considering clergy turnover, all items measuring spiritual wellbeing in ministry were stable from 2021 to 2023.
- We also tested differences among all clergy in 2021 versus all clergy in 2023, even though the makeup of the UMC population changed during that time. The percentage of clergy in 2023 who responded that they frequently or always "felt the presence and power of God when conducting counseling" significantly decreased when evaluated using this method.
- Across all the survey years, the percentage of frequently or always experiencing God's presence and power "in the midst of serious conflict" peaked in 2014 (53%). In that year, those who would eventually leave the UMC were more likely to report feeling God's presence during serious conflict.

Figure 2. Frequency of "Felt presence and power of God..." % frequently or always



Note^a. Data from NC-UMC 2023

Note. Spiritual Wellbeing in Ministry Scale asks participants to indicate they frequency (never, sometimes, often, frequently, always) they felt the presence and power of God in each scenario over the past 6 months.

Table 5. Frequency of “Felt presence and power of God...”

% Frequently or always	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2019	2021	2023
In planning worship?			55%	61%	62%	60%	60%	57%
In leading worship?			70%	77%	76%	74%	72%	68%
When conducting pastoral visitations?	59%	62%	62%	63%	65%	65%	62%	63%
When participating in church-related events (e.g., Bible study, fellowship time, etc.)?	56%	60%	59%	63%	63%	63%	61%	60%
When sharing in crisis intervention?			66%	68%	67%	64%	62%	59%
When conducting counseling?			59%	61%	61%	57%	57%	51%
When sharing in the sacraments?		79%	79%	83%	82%	80%	77%	80%
In the midst of serious conflict?	47%	50%	49%	53%	52%	51%	46%	42%

Note^a. 2008 to 2023 NC-UMC Trends

Note^b. Grayed cells indicate data was not collected.

Table 6. Frequency of “Felt the Presence of God...” – NC-UMC & US-UMC

% Frequently or always	2023 NC-UMC	2023 US-UMC
When conducting pastoral visitations?	63%	73%
When participating in church-related events (e.g., Bible study, fellowship time, etc.)?	60%	68%
When sharing in the sacraments?	80%	82%
In the midst of serious conflict?	42%	53%

Note. Survey items excluded from the NC-UMC/US-UMC clergy comparison table were not collected at the national level.

Other points

- The percentage of pastors who reported feeling God's presence and power "when sharing in the sacraments" hit its lowest point in 2021. This decline may be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated physical distancing and online services, potentially disrupting traditional church rituals. Nevertheless, sharing in the sacraments remains the activity where pastors most frequently report experiencing God's presence.
- Scores are lower for NC-UMC clergy compared to US-UMC clergy, which could be due to different experiences with disaffiliation or to different response rates (the NC-UMC clergy survey has a much higher response rate, thereby potentially including more clergy who are dissatisfied).



► Ministry Satisfaction

Main take-away

- When asked “At the present, what is your level of satisfaction with...” various aspects of church ministry life, there was a statistically significant increase from 2021 to 2023 in 3 aspects: “overall effectiveness as a pastoral leader in this particular congregation”, “spiritual life”, and “quality of your ministry conducted in person” from comparing the same clergy’s responses over time.

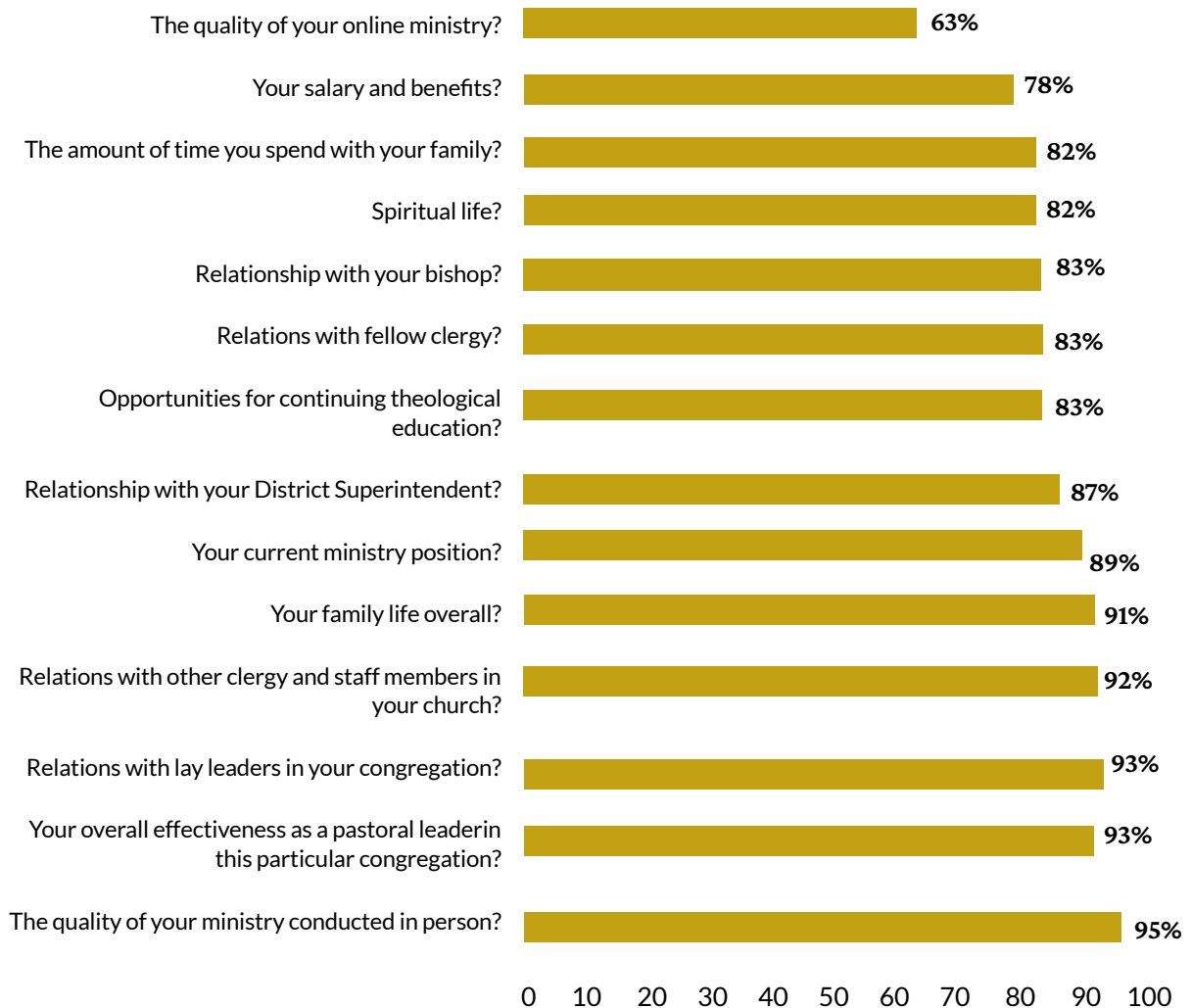
Table 7. “At the present, what is your level of satisfaction with...”

% Frequently or always	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2019	2021	2023
Your overall effectiveness as a pastoral leader in this particular congregation?	89%	88%	89%	92%	91%	91%	87%	93%
Your current ministry position?	89%	88%	87%	89%	91%	88%	88%	89%
Spiritual life?	82%	83%	82%	87%	87%	85%	80%	82%
Opportunities for continuing theological education?	80%	82%	82%	85%	85%	83%	78%	83%
Relations with fellow clergy?	79%	79%	80%	84%	84%	84%	78%	83%
Relations with lay leaders in your congregation?	91%	90%	91%	94%	93%	93%	92%	93%
Relationship with your District Superintendent?	90%	88%	82%	86%	88%	87%	86%	87%
Relationship with your bishop?	72%	79%	78%	84%	81%	74%	78%	83%
Relations with other clergy and staff members in your church?	91%	90%	91%	92%	92%	92%	91%	92%
Your salary and benefits?	80%	75%	75%	77%	83%	82%	81%	78%
Your family life overall?	90%	90%	90%	92%	92%	92%	92%	91%
The amount of time you spend with your family?	69%	71%	74%	80%	82%	78%	81%	82%
The quality of your online ministry?							65%	63%
The quality of your ministry conducted in person?							91%	95%

Note^a. 2008 to 2023 NC UMC Trends

Note^b. Data on ministry satisfaction for US-UMC clergy was not collected.

Figure 3. “At the present, what is your level of satisfaction with...” % of very or somewhat satisfied



Note. Data from NC-UMC 2023

Other points

- The data showed a trend toward statistical significance ($p = 0.054$) between 2021 and 2023 in an improvement in pastors' satisfaction with "opportunities for continuing theological education".
- For each of the years, the average score of twelve items (except "online ministry" and "ministry in person") consistently fell between 2 and 3, which means that on average, pastors indicated between somewhat satisfied and very satisfied for each item.
- Over 2008-2023, the average ministry satisfaction score showed a statistically significant but small increase, from 2.21 to 2.29 on a scale of 0-3.

► Occupational Stress

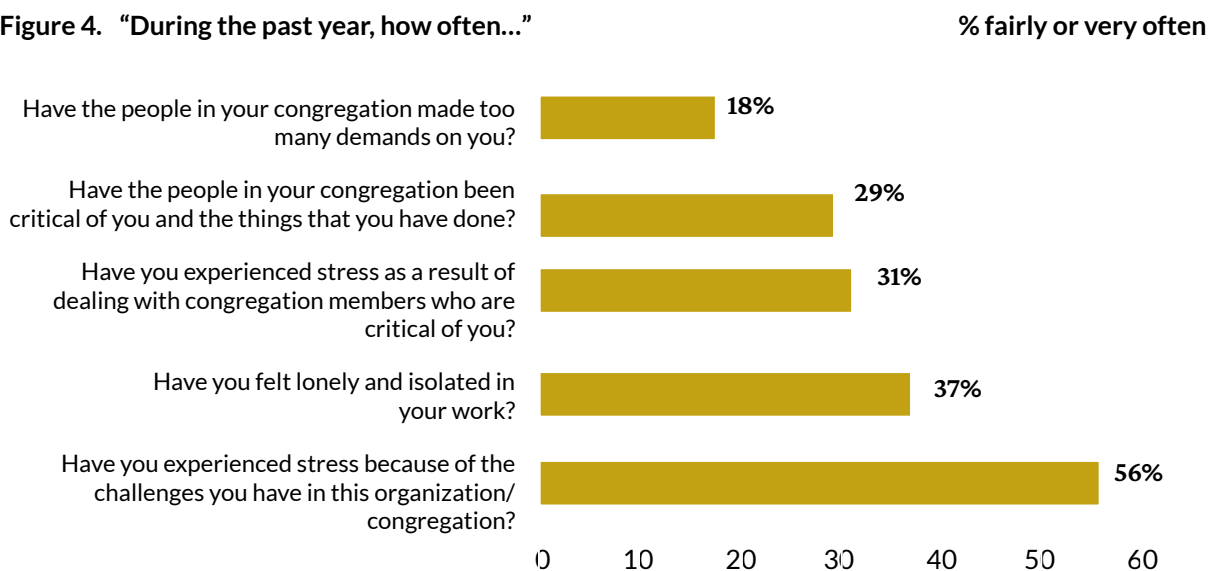
We include on the survey the five-item Clergy Occupational Distress Index.

Table 8. “During the past year, how often...”

% Fairly or very often	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2019	2021	2023
Have the people in your congregation made too many demands on you?	35%	29%	25%	26%	24%	25%	23%	29%
Have the people in your congregation been critical of you and the things that you have done?	16%	17%	14%	15%	12%	15%	17%	18%
Have you experienced stress as a result of dealing with congregation members who are critical of you?	25%	24%	21%	21%	20%	24%	27%	31%
Have you felt lonely and isolated in your work?	36%	35%	30%	31%	31%	36%	40%	37%
Have you experienced stress because of the challenges you have in this organization/congregation?	55%	53%	46%	46%	45%	51%	55%	56%

Note. 2008 to 2023 NC-UMC Trends

Figure 4. “During the past year, how often...”



Note. Data from 2023 CHIL Survey

Table 9. Occupational Stress – NC-UMC & US-UMC

% Fairly or Very often	2023 NC-UMC	2023 US-UMC
Have the people in your congregation made too many demands on you?	29%	33%
Have the people in your congregation been critical of you and the things that you have done?	18%	17%
Have you experienced stress as a result of dealing with congregation members who are critical of you?	31%	28%
Have you felt lonely and isolated in your work?	37%	33%
Have you experienced stress because of the challenges you have in this organization/ congregation?	56%	52%

Other points

- The percentage of NC-UMC clergy who feel lonely or isolated in their work has decreased by 3 percentage points between 2021 and 2023, to now be 37%.
- Clergy who report high levels of occupational distress are more likely to report symptoms of depression over the last month (Frenk et al., 2013). Further, occupational distress is a significant predictor of depressive symptoms in clergy, with those experiencing higher job strain more likely to have scores of moderate or severe depression two years later (Hybels, et al., 2018).

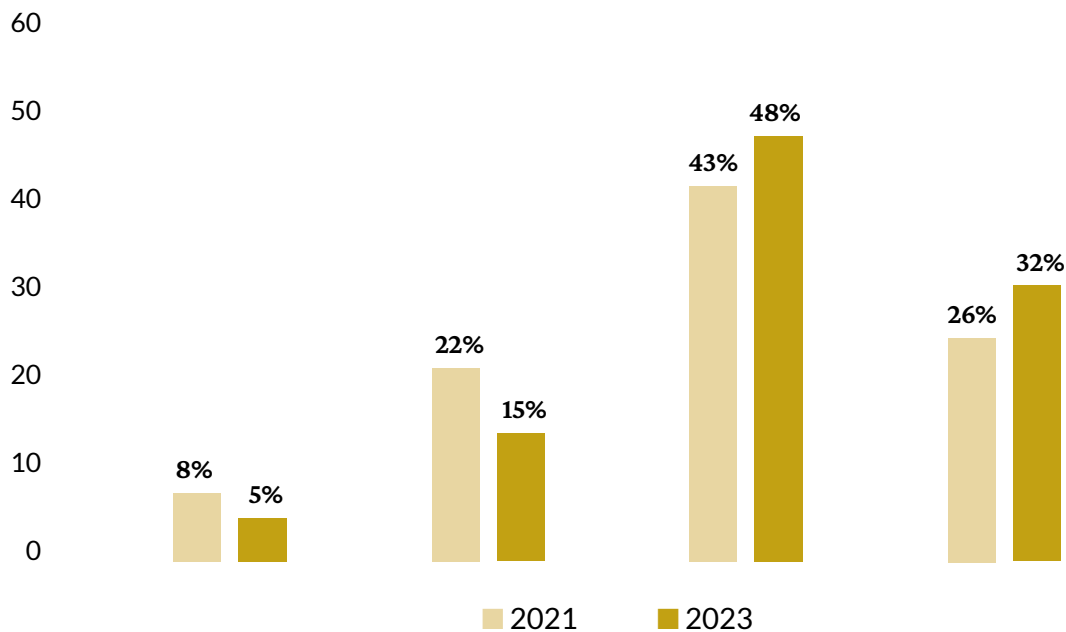


► Morale

Main take-away

- When asked “How much do you agree or disagree with the statement: My current morale as a pastor is high,” the average pastor *somewhat agreed* in both 2021 and 2023.
- The pastor’s average morale score, when measured by a scale of 0 (*disagree*) to 3 (*strongly agree*), statistically significantly increased by 0.2 points from 1.87 in 2021 to 2.07 in 2023.
- The shift from 1.87 (which is closer to *somewhat disagree*) in 2021 to 2.07 (closer to *somewhat agree*) in 2023 suggests a slight improvement in overall morale.

Figure 5. “My current morale as a pastor is high”



Note. From 2008 to 2021, we collected data on congregational morale, but did not begin collecting data on pastoral morale until 2021.

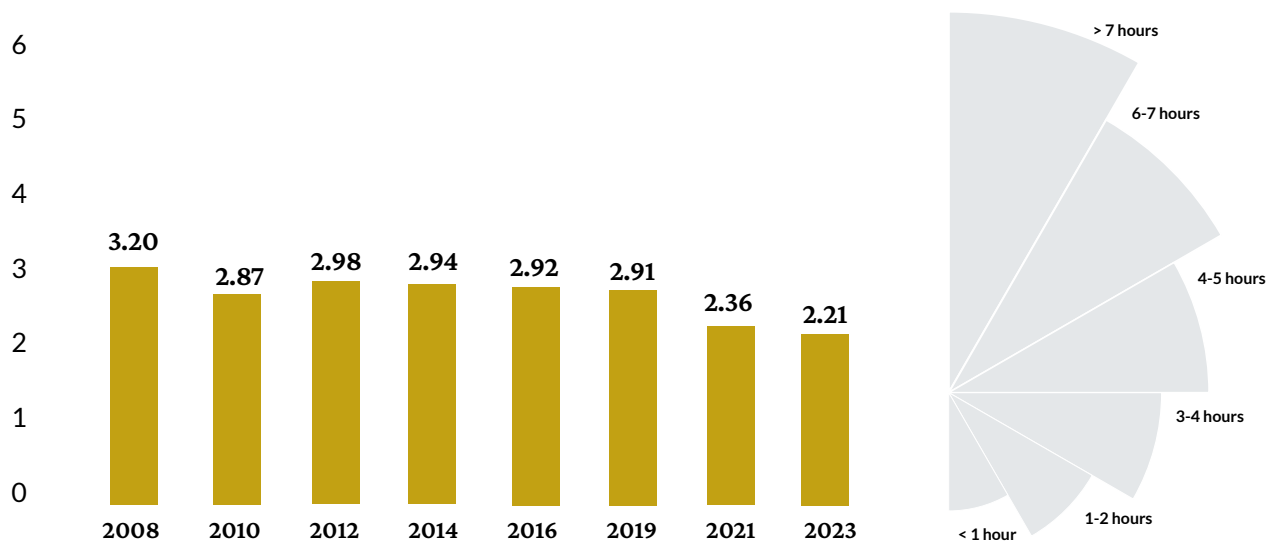
Spiritual Practices

► Prayer

Main take-away

- In both 2021 and 2023, when asked, “In a typical week, how long do you spend in prayer (exclude times spent in prayer during religious services)?”, the average clergy survey respondent chose between the options “1-2 hours” and “3-4 hours” spent in prayer per week.
- Looking at all clergy as a group, there was a statistically significant decrease between 2008-2023 on the amount of self-reported prayer time. However, prayer time amounts in 2021 and 2023 were similar.

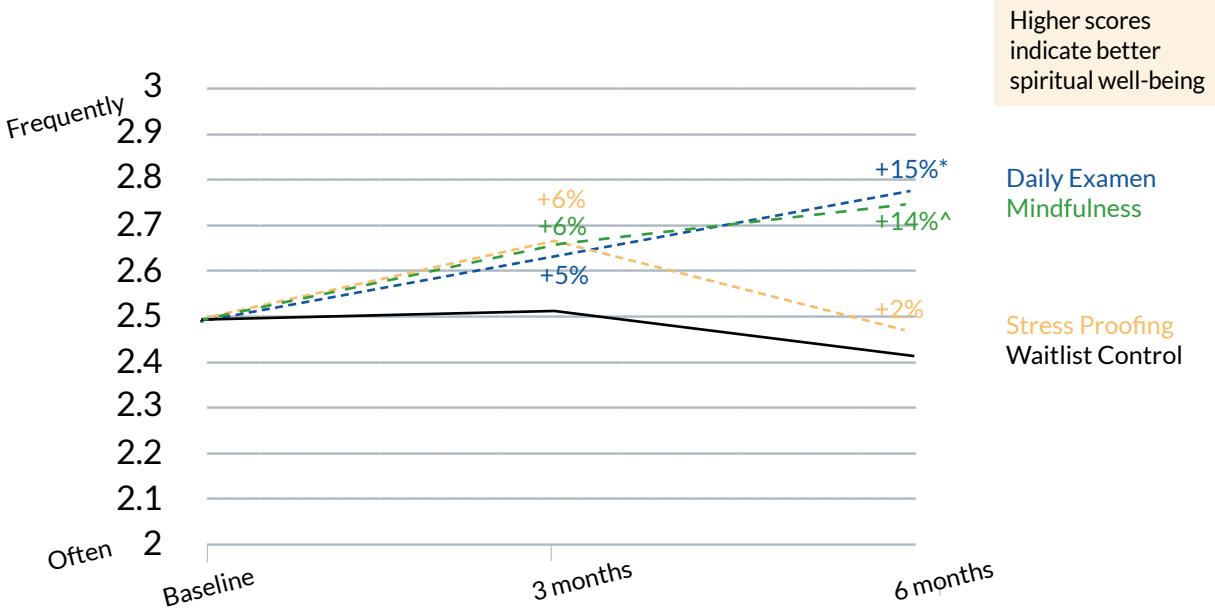
Figure 6. Hours spent in prayer/week (mean)



Other points

- CHI conducted a study in which UMC clergy in NC who were willing to engage in a specific prayer practice, the Daily Examen, daily for six months provided data, which we compared to data from a waitlist control group. As shown in the graph below, clergy who prayed the Daily Examen had a statistically significant increase in their spiritual wellbeing at six months. They also showed a reduction in both stress and anxiety symptoms at six months. For more information on this randomized control trial, visit <https://spiritedlife.org/about/spirited-life-selah>.

Figure 7. Spiritual wellbeing in ministry outcomes



Note. Represents statistically significant change and ^ indicates a trend towards significance

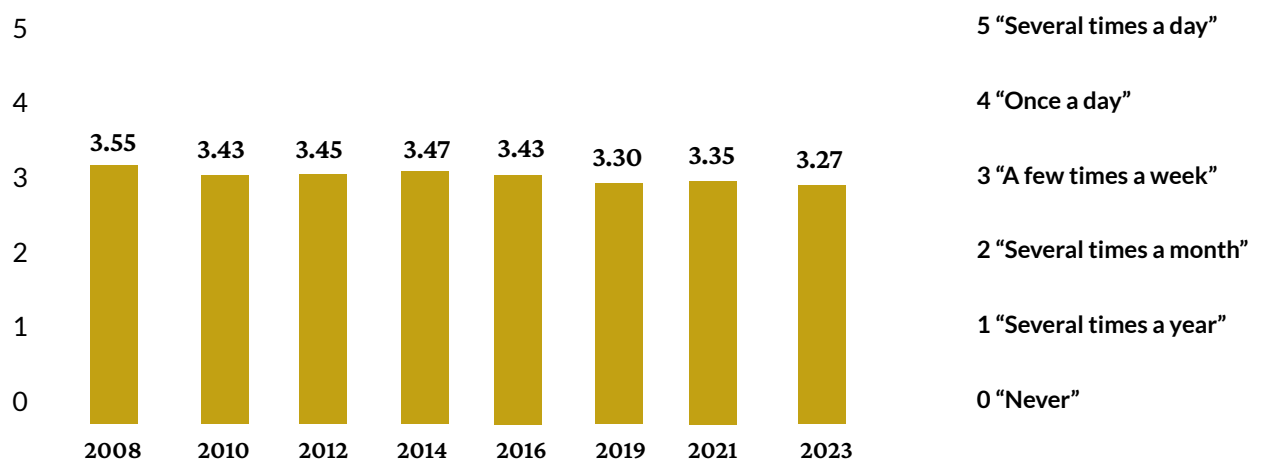


► Bible Reading

Main take-away

- When asked “How often do you read the Bible or other devotional literature, not in preparation for sermons or other work-related tasks?”, over the years, the average clergy chose between response options “*a few times a week*” (3) and “*once a day*” (4), from a list of options starting with “*never*” (0) all the way through “*several times a day*” (5).
- In 2008, the average frequency was closer to “*once a day*” (3.55), while in 2023, it was closer to “*a few times a week*” (3.27).
- As a group, the clergy that were surveyed back in 2008 statistically significantly read devotional literature more often than the clergy that were surveyed in 2023.

Figure 8. How often do you read the Bible or other devotional literature (mean)



Other points

- One of the ways that clergy (and other religious people) cope with stressful situations is by believing that “God is good, all the time,” also known as benevolent religious reappraisal (Pargament, et al., 1998). This hope for a better future or that all is working according to God’s plan is especially strong in studies of people (not necessarily UMC clergy) who read the Bible often (Krause & Pargament, 2018).

► Sabbath Keeping

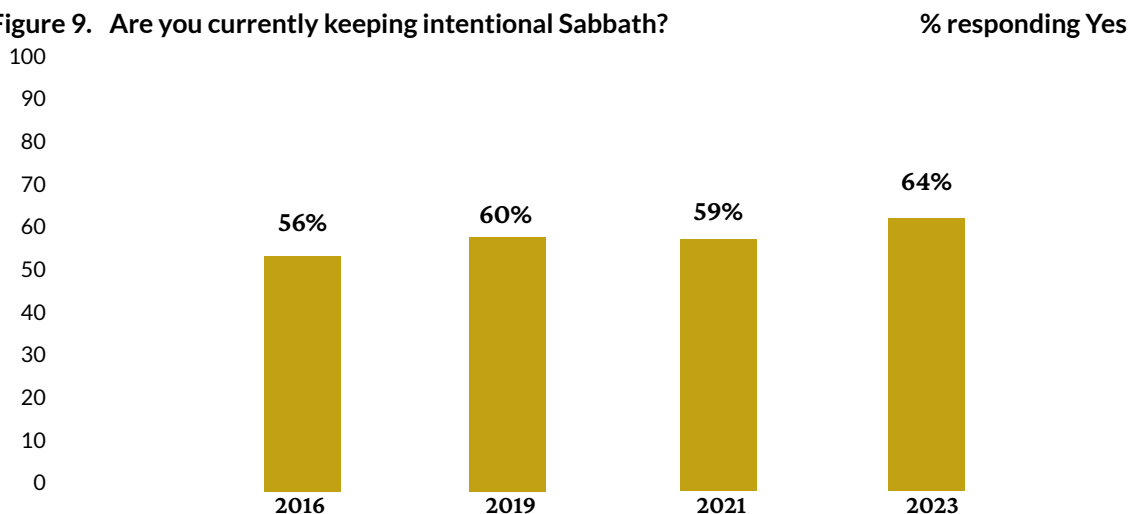
Main take-away

- Overall, over half of the clergy respondents reported currently keeping intentional Sabbath when surveyed. The percentage of respondents keeping Sabbath increased from 56% in 2016 to 64% in 2023, with minor fluctuations between these years.

Table 10. NC UMC Trends in Spiritual Sabbath Keeping

%	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2019	2021	2023
Currently keeping intentional Sabbath					56%	60%	59%	64%

Figure 9. Are you currently keeping intentional Sabbath?



Other points

- CHI conducted surveys with UMC clergy in NC before, during, and after a Sabbath-keeping intervention provided by Nancy and Matthew Sleeth of the non-profit organization Blessed Earth. We found increasing Sabbath-keeping frequency was associated with greater feelings of personal accomplishment at work. Conversely, a decline in Sabbath-keeping frequency was linked to worsening anxiety symptoms, lower spiritual well-being in ministry, and a reduced likelihood of flourishing mental health (Proescholdbell et al., 2022).

► Spiritual Direction

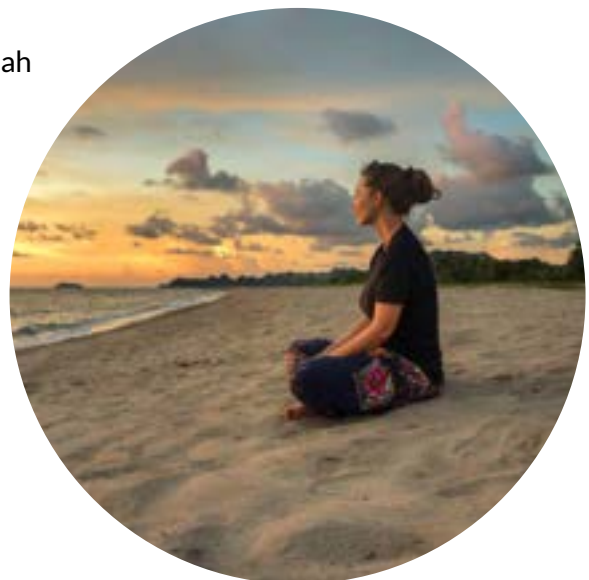
Main take-away

- After a gradual decline from 19% in 2008 to 11% in 2021, the percentage of respondents reporting that they currently have a spiritual director increased to 15% in 2023, representing a statistically significant change and a mitigation of the previous trend.



Other points

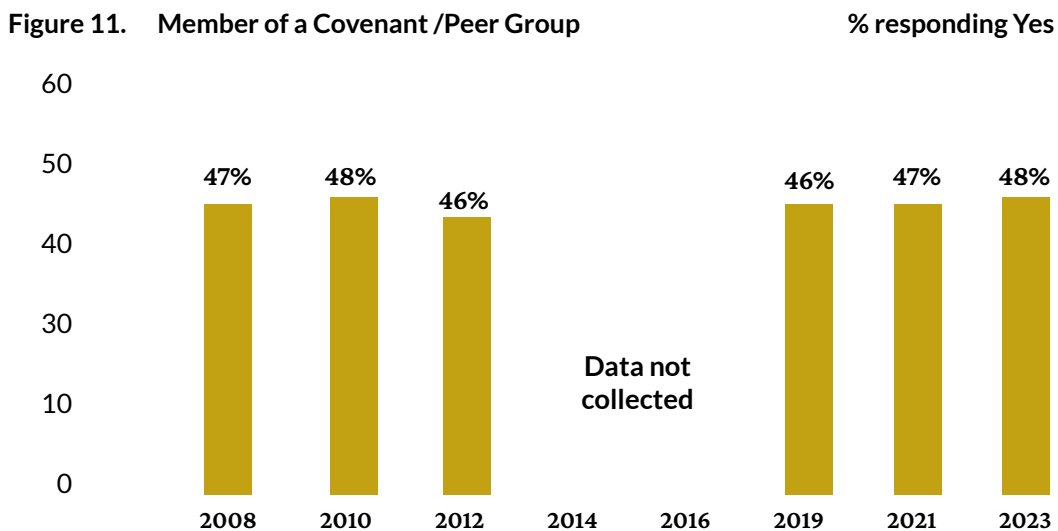
- Karen Keen (one of the instructors from our Selah behavioral trial) has written an article entitled *Never Heard of Spiritual Direction?* She also offers a Spiritual Direction referral list.



► Member of a Covenant or Peer Group

Main take-away

- The percentage of clergy who indicated yes to the survey item, “Are you currently participating in a covenant group or a clergy peer support group? (that is, a semi-structured group of 3 or more clergy that is intended for vocational support or growth?)” has remained relatively stable over the past 15 years, consistently hovering around 46-48%.



Note We did not include this item in 2014 and 2016.

Other points

- In one of our studies we found, clergy who joined a covenant group or clergy peer support group had slightly lower levels of anxiety and depression. However, those who left a group did not report a decline in symptoms of anxiety and depression. Clergy who stayed in a group for 2+ years had the most significant improvement. Clergy who participated in a group at both the baseline and two-year follow-up assessments reported significantly fewer mentally unhealthy days and lower levels of depression at the two-year mark, yielding the strongest observed benefits (Miles & Proeschold-Bell, 2013).



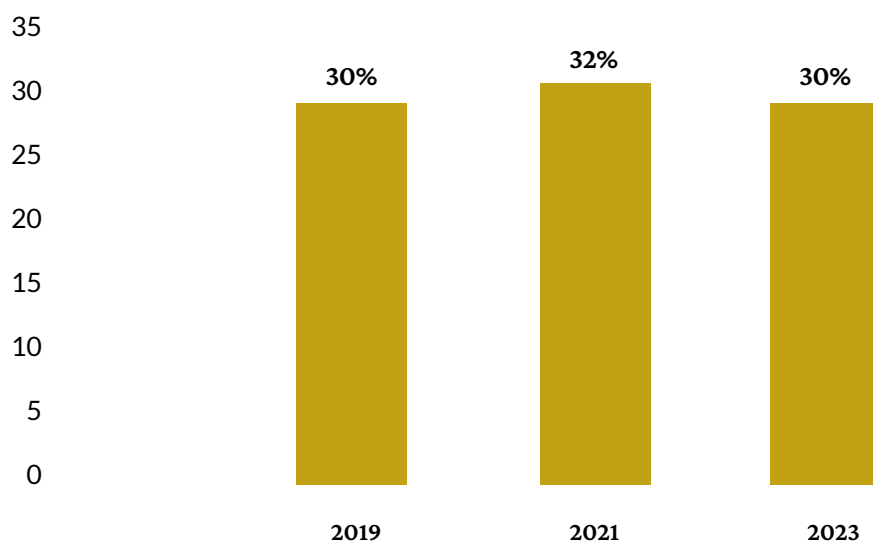
► Coaching

The percentage of clergy who responded yes to the question, “Do you currently have an arrangement with someone to coach you in your ministry or vocational work?” (For example, this might be someone with whom you have a contract and a formal meeting time, and/or someone who is certified as a vocational coach or spiritual director and is working with you in that role and with a specific agreed-upon goal or framework in regard to your ministry work.) has ranged from 30% to 32% between 2019 and 2023.

Main take-away

- For each of the survey years over 2019-2023, slightly less than one-third of clergy engaged in vocational coaching, a participation rate that surpasses spiritual direction but falls short of covenant group involvement.

Figure 11. Coaching (mean)



Other points

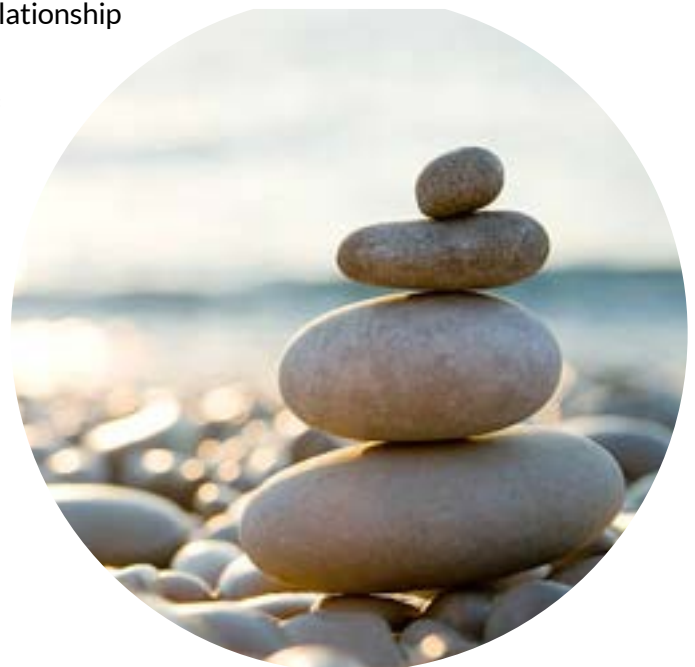
- Clergy who had a coach reported talking with their coach, on average, *about every 2 months*.
- The state of clergy spiritual wellbeing is overall holding stable, which is great news for UMC clergy in North Carolina, especially given the challenging past few years. Ministry satisfaction has returned to pre-pandemic levels. High percentages of clergy engage in programs like coaching and spiritual direction that may help their ministry satisfaction. Continuing to support programs such as these may benefit clergy.

Spiritual Wellbeing Discussion

Sabbath keeping is at an all-time high, with 64% of clergy reporting currently keeping intentional Sabbath. On the other hand, reports of Bible reading and frequency of prayer have decreased, with Bible reading moving closer to *a few times a week* and prayer on average being between 1-2 hours and 3-4 hours per week. We wondered whether an individual pastor's changes in frequency of prayer and Bible reading would be associated with changes in their spiritual wellbeing over time. We found that yes, there is a small but statistically significant change in the expected direction, such that increases in prayer and Bible reading are associated with increased spiritual wellbeing, and decreases in prayer and Bible reading are associated with decreased spiritual wellbeing scores, for both spiritual wellbeing in daily life and spiritual wellbeing in ministry.

We noted a few areas of concern, most especially the 37% of clergy who report *fairly often* or *very often* feeling lonely and isolated in their work. Loneliness can take a toll on mental health and even physical health (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2016; Luo, 2023; Murthy, 2020; Paul et al., 2021). In the clergy data, we have found that clergy are more likely to report being lonely and isolated in their work if there has been a decrease in their laity participating in church activities and outreach.

We also noted that two of the spiritual wellbeing in daily life items saw declines in 2023, specifically feeling that one has a vital relationship with God and feeling that events are unfolding according to God's intent. These are aspects of spiritual wellbeing that are worth tracking in the future, which we will do with the 2025 Statewide Clergy Health Survey.



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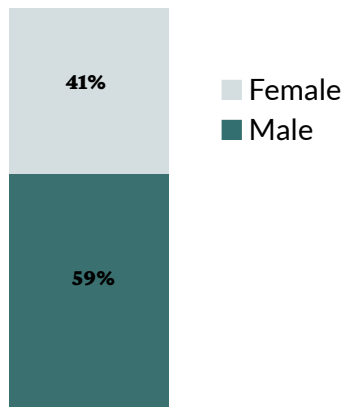
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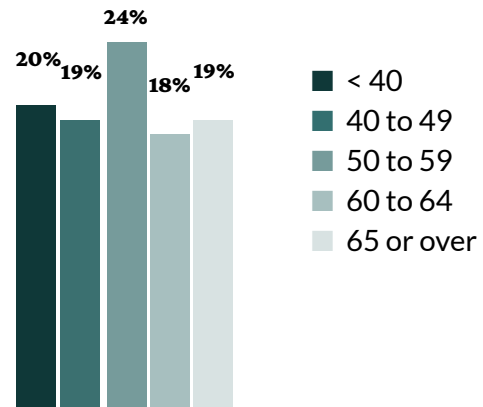
Appendix

2023 Demographics

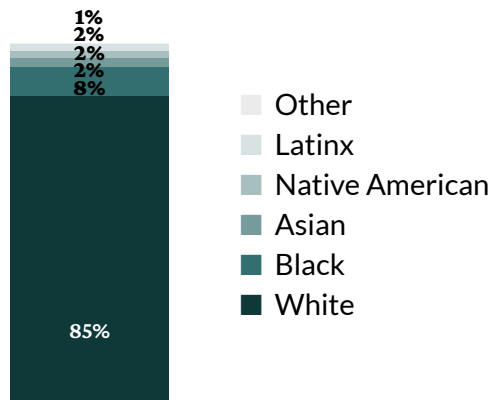
Gender



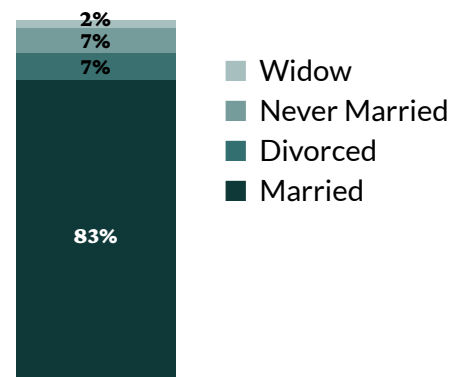
Age



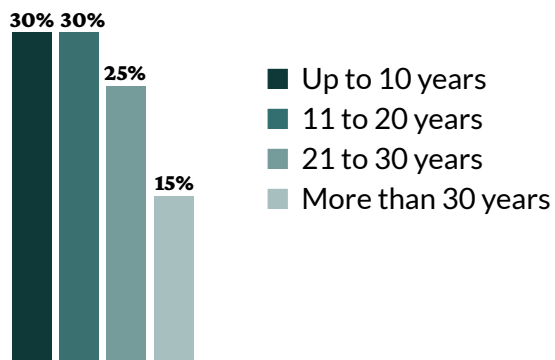
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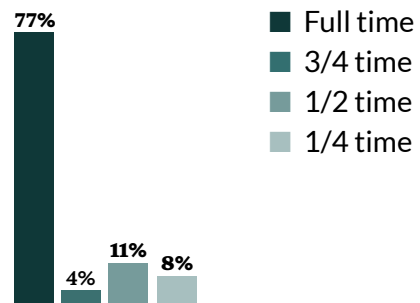
Marital Status



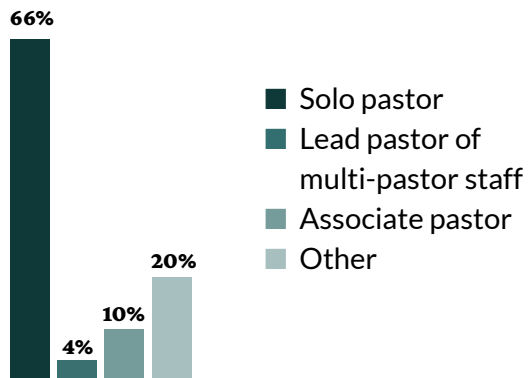
Years in Ministry



Appointment Type



Pastoral Role



About the Duke Clergy Health Initiative

Ministry is a complex profession – full of purpose and meaning. However, the challenges of ministry, combined with the need to prioritize their sacred calling, can prevent pastors from tending to their own well-being. We believe congregations and communities flourish when pastors have permission and tools to foster their physical, emotional, and spiritual health. To that end, we identify, test, and promote evidence-based practices to support the well-being of clergy. Contact us at clergywb@duke.edu to learn more.



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clergywb@duke.edu
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This is a volume in a series of reports on clergy wellbeing from 2008-2023. To learn more about this series on our website, scan the QR code.