

# **KEEPING THE FAITH: CONVERSATIONS TO STRENGTHEN THE BOND BETWEEN PASTORS AND CHURCH LEADERS**



*This is a new resource in 2023 and we are committed to adapting it according to the needs that arise from you, the users of it! We'd love to have your feedback with any comments, concerns, or questions on the resource as a whole or any individual conversation. Click [here](#) or scan the QR code.*



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# Dear Church,

If you are reading this, we know you care about your church. And assuming that you are living in today's world, we know you are experiencing a variety of pressures, alongside the grace of God. **This resource is designed to help congregants and their pastors work together to communicate in the midst of today's challenges so that both congregations and clergy can be healthy.**

Since 2008, the Duke Clergy Health Initiative (CHI) has been collecting data on the well-being of North Carolina United Methodist clergy across a variety of domains, including physical, emotional, mental, financial, and spiritual health. We do this in support of the well-being of clergy, and also in support of all congregants, believing that healthy and energized clergy make a big difference in the lives of congregants.

Every two years, more than 70% of North Carolina's United Methodist clergy tell us about their lives. We take the responsibility of this trust seriously. We are committed to using this data to strengthen the lives of clergy and their congregations in all the ways we can. Over the years, we have offered comprehensive health interventions and, recently, a targeted stress intervention. We have created spaces for healing for minority clergy who are enduring the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racism. We have created resources for congregations such as the P/SPRC training curriculum, *Pastor and Parish*.

Where the common wisdom is that we shouldn't talk religion, politics, or money (at least not in polite company!), we're asserting that congregational leaders and pastors need to be talking about exactly these things. **The health of our churches and their pastors depends on our ability to wade into difficult topics, especially when avoiding these topics is having a potentially harmful impact.**

In this conversation guide you will learn about some of the findings from our Fall 2021 survey of clergy across North Carolina. We have curated a selection of the findings about clergy well-being that we think are important for congregational leaders to understand. They are places where we think that local church leaders can have an impact on improving clergy and congregational well-being.

**Even more importantly, this conversation guide offers you the tools needed to come together in healthy conversation about topics that may be difficult to consider together.** Though using this guide, you are practicing skills needed to live together in healthy community that will benefit you well beyond the 6 particular conversations or topics in this guide.

Dear Church, we share with you love for The United Methodist Church we all hold dear, and, like the apostle Paul, we "thank God every time we remember you... because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now." (Philippians 1:3-5) Thank you for your love and care for Christ's body and its leaders.

*In hope,  
The Duke Clergy Health Initiative*

# How to use this guide

The information included in this guide is intended for use by congregational leaders in P/SPRC or Administrative leadership roles. While we believe that all congregants could benefit from reflecting on the topics in this guide, we have structured it for use by the P/SPRC to engage over the course of the year in six conversations.

The conversations in this guide require a level of trust and vulnerability. If your congregation does not have a stable relationship with your pastor or have experienced an acute and unresolved conflict very recently, there may be another resource better suited to your context at the current time. We encourage you to reach out to your District Superintendent for other resources and support if this is your situation.

*The first conversation in this guide facilitates the creation of a P/SPRC covenant that will guide you in your work, not only in these conversations, but in all of your decision making throughout the year. Please do not skip this step!*

The subsequent conversations have been ordered with intentionality, but you are welcome to complete those conversations in the order best suited to your context. If there is a topic that is too tender or fraught for your leaders at this time, you might choose to skip that conversation in favor of conversations that have the potential to bear more fruit and build a stronger relationship with your pastor. One day you may return to the more difficult conversations, building on the foundation of trust already established from honest and responsive conversation.

## *This conversation guide is for*

1. Churches who have a stable pastoral relationship and are not currently in the midst of an acute unresolved conflict for which Conflict Transformation may be a better short-term option
2. P/SPRCs who want to grow in partnership with their pastor
3. Churches whose DS recommends participation



# The conversations in this guide are based on three core assumptions

## 1 Communication is essential and yet clear communication about important matters doesn't just happen on its own.

We may shy away from difficult conversations, or we raise them at inopportune times or with a group that hasn't agreed to patiently examine assumptions together and hold information in confidence. A good process for communication can overcome these pitfalls to create a strong foundation for whatever may arise.

James Baldwin asserted in an Op-Ed he wrote for the New York Times in 1962, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." Shifts in culture, attendance patterns, and increased societal polarization call the Church to re-evaluate where we have been and where we are going. This work requires that we learn to live together with courage, vulnerability, and open communication, refusing to shy away from hard topics. This is not easy work, but it is holy work. In covenant relationship and with clear expectations and tools, **we believe congregations have the capability to do this hard work.**

## 2 Trust, which leads to creativity and growth, is established through vulnerability.<sup>1</sup>

This conversation guide has been created for P/SPRC committees. The relationship between the pastor and congregation is built into the very definition of this committee's work. Relationships require nurture. Sharing one's opinions and being willing to receive comments on them is by definition being vulnerable. Our belief is that as these conversations progress in the safe container provided, so too will the degree to which committee members are vulnerable with each other and through this process, trust will increase.

## 3 The question starts the change.

We believe that good questions offer us a new lens to view ourselves and our common life. Curious and open hearted reflection made possible with asking strong questions can open us to new possibilities and guide us to act with courage. In organizational change research, this is known as "the simultaneity principle".<sup>2</sup> This principle asserts that as soon as a question is asked, it has an effect on the system and its participants. In short, the inquiry is the intervention.



## *Leaders:*

*These conversations are designed to follow this pattern:*

- 1** Invite participants to read through the material for the upcoming conversation prior to gathering. This pre-reading allows participants to consider their reflections and contributions to the conversation prior to engaging with others.
- 2** After reading the adopted group covenant at the beginning of each meeting, the P/SPRC chair or designated leader (not the pastor!), will invite reflections from the group on the data presented in that meeting's material.
  - a. What stood out to you?
  - b. Are there particular self-assessment questions that we need to focus on as a group? If there are one or two in particular that seem especially relevant, focus your conversation on these questions. If not, work through each question.
  - c. Where does this data highlight our congregation's strengths?
  - d. Where does it highlight areas of potential growth?
- 3** Allow the pastor an opportunity to share any reflections they would like to share based on the pastoral self-reflection questions or the committee's conversation.
- 4** Before moving on to any other P/SPRC business on the agenda, reflect:
  - a. How will we celebrate and build on the congregational and pastoral strengths we have identified?
  - b. What do I (individual) or we (committee/church) feel called to do as a result of this conversation?
  - b. What other information would I/we need in order to facilitate a meaningful change in congregational culture for the sake of our pastor's well-being?
  - c. Who can help us with that? Who will take responsibility for this next step?
  - d. Do we believe that we are ready to move on to the next conversation or do we need to revisit this one?

# Conversation #1: Building a Covenant for Our Work Together



The God we worship and serve is a covenant God. Covenants are sacred. They define the obligations and promises we make to one another as a way to avoid miscommunication and conflict, and for establishing healthy relationships. We begin this set of conversations with the establishment of a covenant for our shared work together. This covenant will form the foundation of how we relate to one another as we do the work of the P/SPRC and have these healing conversations.

A process for creating a covenant is outlined below and is followed by two sample covenants that you are welcome to use and adapt for your purposes after conversation with one another. Once you have responded to the questions outlined below, designate someone to compile the outcome of your work to present back to the P/SPRC. Please know that P/SPRC covenants do not supersede or change any mandatory rules in the Book of Discipline related to this committee.



## *Questions for a covenant-building conversation:*

**1. How will we begin and end our meetings?**

*Ex: on-time, with prayer, by lighting a candle to remind us of God's presence among us*

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**2. What are the values and goals that we hold in common?**

*Ex: individual discipleship, promoting unity in the congregation, supporting our pastor and family, leading by example*

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**3. How will we interact with one another in these conversations?**

*Ex: respectfully, asking clarifying questions, listening to hear and not only to respond, providing open and honest input, ensuring everyone has a chance to speak equally, not engaging in cross-talk*

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**4. What does confidentiality mean?**

*Ex: what information from our conversations can be shared? who shares? are there exceptions? how will we respond to those who are curious about our work? what if someone is absent?*

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**5. What will we do when conflict or tension arises?**

*Ex: take a break, blow out the candle, pray, pass the peace*

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**6. How will we hold one another accountable for upholding this covenant?**

*Ex: using the example of Matthew 18, checking in at meetings, in love, with gentleness and grace*

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### *Sample covenant #1:*

The P/SPRC is the ministry team of our congregation responsible for connecting our congregation to our pastor and staff and caring for the life and well-being of our staff. We represent the members of the congregation in this leadership role and will remain in close fellowship with our brothers and sisters in the congregation.

As leaders of this congregation, we hold ourselves and one another accountable to active participation in the life of discipleship through regular worship attendance, faithful financial stewardship, and faithful attendance and participation in ministries to which we have committed.

When we gather for our meetings, we commit to beginning on time and open our meetings in prayer. By lighting the candle in the center of our gathering, we acknowledge the presence of Christ where two or three are gathered in his name. We will review our covenant with one another before beginning any business.

The content of our meetings is confidential. We will agree together on what themes and learnings can be shared, but we covenant to not share details or stories from our conversations with congregation members, including our immediate family members.

We will take care when we gather to make sure that everyone has an opportunity to speak. We will each be aware of how our presence contributes to the building up of the body as well as how our presence and contribution to the group makes it difficult for others to contribute.

We will speak to one another gently and respectfully. We will make sure that everyone can hear all that is said and will not have sidebar conversations that do not include all members of the group. We will wait for others to finish speaking before we begin speaking. We will clarify any confusing or emotion-inducing statements before we jump to conclusions.

When conflict or tension arise, we will blow out the candle and take a 5-minute break. When we re-gather, one member of our group will relight the candle and offer a prayer. Before making any decisions we will make sure that all sides have an opportunity to offer their perspectives. We commit to listening to one another in a spirit of grace. We will not leave one another's presence until we are able to authentically pass the peace of Christ to one another.

If someone is absent from a meeting, someone from within the group will take responsibility for communicating the work of the group and any decisions made to those absent in a timely manner. If a major decision is to be made, the committee can decide to postpone a vote until the input of all members is available.

## *Sample covenant #2:*

This Covenant is for creating safer, sacred space for all participants. Your presence indicates your agreement to abide by the following Conversational Covenant:

1. We will respect the facilitators as the leaders of the conversation. We will speak directly to the facilitators.
2. We will remain seated.
3. We will use a talking object so that all may be heard.
4. We will use “I” statements and speak only from our own experiences.
5. We will keep the conversation confidential, meaning whatever is said is not to be shared with anyone who has not participated in the conversation.
6. We will not make any electronic recordings of the conversation.
7. We will limit note-taking to brief reminders of topics to address when it is our turn to speak.

This sample Covenant was designed and created by Conflict Transformation Ministries of the North Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church for navigating high-conflict conversations. We offer these samples as a starting point and hope that you will adapt these samples with your own language and group norms to help your community listen to one another with open hearts and approach hard topics assuming best intentions of your fellow congregants and pastor. More covenant-creating resources can be found at [www.nccumc.org/conflict](http://www.nccumc.org/conflict).

*“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”*

—Matthew 18:15-20

*Before you begin your conversation, be sure to review your group covenant together!*

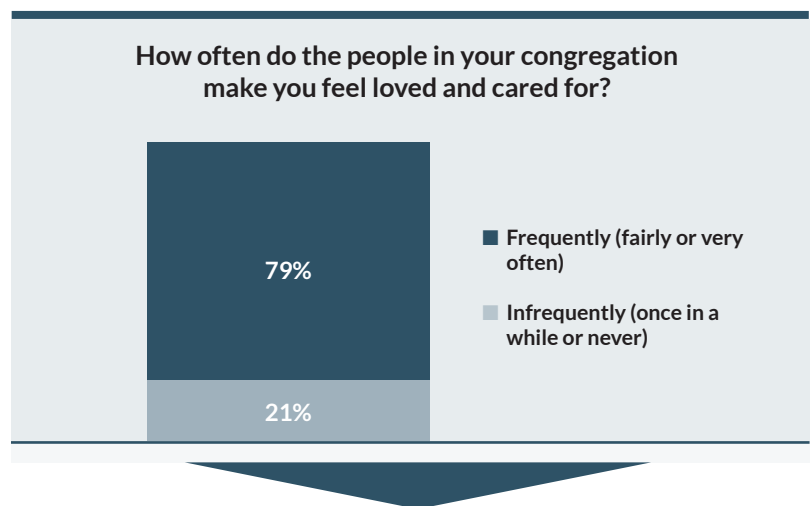
## Conversation #2: The Importance of Human Connection for Pastoral Well-Being

We all need to feel loved and cared for, especially by people who are often around us. It gives a sense of connection, security and belonging. In general, feeling loved serves as a buffer against stress and makes us feel happy, more energetic and more capable of dealing with difficult situations in life<sup>3,4</sup>. Not feeling loved diminishes our life satisfaction, makes us feel negative emotions, and makes us more likely to experience symptoms of depression<sup>5</sup>. For pastors, feeling loved and cared for is especially important if they have been involved with your family and loved and cared for them. Otherwise, feeling seen as only the pastor and not as a whole person can be painful.

### Loved and Cared For:

Showing that you care about your pastor as a person, and not just as a pastor, goes a long way to improving their life and satisfaction in ministry. A little love goes a long way.

In our research specific to UMC clergy, we asked pastors questions including, “How often do the people in your congregation make you feel loved and cared for?” We found that pastors who do feel loved and cared for have higher feelings of personal accomplishment at work, ministry satisfaction, and quality of life.



### Comments from interviews with UMC clergy in NC

- “I don’t think people realize that we are also human beings”
- “I wish I had people who really loved me around me”
- “I feel that sometimes people forget that we are here to also find healing and comfort around people”

## Three elements to burnout

### EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION

Feeling strained as your emotional resources become depleted

### DEPERSONALIZATION

Becoming detached from and cynical toward the people you serve.

### REDUCED SENSE OF PERSONAL ACCOMPLISHMENT

Having doubts about the value of your work. This third element can be confusing since it is considered on a reverse scale from the first two elements. Whereas burnout is characterized by **high** emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, it is **low or reduced** personal accomplishment that indicates a problem.

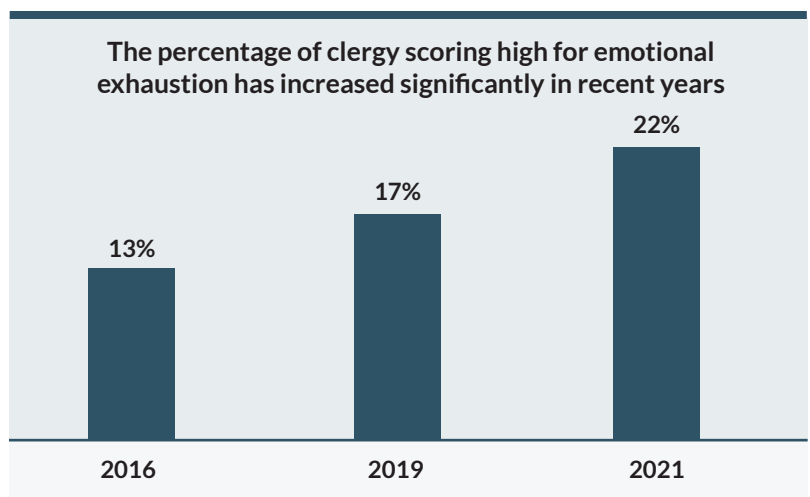
Our data indicates that in 2021, clergy were suffering from two out of three of these components – emotional exhaustion and reduced sense of personal accomplishment.

## Emotional Exhaustion:

In 2021, more UMC clergy in North Carolina than ever before were scoring high for emotional exhaustion.

Pastors are susceptible to emotional exhaustion given that their jobs require constant exposure to complex situations like political division, different world views among congregants, and congregant anxieties, fears, and grief. Additionally, like everyone else, clergy experience personal fears, grief, family conflicts and life complexities that may contribute to emotional exhaustion.

The percentage of UMC clergy in North Carolina who score high measures of emotional exhaustion increased from 13% in 2016 to 22% in 2021.





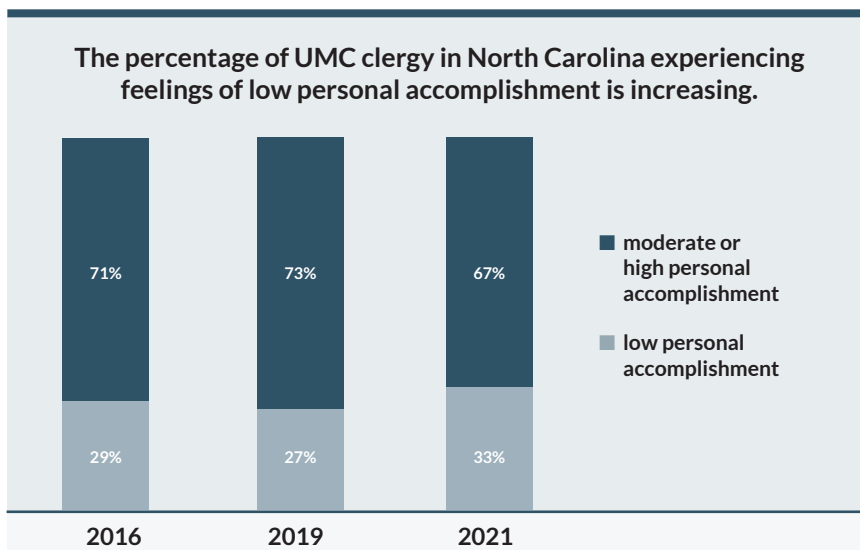
## Conversation #2

### Personal Accomplishment:

Personal accomplishment refers to the belief a person holds that their day to day work matters. When a pastor is having doubts about the value of their work, we consider them to be experiencing reduced personal accomplishment.

About a third of UMC pastors in North Carolina feel low levels of personal accomplishment with their ministry work. While two-thirds of clergy \*do\* feel like their work matters, for the third who do not, it is frustrating and demoralizing.

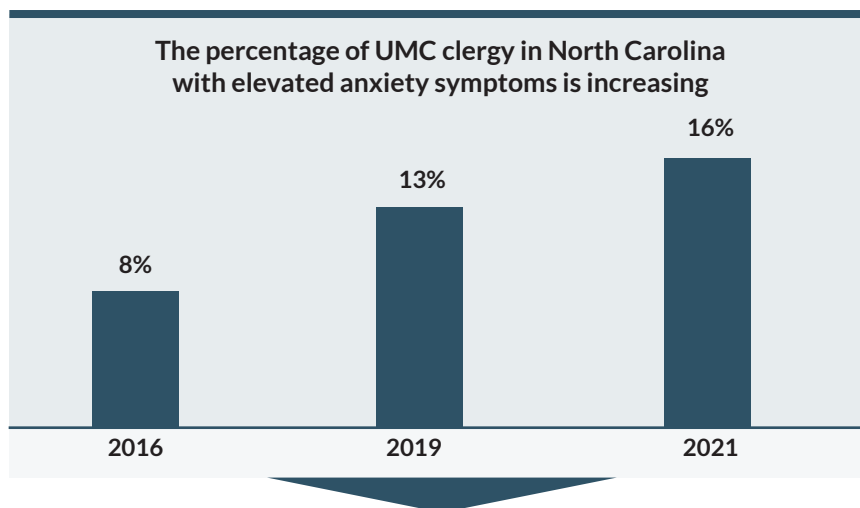
Reduced feelings of personal accomplishment held relatively steady (27-29%) until 2021, when it increased by five percentage points (33%).



### Anxiety:

In 2021, more clergy than ever before reported elevated symptoms of anxiety.

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health concern in the United States, with about 19% of adults in the U.S. suffering from anxiety<sup>6</sup>. Anxiety causes overwhelming feelings of fear or distress that prevent you from engaging in everyday activities. To ensure pastors are thriving in their personal and professional lives, it is important that we support their mental health and well-being. If you, your pastor, or someone you love seems to be experiencing elevated and sustained symptoms of anxiety, there are an array of effective treatment options, including psychotherapy, medication, and physical activity, available to alleviate these symptoms.



#### Symptoms of anxiety to be aware of:

- Feeling afraid or as if something awful might happen
- Being restless
- Trouble relaxing
- Irritability
- Not sleeping
- Worrying too much



## *Reflection and Resources*

**Dear Church,** Pastors are in a unique position in that they are part of your local community, but are always separate from your community in a particular way by virtue of their role. As you can see from the data presented here, for many pastors this is a difficult life. It is important to create space and times where pastors can both acknowledge their challenges and have others join in their celebrations. Use these congregational assessment tools and skills to ensure your pastors know they are loved and cared for, and that their work matters.

### *Questions for congregational self-assessment:*

1. How does our congregation, the community our pastor has committed to live among, extend intentional care and support to our pastor?
2. Jesus instructs us to “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” However, the way that one person best receives love and support may not be the same for another person. Are the ways we show love and care for our pastor helpful to our pastor? Have we ever asked our pastor if our efforts are being received as love and care?
3. Are we comfortable recognizing the humanity of our pastor? In what ways do we allow our pastor to simply “be human”?
4. How do we publicly support our pastor and communicate to the congregation pastoral boundaries (parsonage, family, hours, etc...)?
5. How can our congregation build a culture of grace for all people, including our pastor, that allows for hard seasons, bad days, and mistakes?
6. Do we recognize that some challenges our pastor faces are not ones that we will be invited into? How can we encourage our pastor to seek professional support without shame or worry?

#### **Comments from interviews with NC UMC clergy**

- “It’s also been kind when people call me and say, “Pastor, how are you doing?” Don’t have a whole lot of those, but I do have some. Occasionally, I’ll get a card in the mail that says, “I know it’s been really hard on you, but we thank you so much for what you’re doing for us and for the community.” Your heart just melts. You’re going, “Aw. It’s so sweet. Okay. I can do it for another week, God.” That’s all I needed. I just needed a little pep talk.”
- “The personal relational support of not just the personnel committee but really the whole congregation [to] see me as a human being first with a family and responsibilities has made all the difference.”

## Conversation #2

### *Questions for pastoral self-assessment:*

1. Recognizing that maintaining healthy boundaries, respecting power dynamics, and appropriate self-disclosure are all professional skills that clergy must uphold, in what ways do I long to be seen as a whole person in ministry?
2. What expectations for congregational support do I carry—whether stated or unstated?
3. Something my congregation could do to support me in this season of life is...
4. What are some ways that I can share the response to #3 with my congregation?

### *Engage!*

Pastors' emotional needs can be met in many places and it's important for your pastor to have a variety of sources where they can go for appropriate support. The invitation to care and for support your pastor is not intended to become a substitute for pastors seeking appropriate mental health care, spiritual direction, or friendship with other clergy. Around congregants, pastors most often find themselves providing support to the congregation. Providing emotional support for your pastor is about taking the time to get to know your pastor and genuinely receiving what is going on in their life—whether it be a sick family member or concern about their child in school. Here are tips for conversation starters and ways to make your pastor feel heard and valued as a person.

#### **Ask:**

1. What are you reading lately? What vacation plans do you have? How is your family?
2. What's been going well lately? Where are you finding joy in ministry?
2. What's been particularly challenging lately?
3. Are there concrete ways that we (the congregation) can support you?
4. How can I pray for you?

*“If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”  
—1 Corinthians 12:26-27*

## Do:

1. Create a safe space to talk. Be sure you're in a space where your pastor can trust that what they share with you will remain safe and confidential. This is as much about the place where you are as it is the tone that you set and the trust you build over time.
2. Listen actively without interruption or distraction. Turn off your phone and be fully present. Make eye contact. Pay attention to verbal and non-verbal cues. Nodding and smiling can be helpful. Crossed arms can indicate a defensive posture, so be aware of your own body language.
3. Ask open-ended questions. Restate what you hear them saying as a means of clarification. A non-judgmental, empathetic listener does not pass judgment, even if they don't agree with what's being shared. It's easy to unintentionally sneak in unsolicited advice or judgment with closed-ended questions such as "Have you thought about...?"
4. Validate their emotions and experiences. Remember, your pastor is allowed to feel what they are feeling. It is not your job to talk them out of feeling what they are feeling. Simple and brief statements create safety and validation.  
  
"That's a lot to deal with." "I'm sorry that this is happening." "It sounds like that really hurt you." "That would make me angry, too."
5. If it is appropriate, brainstorm an action step or show support in a tangible way. If a person is experiencing grief, there may not be a specific action. Allowing them to share their experience is important. An action step could be something they commit to doing or something you commit to doing on their behalf. Being present is important, but leading the congregation to show your care and support in tangible ways is also important.
6. Encourage and pray for your pastor! When criticism flies and results are slow to appear, it can be easy to be discouraged. Share stories of the concrete ways you see your pastor's work making an impact in your church and community.

## Don't:

1. Violate your pastor's trust. If your pastor shares about a difficult situation they are facing, allow them to share that experience without judgment or fear that you will spread this information through the congregation.
2. Try to fix every problem. Some days your pastor simply needs to be heard. At other times, you may brainstorm together a way to navigate a next step to resolve an issue. Resist reaching out to other congregants on behalf of your pastor without their consent.
3. Use statements such as "I told you so," "It's really not that big of a deal," "It can't be that bad," "You're blowing it out of proportion" or other critical or minimizing comments. Your job is to show support and empathy.
4. Give unsolicited advice.
5. Make assumptions about your pastor. Remember that there are no two-dimensional people. Everyone is a complex combination of experiences that have formed them into the person they are. Always assume best intentions. Seek clarity when there is something you do not understand.

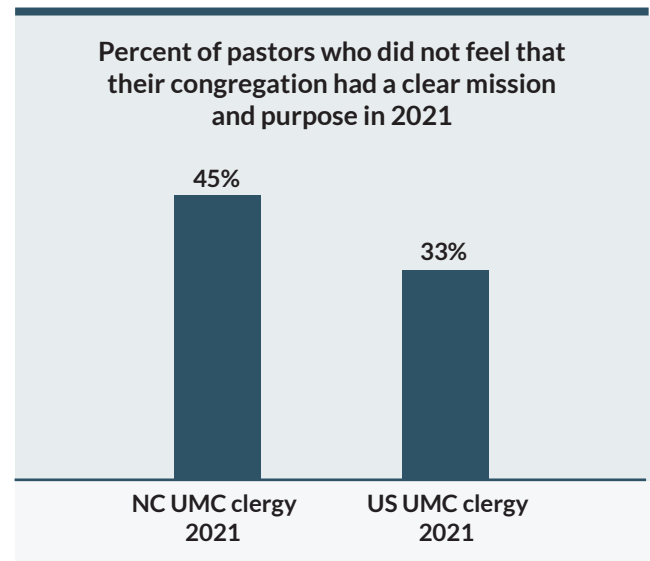
*Before you begin your conversation, be sure to review your group covenant together!*

## Conversation #3: The Impact of Congregational Culture and Morale on Pastoral Well-Being

There is a significant body of evidence that suggests that our personal well-being is linked to the well-being of those around us. In social networks such as your congregation's, happiness has been found to be contagious up to three degrees of separation from the original source. In other words, when you are happy and have a sense of purpose, the people around you are happier too<sup>7</sup>. All of this is to say, your pastor's emotional and physical well-being are in many ways, linked to yours. There are many outside factors that may contribute to a congregation's morale, and these factors affect each congregation in unique ways. Cultural trends in religious attendance patterns over the past 4 decades, increased societal polarization, and the COVID-19 pandemic are some examples of outside forces that may be having an impact on your congregation. Likewise, each pastor brings a unique set of experiences, resources, and coping skills to their work that may affect the ways in which they are impacted by congregational morale and culture. In the face of these challenges, this conversation invites you to consider the mission and morale of your congregation and it's potential impact on your pastor's well-being.

### Mission & Purpose of the Congregation:

Mission and purpose are the reason why your congregation exists. It aligns and focuses the energy of the congregation and generates a sense of hopefulness about the future. A clear mission and purpose serve as a guide when difficult decisions arise. Lack of mission and purpose can lead to low energy, low morale, and conflict.







## Morale:

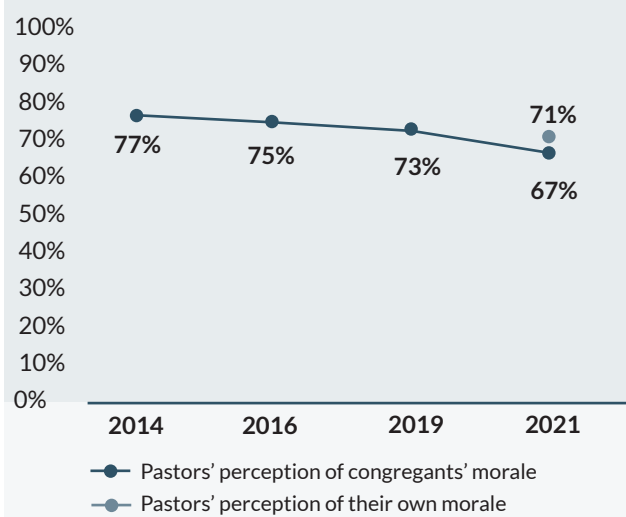
We asked UMC pastors how much they agreed (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree) with the following statements:

- **“The current morale of my congregation is high...”** (asked in 2014-2021)
- **“My current morale as a pastor is high...”** (asked in 2021 only)

In 2021 we asked NC UMC pastors about their own morale and found a strong correlation between pastors who feel that the morale of their congregation is high and their personal morale is high.

While overall morale is high, it has declined in recent years.

Percentage of pastors indicating that they somewhat or strongly agree that morale (personal and congregational) is high



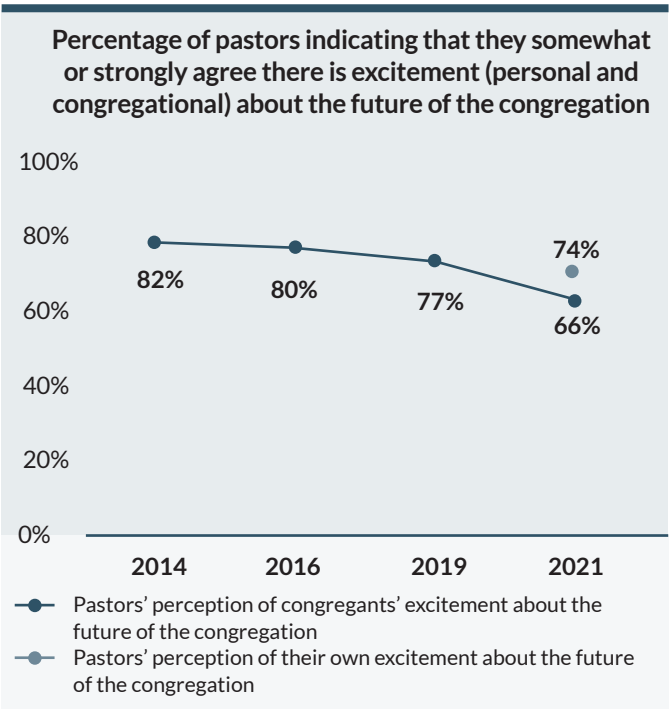
# Conversation #3

## Excitement About the Future:

The percentage of pastors who perceive their congregation is excited about the future has been declining, although two-thirds of pastors still believe their congregation is excited about the future of their church.

We asked UMC pastors how much they agreed (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree) with the following statements:

- “My congregants have excitement about the congregation’s future...”
- “I have a sense of excitement about my congregation’s future...”







## *Reflection and Resources*

**Dear Church, think about what it feels like to go to work each day.** Consider the people you interact with, the collaboration with colleagues, and the support from supervisors.

How do you, and the organization you work for, make an impact with your work? What factors make you stay in your current place of employment? What factors make you want to leave?

Your church is your pastor's place of work. Congregational morale and sense of purpose can have a huge impact on your pastor(s)' morale. While pastors can have some impact on the culture of a congregation, **congregational culture is largely set by congregants, established habits and traditions, and the physical space.** These questions invite you to reflect on your congregation's culture and morale. What impact may it have on your pastor's well-being?

### *Questions for congregational self-assessment:*

1. When we walk into the physical space of worship at our church on Sunday morning, how do we feel? What is the general mood of congregants? If this were our first time here without knowing anyone, what would it be like to experience our church?
2. How do we rate the morale of our congregation?
3. What makes us excited about our congregation's future?
4. If our congregation were to disappear from our neighborhood or town, who would miss us and why?
5. What has been the impact of COVID on our congregation's morale and sense of purpose? Are there other outside factors within our local community or the broader US society that may be impacting our congregation?
6. What are some of the strong traditions in the church? Are there aspects of these traditions that are no longer serving us? Which traditions and habits do we want to strengthen?
7. Follow-up assignment:  
Take some time to reach out to congregants who have left your congregation over the last 5-10 years. These might be young adult children of persons who no longer attend or people who have joined other congregations. What factors contributed to their departure? Consider reaching out to visitors who attended once or twice in the past but didn't stay. What made them show up for the first time? Why didn't they stay? Likewise, talk to individuals who have joined your congregation in the last few years. What drew them to your congregation and helps them stay?

## Conversation #3

### *Questions for pastoral self-assessment:*

1. How is my energy level when leading this congregation reflective of the congregation's current morale?
2. What am I proud of having accomplished with this congregation since my arrival?
3. What are some goals that I have for my ministry in this congregation?
4. Has my congregation been through a process to create shared goals? What mission-setting processes have I been part of in the past that I thought worked well?
5. If I'm struggling with the responses to the previous questions, where can I reach out for support or coaching?

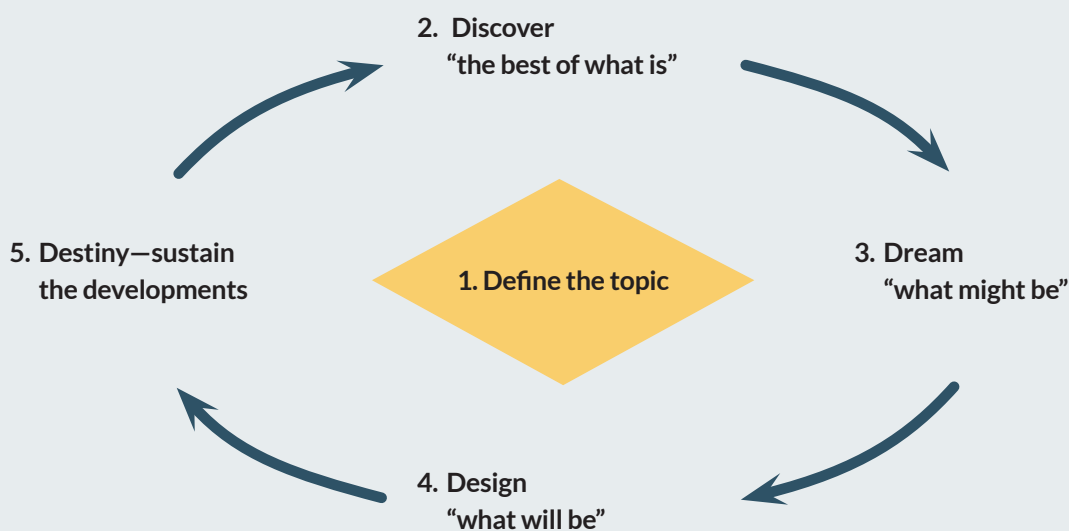
### *Engage!*

If your congregation is stagnant, or lacks energy, vision, or direction, maybe it's time to engage in a strategic visioning process. But watch out - often this kind of process is approached from a deficit mindset. These traditional visioning processes can often leave you feeling more defeated about the challenges you're facing than when you began.

An asset-based and morale-strengthening way to approach this task is through the process of **Appreciative Inquiry**. Just like the name indicates, Appreciative Inquiry looks for the best—strengths, past success, potential opportunities—and combines it with a process of discovery and dreaming. By building on success and dreaming together about what is possible, an Appreciative Inquiry process builds on positive results to generate positive change. Having a common understanding of mission and vision as well as excitement for the future can help congregations resist being pulled into conflicts on hot-button issues.



### 5-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry



Leaders across both North Carolina Annual Conferences have been trained in Appreciative Inquiry and can lead individuals and groups through this strategic visioning process. This coaching process is an excellent choice for Administrative Councils to engage in partnership with their pastor. Appreciative Inquiry is not a silver bullet or magic pill. By engaging the process, congregations will find themselves with renewed hope, vision, and some concrete action steps to move in the direction of their vision.

For more information about congregational coaching, reach out to your district superintendent, Director of Connectional Ministries (NCCUMC), District Vitality Associate, or Director of Church Development (WNCCUMC). For more information about individual coaching, you can contact your district superintendent or Passion in Partnership Ministries ([pipministries.org](http://pipministries.org)).

*"I appeal to you, dear brothers and sisters, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose."*

*—1 Corinthians 1:10*



*Before you begin your conversation, be sure to review your group covenant together!*

## **Conversation #4:**

# **The Impact of Perceived Differences in Worldview on Pastoral Well-Being**

Bishops and district superintendents work hard to appoint clergy to congregations where their gifts can best be utilized to serve the church while also allowing them to live into their sense of calling. We know that congregations and communities have unique theological and political views, as do the clergy that serve these congregations. There are benefits to appointing a pastor whose theology and worldview align with their congregation's and there are also benefits to congregations and to clergy when everyone has to stretch to listen across perceived differences of opinion. The following data illustrate pastors' perceptions of these differences in worldview and the challenges that they pose for their ministry in an increasingly polarized time.





## Pastor-Congregant Alignment:

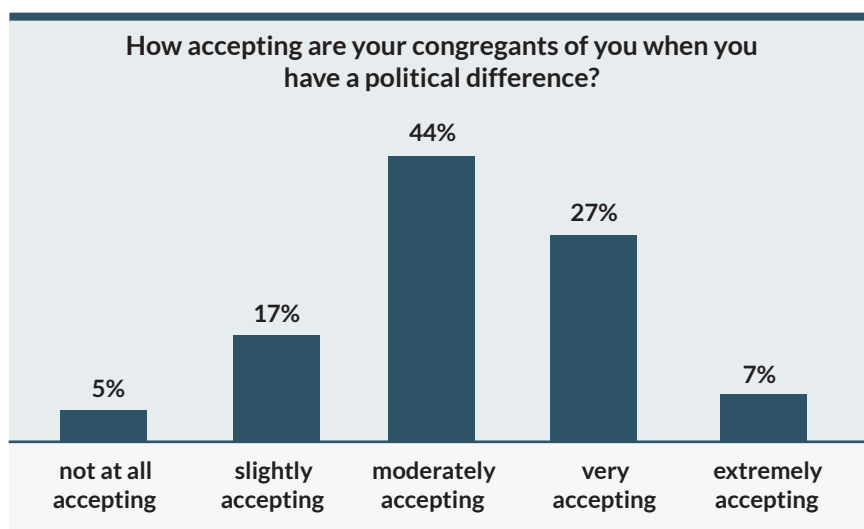
Our data show that a number of UMC clergy in North Carolina experience difficulty in ministry when there is a gap in their perceived alignment with their congregation on sensitive issues like politics or same sex relationships. Many clergy feel subject to being critically questioned by their congregants. In order to support your pastor's well-being, it is important to consider how, when, and why you choose to present constructive criticism.

**According to 2021 data provided by UMC clergy in NC, roughly two thirds of pastors noted a difference in their political alignment with the majority of their congregation.**

**In light of this reality, how does your congregation live well together such that political affiliation does not become a litmus test for belonging in your congregation?**

## Political Differences:

While a majority of clergy indicated that they felt their congregants are at least moderately accepting of them despite political differences, 22% felt that their congregants are only slightly or not at all accepting of them when they have political differences. National trends indicate that we are more likely to be segregated by our political differences than ever before which has led to a decrease in our interactions with others who think differently than us. Accepting differences of opinion is a muscle that we must work to strengthen.<sup>8</sup>



## Conversation #4

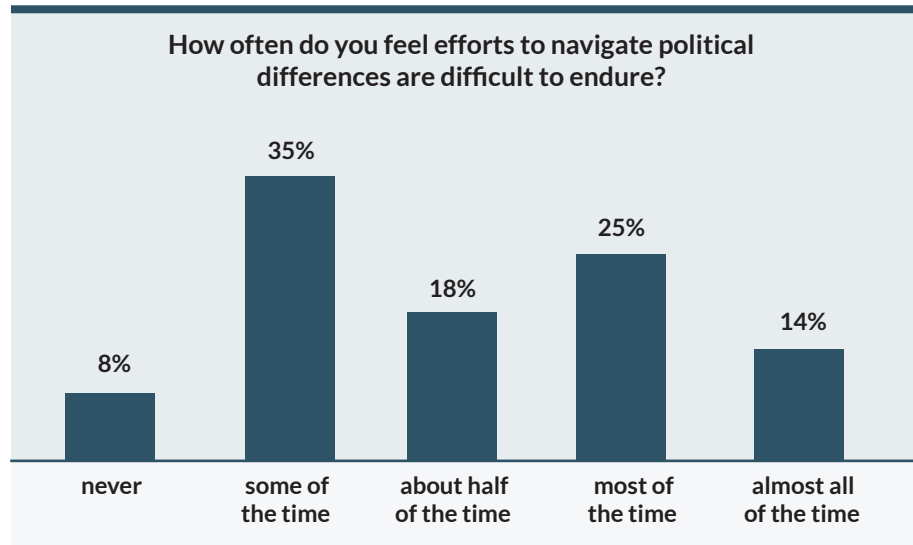
### Difficulty Enduring Political Differences:

Most UMC pastors in North Carolina expressed that navigating political differences was sometimes difficult for them to endure.

In 2021, we asked clergy how often they felt that efforts to navigate political differences were difficult to endure. Only 8% of UMC clergy in North Carolina said they never felt that efforts to navigate political differences were difficult to endure.

**Of the 92% who found that there was some frequency of difficulty, 35% said some of the time, 18% said about half of the time, 25% said most of the time, and 14% said almost all of the time.**

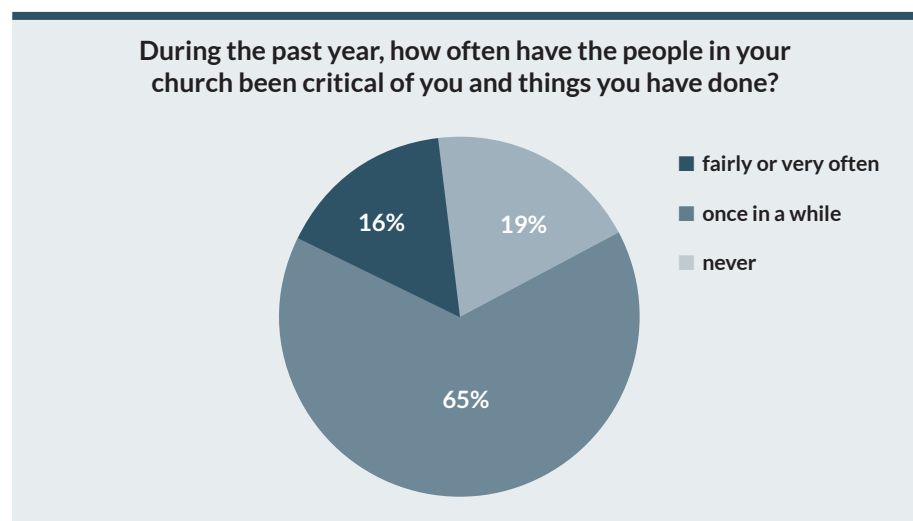
While many pastors are trained and gifted with skills to listen and work across differences, the increasing polarization of our church and country has become a significant stressor for clergy.



### Criticism:

A majority of UMC pastors in North Carolina expressed that they had, at least once in a while, received criticism from their congregants in 2021.

Interactions of a critical or demanding nature are related to worse subjective well-being of pastors<sup>9</sup>. Experiences of personal criticism relate to pastoral burnout<sup>10</sup>. Criticism offered in a constructive manner can be beneficial to both pastor and congregation. It all depends on the spirit in which it is offered.

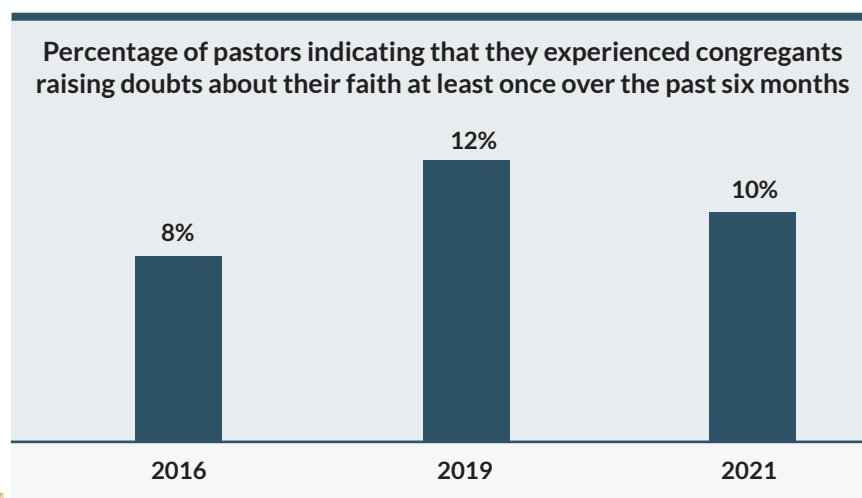
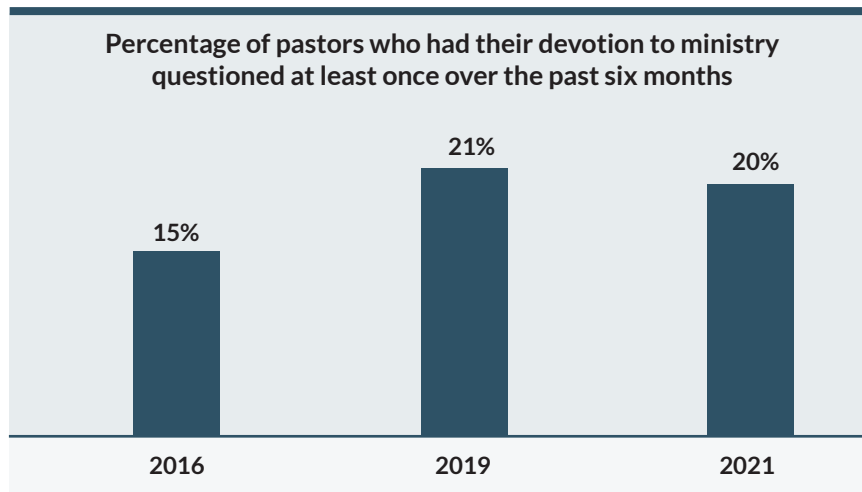




## Criticism can sometimes feel like a question of integrity:

Over the years, a slightly higher percentage of pastors in North Carolina has begun to feel that their congregants question their devotion to ministry and their faith. While many pastors have not experienced this, it is likely very hard for the pastors who do experience it.

In 2021, one in ten pastors had experienced congregants raising doubts directly about their faith at least one or more times in the prior 6 months.



*Share your feedback,  
comments, or questions  
about this resource.*



## *Reflection and Resources*

**Dear Church,** the gospel of Jesus Christ describes God’s dream for the world and how it may be best organized so that we might know “God’s kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.” Anytime people get together and organize life in common, questions of politics—that is, how we organize our life together in community—naturally arise. The politics that we talk about in church are not partisan in any way that we often think of politics. They’re not “liberal” or “conservative”, but they do challenge every single one of us and often make us uncomfortable!

Pastors make a commitment to proclaiming the gospel in their words and deeds. Pastors push the church from injustice, complacency, doubt, and despair towards justice, action, faith, and hope. And this means that pastors, when they’re doing their jobs well, sometimes make us uncomfortable.

Increased societal polarization has taught us to seek comfort in the familiar when our worldview is challenged. We retreat to communities that don’t challenge us. We silence and question the integrity of people who disturb us. In qualitative interviews with pastors, we hear that pastors feel increasingly caught between proclaiming the message of the gospel and the partisan loyalties that congregants hold. Pastors report having to re-work sermons to make them more “purple,” that is, inoffensive to any particular partisan ideology that any of their congregants hold.

Our data shows that pastors bear the brunt of our fierce loyalty to comfort by the criticism they bear, and even worse, by having their vocation and faith questioned. Like other vocations in our society caught in the midst of these culture wars (e.g., teachers, scientists, or healthcare professionals), rates of burnout are higher than ever. The assessment questions below will challenge you to consider how these trends play out in your congregation and how you are supporting the vocation of your pastor in the midst of it all so that they can serve the Church with continued grace and strength as called by God.





### *Questions for congregational self-assessment:*

1. How do we describe our congregation? Would a pastor who interpreted the gospel differently than our currently held values and identity be accepted among us? In what ways do we demonstrate openness to challenge, growth, and hard conversation?
2. How are conversations about hard topics broached in our congregation? Is the way we engage in these conversations a reflection of our mission and values?
3. When our pastor preaches a strong, potentially challenging or disruptive sermon, how do congregants typically respond? Are those responses healthy for building up the Body of Christ?

### *Questions for pastoral self-assessment:*

1. In what ways do my words and actions rise above partisan politics to embrace all members of the congregation and community?
2. When or how has my worldview been previously disrupted by the gospel in such a way that I initially rejected or criticized it? How did I grow? How can that experience shape the way that I receive and respond to congregants who may be experiencing disruption from my ministry?
3. In what ways am I bravely preaching the gospel in spite of criticism and rejection? From where do I receive support when I am criticized or rejected?

The word politics comes from a Greek word **polis**, referring to the organizational structure of a group of people living in community together. Anytime a group of people organize themselves in a community, it's politics! As the Body of Christ, there are values that underlie the way we live together in community, same as in our towns, states, and country. Differences of opinion in the particulars of how we organize life together are expected, and can ultimately strengthen our communities when we build off the best ideas of many people.

## *Engage!*

Church leaders, especially administrative and P/SPRC leaders, often receive congregational concerns and criticism regarding the pastor. It takes a particular spiritual maturity to not allow yourself to be caught up in the emotion of these concerns, particularly if you, too, are feeling challenged!

Here is a process to adopt when a congregant voices concern to you about the pastor (or other paid staff).

1. Direct that person to speak directly to the pastor. Encourage them to seek clarity and understanding from the source rather than assuming ill-intent or incompatibility.
2. Model maturity, open-mindedness, and grace in your own reflections about the pastor. Speak with courage and love when you feel as though a fellow sibling in Christ is behaving poorly. Validate the emotions that they may feel, but do not give too much air-time to unfounded complaints or criticism. Focus instead on their ultimate goal (e.g., “I hear you saying that you want [fill in here—congregants to be respected, community members welcomed, whatever is the larger goal]. It is also helpful to have the complainant write down just the facts of what happened, without any inferences.
3. Remind congregants that neither P/SPRC committees, nor district superintendents, nor bishops will receive an anonymous complaint. If a church member is unwilling to own and speak to their concern by name, then it can go no further. Likewise, P/SPRC committees and conference leaders can receive individual concerns only, not petitions from groups.
4. If a P/SPRC committee receives a complaint about the pastor from someone unwilling to speak directly to the pastor, it should be acknowledged as received, the pastor should be informed, and the matter should be added to the agenda of the next P/SPRC meeting. If the committee decides that the concern has merit, then a course of action should be developed in consultation with the pastor. If the committee decides that the concern has no merit, the committee should return to the concerned person, thanking them for their input. **Remember that P/SPRC meetings are always closed sessions and confidentiality should be maintained by all members.**
5. If the pastor has been unfairly criticized or attacked by congregants or if congregants leave the congregation (for any reason), this is a wound that your pastor is carrying. P/SPRC committees should consider how they can support the pastor so that they do not bear this burden alone.

*“Bear one another’s  
burdens, and so fulfill  
the law of Christ.”*

*—Galatians 6:2*

*Before you begin your conversation, be sure to review your group covenant together!*

## Conversation #5:

# The Importance of a Sense of Agency for Pastoral Well-Being

The field of psychology has long shown us that the inability to exert influence over things that can adversely affect our lives can profoundly affect our mental health. A sense of agency can promote people's well-being and consequently substantially help one's mental health; it can foster motivation, hope and social harmony<sup>11</sup>. However, the lack of a sense of agency can create unpleasant outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and despair<sup>12</sup>.

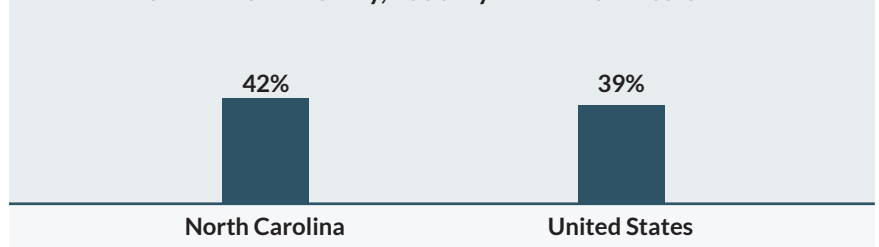
Nobody likes to feel that they have no choice or role in their own lives and in fact, our decisions can, to a certain degree, shape our lives<sup>12</sup>. A feeling of agency and control gives us motivation to act and allows us to regulate our own behaviors more successfully in line with our own values and calling<sup>13</sup>.

### Agency and Locus of Control:

Many UMC pastors in North Carolina and across the country report feeling that decisions that impact them and their families are made by their congregations without their consultation, pointing to a widespread issue.

We know that our pastors experience many blessings in the ministry. Not being consulted about decisions that affect their lives is one example of how pastors experience a lack of agency and sense of control. For example, living in church-provided housing, or when meetings or events are added to the church calendar with the expectation of the pastor's presence but without their consultation, pastors feel out of control. The process matters, and mutual involvement shows respect for agency and leads to increased trust and reduces frustration. Such demands are known to be a predictor of burnout among clergy<sup>14</sup>.

Percentage of pastors in 2021 who indicated that over the past six months, at least one ministry decision was made that affected them or their family, but they were not consulted.



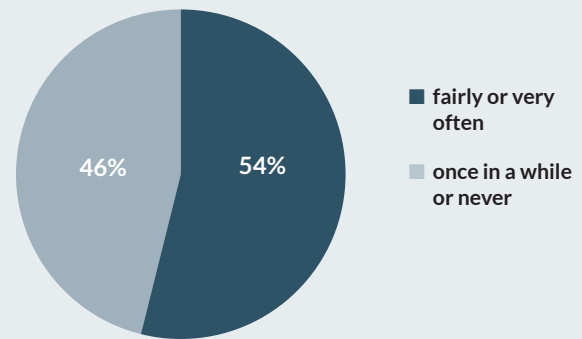
#### Church Size Matters

North Carolina clergy serving at churches with more than 100 members and those in urban location churches report 'more times' decisions were made that affect them or their family and they were not consulted.

## Stress:

About half of UMC pastors in North Carolina in 2021 reported often experiencing stress because of challenges they face in their job. Stress is commonplace and some degree of stress is healthy and expected. The problems with stress arise when it is high and enduring.<sup>15</sup>

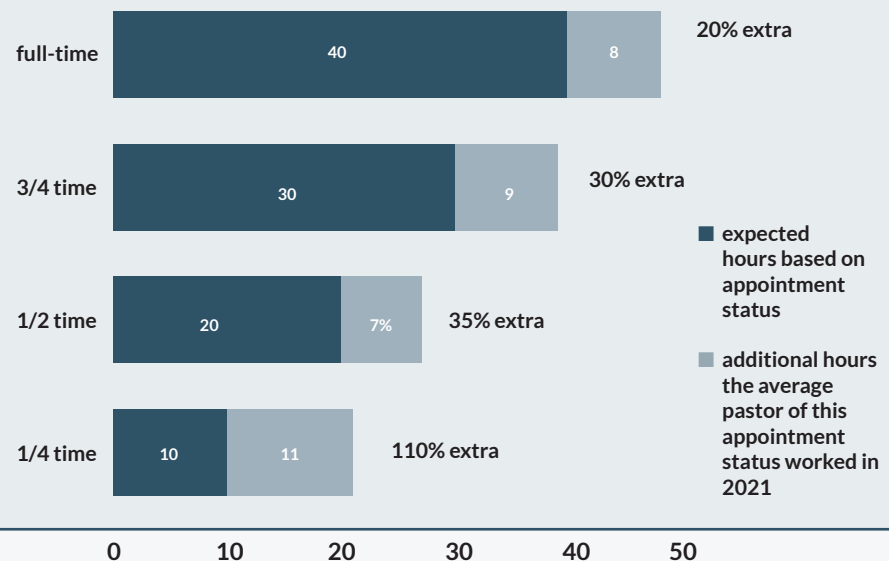
“Over the past year, how often have you experienced stress because of the challenges you have in this organization/congregation?”



## Work-Life Balance and Expectations from Congregations:

It is typical for clergy to work some amount of overtime. Given that most pastors already put in substantial overtime, as S/PRC committee members, you can work to help your pastor find a more sustainable rhythm by helping your pastor define their priorities based on your church’s mission and vision. When the P/SPRC works with pastors to prioritize their time and extends them grace to do less of a lower-priority task, it is important that the P/SPRC take responsibility for communicating this change in expectation to the congregation and defending the pastor if congregants complain.

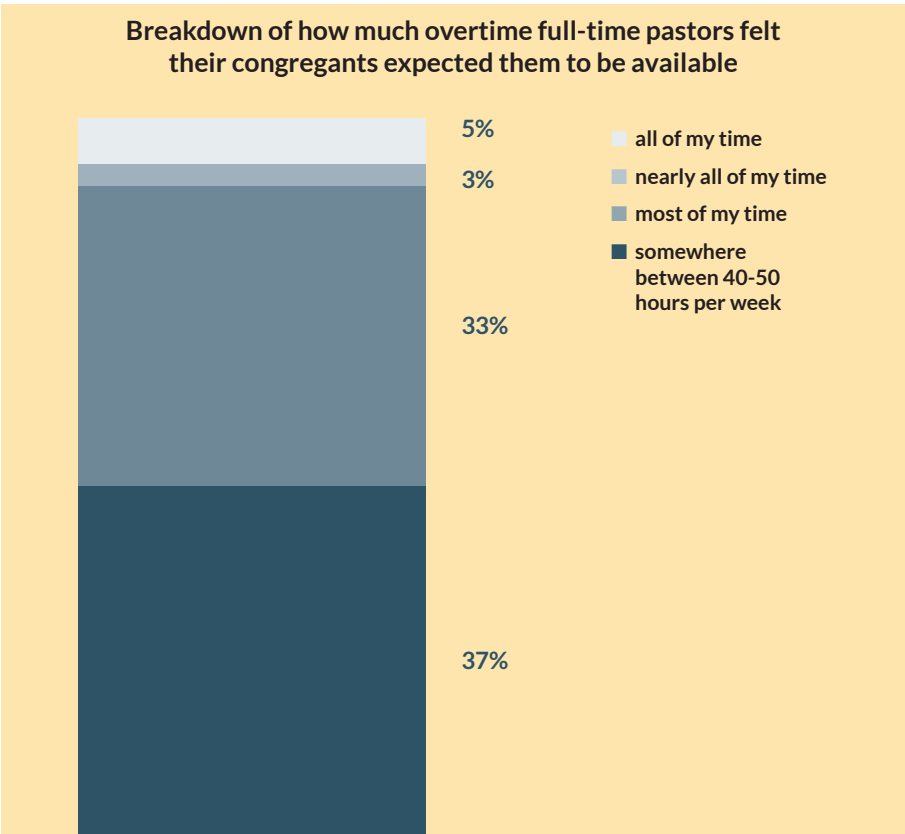
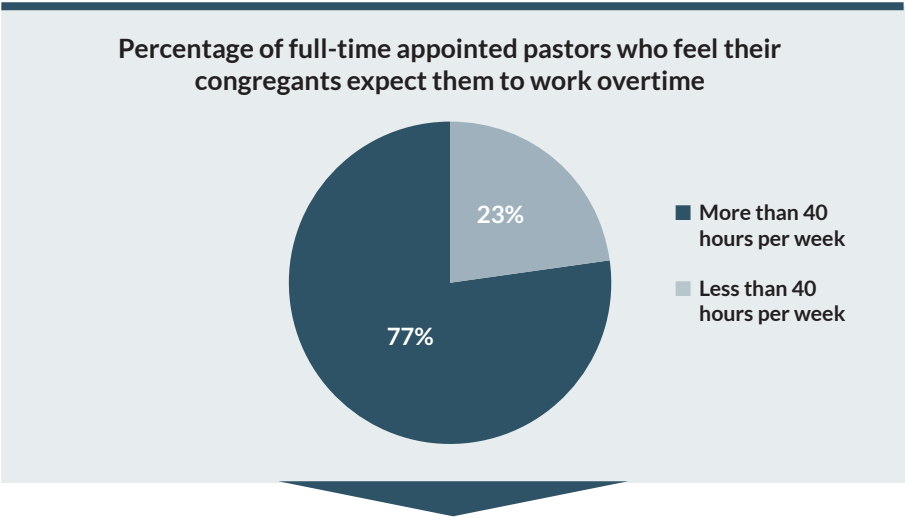
Average number of hours worked per week in 2021



# Conversation #5

## Pastor's Perception of Work Expectations:

Most full-time pastors believe their congregants expect more than full-time work.





## *Reflection and Resources*

**Dear Church,** We all know what it feels like to be out of control and without a sense of agency over the unfolding of our days and weeks. Pastors know that there will be times when their lives will be interrupted by unplanned events and crises in the life of congregants. Pastors recognize the honor of being invited into your lives on such occasions. On the other hand, it is possible for congregants to take advantage of the expectation that their pastors be available for their congregation 24/7. Well-intentioned decisions can have an adverse impact on a pastors' sense of agency, their ability to take care of their own physical and spiritual needs, and their family's well-being. Your pastor is a partner in ministry. In a true partnership, all partners' needs are considered. Please use the self-assessment questions listed here to ensure a strong partnership that values your pastor(s)' opinion and agency. You'll see that this work is needed from both clergy and lay leaders, in order to work together in partnership.

### *Questions for congregational self-assessment:*

1. How are decisions made by committees in our congregation? If decisions are made with the expectation that the pastor will be present, does our pastor have a voice in that decision-making process?
2. How many nights a week is our pastor expected to be away from home and engaged in church functions?
3. What boundaries have been set with church leaders and congregants about when and how our pastor(s) will be contacted or expected to respond to congregational demands? In what ways has the congregation been coached to respect the pastor's Sabbath day or vacation times? Have reasonable and mutually-agreeable expectations for email and phone responsiveness been set with both the pastor and the congregation?
4. When is it absolutely necessary for a pastor to interrupt their vacation or family time? What can wait? What can be delegated? Have the terms "emergency" and "crisis" been defined with our congregation?
5. Has the pastor's family been empowered to be part of decision-making that affects their lives? If our congregation provides housing to our pastor and their family, have we taken the time to understand both the gift and challenge of this situation for their family?
6. If our pastor does not have a family or children at home, do we have different implicit expectations about how often and how much they will be available to the congregation?



### *Questions for pastoral self-assessment:*

1. What boundaries have I clearly established with my congregation(s) about when and how I will be available for non-emergency requests and responses?
2. What practices, such as out of office replies and voicemail messages, am I using to communicate clearly these boundaries with my congregation?
3. With the exception of legitimate crises, where are the gaps between an “ideal” week and a “typical” week? What parts of these gaps are within my control to change? Are there unsustainable individual or congregational patterns that need to be addressed?
4. If a consequential decision or intrusive demand is made upon me without my consent, have I communicated this with the appropriate church leaders in hope of coming to a mutually agreeable solution or avoiding a similar occurrence in the future?
5. Am I taking the vacation time allotted to me by the Book of Discipline? Am I aware of the Book of Discipline guidelines regarding renewal leave?

### *Engage!*

The Book of Discipline does dictate a few congregational decisions that must be made by specific committees with up or down votes. However, the vast majority of decision-making that happens in the life of the congregation does not require this level of officiality. For these types of decisions, consider a consensus model for decision-making. Consensus-building requires that all stakeholders, including your pastor or pastor's spouse, who may not otherwise have a “vote” regarding a decision, engage in conversation until a workable solution is found for everyone involved.

Consensus-building works when you have a group of people who are committed to listening to one another, share a commitment to finding a positive outcome, and are willing to create a safe space for alternative opinions to be expressed.

*“We appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.”*

*—1 Thessalonians 5:12-13*



### A simple consensus-building process can look like this:

1. **Engage in discussion** about the decision to be made. Include stakeholders who may not be officially members of a committee but could be affected by the decision.
2. With a proposed decision, **ask** each stakeholder to assess regarding the idea if they:
  - a. **Like it!** (This means fully on board and ready to support the idea.)
  - b. **Can live with it.** (This means that it's not a first choice, but that the person would not undermine the idea moving forward.)
  - c. **Can't live with it.** (This means that a person cannot support the idea moving forward.)
3. **Allow** those who "Can't live with it" to share why and how they disagree with the idea. If a person can't live with an idea, they must be prepared to offer a potential solution to resolve their concern. If someone is going to block an idea from going forward, they may be required to meet with the committee later to develop solutions.
4. **Amend the idea and repeat steps 2 and 3** until all stakeholders either "Like" or "Can live with" a decision.

Learn more: A Practical Guide for Consensus-Based Decision Making<sup>16</sup>

## Conversation #6:

# The Importance of a Healthy Spiritual Life for Pastoral Well-Being

### Spiritual Well-being:

The spiritual well-being of pastors on average held steady between 2019 and 2021, which is remarkable given the COVID-19 pandemic and other events. Spiritual well-being among NC UMC clergy is relatively high, but there is still room for improvement.

Spiritual well-being consists of having a relationship with God that includes a vibrant sense of life purpose and meaning<sup>17</sup>. We know that spiritual well-being relates to both negative mental health (anxiety, depression, stress) and positive mental health (quality of life). Therefore, ensuring that pastors exhibit strong spiritual well-being in both everyday experiences and in ministry experiences is an important piece in supporting their mental health and well-being.

To measure spiritual well-being in the everyday, we asked pastors multiple questions, such as:

**During the past 6 months, how often have you...**

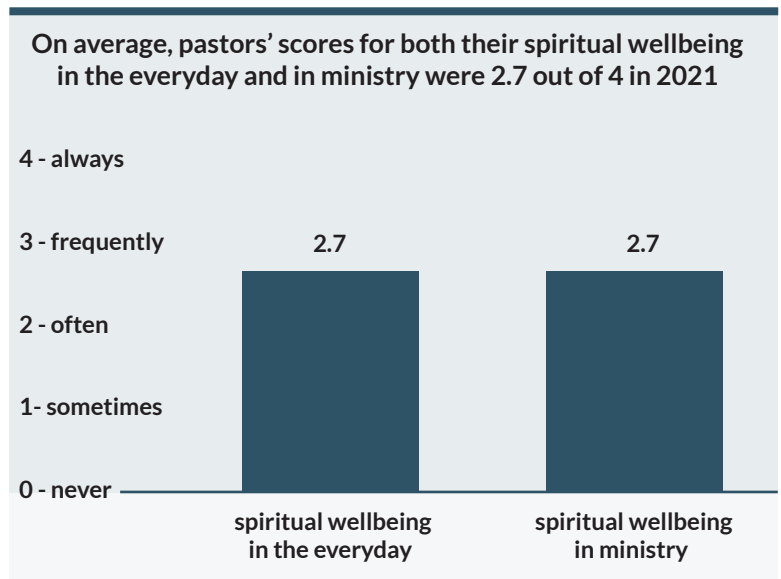
- Observed the presence and power of God in your closest relationships?
- Felt that events were unfolding according to God's intent?

Similarly, to measure spiritual well-being in ministry, we asked pastors multiple questions, such as:

**During the past six months, how often have you felt the presence and power of God...**

- When sharing in crisis intervention?
- When conducting pastoral visitations?

The average score in 2021 for both spiritual well-being in the everyday and in ministry was 2.7, which is somewhere between 2 (often) and 3 (frequently). Unlike anxiety and burnout scores, spiritual well-being scores in 2021 were not significantly worse compared to 2016 and 2019.

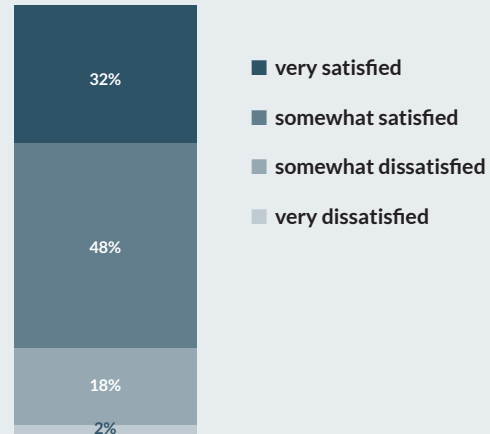




## Spiritual Life Satisfaction:

In 2021, most UMC clergy in North Carolina were somewhat or very satisfied with their spiritual lives, but 20% of clergy were still somewhat or very dissatisfied.

At the present, what is your current level of satisfaction with your spiritual life?

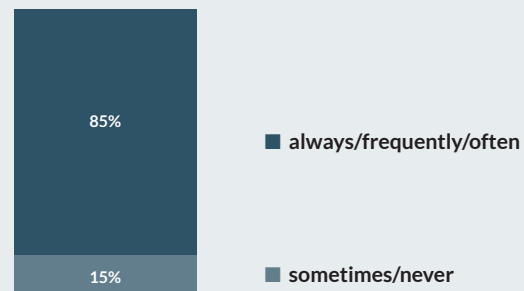


The percent of clergy who feel very satisfied with their spiritual lives has been declining since 2016 (38%) to 2021 (32%).

## Finding God in the Everyday:

While most UMC pastors in North Carolina felt the presence and power of God in the everyday in 2021, almost one in six pastors report only sometimes or never feeling the presence and power of God in the everyday.

During the past six months, how often have you experienced the presence and power of God in the everyday?





## Conversation #6

### Sabbath Keeping:

There are positive benefits of Sabbath-keeping, and over half of UMC clergy in North Carolina regularly keep a Sabbath (defined only as “an intentional Sabbath”).

Work-related stress is common in the United States and we know clergy are not immune to this phenomenon. We know that many clergy find their occupation stressful<sup>18</sup> and that stress may fuel mental health issues for clergy<sup>19,20</sup>. Sabbath-keeping makes it possible to experience a reprieve from the stressful circumstances clergy are accustomed to facing on a daily basis. We know that Sabbath-keeping relates to many positive benefits for clergy, such as increasing feelings of personal accomplishment, or the sense that the work we do matters, which is a key marker of burnout<sup>21</sup>. We also know that in one study UMC clergy in North Carolina who decreased their Sabbath-keeping reported worse anxiety symptoms and lower spiritual well-being<sup>21</sup>.

*In 2021, 57% of UMC clergy in North Carolina reported regularly keeping Sabbath.*

**In an intervention study examining the benefits of Sabbath-keeping<sup>21</sup>, it was found that:**

Increased frequency in Sabbath-keeping → increased feelings of personal accomplishment 3 months later

Decreased frequency in Sabbath-keeping → worse anxiety symptoms and lower spiritual well-being 3 months later





## *Reflection and Resources*

**Dear Church,** by attending to the details that ensure that congregants encounter the divine presence in worship, Bible study, or the hospital bedside, pastors' own spiritual nourishment can often take a back burner. When leading worship is your job, it's not always worshipful! Our longitudinal clergy studies have found that when clergy spiritual well-being is high, they are less likely to experience burnout or depressive symptoms a year later<sup>22</sup>. God is good—recognizing that goodness is protective. Of course, it doesn't come easily. Nourishing the spiritual life of the pastor so that they are able to nourish your congregation takes intentionality on the part of both the pastor and congregational leaders. The assessment questions posed here invite you to attend to the spiritual formation and nourishment of your pastor.

### *Questions for congregational self-assessment:*

1. Sabbath—a day in which we are freed from the burden of producing or performing in order to remember the sovereignty of God over our lives—is a commandment, not a suggestion. Sabbath is a reminder of our humility and it is God who sustains the universe rather than our efforts. What Sabbath practices do each of us keep?
2. What is our pastor's Sabbath practice? How might our congregation grow spiritually by ensuring that our pastor can keep this commandment (likely on a day other than Sunday)?
3. Does our pastor need encouragement or permission to use their vacation time? How does our congregation support the pastor to rest and/or take time away? How do we rest together?

### *Questions for pastoral self-assessment:*

1. If I struggle to take time away for my own spiritual nourishment, what are the barriers to making this happen?
2. Which of these barriers are external to me? How can I ask my congregation for support in removing these barriers?
3. Which of these barriers are internal? Who can I ask to support me in removing these barriers?
4. When do I feel most connected to the power and presence of the divine in my daily life and work? How could I get more of this?

*Note: Keeping Sabbath can be challenging because many things across the week must change to set aside a full day of rest. It may be that supporting your pastor to protect a half or full day for personal time other than Sabbath will pave the way for future Sabbath-keeping.*





## *Engage!*

Take some time for personal and congregational reflection on what Sabbath means for your personal and congregational well-being.

*Sabbath is that uncluttered time and space in which we can distance ourselves from our own activities enough to see what God is doing.*

—Eugene Peterson

*At least one day in every seven, pull off the road and park the car in the garage. Close the door to the toolshed and turn off the computer. Stay home, not because you are sick but because you are well. Talk someone you love into being well with you. Take a nap, a walk, an hour for lunch. Test the premise that you are worth more than you can produce – that even if you spent one whole day of being good for nothing you would still be precious in God's sight. And when you get anxious because you are convinced that this is not so – remember that your own conviction is not required. This is a commandment. Your worth has already been established, even when you are not working. The purpose of the commandment is to woo you to the same truth.*

—Barbara Brown Taylor



Thank you for the time you've given to these conversations. We hope that they have been fruitful for your work together as a committee. Our greatest hope as you complete these particular conversations is that you are walking away with a sense that how we do our work together is as important as what we are discussing. Growth and healing happen when we are open, curious, vulnerable, and patient.

### *How to Debrief this Guide*

- 1** Prior to gathering, invite participants to bring a reading to the group (a prayer, a poem, a note) as a way of offering a closing gratitude to the group.
- 2** Reread the adopted group covenant again. Invite participants to reflect on:
  - a. What stood out to you about how we gathered?
  - b. How did the covenants highlight our congregation's strengths?
  - c. How did the covenants highlight our growth edges?
  - d. How do we want to engage our covenants in conversations to come, both among this group and among the larger congregation?
- 3** Allow the pastor an opportunity to offer a word of closing gratitude.
- 4** Allow the committee members an opportunity to read their closing gritudes.
- 5** End with sharing signs of peace, or with another embodied ritual that feels right to you.

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*This is a new resource in 2023 and we are committed to adapting it according to the needs that arise from you, the users of it! We'd love to have your feedback with any comments, concerns, or questions on the resource as a whole or any individual conversation. Click [here](#) or scan the QR code.*



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