

Indiana Conference of The United Methodist Church

Well-Lived Pastoral Life Study Interim Summary of Survey Results Matt Bloom, Ph.D. Fall, 2008

Financial Well-being

This is a list of financial concerns in order of importance. That is, the issue of greatest concern to pastors is listed first, the area of least concern is listed last:

1. Income to meet your monthly living needs
2. Adequate standard of living for your family
3. Funds for family entertainment, meals at restaurants, and gifts for family
4. Amount of money in retirement accounts
5. Knowledge and resources to plan for and manage financial well-being
6. Amount of debt

This first six are very significant concerns. The remaining 8 are important too, but these first 6 seem to be especially significant.

7. Amount of money in cash or checking accounts?
8. Amount of money in other investments
9. Funds you have left at the end of the month after paying your bills
10. Funds available for personal and family vacations
11. Amount of money in savings accounts
12. Funds for life emergencies
13. Funds for the education of yourself, your spouse, or your children
14. Funds for future health care expenses

The areas where pastors have the most debt are:

1. Education loans
2. Auto loans

Impact of financial concerns

- Financial concerns do seem to weigh heavily on pastors, both in terms of their experiences at work and their overall sense of well-being and meaning in life. Of particular importance are issues related to meeting everyday life needs. Pastors who report having significant concerns about their income and their ability to provide for the family also report diminished well-being at work and lower life well-being. This was, by far, the area of financial concern that had the greatest impact on pastors'

well-being. An interesting result was that concerns about the amount of money in checking, savings, and investment accounts was the next most important area of financial concern in terms of its impact on well-being at work and well-being in life. Pastors that are concerned about the funds they have in investments and cash reserves are also much more likely to report diminished well-being at work and in life.

Financial concerns have a significant, negative impact on pastors' well-being. This includes the pastors' sense of well-being at work, his or her overall sense of well-being in life, and their emotional well-being.

For pastors with very high debt—some category of debt over \$15,000—their high debt load also seems to be related to lower well-being, both at work and in life.

Lastly, pastors who feel that they may not have adequate knowledge or resources available to help them manage their financial condition also have lower levels of well-being at work and general life well-being.

In summary, financial concerns do seem to weigh heavily on pastors. Pastors with greater financial concerns, higher debt loads, and those who feel they lack knowledge or resources to manage their finances also report significantly lower levels of well-being at work and overall well-being in life.

- Although financial concerns are highly related to the amount of debt a pastor has, debt seems to be just one component of an overall sense of concern about financial matters. Pastors seem to be worried about their personal financial situation in general. This appears to stem first from a lack of confidence in their ability to understand and manage their personal finances and, second, from specific financial concerns that seem to embody this overall unease about their finances. The specific “hot points” are
 - Inadequate income to meet living expenses, to provide for one's family, and to retire debt loads.
 - Inadequate income or savings to provide for anticipated future living needs (e.g., retirement, family educational expenses, emergencies)
 - Concerns over the amount of debt, especially educational debt
- There is no clear correlation between pastors' age and debt load. There are as many pastors in their 50s that have \$25,000+ as there are

pastors in other age groups. There is a very weak relationship between debt and years of service. While it is true that the longer you are out of seminary, the lower your debt, this difference is small. Again, there are pastors with 20+ years of service that have very high debt loads. This suggests that it is very hard for pastors to retire their educational debt. Once they have it, it is almost a life-long burden. More pastors in their 20s and 30s also have credit card debt, but that might be a function of changing societal norms and the vast increase in the availability of credit. Most of the research suggests that the trend toward higher consumer debt is likely to continue.

- There is a pretty strong relationship among different kinds of debt. In other words, pastors with high educational debt tend to have higher debt of other kinds, such as consumer or auto debt. Older pastors tend to have less auto debt, but in the other debt categories, age does not matter very much. That is, older pastors are about as likely to have high education, consumer, or auto debt as are younger pastors. Again, this suggests that it is hard for pastors to get rid of debt. One alternative explanation is that older pastors retire debt, but continue to take on new debt. Either way, debt is a burden for almost all age and length-of-service groups. The only age groups that seem to be relatively debt-free are pastors 60+.
- One big regret I have with the surveys is that we did not ask spouses the financial questions. I can say from the phone calls and emails I have rec'd that spouses feel the burden of financial challenges at least as much as do pastors. Spouses seem to be the ones that have to deal with the finances, or at least they have to worry about it too. Other concerns seem to matter more to spouses, but finances are still a major issue for them. There does seem to be a latent sense of guilt around having financial concerns. That is, while pastors and their families seem to feel financial pressures, they tend to blame themselves rather than their income level. They feel bad needing more money and tend to discount any financial challenges. This is a subtle, but I think important, issue. Kevin Armstrong has spoken quite eloquently about this issue. I think he refers to it as a "theological" challenge.

Quality of relationships

- Most pastors feel that they have very supportive spouses. The average score was very high (6.1 out of a possible 7) with very little variation in answers.

- While on average pastors feel they have fairly good relationships with their DS and the Bishop, there is wide variation in responses. Some pastors feel they have very strong, supportive relationships with the leadership of the denomination (e.g. DS, Bishop while at the same time a significant number report low quality relationships with their DS and the Bishop.
- Most pastors do not have strong friendships with other pastors.
- There is wide variation in the extent to which pastors have strong friendships with people outside the ministry. While many report having good friends, there are a significant number of pastors who report they have very few, if any, strong, supportive friendships.

Work Well-being

Most important appointment/ministry-related factors for influencing well-being at work:

- Pastors' perceptions of the degree to which their unique talents and gifts are an appropriate match for the needs & requirements of their appointment/ministry.
- Pastors' perceptions of the degree to which their values and personal beliefs fit those of the church to which they are appointed.
- The sense of meaning or calling that a pastor feels in his or her current appointment/ministry.
- The degree to which a pastor can see that his or her work has an impact on others.
- The degree to which a pastor feels that she or he can be authentic or express their true gifts, talents, and beliefs is very important. Experienced well-being is diminished when pastors feel they have pursued goals that are unimportant to them.

Most important relationships for influencing well-being at work:

- The single most important relationship is having strong, caring relationships with other pastors. These relationships matter more for a pastor's well-being at work than does the quality of the relationship they have with their spouse.

- Relationships with church leaders are second in importance for shaping a pastor's well-being at work.
- Close friendships and pastors' perceptions of their relationship with the Bishop are also very important.
- Relationships with DS are of much less importance.

Other important factors for well-being at work:

- A pastor's sense of the quality of his or her home life is very significant for their experienced well-being at work. An inability to meet family obligations or to spend enough time with one's family seems to be of particular importance.
- For many pastors, work is a fulfilling, but not a consistently happy or pleasant experience. That is, pastors with high levels of well-being at work report feeling that their work is meaningful, that they have a significant positive impact on others, but that work is only sometimes a source of happy experiences. There appear to be some high points, some very low points, and many rather mundane experiences in the life of most pastors.

Life Well-being

Most important factors for influencing life well-being:

- Well-being at work, especially having an appointment that the pastors feels is deeply meaningful.
- Strong, supportive relationships with a spouse are almost equal in importance to having meaningful work.
- Relationships with friends, especially friends who are pastors are very close in importance to meaningful work and a support spouse.
- Somewhat less important, but still significant are strong relationships with church leaders.
- Financial concerns have a significant, detrimental impact on well-being.

- Work-home interface is also a significant factor. Well-being is significantly higher to the extent the pastor feels that she or he can give adequate energy and attention to her/his family.

Summary of spouse surveys

- In general, the spouse surveys confirmed the pastors' responses. That is, spouses agree that pastors who have meaningful work, strong friendships with other pastors, and good relationships with church leaders, and fewer work-family conflicts have higher well-being at work and in life.
- Similarly, spouses of these pastors report higher well-being in life. When the pastor is happy, the spouse is happy, and vice-versa.
- Financial concerns seem to weigh heavily on spouses. Spouses well-being is significantly lower to the extent the family has more financial concerns.
- Being the spouse of a pastor seems to be fulfilling, but not always happy. That is, spouses that gain a sense of meaning and fulfillment from their own lives and from their role as the spouse of a pastor report higher levels of well-being, but also mixed happiness.
 - Spouses report significant strain when the roles they play as a pastor's spouse seem inauthentic to them.
- Spouses who have their own jobs, and who find fulfillment in their work, also report significantly higher levels of well-being.
- Similarly, spouses that have strong personal friendships also report higher well-being.
- Spouses who report higher well-being and greater happiness are also perceived by their pastor-spouses to be more supportive. In other words, happier spouses seem to be more supportive spouses.