

A Study of  
United Methodist Clergy  
in North Carolina

For the last decade, the Duke Clergy Health Initiative has assessed and worked to improve the health and well-being of United Methodist Clergy (UMC) in North Carolina. We know that clergy face challenges to their physical health, such as obesity and high blood pressure. We also know that clergy experience mental illness in the forms of depression, anxiety and burnout. But a discussion of health isn't complete if we're only looking at disease—we also need to explore what it means to be well, both physically and mentally.

This report highlights a recent study on positive mental health and includes practical tips from clergy who are flourishing in their ministry and their lives. And while this report focuses on clergy, we think that everyone will find helpful insights on how to construct valuable and productive lives.

## A Foundation for Flourishing

*Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.* Matthew 7:24-25

These well-known verses from Matthew remind us that though life will inevitably come with challenges, we can weather them if Christ is our foundation. We will return to this image of a foundation later in this report.

Because our goal is not simply to respond better, but to thrive in the face of difficult situations, we'll also explore theories and practical suggestions on how to cultivate positive mental health.



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## Positive Emotions Help Us Engage with the World

Research has shown that experiencing positive emotions can make us more likely to do things like:

- Sign a petition
- Volunteer our time
- Feel playful
- Socialize with people we don't know
- Donate blood
- Set higher goals for ourselves
- Have greater interest in engaging in physical activities
- Experience increases in willpower over temptations
- Persist at a task longer
- Generate more solutions and more creative solutions

What kind of implications might this research have for clergy as leaders in the church and the community?

How might congregations use this information as they engage in missional work in a broken world?

## Positive Emotions: Small Parts of a Foundation for Flourishing

On any given day, we experience a wide range of emotions, from joy and excitement to anger and sadness, and these emotions trigger certain thoughts and actions. A negative emotion like fear can signal us to run, which in turn helps us survive. Positive emotions play a role in our survival as well. For example, joy makes us feel more playful and open to interacting with others, which can lead us to try new activities and gain skills. In fact, turning to positive emotions during times of stress may help pastors recover faster. Research has shown that experiencing positive emotions after a negative or stressful event helps us “shake it off” more quickly and allows our bodies to recover physically and our minds to think normally again.

Emotion	Thought-action tendency	Resources accrued
Joy	Play, get involved	Skills gained via experiential learning
Gratitude	Creative urge to be social	Skills for showing care, loyalty, social bonds
Contentment	Savor and integrate	New priorities, new view of self
Interest	Explore, learn	Knowledge
Pride	Dream big	Achievement, motivation
Amusement	Share, laugh, joviality	Social bonds
Awe	Absorb and accommodate	New worldviews

Experiencing positive emotions also broadens our thinking and helps us be open to new ideas. When this happens, we are better equipped to solve a problem or come up with a new strategy. This broadening also makes us more sociable, which might lead us to make new friends or deepen existing relationships. A broadened mindset also makes us more open to trying new behaviors, such as signing up for a class that stretches our skill sets.

## From Broadening to Building

Let's now return to that image of a house upon a rock. We can think of each positive emotion being a floorboard. The individual planks may not have that much strength, but when strung together into a firm foundation, these emotions provide a strong footing that allows us to feel safe in where we stand.

Having broadened our positive emotions, we can feel secure in building upward. The walls of our proverbial house are built by cultivating strong relationships, knowledge, skills and perseverance. These resources serve as an additional source of strength, leaving us much more capable of coping when we are faced with difficulty.

*Want to learn more? Broaden and build theory is drawn from the work of Barbara Fredrickson. A deeper introduction to these concepts is available at <http://unc.live/1w8WJiq>.*

## How Positive Emotions and Deeper Happiness Combine

Is experiencing positive emotions the same as “being happy?” Not really, because there are different kinds of happiness. What we’ve described so far is the first kind—a short-term happiness that is created by positive emotions. When you feel content, pleasantly excited, or joyful, you’re experiencing positive emotions. They may not last, but they’re important, for they are part of the abundance of life. And, as we learned earlier, they help us broaden and build.

The second kind of happiness is longer-term and deeply satisfying. It also is more constant and usually takes months to shift. This kind of happiness comes from:

- **How well you’re doing as an individual** — having meaning in your life, accepting yourself and feeling like you’re growing as a person.
- **How well you’re doing with other people** — having a sense of belonging and that you’re contributing to the well-being of others. After all, we humans are social beings.

Some studies suggest that experiencing both kinds of happiness is what leads to the fullest, most engaged life.

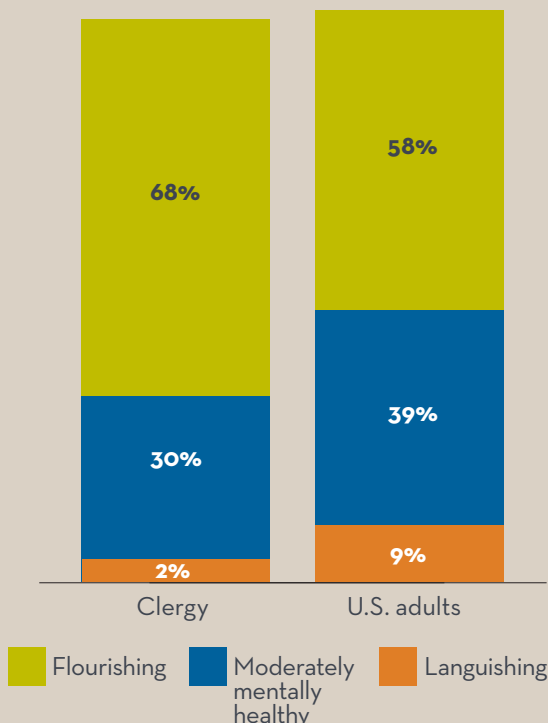


*How do you think you’re doing on these two kinds of happiness?*

*How do you think clergy are faring?*

## Flourishing Among Clergy

Positive mental health rates among currently appointed clergy and U.S. adults



In 2014, the Clergy Health Initiative longitudinal survey included questions about the components of positive mental health. People who regularly experience high levels of positive mental health are said to be flourishing. People who have low levels of positive mental health are said to be languishing, and those who fall in the middle are moderately mentally healthy.

We compared responses on our survey to those from a large representative sample of adults in the United States. As we previously reported in our 2014 Clergy Health Survey report, over two-thirds of currently appointed clergy qualify as flourishing.

This is good news, but our hope is that *all* clergy would flourish. Positive mental health is an important buffer against the negative emotions pastors inevitably experience as they respond to congregants in crisis.

# PRACTICAL APPLICATION

## Positive Mental Health Assessment

Want to gauge your current positive mental health status? Read the items below, think about how you've felt the past month, and choose from the following answer options for each. There's a blank beside each item where you can write in your response, if you wish.

**A.** Never   **B.** Once or twice   **C.** About once a week   **D.** Two or three times a week   **E.** Almost every day   **F.** Every day

	Your Response
<b>Positive Emotion Items:</b> <i>During the past month, how often did you feel...?</i> 1. Happy 2. Interested in life 3. Satisfied with life	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____
<b>Social Items:</b> <i>During the past month, how often did you feel...?</i> 1. That you had something important to contribute to society 2. That you belonged to a community (like a social group, faith community, church, school, neighborhood, etc.) 3. That our society is a good place, or is becoming a better place, for all people 4. That people are basically good 5. That the way our society works makes sense to you	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____ 4. _____ 5. _____
<b>Individual Items:</b> <i>During the past month, how often did you feel...?</i> 6. That you liked most parts of your daily life 7. Good at managing the responsibilities of your daily life 8. That you had warm and trusting relationships with others 9. That you had experiences that challenged you to grow and become a better person 10. Confident to think or express your own ideas or opinions 11. That your life has a sense of direction or meaning to it	6. _____ 7. _____ 8. _____ 9. _____ 10. _____ 11. _____

These items are part of the Mental Health Continuum-Short Form developed by Corey Keyes. Want to learn more? Visit <http://bit.ly/2gJf4H>



### Checking Your Score

If you could answer “every day” or “almost every day” (E’s and F’s) to at least 1 item from the Positive Emotion section AND at least 6 of the 11 items in the Social and Individual sections, you would be considered to be flourishing, with high positive mental health.

How did you do? What areas emerged as strengths for you? Which items indicate an opportunity for attention and the cultivation of new, positive habits or approaches?



## Real World Strategies from Flourishers

In 2015, we interviewed 52 church-appointed pastors about their daily lives and how they approach challenges. The pastors also completed a series of surveys and maintained a daily activity log for one week. Some of the clergy had scored as flourishing; others had lower mental health scores. When we compared the responses between the two sets of pastors, we noticed differences in how they take care of themselves and orient their work. Below are recommendations based on what we heard.



## Partnering with God's Work: Flourishing clergy focus on working in alignment with God.

### Remember who you serve

- Rather than solely looking for praise from the pews, derive your sense of success from knowing you're doing your all to enact the work God calls you to do.
- Remember that you are participating in a process — you are working with God, and only God is privy to the full picture.

*"It's absolutely essential for people...to have a strong sense of working in alignment with God, because there will be times when to [do so] might not be to be in alignment with the expectations or demands of your congregation... You may find yourself doing just exactly what you believe to be pleasing to God [though] the dashboard indicators of your congregation might not be going in the direction that everyone would like for them to go in."*

*"So much of ministry is intangible, like we never see the fruit of a lot of what we do. I mean, occasionally you get that note from somebody that just expresses that you've had an impact on their life in a way that's been transformative for them, but those times are rare... So I think you have to approach ministry from a standpoint of seeking to know God's will and then seeking to live into that will, and then hearing God say 'well done my good and faithful servant,' even if you never hear those words spoken."*

### Discern, discern, discern

- Create time for spiritual disciplines like prayer and Bible study to understand the work God is calling you to do.

*"So...day-to-day, what does that [discernment] look like? I think it begins in prayer and ends in prayer, following the promptings of the Holy Spirit. I can't express how many times in my life in ministry, both as just a person in Christ, but also as a pastor...that I felt like the Holy Spirit was saying you need to go speak to this person or you need to visit this person or you need to just take some time to read the Bible."*

# PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Intentionality Around Health Behaviors: Flourishing clergy are proactive and flexible in taking care of their physical and mental health.

## Prioritize healthy behaviors

- There is tremendous pressure to eat what is offered to you at church gatherings. Remind yourself that your congregants don't want to make you unhealthy. Take smaller portions and don't feel badly about it.

*"So this [pedometer] is the very best thing happening to me lately... it enables me to engage other people and it pushes me out of my house on cold evenings to walk four or five miles. It's incredible. And I'm probably healthier from a mental health perspective now than I have been in a long, long time because of that exercise...."*

- Go to the doctor regularly; get annual check-ups.
- Get outside. Ride bikes, play golf, or go for a walk every day and set a goal for the number of steps you want to achieve. Find time to get some fresh air.
- Make healthy activities a priority, but also adjust how you incorporate those health behaviors into your daily routine. Prefer to go to the gym, but there's no time for that today? See if someone will go for a walk while you meet with them. Pastors' lives are too unpredictable to keep to the same habits all the time, but that doesn't mean you have to dismiss your health goals.

## Invest in spiritual care

- Start each day by reading the Bible. Traveling and can't read Scripture? Listen to a devotion on an MP3 player or mobile device.
- Set aside time for prayers and one-on-one time with God.
- Keep a regular Sabbath. Make time to pray and play.

*"I am an introvert...but I have to balance...putting myself out [there] with a lot of quiet time, and I think...it has worked best for me [to set aside time] in the morning... so then I have the time. It's just me and God, and you do your Scripture reading, you do your prayers, you do your sacred reading or other things... For me... [that] has to be a daily thing...that's a big part of filling things back up."*

## Make time for personal interests

- Set aside time to engage in your personal interests, but also incorporate these into your ministry if possible.

*"I love agriculture, and it has become sort of a hobby... So to have an interest, really to have a passionate interest outside of congregational life, and to the extent to which it can be integrated, makes it just better. So my people hear a lot of Jesus' words on vines and fig trees and sowing seed, because I just love that, and so that's...theologically... integrated with my ministry practice."*

**94%** of clergy with flourishing mental health are intentional about spending time on personal care like exercise, prayer, time with family, and hobbies



## Creating Boundaries: Flourishing clergy are intentional about setting boundaries around their work lives and their personal lives.

### Pick the time that works for you

- Schedule activities in clumps. Pick one night of the week when you will attend night-time church meetings and urge others to use this as a basis for scheduling.
- Set “office hours” for when you will be available at the church each week, and let your congregation know.

### Use space creatively

- One pastor described taking regular “office hours” in a local café. This allows him to have space outside of the church to connect with church members, as well as the broader community.
- To create distance from their work on an afternoon off, some pastors recommend going out of town – even if it’s only as far as the next town.

*“I mean, just try to create an environment of direct communication and good communication, and that we’re in this together as part of a team. And I’m not perfect and you’re not perfect, we’re moving onto perfection and...we do that...by respecting each other and caring enough about each other to speak the truth in love.”*

### Communicate clearly and regularly

- If you keep a Sabbath, include that information in the signature on your emails.
- If you have to say no to a request on your day off, offer an alternate time/day when you could help that person.
- Ask the SPRC what their top priorities for you are and share your own. Then discuss where your expectations diverge. Being honest about your gifts and limitations as a leader and a pastor is important.



### Manage your technology

- Some pastors set a stop time every evening, after which they will not pick up any call they receive. These clergy say they check voicemail and will respond if there’s an emergency, but by waiting for a message, they can decide whether something needs to be addressed that night or can wait.
- Work with another pastor who can be “on call” when you are off or away. Include this person’s contact information in an automatic email reply and on your outgoing voice message.

*“We do need to bend and be available to the people, but it will just sap all the life out of you if every moment of your day is bending to the schedules [of] other people. And I don’t think it [sends the right message] if we’re talking about Sabbath, and about rest to say ‘oh, it’s good for you, but not for me. I’m super pastor.’”*



# PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Social Support: Flourishing clergy nourish friendships and mutual relationships.

## Find support from other clergy

- Identify another pastor who can serve as a mentor.
- Form or join a peer or covenant group.
- Find at least one person in whom you can confide and who can support you in the face of ministerial and personal challenges.

*"I've been really blessed to have really good friendships with mentoring pastors that I knew and trusted who had evidence that they were in it for the long haul, that they had joy in the Lord, that they drew their sense of self-worth from God and not from just the praises of people around them. Being in the presence of people like that and sort of learning from them makes a huge difference."*



## Seek out emotional support from family and friends

- Meet a friend for lunch, especially if you feel yourself getting down or low on energy.
- Create an annual ritual, such as a retreat with friends, so you maintain your connection to them.
- Make yourself accountable to a close friend or spouse who knows the day-to-day stresses you're facing. Help each other maintain boundaries and healthy practices as well.

## Pastor&Parish™

The Clergy Health Initiative developed the Pastor & Parish curriculum to ground staff/pastor-parish relations committees and their pastors in shared ministry. Through videos and group discussion, committees discover new language for working with one another. We encourage all to consider what one participant described as “the most effective SPRC guide that’s ever come across the table.”

[www.pastorandparish.com](http://www.pastorandparish.com)



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