

UMC Systems and Clergy Well-Being: Data Collection Findings

GBHEM and Wespath completed an email series about clergy well-being in 2024, including collecting data and feedback from clergy on how UMC systems impact clergy well-being. The following data is from a convenience sample with 60-200 unique responses per dimension. Potential respondents were the thousands of U.S. based clergy who received emails every other month in 2024 with a link to participate. Responses are skewed toward white clergy, clergy over 35, and female; this data is not statistically significant nor generalizable to all UMC clergy, but rather a starting point for conversation.

<h2>Positive Impact on Well-Being</h2> <p>“How does the United Methodist system have a positive impact on clergy well-being?”</p>	
AI Observations	Human Observations
<p>Narrative Analysis: The United Methodist Church positively impacts clergy well-being by fostering spiritual awareness and connection through covenant groups and support structures, which encourage peer mutual support and provide resources for clergy families. The system also offers financial support through pastoral packages, including salary, housing and health insurance, and promotes emotional well-being by providing accountability structures and opportunities for mentoring and supportive relationships. Additionally, the connectional nature of the denomination helps create a sense of community and camaraderie among clergy, reducing feelings of isolation.</p> <p>Thematic Summary: Key themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clergy support systems • Community support • Health support • Economic security • Spiritual enrichment • Emotional nurturing • Career Stability 	<p>Salient Points Observed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guaranteed appointments offer financial and employment stability and limit competition between clergy colleagues (in some cases) • Being a part of a connectional structure was consistently named with some pointing out the worldwide nature • Clergy felt tied to a shared history and theology • Annual conferences, wellness programs and events, financial education, clergy retreats, covenant groups, spiritual workshops, worship during gatherings, and spiritually centered newsletters were all specifically named. One shared that the AC event felt like church camp for adults. • Flexible work schedule and time off allowed was celebrated. • Total compensation, including retirement benefits, tax advantage of housing allowance, minimum compensation requirements, wellness programs and incentives, and financial contribution toward health benefits

Negative Impact on Well-Being

“How does the United Methodist system have a negative impact on clergy well-being?”

AI Observations

Narrative Analysis:

The United Methodist Church negatively impacts clergy well-being through the stress and instability caused by the itinerant system, which can strain family relationships and create emotional distress. The system’s high expectations and lack of adequate support can lead to physical and emotional burnout, with clergy often facing unrealistic workloads and insufficient resources. Additionally, the hierarchical structure and focus on metrics over personal well-being can contribute to feelings of isolation, lack of trust, and inadequate pastoral care.

Thematic Summary:

Key themes:

- Clergy isolation
- Clergy support deficiencies
- Institutional challenges
- Overburdening
- Stressors
- Financial stability
- Community strain
- Leadership challenges
- Health strain
- Spiritual challenges

Human Observations

Salient Points Observed:

- Confusing nature of the role of DS (supervisor vs. pastor’s pastor; may change depending on the Bishop); several mourn the loss of a pastoral DS presence and feeling unknown by the cabinet
- Desire for HR training and accountability for DS, bishop, and SPRCs; comments that much of the unhealth they experience comes from uninformed and poor management
- Lack of trust (“you never know what colleague might become a DS”).
- Competition for the number of “good” appointments
- No safe spaces for clergy to worry, be weak, fail or be vulnerable for fear of punitive or reactionary responses including impact on future appointments.
- Representatives from different demographics named the particular hardships of relocation on their demographic.
- Appointment issues (concerns about equity, fairness, transparency; spouse job impact; moving costs taxed; lack of agency; no home owned; long term financial impact)
- Unreasonable expectations: district vs. conference vs. congregation; hyperfocus on meetings, metrics, deadlines, administration, production vs. cultivating spiritual depth
- No pastoral care or clergy support, no financial support for spiritual direction; job is lonely; no real Sabbath
- Taxes are confusing and hard to find good help
- Salaries low and have wide discrepancies between various groups: church pastor vs. cabinet; elders vs. local pastors; job complexity exceeds pay
- Seminary debt, cost of health care, 2nd career clergy don’t have time to save; financial ed needed earlier in career
- No network for local pastors; local pastors don’t get the well-being focus of elders
- Concern about fairness of BOOM and no way to appeal
- Sedentary job tasks; sitting events with unhealthy food; Buildings are old, unhealthy, and not accessible
- Concern about body shape stigma

Opportunities for Greater Support

“What specific things can the UMC do to be more supportive of clergy well-being?”

AI Observations

Narrative Analysis:

The United Methodist Church can support clergy by providing more financial and leadership support, such as offering paid sabbaticals, financial assistance for therapy, and resources for spiritual direction. It can also improve work-life balance by encouraging clergy to take regular time off, reducing the frequency of relocations, and providing better support during transitions. Additionally, fostering community through peer support groups, mentorship programs, and social activities can help clergy build stronger connections and reduce feelings of isolation.

Thematic Summary:

Key themes:

- Clergy support systems
- Community support
- Health initiatives
- Monetary assistance
- Rest periods
- Emotional/mental wellness
- Spiritual care

Human Observations

Salient Points Observed:

- Celebration that system allows for sabbaticals and time off BUT does not provide a financial mechanism to make it possible
- Many suggested an HR department for every Annual Conference to which cabinets and SPRCs would be accountable
- Increasing minimum salary and revamping pay structures (e.g. consider clergy pay by conference to give equity across appointments)
- Improve relationship between clergy and cabinet members as well as between clergy colleagues
- More financial and tax education; tuition support and loan forgiveness
- Additional supports and circuits for local pastors
- Published lists of reasonable expectations for conference, districts, and congregation
- Covenant and cluster groups; more mentorship and support for facing conflict and hostility in congregations
- Pulpit swaps
- Gym discounts, national health insurance for all clergy, body justice
- Local church support for self-care
- Access to affordable, easy, healthy meals.

AI Recommendations—Action Steps

General Support: The United Methodist Church should focus on reducing bureaucratic burdens and providing more support for clergy well-being. This includes offering financial and emotional support, such as debt repayment assistance and therapy access, and ensuring clergy have adequate time for self-care and renewal. Additionally, the UMC should improve communication and transparency in appointments, foster a supportive community among clergy, and address systemic issues like inequity and discrimination.

Specific Programs: The United Methodist Church should introduce programs that provide financial support for therapy and sabbaticals, create clergy-focused counseling services, and establish clergy support groups for mutual aid. Additionally, they could implement initiatives like clergy wellness incentive programs, offer grants for spiritual development, and develop mentorship and peer coaching systems. It would also be beneficial to create a clergy pastoral care office and provide training for congregations on supporting clergy well-being.

Highest priority: The highest priority for the church to improve clergy wellness is to reduce the systemic stressors and unrealistic expectations placed on clergy, ensuring they have adequate time and resources for self-care, renewal, and emotional support. This includes providing financial assistance for therapy, implementing mandatory sabbaticals, and fostering a supportive community that values clergy well-being.

Methods: GBHEM commissioned Message Factors, Inc. to conduct a review of qualitative survey responses using an AI-powered research and analysis platform. The data included open-ended responses from clergy to a series of five surveys administered in 2024, asking three questions about one of five dimensions of well-being. The AI platform used to complete this analysis is Yabble. Yabble is a tool designed specifically for analysis of research that protects the confidentiality of the data being analyzed. AI-driven analysis has the advantage of providing an objective and unbiased view of the data. The limitations of AI are its inability to analyze what is not mentioned (in other words, expression of opinions by omission) and a lack of broader context that can be useful in interpreting feedback. Therefore AI analysis should be used to supplement, not replace, human analysis. This report includes two types of analysis: (1) Narrative analysis: these summary paragraphs are generated by querying the data, asking the AI platform a specific question to generate a narrative response; (2) Thematic summary: these bullet points are generated by the AI platform as a summary of the types of issues commonly brought up in the dataset in response to the survey questions.

Human Recommendations—

* * * *

what are your recommendations?

Methods: Staff at GBHEM created a Mural board with notes for each individual observation and comment from the data collected. Staff from GBHEM and Wespath without specific expertise in observational data analysis reviewed the individual comments and noted themes and comments that were frequent, stood out, or reinforced anecdotal feedback heard by the staff members over the years.