



# Lessons in Clergy Health

Seven Key Findings from 18 Years of Research with United Methodist Clergy

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# Duke Clergy Health Initiative

Since 2007, the Duke Clergy Health Initiative has sought to identify, test, and promote ways to improve the physical, mental, and spiritual health of United Methodist clergy in North Carolina.

We serve those who serve God, so that they can do their work with renewed energy, creativity, and insight.

We provide research-based recommendations and resources.

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*James B. Duke*

THE DUKE ENDOWMENT

# 1. Clergy Health is Holistic: Well-being Facets Reinforce Each Other

"May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through God's presence so that in every way you may be spirit, **ing both our souls and bodies,** blameless at the **both** in reaching out to others." R. 1Maddox 5.23

Weight Loss

Increase Physical Activity

+

+

+

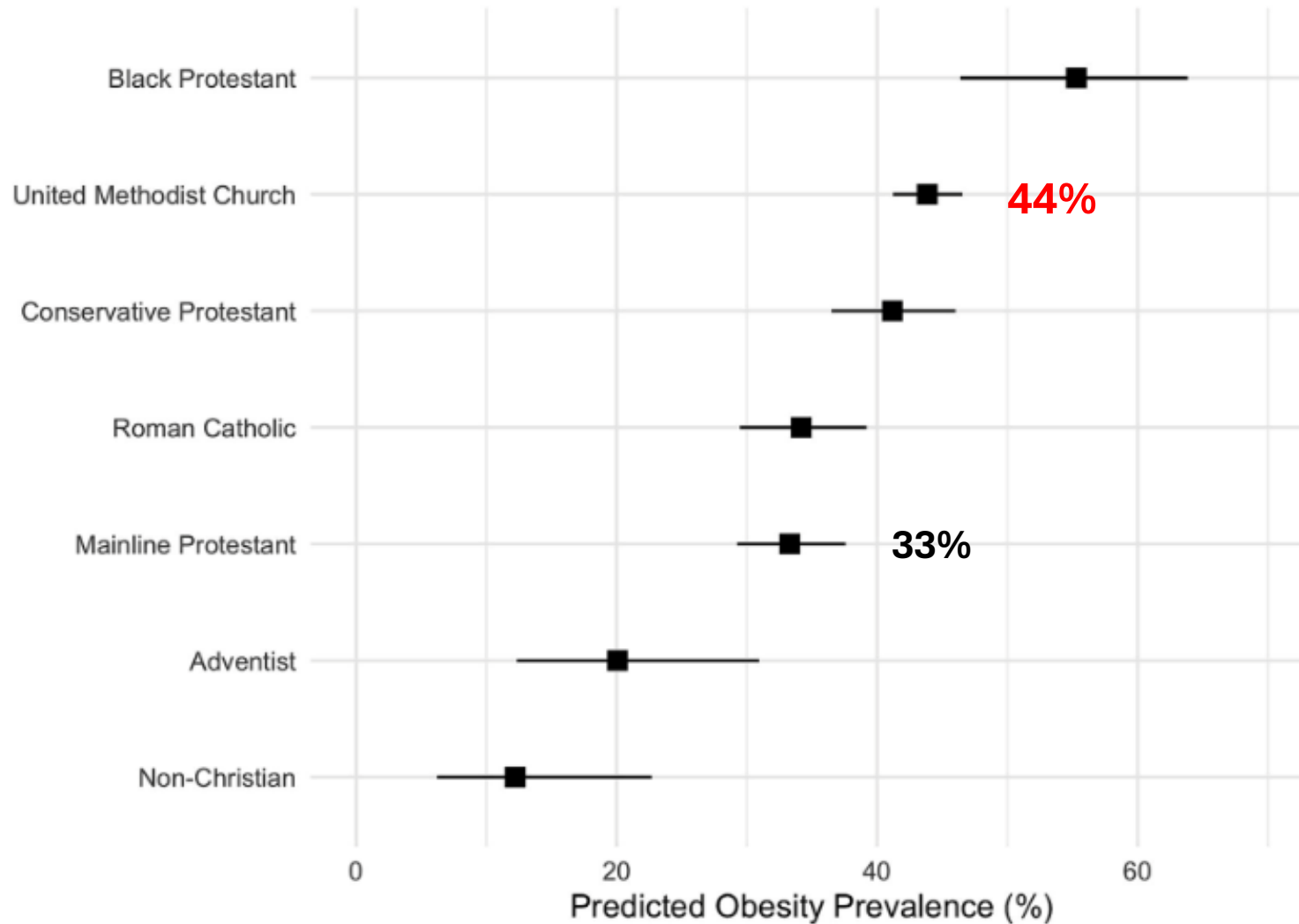
Improved Physical Health

Improved Mental Health

## 2. Obesity and Chronic Diseases Threaten Physical Health

Obesity is higher among UMC clergy than among clergy in other groups.

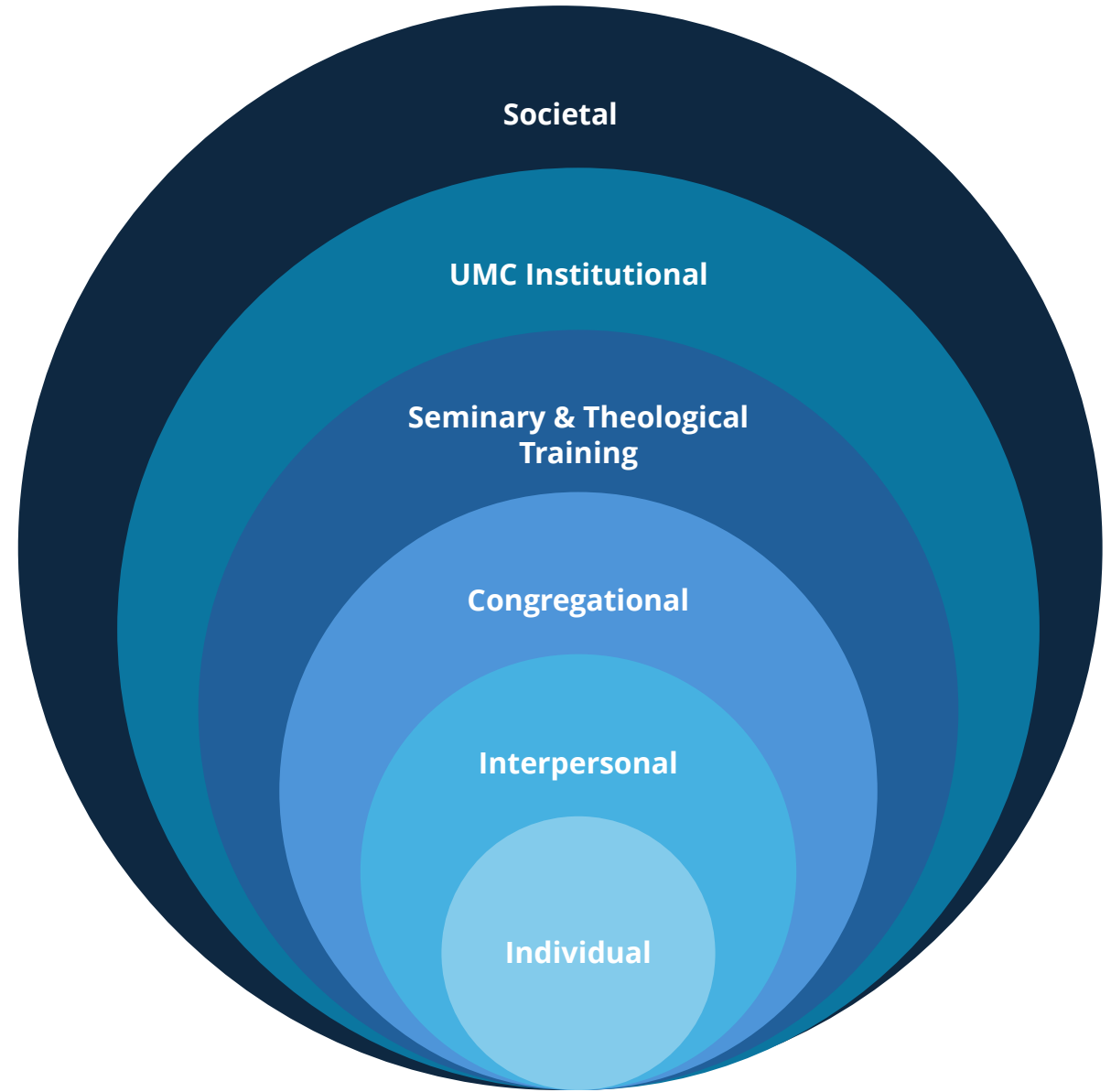
Estimated  
Prevalence of  
Obesity in Clergy  
in the US, 2022



Eagle, D., Holleman, A., Olvera, B. B., & Blackwood, E. (2024). Prevalence of obesity in religious clergy in the United States: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Obesity Reviews*, 25(7), e13741.

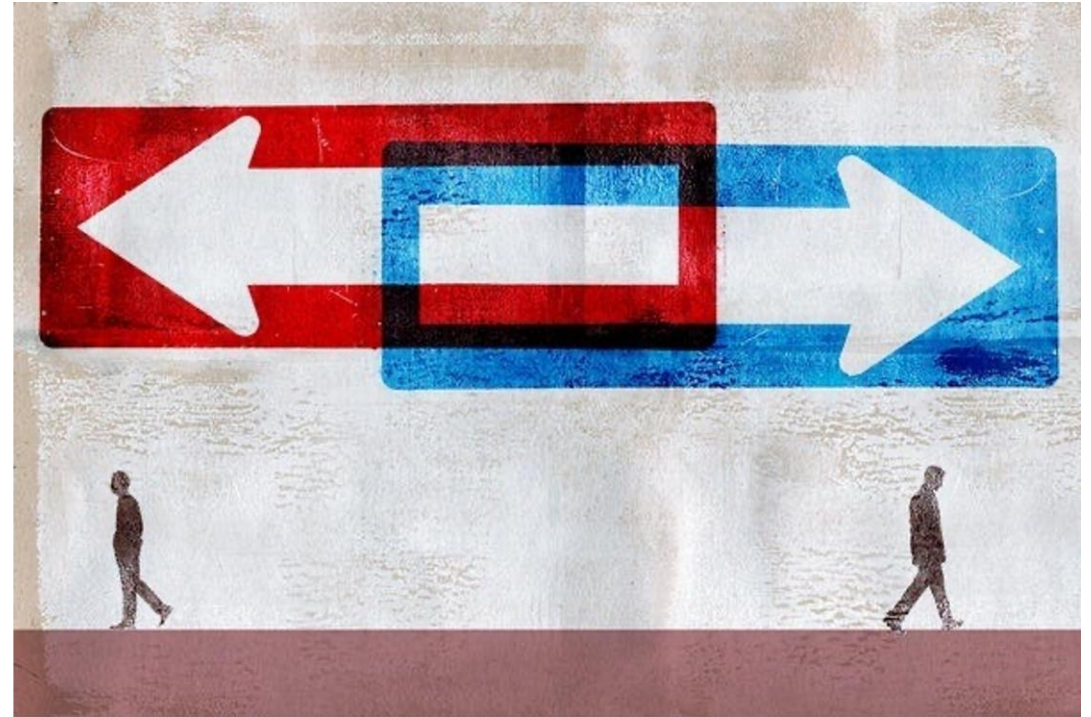
### 3. Working Across Multiple Social and Ecological Levels Improves Wellbeing

Working across these levels is most effective for improving health.



# 4. Our Social Environment is Degrading Wellbeing

Denominational decline and political polarization contribute to poor mental health in UM clergy.



**“The church is not simply an aging, failing institution; it is the dawn of the new creation.”**

*-Edgardo Colon-Émeric*

<https://faithandleadership.com/the-headlines-reinforce-babel-we-are-pentecost>

**"I just don't think I can pastor a Republican congregation. I just find them impossible to love."**

*-Summer field education student*

# 5. Multiple Sources of Social Support Are Crucial for Thriving

Strong family, congregational, and peer relationships support clergy wellbeing.

## 6. Clergy-wide Vibe-shifts Help!



# 7. Clergy Can Flourish and Flourishing Builds on Itself

Positive experiences are self-reinforcing and build clergy resilience over time.

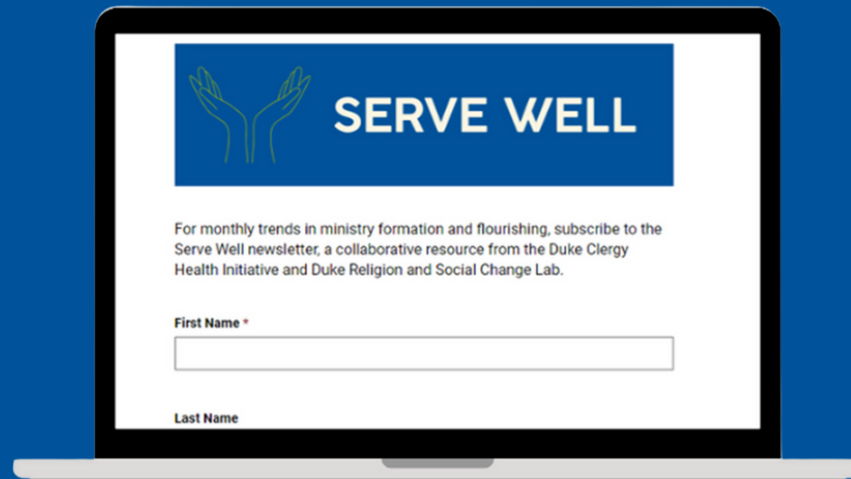
# Recap

- 1. Health is holistic**
- 2. Obesity and chronic diseases threaten physical health**
- 3. Work across multiple ecological levels**
- 4. Our social environment is degrading our wellbeing**
- 5. Multiple sources of social support are crucial**
- 6. Clergy-wide vibe-shifts help**
- 7. Clergy can flourish, and flourishing builds on itself**

# Duke

CLERGY & RELIGION  
RESEARCH COLLABORATIVE

Every month, we share trends in ministry formation and flourishing so that however you serve—seminarian, clergy, researcher, educator, or administrator—you can serve well.



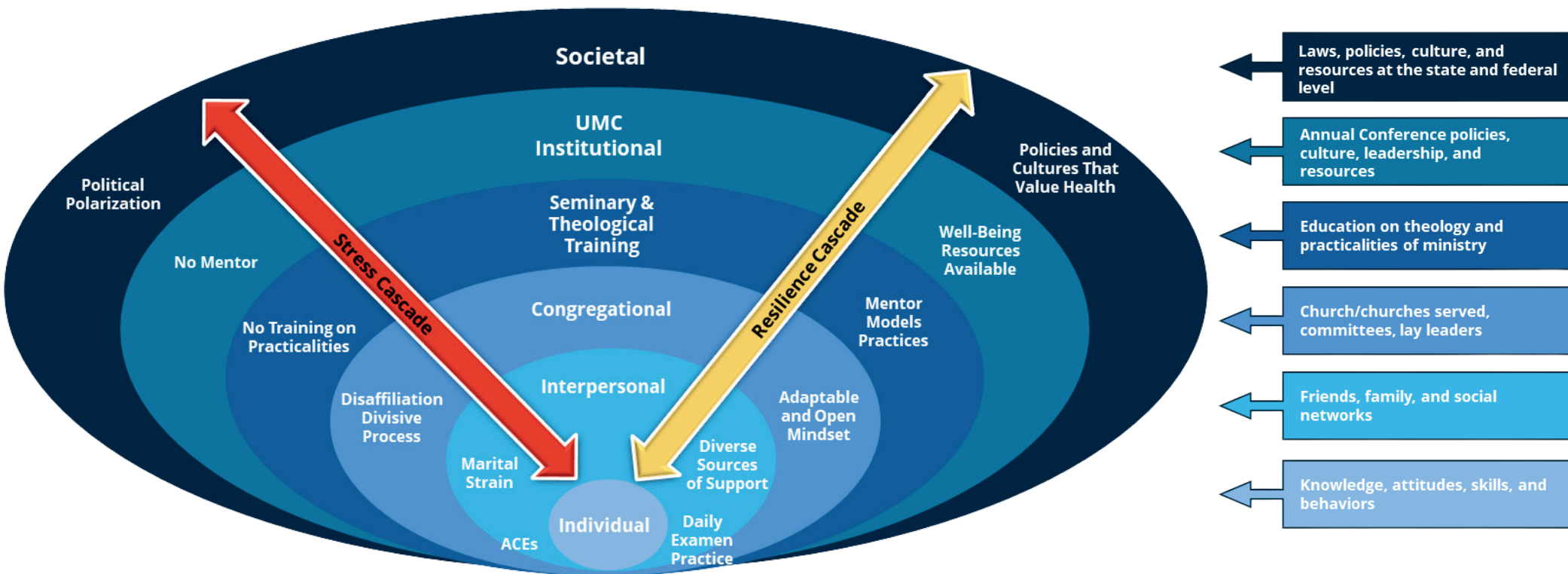
The image shows a laptop screen displaying a sign-up form for the 'SERVE WELL' newsletter. At the top, there is a blue header with a white icon of two hands holding each other and the text 'SERVE WELL'. Below the header, there is a paragraph of text: 'For monthly trends in ministry formation and flourishing, subscribe to the Serve Well newsletter, a collaborative resource from the Duke Clergy Health Initiative and Duke Religion and Social Change Lab.' Underneath this text are two input fields: 'First Name \*' with a red asterisk and a white text box, and 'Last Name' with a white text box.



<https://clergyreligionresearch.duke.edu>

# The Ecology of Clergy Well-Being: A Multiple-Level, Data-Driven Approach

Since 2007, the Duke Clergy Health Initiative and the Religion and Social Change Lab have partnered with United Methodist Church (UMC) clergy in North Carolina to understand and improve their holistic health through biennial statewide surveys, periodic focus groups and interviews, and two large behavioral intervention trials that included biometric data. The data reveals factors related to well-being, listed on the back. These factors are organized using the Sociological Framework seen here, adapted for the social, community, and institutional levels in which clergy are embedded.



# Data-Driven Factors of Clergy Well-Being

## INDIVIDUAL: STRESS FACTORS

- Work stress
- Financial stress
- Depression and anxiety symptoms drive future distress
- BMI related to future depression

## INDIVIDUAL: RESILIENCE FACTORS

- Minimizing reactions to stress (mindfulness and Daily Examen practices)
- Process orientation to ministry
- Protected personal time
- Physical activity benefits mental health
- Positive mental health and spiritual well-being protects against future distress
- Better physical health
- Perceived emotional support

## INTERPERSONAL

- More diverse sources of support
- Feeling cared for by congregants
- Spousal support
- Strained marriages
- Isolation at work

## CONGREGATIONAL

- Adaptable/open churches
- Expressing care for clergy
- Managing conflict
- Church morale
- Life unpredictability
- Negotiating pastor's time
- Communication & trust

## SEMINARY & THEOLOGICAL TRAINING

- Observing healthy mentors
- Supportive field education
- Trying out coping strategies
- Linking faith identity to health

## UMC INSTITUTIONAL

- Well-being resources
- Itinerancy – stress & growth
- Mentoring during ordination
- Health encouragement

## SOCIETAL

- Shrinking churches
- Political polarization
- Higher BMI in rural areas
- Lower BMI in northern US
- Fewer financial resources in rural areas
- Racial health disparities

**Resilience** is a process of growth in the midst of adversity that results in long-term, increased well-being. It is not an end state or a trait.

- Resilience requires ongoing practices to foster growth in challenging circumstances.
- The process of resilience involves growing and learning.
- Thus, the 'bouncing back' analogy falls short – one is ultimately transformed and has new wisdom and capabilities.

Better health outcomes are achieved by working across multiple levels.

# Lessons in UMC Clergy Well-Being From 18 Years of Research

1

## CLERGY HEALTH IS HOLISTIC: WELL-BEING FACETS REINFORCE EACH OTHER

- Improving mental, physical, or spiritual well-being will improve the other kinds of well-being

2

## OBESITY AND CHRONIC DISEASES THREATEN PHYSICAL HEALTH

- UMC clergy have higher obesity rates than clergy in other denominations

3

## WORKING ACROSS MULTIPLE SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL LEVELS CAN IMPROVE WELL-BEING

- Intervene on more than one level
- Levels: individual, interpersonal, congregational, seminary and theological training, UMC institutional, and societal

4

## OUR SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT IS DEGRADING WELL-BEING

- Political polarization
- Shrinking congregations and financial resources

5

## MULTIPLE SOURCES OF SOCIAL SUPPORT ARE CRUCIAL FOR THRIVING

- Emotional support from spouses is essential for ministry satisfaction
- Feeling loved and cared for by congregants is helpful for mental health
- Other sources: peer clergy, mentors, family, and friends

6

## CLERGY-WIDE VIBE SHIFTS HELP

- Clergy leaders can give permission for time spent on well-being
- Social norms around care

7

## CLERGY CAN FLOURISH AND FLOURISHING BUILDS ON ITSELF

- Over 40% of UMC clergy in NC have high positive mental health and low depression, anxiety, and burnout
- Flourishing status protects against distress in future years
- Clergy with mixed profiles of moderate positive mental health and moderate depression, anxiety, and burnout are at risk of high future distress
- Therefore, it is important to intervene not just with currently distressed clergy, but also those with increasing symptoms