



BLESSINGS OF RETIREMENT

A Report from the Duke Clergy Health Initiative





DUKE CLERGY HEALTH INITIATIVE

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Blessings of Retirement

We at the Duke Clergy Health Initiative have had the honor of collecting data from United Methodist clergy in North Carolina for well over a decade.

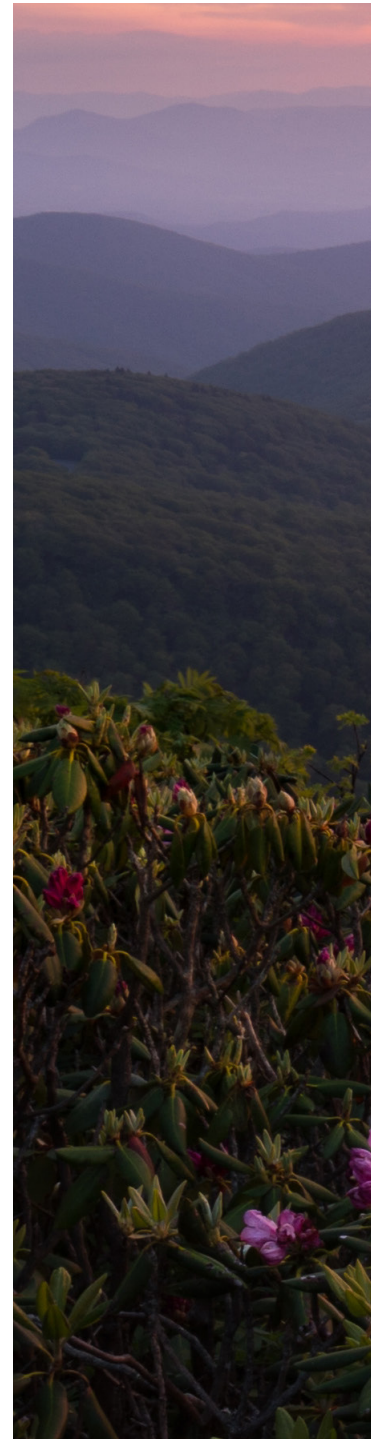
We have conducted the Statewide Clergy Health Survey every 2-3 years since 2008, and the Spirited Life survey every 6 months from 2010-2016. The average age of United Methodist clergy in 2008 was 52; when we fielded the Statewide Survey in 2019, many clergy were 63 years old or older and still serving. Of course, clergy also retire, and we invite them to continue to take the survey if they have been retired fewer than 4 years.

This report presents findings on the well-being of United Methodist clergy ages 55 and older, and the well-being of clergy retired 4 years or fewer.

You might wonder if engaging in the challenging work of clergy for decades takes a toll on emotional well-being and life satisfaction that persists into

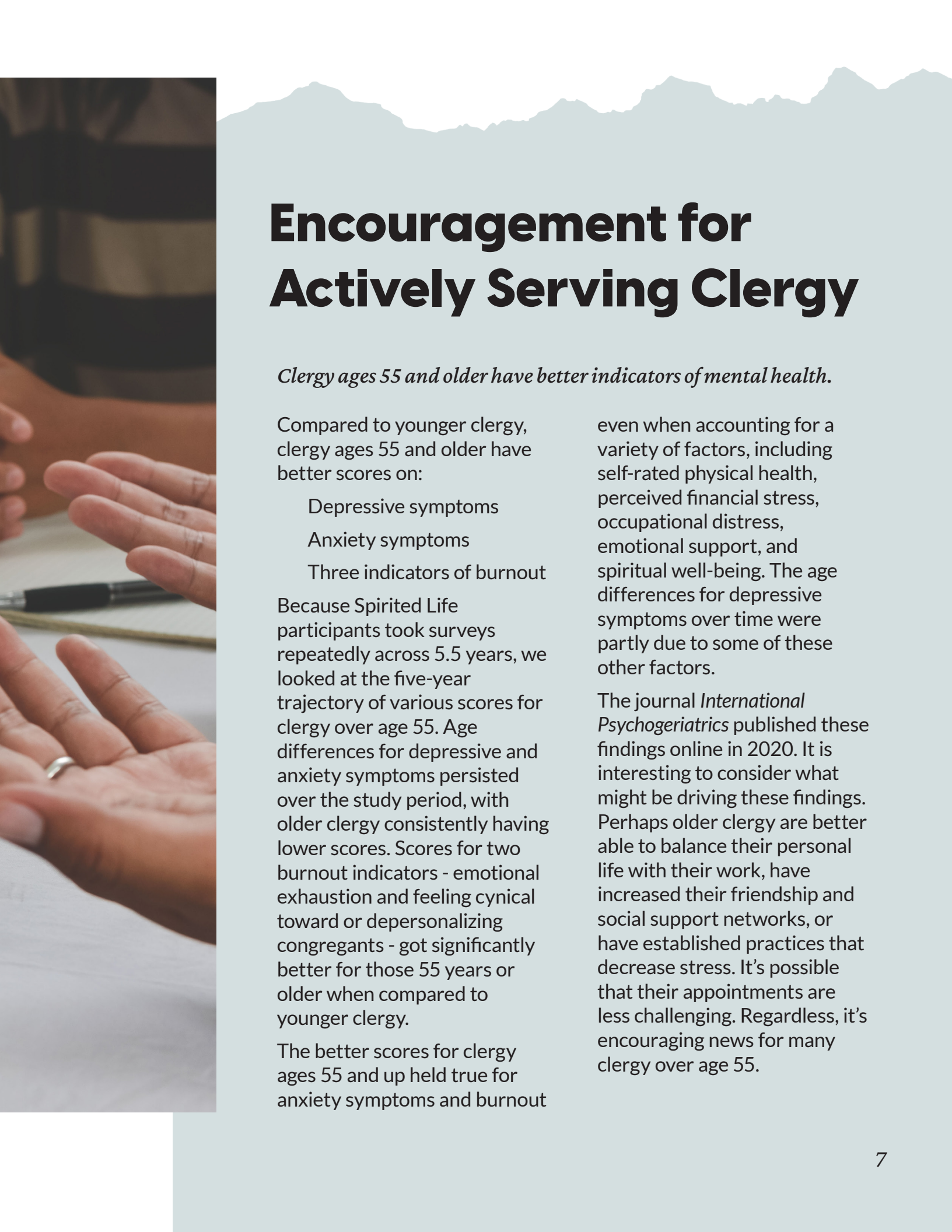
retirement. The picture these data paint is that longevity as clergy is associated with better well-being.

We examined well-being trends for clergy who have served several decades, for clergy ages 55 and older, and for clergy who are retired. In each case, life indicators are good. For example, among retired clergy, several positive life aspects are better, including various quality of life factors and relationship satisfaction. Several negative life aspects are also better for retired clergy, including anxiety symptoms, depressive symptoms, and social isolation.









Encouragement for Actively Serving Clergy

Clergy ages 55 and older have better indicators of mental health.

Compared to younger clergy, clergy ages 55 and older have better scores on:

- Depressive symptoms

- Anxiety symptoms

- Three indicators of burnout

Because Spirited Life participants took surveys repeatedly across 5.5 years, we looked at the five-year trajectory of various scores for clergy over age 55. Age differences for depressive and anxiety symptoms persisted over the study period, with older clergy consistently having lower scores. Scores for two burnout indicators - emotional exhaustion and feeling cynical toward or depersonalizing congregants - got significantly better for those 55 years or older when compared to younger clergy.

The better scores for clergy ages 55 and up held true for anxiety symptoms and burnout

even when accounting for a variety of factors, including self-rated physical health, perceived financial stress, occupational distress, emotional support, and spiritual well-being. The age differences for depressive symptoms over time were partly due to some of these other factors.

The journal *International Psychogeriatrics* published these findings online in 2020. It is interesting to consider what might be driving these findings. Perhaps older clergy are better able to balance their personal life with their work, have increased their friendship and social support networks, or have established practices that decrease stress. It's possible that their appointments are less challenging. Regardless, it's encouraging news for many clergy over age 55.

Good Indicators After Serving for Decades

Next, let's consider the well-being of clergy across time by looking at the number of years clergy have served.

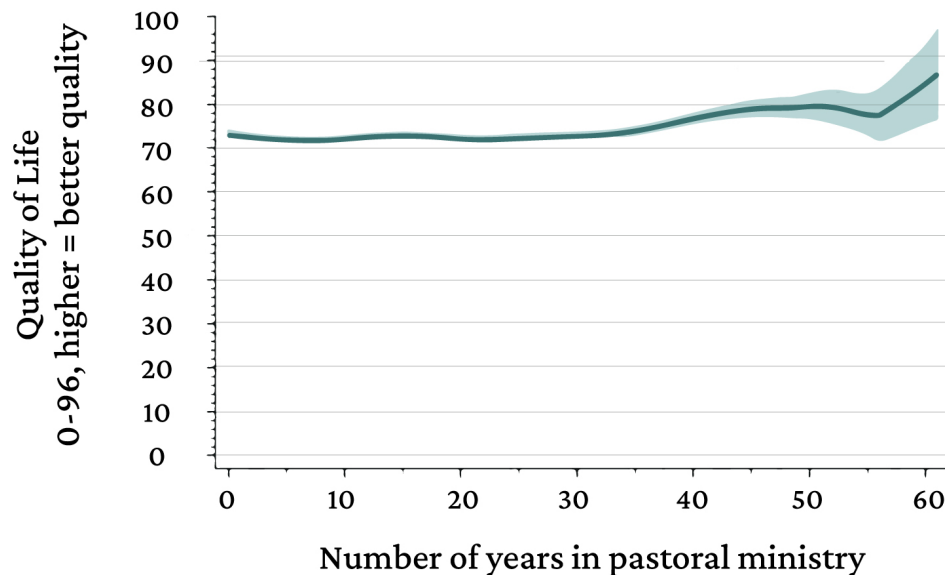


The View From the Top

When approaching retirement, many people worry about loss of independence and being alone. The Statewide Clergy Health Survey includes items on satisfaction with one's independence, friends, and socializing. During retirement, clergy report even higher levels of satisfaction in these and other areas.

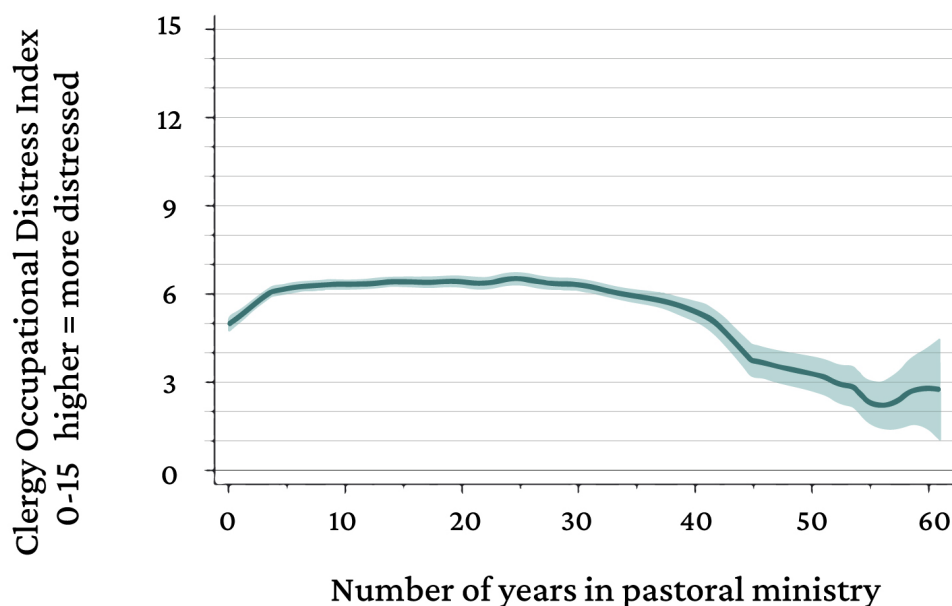
The Statewide Clergy Health Survey data offer a promising message as clergy serve more years. In the graphs below, you can see the scores for clergy by how many years they have served in ministry. The middle line in blue shows the central tendency of the data and the gray indicates where we are 95% confident that the true population mean falls. We see that quality of life scores are higher, meaning better, during advanced years in ministry.

Quality of Life



Occupational Distress Index

We see that Clergy Occupational Distress Index scores are lower – meaning they are better – during advanced years in ministry. These are correlational findings and we do not know exactly what causes them. There is a wide range of possible explanations, from part-time appointments to having more skills in ministry.





Reverends Denise Honeycutt and Pat Watkins who each served 30 years in ministry continue to enjoy and care for God's creation as they visit National and State Parks in their teardrop camper.

Improved Satisfaction During Retirement

For the rest of this report, we turn our attention to clergy who have been retired 4 years or fewer.



Satisfaction scores are higher during retirement for:

Material Comforts
home, food, conveniences, financial security

Health
being physically fit and vigorous

Relationships with parents, siblings, and other relatives
communicating, visiting, helping

Understanding yourself
knowing your assets and limitations, knowing what life is about

Expressing yourself creatively

Reading, listening to music, or observing entertainment

Participating in active recreation

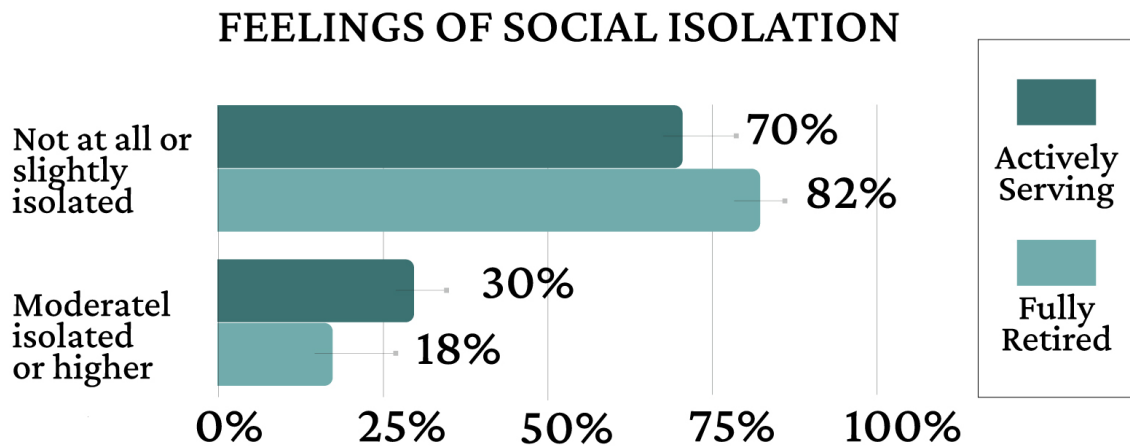
Independence, or doing for yourself

Having close friends

Socializing
meeting other people, doing things, parties, etc

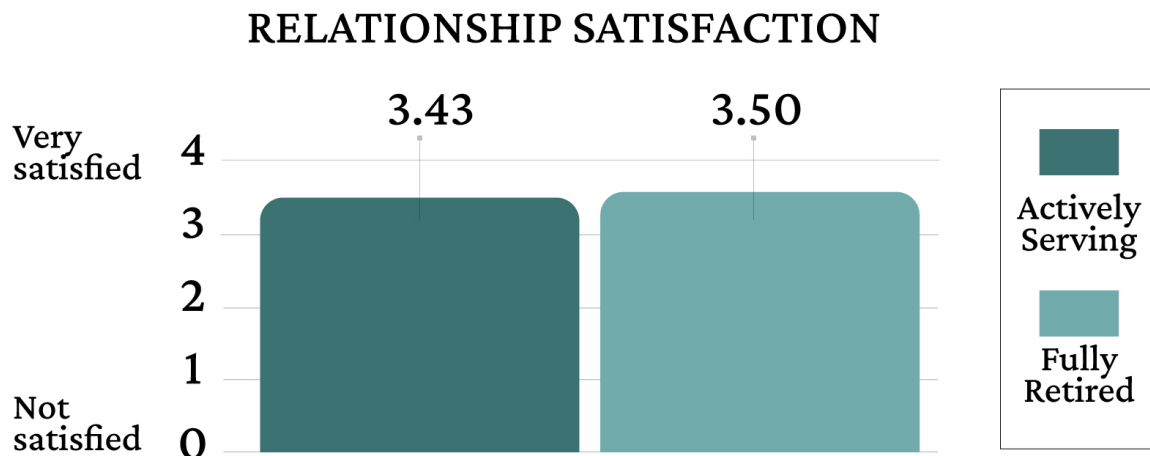
Social Isolation

Being socially isolated is a concern as one grows older and enters a new phase of life. Retired clergy actually report less feelings of social isolation.



Relationship Satisfaction

You might wonder if extra time spent with your spouse or significant other will negatively affect your relationship satisfaction. We found for most clergy, relationship satisfaction with their spouse or significant other is slightly higher for retired clergy. Of note, both retired and active clergy have high relationship satisfaction scores.



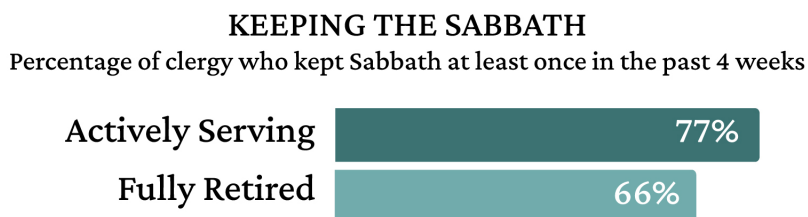
More Time for Spiritual Practices

With the additional time that retirement offers, we wondered if clergy would spend more time engaged in spiritual practices.

The frequency of reading the Bible is slightly higher among retired clergy, and the amount of time spent in prayer is higher for retirees in the categories of praying less than 1 hour/week and praying 1-2 hours/week. However, retired clergy were less likely to report keeping Sabbath at least once a month. Perhaps without a work rhythm to the week, the structure for Sabbath-keeping falls away. Alternatively, it may be that older clergy are less interested in Sabbath than younger clergy. Sabbath-keeping is one area you might consider attending to in retirement. In terms of experiencing the presence and power of God in daily life, scores for clergy stay the same in retirement, even without the structure of local church ministry.

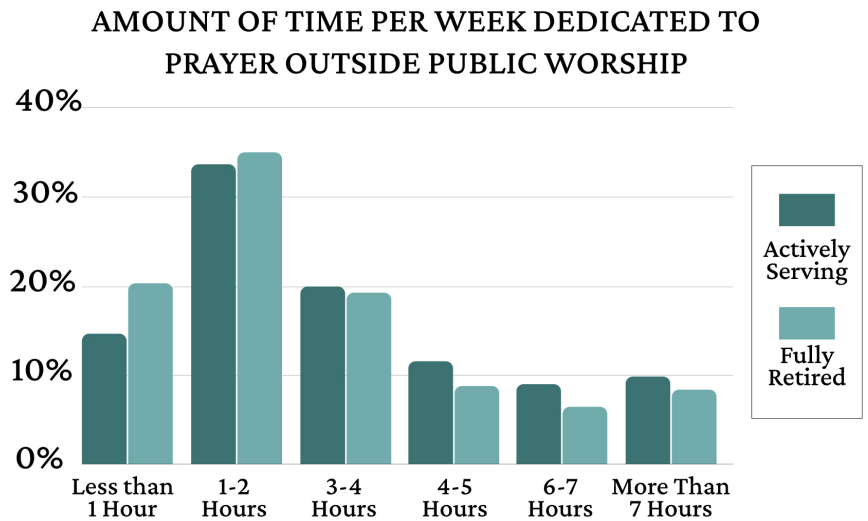
The Sabbath

Fully retired clergy are less likely to keep an intentional Sabbath, although their rate of Sabbath-keeping is still high.



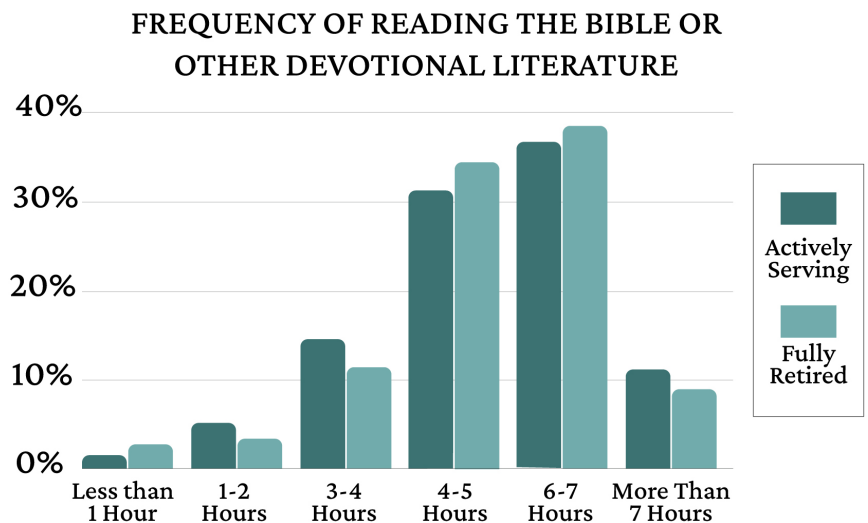
Amount of Time per Week Dedicated To Prayer Outside Public Worship

A higher percentage of retired clergy (compared to active clergy) report spending 1-2 hours in prayer each day. The same is true for spending less than 1 hour in prayer each day. However, retired clergy are less likely to spend more than 3 hours in prayer each day.



Devotional Literature

Compared to active clergy, fully retired clergy report reading the Bible slightly more often.



A Snapshot of Clergy Retired Fewer than 4 Years

Within the United Methodist Church in the US, there has been a slow, upward trend in the age at which clergy retire, with clergy with the title of ordained elder between the ages of 55 to 72 comprising 56% of all elders in 2017, up from 30% in 2000.

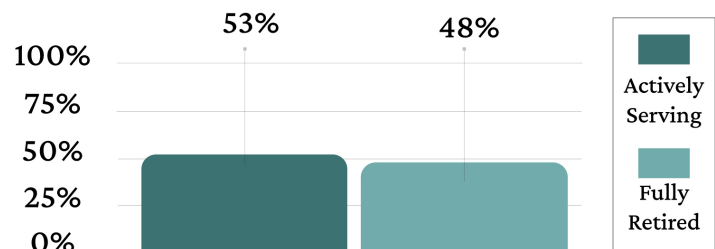
In our data from clergy from the North Carolina and Western North Carolina Conference, 50% of appointed and actively serving clergy were ages 55 to 72. Clergy have often served for decades before retiring. Even second career clergy serve on average 23 years prior to retirement.

As expected, clergy who are retired are older and have fewer children living at home. Yet overall, the Statewide Clergy Health Survey data do not suggest other large demographic differences between clergy who are and are not retired. However, retired clergy are slightly more likely to be male and first career clergy (i.e., they are less likely to consider themselves to be a second career pastor).

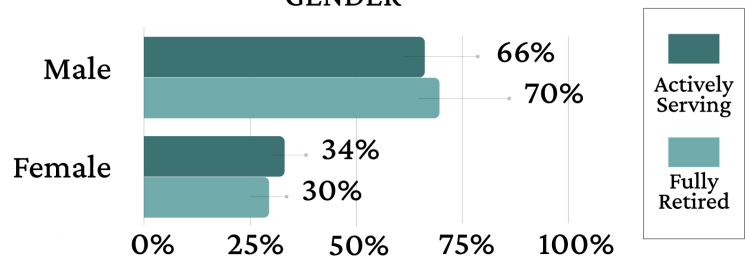
AVERAGE NUMBER OF YEARS SERVED IN MINISTRY
AMONG RETIRED CLERGY BY FIRST VS SECOND CAREERS



SECOND CAREER PASTORS
Percentage of clergy who responded yes to:
“Do you consider yourself a second career pastor?”



GENDER

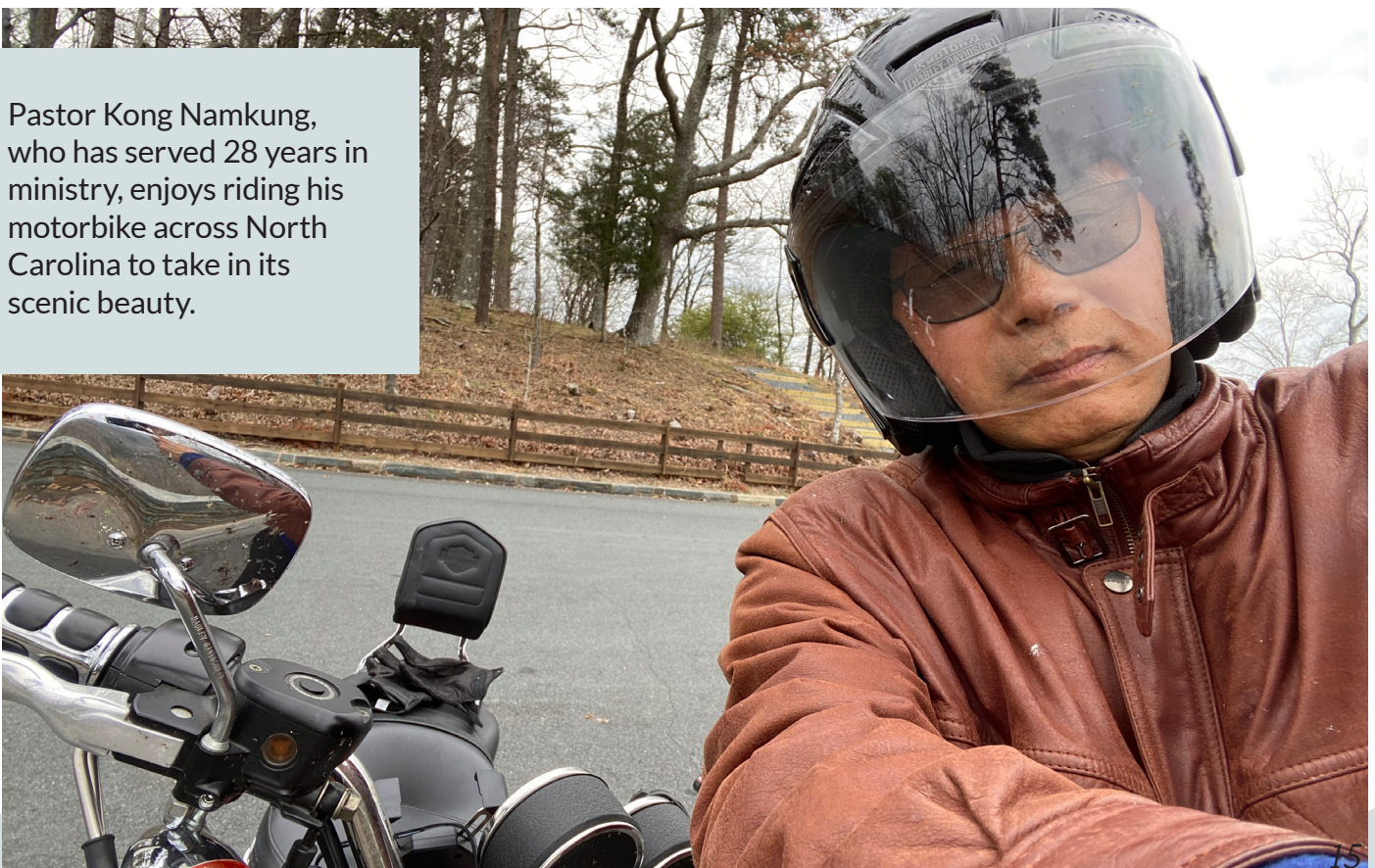


Lower anxiety and depressive symptoms

We compared the anxiety and depressive symptoms scores of clergy to themselves before vs after retirement. Fully retired clergy have, on average, anxiety symptoms scores that are 7% lower than their own scores before retirement. For depressive symptoms, scores are 16% lower during retirement.

Anxiety Symptoms Scores	Depressive Symptoms Scores
↓ 7%	↓ 16%

Pastor Kong Namkung, who has served 28 years in ministry, enjoys riding his motorbike across North Carolina to take in its scenic beauty.



In Conclusion

Across the report, these findings suggest that actively serving as clergy is busy and difficult work. They also suggest that clergy have the skills to create a satisfying and meaningful life. For most clergy, being retired appears to be as good a life as actively serving, or even an improvement.

Anticipate blessings in retirement.

