

## Seeking and Giving Social Support Among United Methodist Church Clergy in North Carolina

By responding to the Statewide Clergy Health Survey, clergy from the United Methodist Church in North Carolina are helping the Duke Clergy Health Initiative learn more about the patterns of social support that they seek out and provide to their colleagues. This memo outlines three take-aways about the 2021 social support network data and describes future questions we plan to answer as we continue to explore the rich data that UMC clergy have provided across multiple points in time.

### The 2021 Social Support Network

Survey respondents shared info about the current and former clergy to whom they turn for social support. Each circle and triangle in the network figure represents a single clergy-member. Each “tie” or gray line is a support connection reported by a UMC clergy-member. The triangles cluster together, indicating that Western NC Conference clergy support each other, and the circles also cluster together, showing that NC Conference clergy support each other. The triangles and circles positioned between the two clusters reveal that numerous clergy give and receive support from clergy in a conference other than their own. The different colors represent three different clergy statuses. There are Elders, Local Pastors, and Deacons who are central to each cluster, meaning they provide and receive support to many colleagues. The larger the shape, the more people they are connected to as seekers or providers of support. Can you find the largest triangle and circle? While many clergy have more support ties within their own conference, many supportive relationships link members of different conferences together in the support network.

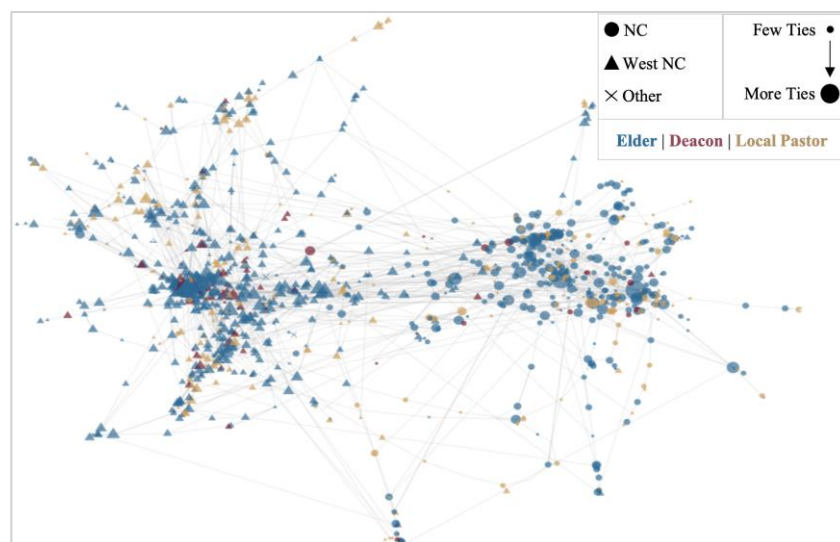


Figure 1- Social support ties linking United Methodist Church clergy in North Carolina in 2021. Symbols depict how important individual clergy are to the network and do not reflect the geographic area where specific clergy live.

### Who Seeks and Provides Support in the Network?

Clergy in the support network have an average of 3.35 support ties in total. These ties come from two sources: colleagues that a clergy-member names as someone they seek support from (i.e., “support-seeking ties”), and colleagues that name the same clergy-member as someone who gives them support (i.e., a “support-giving ties”). Support-seeking ranged from 0-20. About 28.1% of clergy reported seeking support from 0 clergy. Support-giving ranged from 0-27. Almost a fifth of clergy, 22.7%, are never nominated as giving support to other clergy. The data show that, on average, Elders, Local Pastors, and Deacons report seeking support from a similar number of colleagues. However, on average Local Pastors are named slightly less often as support-giving. While we do not know for sure, this may be because their roles are less permanent, making them less available as fixtures whom other clergy can go to for support.

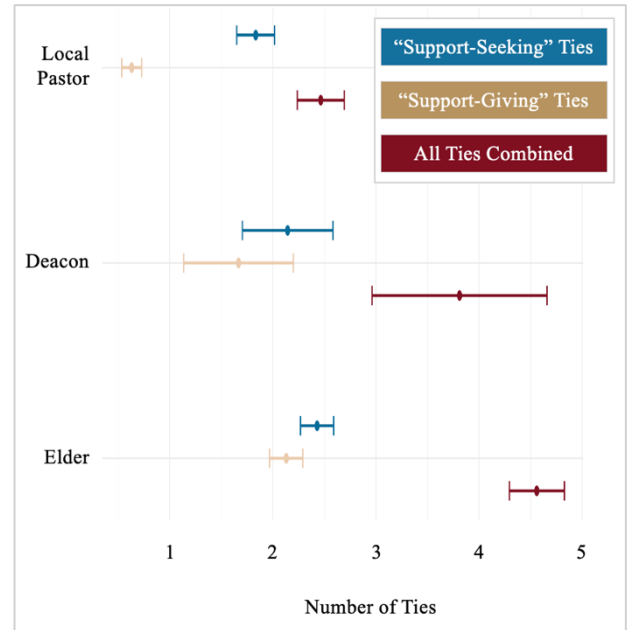


Figure 2 - Average number of social ties by tie type and clergy status.

### How Useful Are Support Ties?

The story about whether support ties between clergy are always helpful is more complicated than it would seem. On the survey, respondents completed multi-item measures about their satisfaction in ministry (e.g., *At present, what is your level of satisfaction with your current ministry position?*), their positive mental health (e.g., *During the past month, how often were you satisfied with life?*), and their occupational distress (e.g., *Over the past year, how often have the people in your congregation made too many demands on you?*). Using simple analyses that allow us to measure differences between groups, we find that:

- (A) Clergy with above-average levels of ministry satisfaction tend to report seeking support from more colleagues than clergy with below-average levels of job satisfaction.
- (B) Clergy classified with the highest level of positive mental health (i.e. “flourishing”), on average seek support from more colleagues than people who are not classified as flourishing – but upon closer examination, this finding is driven by a handful of highly connected members (see Figure 3).
- (C) Clergy with above-average levels of occupational distress tend to be named more often as giving support than clergy with below-average levels of occupational distress.

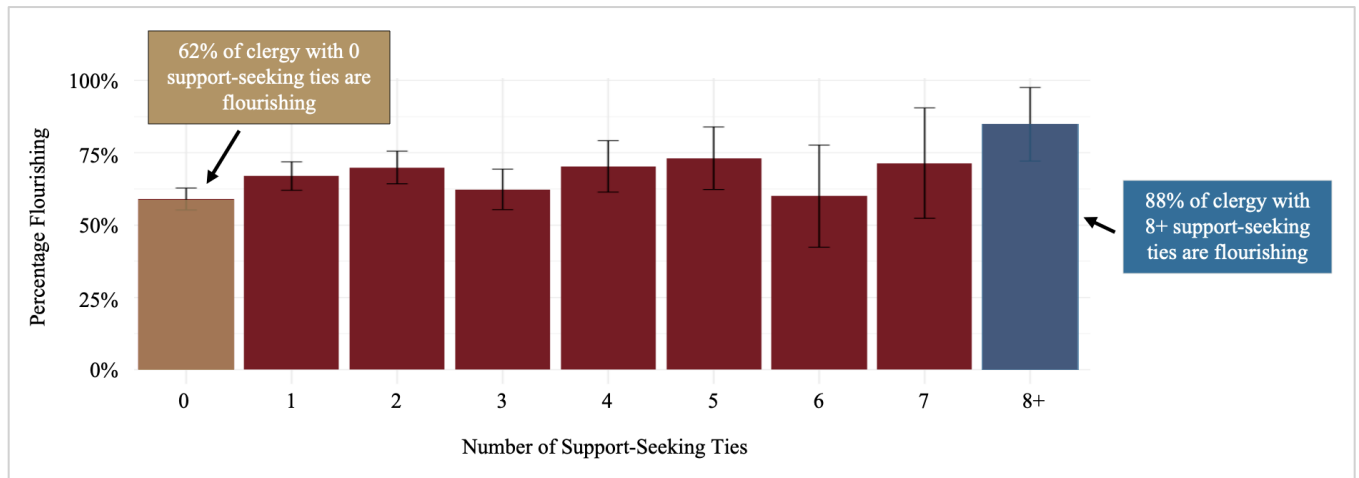


Figure 3 - Proportion of clergy classified as "flourishing" grouped by the number of colleagues they report seeking support from.

These relationships are helping our team come up with testable research questions about the relationship between support-seeking or support-providing behaviors and the well-being of clergy across the UMC of North Carolina.

The descriptive findings above do not necessarily mean that clergy can simply shape their ministry satisfaction, positive mental health, and occupational distress by increasing the number of clergy they seek support from or reducing the number of colleagues they support. In fact, it is very possible that social network ties may be *reflecting* the underlying dispositions of clergy (e.g., extraversion might independently cause more social connections *and* a greater sense of flourishing, making them only coincidentally related each other) rather than *affecting* them. Our team at the Clergy Health Initiative plans to explore whether and how giving and receiving support from other clergy can influence their well-being by linking waves of survey data together and considering other factors.