Economic Challenges Facing Pastoral Leaders:
Report on NEI Planning Grant Research, 2015-2016

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That pastoral leaders in the United States face economic challenges in the current economy and through their unique occupational status is without question. The extent and parameters of these challenges, however, have been unclear and primarily based on hunches and anecdotal stories. In 2015 and 2016, 31 denominational agencies and judicatories conducted original research into the issue as part of the Lilly Endowment’s National Economic initiative (summaries of the various projects are attached). The goal of the research was to point to potential solutions and strategies to address these challenges across denominational contexts among various populations of clergy. In this report, we analyze survey data and other research from over 25,000 pastoral leaders and include reactions and interpretations from research professionals and experts at a conference held in Indianapolis in April 2017.

The research conducted by the various denominational agencies and organizations is by no means uniform in terms of approach, questions, and research methodology. There is no single research instrument that was used, although some surveys used identical or similar questions to get at key issues such as salary, debt, savings, benefits, and financial training. In some cases, questions on denominational surveys mirror items that were also included in governmental occupational surveys or polls conducted by financial institutions. Where possible, denominational data are compared to national statistics. Data are reported for a variety of denominations, but are necessarily restricted by the quality and similarity of the questions asked. In addition, some denominational data allowed breakdowns by demographic characteristics (gender, age, etc.) and congregational items (size, location, etc.), as well as by occupational status (ordination status, church position, years in ministry, etc.). Such surveys were used to identify the parameters of financial challenges facing clergy but were not available from most of the research projects. Still, this kind of analysis is important because financial challenge is not evenly distributed across denominations, churches, and populations of clergy.

Clergy Income

Nationally, pastoral leader salaries are relatively low compared to most other professional occupations. Indeed, there are very few occupations that are classified as “professional” in federal labor statistics that have an income profile comparable to clergy. And there are even fewer professional occupations that combine predominantly high levels of education with relatively low median income. Clergy salaries are somewhat higher than for the general population age 25 or older (in terms of the median, but not in terms of the average, salary). As shown in Figure 1 below, the median clergy salary in 2015 was $45,000; whereas the median salary for all working adults was only $37,000. However, the average clergy salary was $49,000 as compared to $50,000 for the general population—due to the higher range of salaries in the general population, and the relatively restricted salary range among clergy (since few earn very large salaries). Clergy who earn at the 75th percentile make $61,000, which puts the incomes of higher-earning clergy only slightly above the median income level of elementary school teachers.¹
Clergy salaries are sometimes compared to social workers and counselors in terms of education and income. The median healthcare social worker earns $54,000 as compared to $45,000 for a clergyperson. Both clergy and social workers are overwhelmingly college educated but clergy have a much higher proportion of doctoral degrees. Even with the educational advantage for clergy, social workers tend to earn more. Counselors and licensed practical nurses are among the few other professional occupations where salaries are comparable to clergy and all have median incomes around $45,000. Counselors also have a high education profile, with even more college graduates than is the case among clergy. So, this is one profession that shares both low median salary and high education. Licensed practical nurses are the least educated among all types of nurses, and they have the lowest salaries which are about the same as clergy salaries. Technical occupations like licensed practical nurses, dental hygienists, and tax preparers have median salary levels comparable to clergy.\(^2\)

Elementary school teachers and elementary school administrators are both typically highly educated and earn considerably more than clergy. The median elementary school teacher typically earns over $10,000 more than a clergyperson and an elementary school principal earns more than twice the salary of a clergyperson. Lawyers are compared to clergy in Figure 1 because clergy and lawyers were once comparable in status and salary, albeit during the early years of the United States. Today, however, the median salary for lawyers is over $110,000 and the average salary is almost $140,000. As a credentialed profession with strict educational rules about who can practice law, almost all persons who call themselves lawyers have an advanced professional degree (JD or LLM) and earn much more than clergy.

Figure 1. Education by Selected Occupations and in the General Population Age 25+ (with median income): 2016

Most American clergy are not particularly well paid and can be considered barely middle class. This was not always the case. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the status of the ministerial profession was quite high, and clergy, who were among the most educated Americans, ranked above
lawyers and physicians socially. Clergy were paid accordingly, typically by the community rather than by the members of a congregation. For many reasons, including the breakdown of the religious establishment system which taxed residents for church support, the lack of economic leverage compared to most other occupations, and changing wage-related assumptions of local church leaders, the relative economic status of clergy declined from a very high position to its current state. Hudnut-Beumler traces the decline in economic status using income data from the Methodists, Presbyterians, and the Census Bureau and shows that although clergy salaries increased over time, they declined relative to other occupations and even lost ground in constant dollars during several economic crises, never really regaining their previous position. 3

As in the seventeenth century, most clergy are highly educated today. This situation, in and of itself, may not constitute a large economic challenge if congregations and clergy expect and accept that their pastoral leaders earn lower-middle class wages. What makes this situation more complicated, however, are the facts that clergy minister to congregations where members may earn more; they struggle to pay off student loans that made ordination status possible and try to obtain housing in or near the community where they serve, which may be beyond their means. It is a situation in which some clergy do well, or well enough, but many others are struggling financially. Many pastoral leaders commented on their surveys that no one ever went into the ministry to get rich. At the same time, most also did not expect to be living paycheck to paycheck, just scraping by, putting off needed purchases, postponing medical procedures, or depending on tips given after services to put food on the table. Yet there are clergy that are living in tenuous financial circumstances and doing so is clearly a challenge that affects their ability to serve.

**Factors Affecting Salary and Contributing to Economic Challenges**

**Denomination.** Religious bodies have different norms for clergy salaries. To a certain extent such variation is due to the relative income levels and giving patterns in local congregations. Larger congregations with wealthier constituents can afford to pay pastoral leaders more and some have multiple staff. Also, congregations in denominations with higher norms for contributions will have larger budgets as compared to similarly-sized churches in denominations with lower norms for giving. In general, clergy associated with the Protestant Mainline tend to have higher median income than conservative, evangelical Protestant congregations. The median income (salary and housing allowance) for full-time clergy in the Episcopal Church was $75,355 in 2015 and in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) it was $58,471 ($63,000 for full time calls). 4 There is, of course, great regional variation in clergy salaries, with Episcopal dioceses ranging from $56,000 in western Pennsylvania to $98,000 in Hawaii. The typical Greek Orthodox priest also tends to have an income much higher than the national median for clergy. Over half of Greek Orthodox priests earn over $77,000 per year. By contrast, the median salary for Assemblies of God clergy was $42,351 in 2015 and the average salary for clergy in the Church of the Nazarene was $41,747. 5

Mainline Protestant bodies and other denominations with a strong denominational or judicatory structure tend to have policies regarding minimum salaries or at least accepted guidelines for what full-time clergy should be paid. For instance, in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, pastors in their first call receive approximately $54,000—in line with denominational guidelines. In the Greek Orthodox Church, the minimum compensation in 2016 is $51,120 for priests with up to 5 years of service with the high end of the 5-year service range at $69,240. 5 However, it should be noted that not all Greek
Orthodox churches (or churches in other denominations with salary guidelines or minimum salaries) pay their priests according to guidelines, resulting in income disparity and low wages in small, less affluent congregations.

A conservative denomination with a more centralized denominational structure, the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) gives compensation benchmarks to all congregations resulting in a rather flat salary structure in which the lowest salary quartile is 87% of the median. Few full-time CRCNA pastors command very large salaries. Due to the expected minimum salary, the overall compensation for full-time clergy including housing allowance is around $75,000.6 This figure, however, does not include part-time clergy or Commissioned Pastors. Even so, the median full-time compensation for a CRCNA Minister of the Word is higher than the median for full-time clergy in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

**Intervening Sources of Salary Difference.** Within a given salary range, there are persons towards the top and those nearer the bottom. So regardless of the overall adequacy of clergy salaries and compensation in a denomination, there are those for whom the economic challenge is greater than for others. Here we consider ordination status, church size, gender, employment status, years in ministry (and age), and race/ethnicity from denominational surveys.

**Ordination Status.** Some denominations, but by no means all, have an ordination hierarchy that greatly affects the salaries of pastors. In the Christian Reformed Church in North America, for example there is a two-tiered system consisting of Ministers of the Word (82% of clergy) and Commissioned Pastors. If full-time, a Minister of the Word is automatically in the pension system and earns much more, on average, than does a Commissioned Pastor. Ministers of the Word are almost all seminary trained. Commissioned Pastors are not seminary trained. They are currently excluded from the pension system (even if full-time) and typically earn considerably less than Ministers of the Word. The United Methodist Church includes three categories of ministerial service. Elders are ordained clergy with seminary training. Deacons are ordained clergy who typically serve in ministry situations beyond the local church or who serve congregations in specialized ministries, rather than in a pastoral role. Local Pastors are not ordained, but instead are licensed to preach, conduct worship, and perform the duties as a pastor. As is the case with CRCNA Commissioned Pastors, this licensed status is associated with lower income. The number and proportion of local pastors serving United Methodist congregations is increasing, in part because of the cost of seminary education and because small congregations have limited ability to pay their pastors. The Episcopal Church has an ordination track through several seminaries that produces priests ordained specifically for bi-vocational calls. In each case, clergy leaders and pastors in these denominations earn less than those who have what might be called “full ordained status.” The presence of these lower income categories results in reduced overall median incomes for the denomination. Although they represent educational and occupational choices, the situation is one where some clergy are by definition, underemployed, and likely to be struggling financially unless they have access to other financial resources.

**Employment Status.** Employment status has a more pervasive impact on salary differential than ordination status. Many clergypersons serve part-time calls (in varying configurations of percentage of full-time pay: ¼; ½; ¾ etc.). Typically, although the pay is part-time, the work load is closer to full-time except for supply clergy who may only preach on Sunday. To earn a living, part-time clergy usually have more than one job, or they have a spouse with a full-time income.
For the most part, bi-vocational clergy serve in churches that cannot afford to pay a full-time salary. They may be essentially full-time in terms of the number of hours spent serving a church, but in terms of salary from the church they receive part-time wages. Some denominations report bi-vocational (or even tri-vocational) employment status among their clergy. Others report only full-time, part-time, or unpaid (non-stipendiary) clergy employment. In the Mennonite Church, both statuses are recognized: 23% of pastors are part-time and 19% are bi-vocational. In the Church of God, Anderson, Indiana, 27% of clergy are bi-vocational and another 6% are tri-vocational. Among Assemblies of God (AG) clergy, 74% serve full-time calls. For the rest, the largest proportion (16%) identified as bi-vocational with other clergy (10%) being part-time, paid or full or part-time, unpaid. So, for AG clergy employment status issues include the level of work and pay and whether the person has another job. The proportion of bi-vocational clergy is highest among the African American clergy that are part of the DeWitt Proctor Conference, where 54% indicated that they worked an additional job to help supplement their church income. For most denominations conducting surveys for the National Economic Initiative (NEI), the percentage of part-time or bi-vocational clergy was at least 15%. In some denominations, it was difficult for church agencies to determine the actual percentage of part-time clergy without a survey because congregations do not necessarily report the status of their pastors unless the person is paid a full-time salary and are thus billed for a pension, annuity, or medical insurance. This is the case for the Episcopal Church, where 27% of paid clergy were part-time in 2015 but most were unidentified as part-time church employees by the agency that records clergy status.\footnote{A large proportion of part-time and bi-vocational clergy necessarily decreases the median or average income of clergy in a denomination. And to the extent that clergy depend primarily on their church wages to live, part-time status means that some clergy are severely underemployed. Being part-time or bi-vocational with a part-time salary from a congregation also has problematic effects for clergy in terms of benefits, over and above the simple ability to save enough from their salaries. Frequently denominations have a salary threshold below which a congregation is not obligated to pay for retirement and health benefits. Obviously, this is only an issue in denominations that actually offer such benefits. In the Christian Reformed Church in North America a part-time Minister of the Word can participate in the retirement system, but only if the congregation pays the same assessment as full-time clergy in a church of the same size. In the Episcopal Church, congregations are simply not billed for retirement and medical insurance for their part-time clergy. Of course, some part-time clergy are retirees who are already receiving retirement income and Medicare, and others rely on benefits from outside employment instead of those from the church. But for many others, and particularly for those without spouses earning larger salaries, part-time status leads to a benefit gap that may be difficult to fill. }

\textbf{Gender.} Not all denominations have female clergy, but for those that do, women tend to have lower salaries than men. In the Episcopal Church, for instance, the median salary for full-time male clergy is $80,000, while the median salary for females is $68,000.\footnote{In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the median compensation for men is $65,000 and $57,000 for women and 58% of women clergy earned $60,000 or less, as compared to only $37% of men. In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), 43% of female clergy earn less than $40,000, as compared to only 28% of the men. Among American Baptist pastors, women were more likely to be bi-vocational and to experience financial stress. Across denominations, women are more likely to be part-time, employed as assistants or associates in multi-staff churches, and serve in smaller congregations. Figure 2 shows that in the}
Episcopal Church, women are disproportionately represented in smaller churches and in associate level positions. The larger the church, the less likely it is to have a woman serving as their senior or solo priest. Clergy who are part-time, bi-vocational, in associate level positions or in smaller churches tend to be paid less, so the fact that women are disproportionately found in these lower paid situations contributes to their lower income situations.

**Figure 2. Percent Female Clergy by Church Size (Attendance) and Position in the Episcopal Church: 2015**

An analysis of United Methodist clergy showed that years in the ministry explained most of the income differential between males and females, and fewer years in the ministry might well be associated with serving in associate level positions and in smaller congregations. However, since women’s ordination is not a new phenomenon in most denominations that ordain women, it is also quite likely that more women than men find that it is difficult to get a position other than in a small church (and possibly a part-time call) or as an associate in a larger, multi-staff church. Analysis of data from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) does not support the tenure in ministry-gender-income connection, nor does data from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. When controlling for years served in the ELCA by only looking at clergy ordained in the last 5 years, men made $8,000 more than women. The evidence suggests that salaries for women are lower than men, on average, during the early years of ministry service and the disparity tends to continue. So, the intervening effects of tenure on the gender pay disparity among United Methodists may be a result of a connectional system where most clergy are assigned pastorates and where years in the system matter more than gender. Open-ended survey comments from female clergy also point to many instances where male clergy were offered more money than female clergy for the same position.

**Race/Ethnicity.** Given the income disparities involving race and ethnicity in the United States, it is not surprising that African American, Hispanic and other clergy of color tend to report lower income in
the surveys that allowed racial/ethnic breakdowns. One difficulty in dealing with surveys on questions of race/ethnicity is that in predominantly White denominations the number of non-Caucasian clergy included in the sample was too small to analyze as separate groups. So, all we have is a Caucasian/clergy of color comparison. Nevertheless, the results are consistent.

In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), 59% of clergy of color earn less than $40,000, as compared to only 20% of White clergy. In the Christian Reformed Church in North America, Black, Hispanic and Asian clergy are much more likely to be Commissioned Pastors or bi-vocational than are White clergy. Both occupational status categories tend to have lower income in the CRCNA. In addition, clergy of color are much more likely to pastor small churches (50 or less in average worship attendance) and churches with lower congregational income. All these factors result in lower income for non-White clergy in the Christian Reformed Church. It follows that racial/ethnic minority clergy in the CRCNA are much more likely to be concerned about their salary and much less likely to be satisfied with it (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Satisfaction with Base Salary by Clergy Race: CRCNA**

Only one research project was administered to a population of clergy that was not predominantly Caucasian. In this case, the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference conducted their survey among Black pastors. The results cannot be directly compared to other denominations due to question wording, but they do suggest greater economic challenges for Black pastors. Only 33% of survey respondents felt “fairly and adequately compensated as a professional” and 67% say they have “particular financial stress” at the present time. By contrast, 67% of local church clergy in the CRCNA are very satisfied or satisfied with their base salary, 54% of ELCA clergy agree that “my compensation meets my financial needs,” and only 16% of Church of the Nazarene clergy say their financial situation is in some or serious difficulty. In most of the predominantly White denominations, half or more of clergy are satisfied with their income and the majority do not feel great financial stress. Among Black, Hispanic, and other racial/ethnic minority pastors in these denominations, the situation is reversed.
**Church Size and Congregational Income.** Smaller churches have fewer financial resources and tend to pay their clergy less than larger congregations. Not surprisingly, the pastors of smaller congregations experience greater financial challenges than do pastors of larger churches. Yet small churches with 50 or less in average worship attendance are a large percentage of the congregations in most Protestant denominations and are becoming more prevalent in many. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, for instance, 37% of congregations were very small (attendance of 50 or less) in 2015, up from 22% in 2000; in the Episcopal Church, 45% of congregations were similarly small in 2015, up from 33% in 2000. In other denominations, the percentage of very small congregations varies greatly, from only 9% of Christian Reformed congregations to 43% of churches in the Church of God, Cleveland, Tennessee. In most denominations, the percentage of churches with 100 or less in average attendance is close to or greater than 50%. The effect of small size on clergy salaries can be seen in ELCA congregations. The median clergy compensation in these congregations is $49,456, as compared to $59,800 in churches with 100 to 200 in attendance and $70,007 for those with attendance of 201 to 350. Since the median revenue of the smallest churches was only $61,826 it is likely that many of these small, less wealthy churches cannot afford full-time clergy and are relying on part-time, retired, or supply clergy.

In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), 49% of clergy in congregations with average attendance of less than 100 earn less than $40,000, as compared to only 13% of clergy in churches with attendance of 100-199 and 1.5% of clergy in churches 200 or larger. Even more extreme is the relationship between church budget and clergy salary. Among churches with revenue of less than $100,000, 79% of clergy earn less than $40,000 and over half (56%) earn less than $30,000. Only 6% of clergy in congregations with income of $100,000 to $249,999 and 5% of clergy in congregations with incomes of $250,000 or more earn less than $30,000.

**Figure 4. Clergy Income by Church Budget (Disciples of Christ)**
Since salaries are lower, it is not surprising that clergy in smaller congregations are much less satisfied with their incomes than clergy in larger congregations. Figure 5 shows the relationship between congregation size and satisfaction with salary in the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

**Figure 5. Satisfaction with Salary by Size of Church: CRCNA**

Retirement is a serious financial concern for most Americans. Defined benefit plans in the form of pensions are increasingly rare and have been largely replaced by defined contribution plans, such as 401K and 403B accounts, which gain value from the contributions of employers and individuals, and gain (or lose) value from investment returns. But not all workers, including clergy, are under a retirement plan to which employers contribute substantially. So, they must save and invest on their own initiative, reducing their current income level by salary reductions or a regular savings strategy—something that many Americans have difficulty doing. Social Security is the only active retirement plan for large numbers of Americans, and in the case of all clergy and many government workers, participation in Social Security is optional.

In most surveys conducted by projects in the National Economic Initiative, retirement saving is the most serious financial concern expressed by clergy, even though the possibility of retirement may be somewhat abstract to many younger clergy. This is true even for clergy in denominations that offer retirement plans. Among Greek Orthodox priests (who have a defined benefit pension plan), for instance, 70% indicated that they were concerned about the adequacy of their projected sources of retirement income but were not sure how to figure it out. Among Assemblies of God lead pastors, 91% indicated that retirement savings is a significant stressor in their lives. In the Evangelical Covenant Church, 84% of clergy indicated that saving for retirement was a significant financial hurdle—higher than any other financial issue. For Mennonite clergy, 75% indicated that retirement planning was a serious
financial concern, as compared to 43% for health insurance, and 38% for college education for children. Retirement looms in the future, becoming a source of worry and concern but for many clergy, figuring out what they will need in retirement and whether their plan(s) and/or savings will be sufficient is difficult.

Several denominations participating in the National Economic Initiative still offer defined benefit plans for clergy, although the particulars of these plans differ to a substantial degree. The Episcopal Church, several Roman Catholic dioceses, the Greek Orthodox Church, and the Christian Reformed Church in North America all have defined benefit pension plans. The value of one’s pension is typically based on years of service upon reaching full retirement age at 65 or 66. The income of the clergyperson during the final years of service or during their highest income period is also sometimes involved in determining retirement income. Pension income thus varies greatly, depending on years of credited service and salary during those years of service. In the last 20 years, the years of credited service prior to retirement has been in decline in many denominations as more clergy are being ordained later. Pensions based on fewer years of service are necessarily lower and can rarely serve as the primary source of retirement income for a clergyperson.

Defined benefit plans should allow clergy to figure out their benefits in retirement with some level of confidence. Doing so may not lead to a sense of security, however. If years of credited service and/or income is low during one’s service, it may be quite apparent that future retirement income will be inadequate, resulting in financial concern and worry. Furthermore, some pension plans are designed to give retired clergy what could be called a “baseline” income stream, which when combined with social security will result in a significant decrease from the salary and housing allowance package when they were employed. In one denomination with a defined benefit plan, all clergy with sufficient years of service who retire at 66 receive essentially the same pension, based on the average full-time clergy salary of all clergy. The plan helps clergy who had lower than average income, but hurts clergy who had higher than average income. In addition, the plan only pays roughly 50% of the current average salary (not including housing allowance) resulting in the necessity for retirement savings outside the pension plan (in addition to Social Security)—particularly for clergy who earned more than the denominational average.

The pension plan for the Episcopal Church is one of the most generous in terms of retirement income, at least for persons who served for many years and had higher incomes while serving as priests. However, greater retirement benefits come at a cost. In the case of the Episcopal Church, congregations and other Episcopal employers must contribute 18% of a priest’s salary to their retirement. Such a financial burden on congregations is one reason so many congregations employ part-time priests (who are not assessed for the pensions of their priests) and a reason that so many other denominations have 401K/403B plans instead of defined benefit plans.

For denominations with defined contribution plans, the clergyperson’s account will have a dollar value that can be tracked during their career until retirement. In many cases, a church or denominational employer contributes a set percentage of salary to the retirement account and to which the pastor or priest can contribute a percentage of their own earnings before taxes. The contributions from churches can range as high as 14%, but are more frequently around 10%, and can be as low as 5%; and the percentage may be based on both salary and housing allowance. Some, mostly Protestant mainline, denominations require congregations to contribute a set percentage of clergy salary to retirement, but
in most cases the contribution is “suggested” or “recommended” and the congregation can do less (or more). Some part-time clergy receive no retirement contributions from their congregations.

Denominations vary greatly to the extent that congregations contribute to clergy retirement. In some denominations, all, or nearly all, full-time clergy receive a set percentage contribution to their retirement accounts. Contributions to these “qualified” plans are not counted as income and are not taxed until after a clergyperson begins to receive retirement distributions or “cashes out” their account at some point. But for other denominations, where only a minority of churches contribute to clergy retirement as employers, having a plan largely means that the clergyperson has a way to contribute to their own retirement in the form of a 401K/403B account rather than investing in IRAs. This situation not only reduces the overall contribution to the retirement accounts of clergy (because there is no employer contribution), it makes the account dependent on the ability and resolve of clergy to contribute on their own through a reduction of their salaries.

In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), 85% of parish clergy participate in the denomination’s retirement plan. Among clergy who are full-time church employees, 89% participate in the retirement plan. Those left out of the retirement plan are primarily part-time or bi-vocational. Still, over half of part-time clergy (63%) are in the retirement plan, even though a much smaller percentage receive employer contributions to their retirement accounts. Overall, 59% of part-time clergy say they alone contribute to their retirement or that neither they nor their employer contributes. The situation is similar in other denominations that either require or strongly recommend that all clergy participate in the denomination’s retirement plan and that churches contribute to the accounts of their clergy. Those left out are typically part-time clergy, who are either not included in the retirement plan or in congregations who are not required to contribute to the plan on behalf of their part-time, ordained or commissioned staff. Retirement plan participation levels for the Reformed Church in America were 73%, 76% for the Church of the Nazarene, and 79% for the Evangelical Covenant Church. Of course, for bi-vocational pastors and priests, it is possible that they are earning retirement benefits separately through a non-church employer.

The level of clergy participation is much lower in some denominations with retirement plans, because participation is voluntary and not necessarily part of the denomination’s assumption of what a church should provide in terms of compensation. For instance, in the Church of God, Cleveland, Tennessee, 72% of clergy either do not have a retirement account or their church does not make contributions to their account. For the Church of God, Cleveland, clergy whose churches do contribute to their retirement, most do so at the 5% level recommended by the denomination. For part-time clergy in this denomination, over 90% either have no retirement account or their congregations do not contribute to it.

Among lead pastors in Assemblies of God congregations, only 29% receive a contribution from their church that matches their own personal contribution to their retirement account through a 403B offering. Participation by churches and clergy is totally voluntary and optional. As a result, 27% of AG clergy report having no retirement savings.

In the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, nearly half (48%) of clergy indicate that their congregation does not contribute to their retirement.
Clergy in denominations where relatively small proportions of churches contribute to clergy retirement and where the percentage contributed is low are at a great disadvantage with regard to retirement savings and eventual retirement income. To maintain roughly the same standard of living (assuming a median clergy salary) in retirement as when employed full-time would require at least half a million dollars, also assuming that one receives Social Security payments. Relatively few clergy approaching retirement have retirement savings accounts that are so large.

Social Security is a major source of retirement income for most Americans. And it is more important for middle (or lower)-income persons (such as clergy) than it is for the wealthy. But for clergy there is a dilemma. They are treated as self-employed in terms of Social Security and Medicare and thus must pay self-employment tax, which, at 15.3%, is double what a regular employee would pay. Some churches and church-related organizations reimburse clergy for the additional tax, but for those that don’t there is essentially a salary reduction of over 7% for clergy. Clergy can opt out of the self-employment tax, but are supposed to do so for reasons of conscience rather than finances. Still, all it takes is filling out a form to opt out, thus saving a substantial amount of one’s take-home pay. Some financial advisors even suggest that all clergy opt out, provided of course, that they invest wisely and substantially enough to make up for the fact that they will not receive Social Security payments in retirement. Once the decision is made to opt out of Social Security, a person cannot go back and opt in later.

Many clergy do opt out of Social Security and the percentages vary widely across denominations. Among the denominations included in the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) and in the more mainline Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) the percentage opting out is quite high: 19%. For Assemblies of God (who are included in the NAE total) the percentage opting out of Social Security is 18%. The figure for the Church of the Nazarene is 11% and for United Methodist clergy it is 10%.

Given the relatively modest pension, annuity or monthly retirement distributions that most clergy can expect in from their denominational plans, some outside savings for retirement is usually essential. The Christian Reformed Church in North America even presumes the necessity of such savings so their clergy will have a reasonable level of income in retirement. Opting out of Social Security makes substantial saving for retirement even more essential, particularly if one considers how much additional retirement savings will be necessary to replace $2,000, $2,500 or more a month in Social Security income. Realistically, a clergy person should save well over $400,000 over and above their normal retirement savings just to make up for the lack of Social Security. But given the low level of retirement savings among clergy in general, it is unlikely that many will invest what they would have paid in self-employment taxes to make up for the loss of Social Security. This is particularly true for lower income clergy and recent seminary graduates who opt out of social security because they believe that they need the additional income just to make ends meet.

Retirement saving is highly correlated with education, certainly because of higher average income but also because persons with greater education realize that retirement saving is essential and tend to set much higher goals for their retirement savings. In Figure 6 it is apparent that a bare majority of persons with college education have $100,000 or more in retirement savings. For those with less education the proportion drops to 33% for those with some college and 24% among those with a high school diploma or less. And among those with a high school diploma or less, almost one third have less than $10,000 in retirement savings.11

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11 See Figure 6 in the report for more details.
For clergy in the Assemblies of God, the percent of clergy with retirement savings of $100,000 or more is only 20% and the percent with $10,000 or less is 44%. So, in a denomination where 18% of clergy have opted out of Social Security, pastors and other ordained church leaders are saving at much the same rate as Americans with only a high school education. Educational levels among AG clergy are lower than in some denominations but are identical to the national average for clergy, with half earning a seminary or other graduate degree. These low levels of savings will not be sufficient, and most clergy know it. But they also believe that they cannot save at a greater level because of their relatively low incomes and the financial pressures they feel.

Figure 6. Household Retirement Savings by Education: 2016

Not surprisingly, pastors in smaller churches with small budgets (and particularly in very small churches with 50 or less in average attendance) are least likely to believe that they are on track with their retirement savings. The same is true for clergy who are persons of color, women, part-time clergy, and pastors who are in a lower tier of ordination status in their denominations.

Health Insurance, Benefits, and Other Employee-Related Issues

As a professional category, clergy are unique, and it is difficult to compare them to other occupations. Clergy have some aspects of a professional, credentialed guild; they have some characteristics of a small business employee or manager; and some similarities to independent contractors. Their “dual tax” status reflects this profession’s unusual work as both ministers and church employees. The nature of clergy employment also affects how their employers deal or do not deal with benefits and taxes. The economic effects of how clergy receive or obtain benefits and how churches act as employers (or as businesses who hire them as independent contractors) are profound.
In denominations where clergy are part of a professional, credentialed “guild,” congregations employ clergy from the denomination’s pool of candidates and provide them with a set of benefits that are consistent across the denomination. Retirement contributions are part of that set of benefits (at least for full-time clergy), but benefits also include health insurance, mileage allowances, housing allowances, continuing education allowances, etc. In denominations that treat clergy as independent contractors or hired managers, some benefits may be offered clergy but they tend to be inconsistent across congregations with some churches providing them as a matter of course (particularly in larger congregations) and others treating benefits as the clergyperson’s responsibility.

Most mainline Protestant denominations provide a health plan for all clergy who are employed (usually full-time) by congregations. Having large numbers of employees tends to lower the cost of insurance, which is typically provided by national insurance companies, such as Blue Cross and United Health Care. The Episcopal Church offers what is rated a “platinum plan” using Affordable Health Care guidelines. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America offers bronze, silver, gold, and platinum plans but most clergy opt for the “gold plan.” Other denominations have a contracted plan but participation is optional and the clergyperson or church can opt for privately offered health insurance. Among Greek Orthodox clergy, 59% use the Archdiocesan plan, 19% use a private plan, paid by the church, 12% use their spouse’s plan (thus saving the church the cost of insurance), 7% have private insurance which they pay themselves, and 3% have no plan. Many Orthodox priests (21%) say their plan does not adequately cover their medical needs and others complain about the costs and high deductibles of the Greek Orthodox plan.

In a few mainline denominations, however, health care paid by the church is not so universal. In the Reformed Church in America, 58% of clergy have health care through their churches. In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) 55% have health care through churches, and 16% contribute to paying for the insurance along with their congregations.

In other, typically, conservative evangelical, denominations it is relatively rare for the congregation to provide health insurance, and there is not a denomination-wide provider in most cases. This lack of consistent coverage means that a large proportion of clergy use their spouse’s insurance rather than obtaining it through the church. In the secular private sector, where staff are typically considered employees rather than independent contractors, health care coverage is more widespread. But in evangelical churches, this is not the norm. In the Church of the Nazarene, 23% of clergy have health insurance paid by their church; 28% have health insurance through another job or through their spouse; and 17% buy the insurance on their own. In the Church of God, Cleveland, Tennessee, 58% of clergy pay for coverage without reimbursement, 23% obtain insurance on their own but are reimbursed in part (6%) or completely (17%) for the cost. Another 19% obtain coverage through their spouse.

It is ironic in denominations where salaries tend to be lower that many clergy must pay for health care out of their own salaries. And even when costs for health insurance are reimbursed, the cost is still considered income and subject to income tax. In denominations that provide health insurance, the amount a congregation pays for insurance is not treated as part of a pastor’s salary.

The lack of clear status as church employees and a lack of understanding about the way clergy are treated by federal tax laws leads to financial problems and deficits for clergy. Different from lay employees or employees of any other small business, churches are not required to pay Social Security or Medicare taxes for clergy and they are not required to withhold income taxes from their minister’s pay.
Making clergy responsible for paying their income taxes and Social Security taxes independently reinforces the sense that clergy are not true employees of a church—that they are self-employed persons contracted by churches to do a job. One unfortunate consequence of this situation is that some clergy find themselves in trouble with the Internal Revenue Service because they have failed to pay their income taxes. Not only is failing to do so illegal, leading to fines and even arrest but clergy also end up in debt. Churches that simply pay their minister a cash wage also may forget or not be aware of the tax advantages of dividing clergy income into base salary and housing allowance. This has huge ramifications for clergy tax obligations and thus for net income, since housing allowance is not subject to income tax. A clergyperson could easily exclude half their salary from income taxes, resulting in a much lower tax rate. But churches must officially designate and separate housing allowance from salary before payment is made. Otherwise, it is illegal. Surprisingly, some churches do not do this.

Among denominations reporting housing allowances, the Church of God, Cleveland, Tennessee reported the lowest incidence: 50%. The National Association of Evangelicals, Assemblies of God and the Church of God, Anderson, Indiana all report that around 70% of their clergy have a housing allowance.

It also should be noted that opting out of Social Security has implications for health care, albeit in the future, after the clergyperson reaches the age of 65. By opting out of Social Security, one also opts out of Medicare. And since a clergyperson loses employer health care after retirement, the costs of not having Medicare in retirement are quite large.

Debt

Americans are not strangers to debt, but there is no clear evidence that clergy are more likely to experience non-mortgage debt than the average American worker. There is, however, one area of debt that grew in near exponential fashion during the last 15 years and may be impacting clergy more than other professionals: educational debt. Clergy are highly educated, with around half holding an advanced degree, but they are not highly paid. Many denominations require a Masters of Divinity or comparable degree to qualify for ordination, yet starting salaries make it difficult to pay off the student loans increasingly necessary for the degrees.

The rapid increase in educational loans held by Americans is a relatively recent phenomenon. Both the number of loans and the average size of loan debt have increased, resulting in aggregate student loan debt in the United States rising from 260 billion in the first quarter of 2004 to 1.3 trillion dollars by the end of 2016—surpassing all other forms of debt, except for mortgages.12 The rapid increase in education debt cannot be explained completely by tuition rising faster than the rate of inflation, although it has done so. An even more important factor is that students are financing college and graduate education increasingly through loans. In 1990 half of 4-year college students graduated with no debt, but in 2015 the proportion with no debt was less than 30%.13

As shown in Figure 7, below, the average yearly tuition in stand-alone seminaries increased from just under $8,000 per year to over $15,000 per year—almost doubling during this 16-year period. If seminary tuition had followed the rate of inflation, the increase would have been only 39%, rising to $10,700 in 2016. Tuition in divinity schools and seminaries connected to colleges and universities is even higher on average and the rate of increase has been similar. These are average levels, of course, and in some seminaries tuition and fees are much higher and in seminaries that are heavily subsidized by denominations the costs are considerably lower. But for many prospective clergy the choice of a
A study by Auburn Seminary indicated that the average debt for students who used loans to finance seminary education (for the Masters of Divinity degree) was $38,704 in 2011. According to data collected by the Association of Theological Schools, the percentage of students with seminary debt of $40,000 or more increased steadily from 2010 to 2015, rising from 15% of all students to 25% in only five years.

Since many seminary students also took out loans for undergraduate education, loans for seminary were not their only source of debt. Data from ATS indicates that 42% of entering seminary students brought college debt, with 27% bringing debt of $20,000 or more. When added to consumer debt (not counting mortgage debt), 38% of incoming seminary students brought debt of $20,000 or more. The percentage of students bringing educational debt of $40,000 or more to seminary steadily increased among all age groups from 2008 to 2015, rising from 7% or less in 2008 to 14% of students in their 20s, 30s and 40s. The percentage of students in their 50s who brought educational debt of $40,000 or more was lower (10%), but also increased substantially over the last 7 years.

According to the studies by Auburn Seminary and ATS, around 43% of students incurred no debt during seminary. Another 16% had debt but owed less than $20,000. So, there is great disparity among recently graduated clergy in terms of what they owe when they are ordained. Some owe little or nothing. But 41% owe more than $20,000 in seminary debt, plus whatever they also incurred in college debt, credit card debt, and other consumer debt. Those with large debt (with some owing $60,000 or more) face years of difficulty meeting their monthly payments at a time when their income is the lowest.
Data from various NEI surveys indicate a much higher incidence of educational debt in many denominations than suggested by ATS. For younger United Methodists pursuing ordination, 72% had student loans, with a median amount of $40,000. For younger ordained United Methodist clergy, 67% currently had educational loans, with a median of $30,000. Over 30% of these persons also had loans outstanding for their spouses ($30,000 median for those pursuing ordination; $24,000 median for ordained United Methodists). Among clergy in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 80% had incurred educational debt at some point before graduating from seminary and 38% were still paying off the debt. For those with current student loans, 55% owe more than $25,000. Among Mennonite pastors, 70% had educational loans at some point, with 18% still owing educational debt. For those Mennonite pastors with debt, only 55% thought that they had enough income to repay the loans. The survey of Church of God, Anderson, Indiana clergy asked about educational debt in terms of the household, rather than the pastor. Only 37% had no educational debt; 40% had current educational debt of $20,000 or more; and 27% had educational debt of $40,000 or more.

Not surprisingly, survey results show that clergy who were ordained more recently are most concerned about educational debt. Among clergy in the Christian Reformed Church in North America, 34% of those ordained in the last 5 years were concerned or very concerned about student loan debt, as compared to only 15% of those ordained 6 to 11 years ago. Among clergy in the Minnesota Conference of the United Methodist Church, 70% of those ordained less than five years had educational debt compared to 56% of those ordained 5-9 years. After 10 years in ordained ministry, the likelihood of educational loan debt and the average amount of loan debt dropped greatly. Over 40% of United Methodist clergy ordained less than 10 years owed more than $25,000 in educational loan debt as compared to only 15% of those ordained 10-14 years and 5% of those ordained 15 years or more.

It almost goes without saying that in all surveys that asked questions about concern over loan debt, the level of concern was strongly related to the amount of loan debt incurred. Student loan debt is widespread but because it is a concern only for those who have it (or expect to have it for their children), a smaller proportion of survey respondents indicated concern over educational debt than about issues like retirement and health insurance which affect everyone. It also should be noted that even though educational debt is most salient to recently ordained clergy at present, the recent rapid rise of student loan debt suggests that it will be a serious problem for increasing numbers of clergy and for longer in their careers.

As with most economic issues, levels of debt and concern over debt affects some groups of pastors and priests more than it does others. Data from the Association of Theological Schools shows that although women and men brought similar amounts of debt to seminary, women were more likely to incur greater debt while at seminary—particularly in the percentage who owe more than $60,000 by the time they graduate. Among Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) clergy, 30% of women currently owe $20,000 or more in student loans, as compared to 19% of men. A larger proportion of women also incur undergraduate loan debt and recent studies indicate that the disparity with men in outstanding debt grows after graduation because of the amount owed and the level of income disparity.

Seminary debt tends to be larger among all racial/ethnic groups except Asian/Pacific Islanders and White clergy. Levels of debt are particularly high among non-Hispanic Black clergy. According to ATS data on recent seminary graduates (US Citizens), 55% of graduates who identify as Black, Non-Hispanic owe $40,000 or more as compared to less than 20% of White, Non-Hispanic graduates. Survey data
from various National Economic Initiative research projects also shows that Black, Latino, Native American, and other clergy of color tend to have larger educational loan debt and express greater concern over that debt. With fewer resources to draw upon going into seminary, non-White clergy tend to rely more heavily on loans. And after seminary, the fact that they tend to serve in less affluent congregations means that they may have greater difficulty paying off their loans. This same effect is seen nationally in terms of undergraduate loans, where rates of repayment are much lower for African Americans and Hispanics than for White Americans.

**Savings**

Since the average American household has almost $6,000 in credit card debt and much more in non-mortgage household debt (including student loans, auto loans, etc.), saving can be difficult. How can people save for emergencies, education for children, or retirement if they owe so much? Saving for retirement typically comes in the form of automatic savings deductions from one’s income or through investing in IRAs to reduce tax payments at the end of the year, rather than a discipline of building up a savings account or investment portfolio. Yet, accumulating saving outside of retirement is essential for both unexpected emergencies and expected life events. And this is particularly true for clergy with limited income and limited medical benefits.

Quite a few surveys conducted for the National Economic Initiative asked about emergency savings. Some of these questions were in the form of levels of concern. 42% of Assemblies of God clergy indicated that having sufficient savings for emergencies or unexpected expenses was a major issue causing them financial stress, worry, or concern. 67% of AG clergy also say they could not come up with $10,000 for unexpected emergencies out of savings. When asked about money for emergencies, 46% of clergy in the Missouri Conference of the United Methodist Church were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Among Church of God, Cleveland clergy, 24% have no savings and 53% have savings of less than $1,000. Financial advisors recommend that households have between 3 and 6 months’ savings for emergencies. Only 40% of clergy in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have 3 months of savings. In the ELCA North Carolina Synod, an even greater proportion (64%) had less than three months of savings. In the Reformed Church in America, 61% of clergy had less than three months of savings.

One of the strongest correlates of the amount of emergency saving is education. Nationally, among those with a high school diploma or less, the median saved was only $1,000. For those with trade school or some college, the median rises to $4,000. For college graduates and those with post-graduate education, the median levels of savings are $10,000 and $25,000, respectively. Since 75% of clergy have a college degree and 51% have post-graduate degrees, most clergy should have savings of at least $10,000. But among Greek Orthodox priests, a denomination that requires a Masters of Divinity degree and with clergy who earn more than the average pastor, only 30% of priests say they have emergency savings of $10,000 or more. Greek Orthodox priests fall somewhere between persons with a high school diploma and those with some college or a trade school degree with respect to emergency savings.

In terms of savings, it would appear that clergy have lower levels of savings than would be expected given their level of education. This situation puts clergy families at risk when financial emergencies do occur.
Another area of concern to many clergy is saving for children’s education. With such low levels of saving overall, and modest salaries, the possibility for saving enough for college tuition and expenses is daunting. It is even more of a concern for clergy in denominations that stress attending a Christian (and therefore private) college or university where tuition cost tends to be much higher than for public colleges and universities. The Christian Reformed Church in North America is one such denomination which has the added financial cost of stressing attendance in primary and secondary education, as well as college. For most CRCNA clergy, this means additional student loans on top of what is already owed for their own college and seminary education. For Church of the Nazarene pastors, the prospect of enrolling children in a Nazarene college or university was a subject of financial stress with many indicating that doing so is not possible due to their financial situation.

Many pastors and priests live in parsonages or rectories. Although they do not have to pay out of pocket for housing in such situations, they do have to pay income tax on the rental value of the housing in which they live. A major dilemma, of course, is that clergy who live in church-owned housing do not accumulate any equity and find themselves in a financial bind when they are no longer able to live in a parsonage. So not only is their income reduced in retirement, their housing costs may go up. If a clergyperson wishes to buy a house or condominium at some point, substantial savings will be necessary to afford a down payment large enough to reduce monthly mortgage costs.

In some denominations such as the Greek Orthodox Church, the Church of God, Anderson, Indiana, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) use of a parsonage is low, around 14%. In others it is considerably higher, such as the Church of God, Cleveland, Tennessee (26%), Christian Reformed Church in North America (28%), National Association of Evangelicals (28%), and Reformed Church in America (34%). Levels of parsonage use are greatest in several mainline denominations, particularly in the United Methodist Church due to itineracy, 53%; the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, New Jersey Synod, 42%; The United Methodist Church, Minnesota Conference, 45%; and among United Methodist
Church younger clergy, 56%. All clergy living in church-owned housing will face the financial difficulty of transitioning to housing they own or rent for themselves. The only notable exception may be the Roman Catholic priests who continue to live in church-owned facilities.

**Standard of Living: Doing Well, Just Getting by, and Financial Stress**

With a few rare exceptions, clergy have not, and do not gain great wealth serving the church. Still, incomes for clergy were once comparable to lawyers, physicians and other high-status professions, and as late as 1890 were 81% higher than the average worker in the United States and 210% higher than public school teachers. Clergy income has not kept up with other professions and now lags behind most. Average clergy income is now slightly below the national average for all adult workers and is considerably below the average for school teachers, other than preschool and kindergarten teachers. Yet, standard of living is not just about the income of a minister. One’s standard of living results from the level of household income balanced against expenses. Incomes vary; not all clergy have spouses or spouses who work; and expenses vary more than income, depending on where a clergyperson resides, how retirement and other benefits are handled, the amount of educational debt, denominational expectations, and many other factors. Most clergy expect to live “well enough” or to have “a reasonable standard of living,” in the words of two pastors. But others “struggle to keep a roof over our heads and gas in the tank,” to quote another.

Several NEI surveys looked at financial satisfaction in terms of both income and standard of living. Clergy were generally somewhat more satisfied with their standard of living than with their salaries. Among clergy in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 74% were satisfied or very satisfied with their standard of living. The percentage of clergy who said they were satisfied with their salary and benefits was lower at 62%, as was the proportion of clergy who said their level of compensation meets their financial needs (54%). A similarly high percentage of clergy in the Christian Reformed Church in North America were satisfied with their standard of living (75%). CRCNA clergy expressed satisfaction regarding salary at a slightly lower level (67%), but the percentage of CRCNA clergy who were concerned about their salary (17%) was much higher than the percentage who were concerned about their standard of living (8%).

The primary reason that satisfaction with standard of living is higher than satisfaction with salary is that standard of living is based on household income rather than personal income. Most clergypersons are married and most of their spouses are in the workforce, so the median household income for clergy of $55,775 is considerably higher than the median salary of $45,000. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, where income is higher on average than for clergy nationally, the median household income for clergy with full-time calls was $86,000, as compared to the median defined compensation (primarily salary and housing allowance) of $63,000. So, median household income among full-time ELCA clergy was about the same level as adult Americans with bachelor’s degrees, and part-time clergy households were earning slightly more than the average American household. Median household income is considerably higher than personal income for clergy, but household income for clergy still lags behind the typical worker with similar education. Nevertheless, the higher level of household income apparently makes it possible for most clergy to be satisfied with their standard of living.

Although most clergy are satisfied with their standard of living, there is a substantial number with serious financial problems. When asked about their greatest financial priority in a national survey (which included saving for retirement, paying off mortgage, paying off debt, paying off student loans
and “just getting by”) 21% of Americans indicated that they were just getting by—covering basic living expenses. There is a Maslow-like hierarchy of need here. One cannot be so concerned about saving for retirement (the most frequently mentioned priority), for instance, if one is living paycheck to paycheck, just barely able to cover one’s monthly bills. Not surprisingly, the proportion just getting by varies by educational level, as seen in Figure 9.

**Figure 9. Greatest Financial Priority for American Workers: 2015/16**

![Graph showing financial priorities by educational level]

**Source:** 17th Annual Transamerica Retirement Survey, December 2016. Transamerica Institute.

For 60% of persons with high school education or less, just getting by was their highest financial priority. For persons with some college or trade school, 50% listed it as a priority. And for college graduates and those with some graduate school or a graduate degree, the percentages listing just getting by as a priority were 31% and 19%, respectively. Among Greek Orthodox priests, 50% say living paycheck to paycheck is something they experience frequently or sometimes. In answer to a similar question, 53% of Assemblies of God clergy and the same percentage of clergy in denominations affiliated with the National Association of Evangelicals say that making ends meet each month is an issue that causes financial stress, worry, or concern.

It is possible to earn enough as a household for a reasonable standard of living, but to have such a standard of living, many clergy must live paycheck-to-paycheck and some apparently finance their living standard with loans and credit card debt. So, it is possible to be both satisfied in terms of the way one’s family is living and still under financial stress because of the difficulties in maintaining that standard of living. Among clergy in the Christian Reformed Church in North America (whose spouses are much more likely to work part time jobs than in the average American family), 77% are satisfied with their standard of living but only 53% say that they have money available after bills and expenses for savings. In the CRCNA as in many denominations, saving for retirement over and above the retirement plan, as well as for emergencies, is critical. Not being able to do so in order to keep up with immediate financial needs necessarily causes stress. Financial stress is not just about relative lack of income, it also is about the
ability to live a reasonable lifestyle with one’s expenses and debts. Not surprisingly, then, in a NEI survey of Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) clergy, the level of overall financial stress was strongly related to student loan debt. Those without student loan debt were most likely to say they currently had no financial stress in their lives (38%) and least likely to say they had major financial stress (12%). Just having student loan debt greatly increases the likelihood of having financial stress. However, among Disciples clergy, the likelihood of major financial stress is much greater among those with $40,000 or more in outstanding student loan debt. For clergy who owe less than $39,999, 26% are experiencing major financial stress, as compared to 42% of those who owe $40,000 or more and only 12% of those with no student loan debt. So, regardless of whatever else is going on in their lives, student loan debt looms large over those who have it and particularly over those who have a lot of it.

Figure 10. Student Debt and Financial Stress: Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Parish Clergy

Among Disciples of Christ clergy, financial stress is also greater for those with lower household income (rather than salary), and for single persons, part-time clergy, clergy in smaller, less affluent churches, and women. The relationship was particularly strong for gender. The vast majority (91%) of female clergy experience major or manageable financial stress, as compared to 67% of men. Almost 30% of women experience major financial stress and a much larger percentage of women (44%) have considered leaving the ministry due to financial issues than men (31%).

Data from American Baptist clergy also indicates that financial stress is greater for women clergy and particularly for African American clergy. The American Baptist Churches have proportionately more African American clergy than other mainline or moderate denominations (18% in their survey), and 40% of Black clergy reported that their financial situation caused an “extreme” or “large” problem for them, as compared to only 27% of white/Caucasian clergy.

High levels of financial stress tend to average around 31% among the various denominational groups conducting NEI research. For the Assemblies of God and denominations affiliated with the National
Association of Evangelicals, 33% and 31% of clergy, respectively, say that they experience “quite a bit” to “tremendous” financial stress. As a result, 38% and 36% of their clergy, respectively, have considered leaving the ministry due to financial concerns. In the Greek Orthodox Church, Church of the Nazarene, and American Baptist Churches, 29% of clergy indicate high levels of financial stress. Around one quarter of Orthodox priests have considered leaving pastoral ministry because of finances. Among Church of God clergy (both COG Anderson, IN and COG Cleveland, TN), 34% and 33% of clergy, respectively, say that their calling is at risk due to finances, with even larger percentages among clergy in small congregations.

**Financial Knowledge and Training**

For most Americans, talking about money and one’s financial situation is not a high priority. For clergy, who gravitate to the sacred aspects of their role more so than its secular demands, there is an even greater tendency to avoid dealing with personal financial issues. Clergy were not ordained to work with spreadsheets and there is a sense that “God will provide,” in the words of several survey respondents. And if what God provides is not very much, there is always the “suffering servant” narrative where the pastor does without or just gets by but carries on for the sake of the gospel. And when problems arise (or begin to loom in immediate future), there is often a sense of shame in not being able to meet one’s financial needs. Nevertheless, most clergy express confidence in their ability to handle personal finances. Most clergy are also open to additional financial training and education. Getting clergy the financial planning resources they need is often a challenge, however, because of logistical and psychological barriers.

Most National Economic Initiative projects involve financial education for clergy, based on the assumption that at least some of the financial challenges facing clergy could be avoided or mitigated by training, information, and better planning. Not all clergy are at the same place, however. Some already have taken financial seminars or courses; others have financial counselors; and a few bring considerable financial knowledge with them from prior business experience or have spouses with greater financial expertise.

There are relatively few survey questions about financial training that are similar across NEI research projects or that are included in secular national polls. One exception is the use of professional financial advisors. Nationally, 39% of Americans use a financial advisor, and doing so is strongly correlated with education. Among Americans with some graduate school or a graduate degree, 48% used a professional financial advisor, as compared to 43% of those with a bachelor degree, 34% of those with some college or trade school and 35% of those with a high school diploma or less. Clergy are typically highly educated, of course, but unlike some other indicators of financial health where they scored low, here clergy are in line with the general population with college degrees or higher. The highest proportion working with a financial advisor was among Greek Orthodox priests (51%). In the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship the percentage is 47%, although only 26% are currently working with a professional financial advisor. In the Evangelical Covenant Church, 44% of clergy use a financial advisor, and among Assemblies of God pastors 35% of clergy do so. Using a financial advisor or counselor is less frequent among United Methodist clergy (30%), even though the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits (Wespath) provides the service of Ernst & Young (EY) as a benefit without charge.

As noted above, most clergy who participated in NEI denominational surveys express confidence in their ability to manage personal finances. Among United Methodist clergy, 90% say they are either very or
somewhat confident in their ability to do so. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 80% said they were well equipped to manage personal finances; and among Assemblies of God pastors, 91% expressed confidence in their ability to shepherd personal household finances. These high levels of confidence may seem exaggerated given the financial difficulties expressed by many clergy, but clergy who are confident in their ability to manage personal finances undoubtedly mean they are able to do so within the parameters of their own (often difficult) financial situation. They can pay their bills and live within their means, even though loans payments are deferred, saving seems impossible and retirement is a distant dream.

Majorities of clergy in various denominational surveys also indicated that they had received financial training at some point. Such training included college courses, seminary courses, seminars and one-on-one training with financial professionals. In addition, large numbers of clergy said they had read books about financial planning. For instance, 63% of clergy in denominations affiliated with the National Association of Evangelicals had participated in Christian financial seminars and 69% had read books on financial management practices.

Even though most clergy have had some financial training, and large majorities feel confident about their ability to manage their personal finances, most also would welcome additional financial literacy training. Among American Baptist clergy, for instance, 69% agree that additional training in personal financial management is needed and an even larger percentage (79%) believe that such training is needed for church financial management. A similar percentage (74%) of United Methodist clergy in the Missouri Conference would want to receive continuing education about finances.

But does financial training actually help clergy with their own finances or with the financial situations in their churches? Unfortunately, a causal relationship cannot be measured in most cases. But at least among clergy in the Christian Reformed Church in North America, it can be said that more is better. Coursework, financial seminars, and personal financial counselors all help and have an additive effect on the confidence clergy express about their ability to manage their personal finances and the finances of their churches. This relationship exists, even though such courses and training were many years in the past in some cases.

Separate from the financial knowledge and training of clergy is the financial knowledge of church leaders. Due in part to the dual tax status of clergy and the fact that benefits often are part of a “salary package,” church leaders often misunderstand the actual salary they are paying their clergy, at least in comparison to a “normal” corporate or professional salary for which retirement, health insurance, and other benefits are excluded. This is a matter of education and in many churches, it doesn’t happen, leading laity to think their pastor is adequately paid (or even overpaid).

**Ideas for Future Research and Research Questions**

Many ideas for future research on economic challenges facing clergy in the United States were suggested by participants at a National Economic Initiative research gathering held in Indianapolis in April 2017. Below is a list of possible projects as well as research questions that might be addressed.

There should be a multi-denominational study of the cost of theological education over time that takes denominational subsidies into account, compares costs to the rate of inflation, and examines the role of
debt incurred in seminary and during undergraduate education. As one participant put it, “Why is it so difficult for students to afford seminary education now, when it was much less difficult 25 years ago?”

There should be a congregationally-based study of clergy and career professional ministers in terms of position, employment status, and benefits. Denominations have a great deal of information on full-time pastors and priests but little on those who are part-time, bi-vocational, and/or on a lower tier of ordination. They are less likely to know their salaries and benefits or how such clergy fit into the staffing pattern of local churches. How parish clergy without traditional full-time positions come to have such employment is also unknown, as are their career paths. By focusing on the local congregation, the hidden economy of the church would be revealed as well as the extent of clergy under-employment. Also by focusing on the local congregation, comparisons could be made to the corresponding financial situation of church members (through surveys of parishioners) or persons in the surrounding community (using census data). A key part of such a study would be to look closely at both small churches (where clergy under-employment is widespread) and large, multi-staff congregations (where a larger variety of staff positions are present). It would also be possible to look more closely at gender equality/inequality among clergy since women are more likely to be in positions that are under the radar of denominational agencies and pension boards.

There should be a large national survey of clergy using the best questions from the various NEI initiative surveys and replicated questions from national/government polls dealing with income, benefits, debt, saving, retirement, and other financial issues. With denominationally-based surveys asking questions about the same issue in different ways it is difficult to get a complete picture of financial issues facing clergy or to what extent clergy are similar to or different from the general population or other occupational groups. This could be a National Opinion Research Center General Social Survey-type instrument using an oversample of clergy from the general population or a targeted survey of clergy using denominational samples supplemented by national databases of clergy.

There should be a study of life transitions that impact clergy (positively and negatively), looking at the cost of personal decisions and how financial stress develops. What patterns/problems emerge gradually and what were the crisis-causing events?

There should be a closer look at health issues and health care/insurance costs for clergy. Some research could be done using large health care surveys which include occupational data to identify both risky and healthy behaviors among clergy and other occupations. A study of clergy which includes batteries of questions from national health polls would reveal more granular data on both health-related costs and behaviors.

Finally, significant future research should be focused on racial/ethnic economic disparity among clergy. What is the clergy employment/financial situation in African-American, Latino, Native American and immigrant congregations—both in denominations where clergy of color are the majority and in the minority?

Summary Observations

The primary financial challenge facing clergy in the United States can be stated as a dilemma: how does a clergy family maintain a standard of living consistent with the status of their position and the members of their community when the financial costs for clergy education have greatly increased, clergy salaries
have decreased relative to other professional occupations, and benefits and savings are insufficient or absent?

The financial demands for education, lifestyle, and saving for emergencies and retirement can be daunting but if income levels were high enough, the challenge would be much less. Salaries for clergy, however, tend to skew low than high, resulting in an overall lower median salary figure than might be expected. So, although many clergy may earn $75,000 to $85,000, median clergy income is reduced by the large numbers of part-time, bi-vocational, and small-church clergy who earn very little through their church-related employment. By contrast, few lawyers and even few doctors are on the low end of their professional income range but many are far higher than the professional median. For lawyers, the salary range goes from a large group of adequately and well-paid attorneys and then extends upward to those that are quite wealthy or even rich, with very large salaries. One does not get rich by being a clergyperson but it is quite likely that one might be fairly poor, earning $15,000 a year for a part-time position as priest-in-charge or pastor of a small church.

Maintaining a comfortable but marginally middle-class lifestyle for full-time clergy on the higher end of the income range is quite possible if one is not saddled with large educational debt. With large educational debt, even more highly compensated clergy struggle to make ends meet and are unable to save for retirement or for emergencies. For less well-compensated clergy in full-time positions, a comfortable middle-class lifestyle is more difficult and particularly so if the clergyperson is single or married with a spouse who does not work. Even without the burden of student debt, it will be difficult for middle-income clergy to save for retirement and to keep levels of consumer debt low. And if the clergyperson is in a church or denomination that does not contribute substantially to a pension or retirement account, it will be very difficult to retire with a comparable standard of living.

For clergy who are paid considerably less than the national median, the income provided by clergy employment is not a living wage. So, it is necessary for the clergyperson to supplement their income through other jobs, a working spouse, or both. In other cases, the clergyperson may be retired or in a second career. There are many clergy who become ordained after a career in a secular job and there are many others who retire as pastors but take part-time calls in retirement for additional income and commitment to the ministry. But there are even more clergy who accept ½ or ¾ calls or other financial arrangements because the church cannot afford more and because the clergyperson cannot find full-time employment. These low-income situations also include people who work full or part-time hours but receive no salary other than, possibly, residence in the parsonage.

The lower one’s income from the church, the less likely is one to receive substantial benefits including the two most crucial benefits: retirement contributions and medical benefits. Being part-time and/or in denominations with a less centralized structure usually means that retirement and medical benefits are the ultimate responsibility of the clergyperson. For clergy in this situation, their income is necessarily lowered by having to contribute all, or nearly all, of their retirement and most if not all of their medical insurance costs out of pocket. Not only is their salary reduced, but the income used for medical insurance will be taxed.

In denominations with a centralized denominational structure, full-time clergy will normally be in the higher income tier and will receive a full set of benefits. But part-time clergy in these same denominations will not necessarily receive any benefits, even reduced benefits. And as these
denominations see more of their congregations become smaller the number of churches able to support full-time clergy with full benefits is declining.

Three, sometimes overlapping, groups are at a disadvantage regarding their finances: women, Black and Hispanic clergy, and clergy in small congregations. Male clergy, White clergy and clergy in congregations with 100 or more in average attendance tend to fare much better in terms of income.

Given the sobering figures on clergy salary, benefits, and debt, it may be surprising that the profession still attracts so many candidates. But another of the atypical things about the ministry is that while clergy are underpaid compared to almost all professional occupations, the level of occupational satisfaction for clergy is among the highest. And while advanced education does not tend to benefit clergy financially in the same way it benefits other professions, most clergy say the degrees they received were worth it. Clearly, job satisfaction for clergy is not driven by money. But the stresses associated with marginal incomes, large debt, and the inability to save has caused many clergypersons to consider leaving the ministry. They are not the majority but their substantial presence and the compounding, and by most measures increasing, financial pressures that most American clergy experience raise important questions for denominations, institutions of theological education, and congregations—not the least of which are questions of justice if not compassion. Any risk, whether driven by macro-economic forces or micro-economic consequences, that threatens to undermine confidence in and commitment to a divine call among pastoral leaders is not a risk worth taking. These data should be a wake-up call to all agencies and institutions that support clergy and congregations both for strategic action and further research.

2 Source of educational data: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Educational attainment for workers 25 years and older by detailed occupation. Table 1.11.
9 Source: Kenneth W. Inskeep, 2015, Congregational Clergy in the ELCA and Their Finances (Chicago, IL: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America).
13 Source: Student Debt and the Class of 2015, 2016 (Oakland, CA: Institute of College Access and Success).
16 Deasy, 2016.
17 Deasy, 2016.
19 Deasy, 2016.
23 17th Annual Transamerica Retirement Survey.
In focus groups, deep concern was expressed over the lack of both personal and professional fiscal participation. The Foundation examined existing issues. A survey of clergy was conducted in 2015 and the results were compared to those from earlier surveys in 2008/2013. Focus groups also were held and extant research from the Presbyterian Foundation was reviewed. Information was available for survey distribution/response for the 2013 survey only. 1,000 surveys were distributed in 2013. The 2013 survey included 69 questions that covered topics such as study leaves, sabbaticals, mentoring, support groups, overall health and wellbeing, areas of personal concern (income, debt, medical costs, time with family, and burnout), information about the respondent’s congregation, the respondent’s financial situation (including insurance, compensation package, medical insurance, adequacy of income, home ownership, spousal employment, retirement savings plan, and children’s college costs), and the respondent’s family household status. In addition, there was a brief survey in which pastors were asked to rate their level of concern about a number of topics including financial issues.

Survey results: 2015 top concerns were retirement planning (39%), need for spiritual renewal (38%), burnout (31%), physical health (21%) and isolation in your ministry (17%). Approximately 600 pastors responded to the survey; the response rate was 54%. In focus groups, clergy indicated that financial stress was often shameful and kept private; ministers coped by avoidance rather than seeking help. Clergy often felt inadequate as leaders of financially-stressed churches (financial stress in their own lives affects the way they lead churches with financial problems). In 2008, 2013, and 2015 retirement planning was the number one concern.

Women pastors faced a number of problems. Salary negotiation was a problem because of the lack of personal and professional fiscal sophistication in their church work. Pastors reported that they need help in understanding church finances and financial management. Pastors of large churches bemoaned the pressure to maintain and increase budgets to support multiple staff positions, large facilities, and extensive programs. Women pastors faced a number of problems. Salary negotiation was a problem because of the lack of personal and professional fiscal sophistication in their church work. Pastors reported that they need help in understanding church finances and financial management. Pastors of large churches bemoaned the pressure to maintain and increase budgets to support multiple staff positions, large facilities, and extensive programs.
Christian Church of Ohio, Disciples of Christ
Research was conducted and analysis of the data was performed by a focus group coordinator and review team.

An online survey was distributed to 202 active clergy. The survey included open-ended and closed-ended questions on demographics, personal financial characteristics, health, ministry, retirement planning, and compensation. The survey was piloted in New Jersey Synod, ELCA. The survey was reviewed by a project-related focus group. The firm of Team conducted the research led by ELCA’s Research and Evaluation group coordinator and review team. The Resourceful Servants Questionnaire (2015) was distributed to a random sample of 1,000 ELCA clergy including 29 questions on topics such as compensation, pension, salary increases, participation in the pension plan and health plan, ratings of financial compensation, educational debt, overall household debt, household income, emergency savings, satisfaction with various aspects of finances, items about the clergyperson’s congregation, stress, and resentment related to level of compensation. Inskipp and Victoria Flood also evaluated existing 2014 data to estimate the level of concern about education debt for first-call pastors.

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
ELCA’s Research and Evaluation Team conducted the research led by Kenneth W. Inskipp.

The results of this research are presented in order of the number of respondents in each state or region.

Rocky Mountain & North Carolina Synods, ELCA
The surveys in the Rocky Mountain Synod were developed and implemented in 2014 by a research and planning team. The firm of Research conducted interviews with 100 rostered leaders in two-hour interviews as part of a larger strategic planning process. The Resourceful Servants Questionnaire (2015) was distributed to a random sample of 1,000 ELCA clergy including 29 questions on topics such as compensation, pension, salary increases, participation in the pension plan and health plan, ratings of financial compensation, educational debt, overall household debt, household income, emergency savings, satisfaction with various aspects of finances, items about the clergyperson’s congregation, stress, and resentment related to level of compensation. Inskipp and Victoria Flood also evaluated existing 2014 data to estimate the level of concern about education debt for first-call pastors.

Southwestern Minnesota & New Jersey Synods, ELCA
In 2015, a detailed survey of pastors was conducted in New Jersey and Minnesota (distribution and universe is unknown). The survey included 38 questions on topics such as satisfaction with compensation, evaluation of financial support and attitudes of congregations toward clergy finances, level of equipment for congregational tasks (such as preparing congregational budget, pastoral care, personal household budget, and personal finances), other financial concerns (including housing, retirement, medical costs, children’s education, and other family issues), characteristics of congregations, type of call, salary, comparison of salary and benefits and Synod minimum guidelines, total household income, amount of savings, amount of retirement investments, other retirement income, and marital status. In addition, an eight-item personal well-being survey was completed by pastors and financial chairs in Southwestern Minnesota. In depth hour interviews were also held with 12 pastors in Minnesota.

51 clergy responded to the survey; 23% response rate. 32 focus group participants, all ordained and commissioned pastors from the 4 geographical areas of the region and ranging in tenure from 1-133 years.

Focus group participants suggested that denominational efforts should focus on: 1) personal financial resources and planning 2) congregation financial planning and budgeting, 3) clergyperson’s health insurance, and 5) compensation negotiation. Other challenges identified included the impact of the 2008 recession on members, poverty in church neighborhoods, the cost of education for clergy as a test of the student form of loans, the aging of congregations and the loss of older members who faithfully tithe, the costs of staff (including benefits, especially health care) and maintenance on buildings. The survey reinforced many of the focus group findings. Half of respondents who reported being "financially challenged" did not receive any type of health care insurance from their congregations. Many respondents served in ministry on a part-time or bi-vocational basis because of lack of adequate compensation. Not surprisingly, debt was also identified as a problem. Further, many clergy were not preparing for retirement because they were unable to fully participate in programs available through the Pension Fund. It was not uncommon, the report stated, for clergy to be offered a total compensation package and have to decide how to distribute it between salary, housing, retirement, and healthcare. Both the survey and focus group respondents reported that clergy often need the immediate income to live on and forgo adequately paying into their pension or making other retirement investments. In some instances, churches underreport the pastoral compensation on which the pension dues are based with the result that the pension income available at retirement is also reduced (are disability benefits).

According to the survey, the median compensation for ELCA pastors in 2015 was $59,000, the national median for high school teachers in the U.S. with a B.A. degree. Many clergy moreover did not receive a pay increase in 2015 (42%) or 2014 (34%). The median household income for clergy in the ELCA was $88,000. Compensation for female clergy was lower than for their male counterparts. 50 interviews were conducted with clergy, financial chairs, and pastor’s spouses. Women, further, were more economically strapped by student debt and low salary than men. The North Carolina survey found similar concerns, if a different priority among them: high health care costs impacted 70% of respondents; 66% were concerned about retirement savings; 66% had less than three months’ income in household savings for emergencies; 45% had education debt (about a third reported loan balances over $40,000); and 28% had student loan debt greater than $5,000. Further, as for Rocky Mountain, there was disparity in compensation between female and male leaders and for North Carolina, in ethnic specific communities. Among pastors of smaller churches “are living paycheck to paycheck.” The results of the research showed widespread concern about seminary debt. Rostered leaders were concerned about salaries and the capacity of their congregations to pay a fair and adequate salary, particularly in the context of rising costs for housing and health care. There was concern about the economic viability of congregations and the ability of congregations to manage their finances. In the online survey, most respondents in the Rocky Mountain Synod, education debt was a top concern among them: high health care costs impacted 70% of respondents; 66% were concerned about retirement savings; 66% had less than three months’ income in household savings for emergencies; 45% had education debt (about a third reported loan balances over $40,000); and 28% had student loan debt greater than $5,000. Further, as for Rocky Mountain, there was disparity in compensation between female and male leaders and for North Carolina, in ethnic specific communities. Among pastors of smaller churches “are living paycheck to paycheck.”

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In New Jersey, over half of respondents reported that personal finances affected their work but significantly more (72%) reported that most members of their congregations felt they are appropriately compensated. Respondents noted the most assistance in managing congregational finances: 41% indicated they did not feel very well-equipped to do so. Finally, the proportion of respondents who were satisfied with their salaries and retirement and 41% are not satisfied with their overall level of savings. Almost half of clergy felt appropriately compensated for their work but significantly more (72%) reported that most members of their congregations felt they are appropriately compensated. Respondents noted the most assistance in managing congregational finances: 41% indicated they did not feel very well-equipped to do so. Finally, the proportion of respondents who were satisfied with their salaries and retirement and 41% are not satisfied with their overall level of savings. Almost half of clergy felt appropriately compensated for their work but significantly more (72%) reported that most members of their congregations felt they are appropriately compensated. The results of the research showed widespread concern about seminary debt. Rostered leaders were concerned about salaries and the capacity of their congregations to pay a fair and adequate salary, particularly in the context of rising costs for housing and health care. There was concern about the economic viability of congregations and the ability of congregations to manage their finances. In the online survey, most respondents in the Rocky Mountain Synod, education debt was a top concern among them: high health care costs impacted 70% of respondents; 66% were concerned about retirement savings; 66% had less than three months’ income in household savings for emergencies; 45% had education debt (about a third reported loan balances over $40,000); and 28% had student loan debt greater than $5,000. Further, as for Rocky Mountain, there was disparity in compensation between female and male leaders and for North Carolina, in ethnic specific communities. Among pastors of smaller churches “are living paycheck to paycheck.”
A pilot survey was conducted among 1,000 UMC clergy under age 35 (part of a larger overall survey) to determine current knowledge and confidence in various financial areas: compensation, financial training, opting out of Social Security, household income, loans, financial counseling, personal knowledge of financial matters, and attitudes about finances. Project leaders also consulted with member foundations of The National Association of United Methodist Foundations. 278 clergy were surveyed in 2015.

Researchers pointed to two key findings: 1) UMC clergy, and especially young clergy, lack financial training and confidence; 2) among UMC clergy, student loan debt stands out as a particularly significant burden among other forms of debt and financial pressure. On the first issue, 60% of respondents on both surveys reported that they had not received financial training, 70% of young clergy, further, indicated that they had not received the training necessary to effectively manage church finances. In the larger survey of UMC clergy, 42% felt that the UMC provided them with less than adequate financial planning resources. On the second, education debt is high among young clergy, indeed, over 70% and most received loans both as undergraduates and in seminary. 46% had loans and the median amount was $42,500. 87% said they would have opted out of medical benefits if they chose.

The research was conducted by J. McCarthy (market 2015. develop and conduct the research in satisfaction and well-being) of the University of Missouri partnered to collaborate to gather data in 2015. The survey was distributed to 6,500 clergy who had served UMC congregations 20 years or less that consisted of 24 questions on topics such as payments on student loans, number of student loans, loan amounts, adequate compensation, financial training, opting out of Social Security, household income, pension, financial counseling, personal knowledge of financial matters, and attitudes about finances. Project leaders also consulted with member foundations of The National Association of United Methodist Foundations. 80% of clergy respondents were employed by the church full-time. 17% were employed elsewhere for supplemental income, personal fulfillment, and supplementary benefits; nearly 54% of clergy spouse participants reported that they were employed. On personal income and debt, there was a slight correlation between years in ministry and income; the amount of clergy educational debt was directly (negatively) correlated to the number of years in ministry; and about half of respondents had credit card debt. Personal financial management: confidence in managing personal finances and debt increased with age; more than 55% of all respondents agreed that their education was worth the work they incurred to receive it, and ages 23-34 reported that they do not believe or have no strong opinion about whether the UMC provides adequate financial planning. Congregational financial management: the vast majority of clergy did not lead the budget process; training in congregational financial management was an opportunity across all age groups with the biggest gaps in training found within the 23-34 age group and among those with less than 5 years of ministry experience; and an overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that clergy should be involved with stewardship/fundraising. Focus group themes: Clergy did not receive training in basic finances in seminary nor have they taken accounting classes. Many clergy did not have the financial knowledge to manage their own finances or a church's and many did not feel that it was their gift. Most clergy relied on laity or paid staff to manage congregational finances. Severe financial hardship was a reality for clergy as a result of newness to the process, rural placements and moves, and laity who controlled finances based on what they believed was right or fair. White clergy often knew about a pastor's financial situation, but it solid or shaky, they rarely offered help or gave advice.

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Pastoral leaders (particularly LEMs) expressed personal financial difficulties that caused stress due to low salary and/or open-ended finances. Priests were not planning efficiently for retirement or health care. Priests felt unprepared in areas of financial understanding, retirement planning, and leadership training was mentioned by more than three-quarters of pastors and parish life coordinators said they were not paying staff according to archdiocesan quidelines. Lack of financial and leadership training was mentioned by more than three-quarters of pastors and parish life coordinators said they were not paying staff according to archdiocesan guidelines. Half of the LEMs reported that they were adequately preparing for retirement (48% reported less than $100,000 in retirement savings). For lay staff, the greater concerns were over financial preparedness: for retirement, children's college expenses, emergency needs, and estate planning. They had no access to a 401(k) or 403(b) vehicle. Most did not know what to do in the event of retirement, and few had a plan for combining retirement with their financial understanding. But many had undertaken no formal programs for retirement and were unsure if they would have enough money to retire. They had no access to 401(k) or 403(b) retirement savings accounts. Seminary debt is less of an issue.

In 2016, paper surveys were sent to 74 priests serving parishes and 36 retired priests still active in ministry. The priest survey consisted of 28 questions on topics such as satisfaction with compensation, medical benefits, and retirement; education/training in financial management; satisfaction with leadership skills, budgeting, financial management, stress management, problem-solving and fundraising; frequency of use of skills; professional development; total income from all sources; savings; retirement savings; adequate preparation for retirement; sources of debt; and time spent worrying about personal finances. Representatives from both groups also participated in focus groups. 170 lay ecclesial ministers received surveys, along with 47 archdiocesan leaders. The lay ecclesiastic minister survey consisted of 26 questions on similar topics but including the number of dependents and home ownership. Focus groups were held for parish business managers, parish lay ministers and archdiocesan staff. 14 seminary students also received surveys. Unuse to half of priests reported dissatisfaction with their skills in financial management, fundraising and both stress and conflict management. Lay ecclesiastics ministers reported low satisfaction with their skills at fundraising, recruiting volunteers, stress management, and parish operations management. Priests reported low levels of personal savings, 38% had debt including car loan (55%) and credit card debt (31%). For lay ecclesiastics ministers (78% of whom reported debt), housing is the chief source (67%), followed by credit cards (37%), car loans (38%), and educational expenses (31%). In focus groups, LEM reported on the burden of the rising cost of Catholic school education for their children and grandchildren. Moreover, the majority of LEMs did not believe they were adequately prepared for retirement (48% reported less than $100,000 in retirement savings). The majority of priests (72%) reported that they were adequately preparing for retirement; however, only half had more than $100,000 in retirement savings. Unlike LEM, priests had access to a partial salary continuation program in addition to their 401k but few had any planning or analysis of expenses for their retirement years.

In 2016, parish leaders including the Archbishop, priests, deacons, parish life coordinators, parish business managers, principals, and Catholic Catechetical leaders were interviewed via a 16 question schedule to determine their perceived needs in the areas of finance, stewardship, management, and leadership. In addition, the operating team went to parishes for listening sessions: at the time of the proposal, 12 parishes out of 62 were visited. For lay staff, the greater concerns were over financial preparedness: for retirement, children's college expenses, emergency needs, and estate planning. They had no access to a 401(k) or 403(b) vehicle. Most did not know what to do in the event of retirement, and few had a plan for combining retirement with their financial understanding. But many had undertaken no formal programs for retirement and were unsure if they would have enough money to retire. They had no access to 401(k) or 403(b) retirement savings accounts. Seminary debt is less of an issue.

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In 2016, 158 priests responded to the survey (86% response rate) and 21 retired priests (80% response rate); 104 lay ecclesial ministers responded (81% response rate); 26 archdiocesan leaders responded (55% response rate); and 9 diocesan seminary students responded (64% response rate). A survey for priests was conducted in 2016, focusing on general financial topics such as satisfaction with compensation, medical benefits, and retirement; education/training in financial management; satisfaction with leadership skills, budgeting, financial management, stress management, problem-solving and fundraising; frequency of use of skills; professional development; total income from all sources; savings; retirement savings; adequate preparation for retirement; sources of debt; and time spent worrying about personal finances. Representatives from both groups also participated in focus groups. 170 lay ecclesial ministers received surveys, along with 47 archdiocesan leaders. The lay ecclesiastic minister survey consisted of 26 questions on similar topics but including the number of dependents and home ownership. Focus groups were held for parish business managers, parish lay ministers and archdiocesan staff. 14 seminary students also received surveys.

In 2016, 60 parish leaders were interviewed. A survey for priests was conducted in 2016, focusing on general financial topics such as satisfaction with compensation, medical benefits, and retirement; education/training in financial management; satisfaction with leadership skills, budgeting, financial management, stress management, problem-solving and fundraising; frequency of use of skills; professional development; total income from all sources; savings; retirement savings; adequate preparation for retirement; sources of debt; and time spent worrying about personal finances. Representatives from both groups also participated in focus groups. 170 lay ecclesial ministers received surveys, along with 47 archdiocesan leaders. The lay ecclesiastic minister survey consisted of 26 questions on similar topics but including the number of dependents and home ownership. Focus groups were held for parish business managers, parish lay ministers and archdiocesan staff. 14 seminary students also received surveys.

In 2016, 158 priests responded to the 2015 NAE survey (estimated response rate of 84%); over 2,100 non-lead priests responded to the 2016 AG survey (estimated response rate of 11%). 18% of lead pastoral respondents were bi-vocational; 5% worked part-time as a pastor, and 5% worked full-time as a pastor in an unpaid position. 36% of respondents had no savings. Only a third of respondents could cover a $10,000 emergency without borrowing against retirement, taking out a loan, or using credit cards. 24% carried medical debt; 70% had consumer debt; and 26% student loan debt. A third reported that their household's financial situation caused quite a bit to a tremendous amount of stress. As a result of such stressors, 38% of respondents considered leaving the ministry. Types of debt included student debt (particularly for lay ministers), consumer debt, and medical debt. 37% of respondents had no savings. Only a third of respondents had any education savings. Over half of respondents reported that their children’s retirement resources; and 77% reported that they had not talked about the adequacy of their projected sources of retirement income. 49% of respondents reported that they were not preparing for their children's education: 51% reported having no education savings in place for their children's higher education. Priests were not planning themselves on personal and parish financial planning or budgeting: 49% never consulted a financial advisor, 33% reported either not having a home budget or having one and not adhering to it, and 29% requested further information or assistance. Priests believed that the church financial culture was not supportive: 97% said they would not seek help with financial difficulties from their parish council; 94% would not turn to the Archdiocese/Metropolis for help; 15% said that financial situations are "mostly" to "very "shaky." Only 30% reported that the health plan covers their needs adequately; 71% of pastors reported having other sources of income (43% from a spouse's job). Finally, 68% of priests felt mild to overwhelming financial stress (highest among clergy age 31-54). 54% had experienced events that left them feeling overwhelmed, fearful and hopeless, with 80% of those persons experiencing trauma related symptoms at a clinical level--much higher than the national average.
In April 2016, a survey was distributed to 1,125 Ministers of the Word and Commissioned Pastors with 33 questions including rating of adequate income for various financial issues such as monthly bills, debt obligations, and retirement; concerns of church budgets, report of savings, and access to financial services. 38% of pastors responded to the June 2016 survey, a response rate of 44%; 84 SPC participants responded to the June 2016 survey, a response rate of 44% for 2,939 credentialed associate pastors, 992 senior pastors responded (22% response rate); 203 associate pastors responded (7% response rate), and 77 lay leaders responded (18% response rate). Minister and church subgroups, so only the national level results were used for analysis.

Research findings included perceived lack of awareness among congregations of the economic challenges of pastoral leaders (74% reported that the congregation felt the pastor’s standard of living was comfortable, although 30% of pastors did not have funds available after monthly bills for savings or investments); inadequate financial planning among pastoral leaders that a third did not feel competent to manage finances and half wanted help with church and personal finances); and inadequate planning and preparation for retirement (half were concerned about retirement and 44% disagreed that they were on track with retirement planning). Dissatisfaction with and concern about retirement were even higher among Commissioned Pastors. Much of this was related to a lack of denominationally-based retirement options. Those who finished seminary training in the last 15 years had more educational debt (a quarter of the pastors who participated in the NAE survey were burdened with an average educational debt of nearly $30,000). Concern about monthly bills, debt, and savings were especially acute among ethnic minority pastors. The CRC encourages Christian education for children and Christian Day School tuition was second only to retirement concerns among CRC pastors. Spousal employment helps to defray these costs. Finally, 38% of all pastors and over half of ethnic minority pastors gave the denomination a “C” or worse grade on how it supported its pastoral leaders with the economic challenges they faced. One of the open-ended items in the survey was “Tell us about the economic concerns you have faced as a pastoral leader” which netted over a hundred written responses.

Issues uncovered included the fact that many pastors did not use a personal budget and had no emergency fund; carried credit card and education debt; had difficulty affording a home; and needed help with financial planning including knowledge of housing allowance rules. A large majority (73%) were concerned that their ability to live out their calling was at risk due to financial concerns. However, about the same percentage indicated that their finances were adequate. Many responding clergy (32%) were either bi-vocational or tri-vocational. Challenging financial issues for a majority of respondents included savings for retirement, sufficient income to pay bills, being able to afford a reasonable level of comfort, and paying for health care. Relatively few clergy received health insurance through their congregations and only 34% reported that their congregations contributed to their retirement fund (and for those that did, 33% had their salary reduced in order to do so). Clergy were very interested in education in financial matters—particularly retirement planning and health care expense management.

Average income from pastoral employment for respondents was $41,747; the average spousal income was about $21,226. About 2 in 10 pastors and their families had health insurance provided by the church. Additional sources of health care coverage included other employment, the purchase of a private policy, Medicare, and/or Medicaid. Nevertheless, over 60% of respondents rated their health insurance coverage as a “C” or worse grade. Economic challenges include inadequate medical care, inadequate financial planning, inadequate knowledge of housing allowance rules, and monthly expenses among others. The research uncovered a need for effective strategies for teaching biblical financial management in the local church as well as accessing financial management tools (and using them).

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Baptist General Convention of Texas

BGCT conducted its own research. A convenience survey (via paper and on-line distribution) of BGCT pastors was conducted in 2016. The survey had four questions including total church members, church budget size, pastor's salary, and economic challenges such as retirement, education debt, medical deductible, prescription costs, living expenses, no retirement, no emergency savings, medical insurance, unemmbursed business expense, credit card debt, vehicle costs, general debt, no tuition, children's education expense, and no housing allowance (on the on-line survey only). A planning retreat with 19 key stakeholders was also held to review the data and generate additional information about the economic needs of clergy and congregations in the BGCT. 173 responses were received. A little over half of respondents led congregations whose worship size was less than 100. The racial/ethnic distribution of pastors included Anglo (52%), African-American (15%), Hispanic 19%, Asian (4%), and other (10%). Among pastors of churches under 200 in size, the greatest financial challenge was low salary (43%) followed by no medical insurance (40%) and no retirement (30%). Of about a quarter of pastors in larger churches, medical insurance, no retirement, and children's education were the top concerns. The planning retreat conversations surfaced concern about the lack of retirement planning for smaller churches and the deficiencies in financial planning among all pastors. A surprising finding was that student debt was not as significant a challenge for BGCT pastors as other studies have found: a little over 10% of smaller church pastors and only 5% of larger church pastors reported educational debt as an economic concern.

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

The CBF prepared the Pastoral Leader Economic Challenges Survey and data analysis was completed by a Bank of America asset liability manager. Research included both online and paper distribution of the Pastoral Leader Economic Challenges Survey through social media and at a booth at General Assembly and analysis of denominational data from Empower (retirement/benefits 3rd party administrator), Indiana's MEF, and 2 Divinity schools from the ATS economic initiative. All research was conducted in 2015. The survey included 37 questions on topics such as staff position; employment status; years in the ministry; information about the congregation (membership, annual budget, and age of congregation); types of personal savings and amounts in retirement accounts; current salary; preparedness for retirement; borrowing against retirement accounts; benefits; whether congregation pays for benefits; types of allowances including housing, travel, phone, and books; congregation withholding taxes; financial advice; and economic challenges or stress related to base salary, student loans, credit card debt, medical bills, retirement funds, aging parents, taxes, and ministry expenses. The 2015 survey was distributed to 1,283 clergy. It included 21 items and a five-point question on topics such as conversations with others about financial issues, meeting financial obligations, stress because of financial situation, salary and benefits package, retirement planning, leaving ministry due to financial concerns, areas of financial concern, debt, income adequate to repay debt, total income, and sources of income. Prior to survey development 12 in-depth interviews were conducted that informed the survey design. A denominational summit was also held. 609 pastoral leaders responded. 42% of pastors indicated debt burdens at least 2 times their annual salary and higher. As an example, 54% of respondents making $70,000 to $80,000 a year have at least $100,000-$250,000 in total debt. 44% reported that they did not receive medical benefits from their congregation; 50% of pastors in congregations with budgets of $500,000 or less were not provided medical benefits. Only a quarter of respondents said they were prepared for retirement and 61% reported they were not prepared. Only respondents age 55 and older reported that they were "somewhat" confident about retirement. 61% reported they were not currently in consultation with a financial advisor. The report emphasized that the impact of economic challenges on pastors was not differentiated by age or experience.

Evangelical Covenant Church

The ECC conducted their own research. An online survey was created and distributed in 2015 that included 45 questions on topics such as saving for financial goals, amount of debt; bi-vocational status, feelings/concerns about investing, managing debt level, handling unexpected expenses, the top five financial challenges facing clergy, and questions about the congregation among others. Multiple attempts were made to distribute the survey to all 1800 clergy. Twenty-eight focus group sessions across all 11 ECC conferences in the U.S. and Canada were conducted in all conferences. 674 clergy responded to the survey, an estimated response rate of 36%; 198 clergy participated in focus groups, representative of ECC pastors by age (11% of all pastors). Issues discovered among pastors included the need for financial coaching and pastoral advocacy; the need to address debt load (self-bi-vocational ministry become financially necessary); the need to train lay leaders on financial matters; the need to address housing issues, retirement planning, and saving; the need to increase understanding of investing; the need to increase understanding of pastor's taxation and housing allowance; the need to increase understanding of congregational financial resources and the development of benchmarks and the need for a central resource cache and best practices to communicate about financial issues. The most significant financial and economic challenges identified by respondents included saving for retirement (84%), housing expense (87%), and healthcare or children's expenses (61%). The most significant challenges for the congregations of respondents were a lack of financial resources (73%), lack of interest in addressing financial issues (52%), and lack of guidance on financial matters (49%). Among the most surprising findings were that nearly a quarter of respondents reported they had taken a second job or were bi-vocational to meet their financial needs. 40% said they did not have a will. Almost a third said they carried unpaid credit card balances from one month to the next. 28% currently had student debt.

Mennonite Foundation (Evansville)

Bellweth Research (Winston-Salem, NC) conducted the survey. The 2015 survey was distributed to 1,283 clergy. It included 21 items and a five-point question on topics such as conversations with others about financial issues, meeting financial obligations, stress because of financial situation, salary and benefits package, retirement planning, leaving ministry due to financial concerns, areas of financial concern, debt, income adequate to repay debt, total income, and sources of income. Prior to survey development 12 in-depth interviews were conducted that informed the survey design. A denominational summit was also held. 409 clergy responded to the survey, a 32% response rate (MCUSA subsample response rate=33%; MCCUSA subsample response rate=28%). The research report concluded that few pastors found themselves in truly uncomfortable financial situations; 70% reported no stress because of financial reasons; 14% indicated that their financial situation was uncomfortable; and 14% said that financial concerns had caused them to consider leaving the ministry. Those with the most comfort about their personal financial situation included those with higher household incomes, a seminary education, and more than 20 years in the ministry. Nevertheless, 30% reported stress because of financial reasons and specific sources of concern included saving for retirement (40%), student loan debt (28%), low pastor salary (25%), and housing costs (20%). Student loans were more an issue for those newer to the ministry and MCUSA pastors. Pastors with lower household incomes and racial ethnic pastors expressed more concerns about their ability to meet financial obligations. The report concluded that pastors needed help with retirement planning and tax preparation. They also could benefit from having a pastoral advocate in the congregation. Rather, more education about financial challenges for pastors was needed for congregational leadership. Possible program priorities indicated by the research included increasing comfort around issues of financial assistance/intervention, saving for retirement, managing student loan debt, addressing low pastor salaries, helping clergy deal with housing costs and health care costs, and addressing emergency savings. More specific findings included the facts that pastors needed help during times of transition from one congregation to another (selling a house) and more education about being self-employed and the implications for taxes including housing allowances.
National Association of Evangelicals

Grey Matter Research & Consulting (Phoenix, AZ) conducted surveys. Program staff also engaged in other kinds of qualitative research.

A lead pastor survey was designed by NAE staff in consultation with Grey Matter research in 2015. Surveys were distributed through 19 participating denominations including the Assemblies of God, Church of the Nazarene, the National Association of Evangelicals, Grey Matter Research & Consulting, Evangelical Free Church of America, Converge Worldwide, Free Methodist Church USA, Christian Reformed Church in North America, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church USA, Church of the United Brethren, Conservative Congregational Church, Every Nation Churches, Fellowship of Grace Communion International, Great Commission Churches, and The Brethren Church. The lead pastor survey included 44 questions on topics such as employment status, the congregation's financial situation, the relationship between the pastor and laity in determining compensation, ratings of clergy finances, financial stress and its causes, training needs, the pastor's relationship with spouse regarding finances, unexpected expenses, satisfaction with compensation, aspects of compensation that benefit packages, salary and other sources of income, retirement savings, other savings, types of debt, and demographics. A denominational leaders survey was also conducted. Gatherings of senior evangelical leaders, in-depth phone interviews with 10 pastors, and a review of existing financial literacy and management resources were also a part of the research effort.

4,489 surveys of NAE lead pastors were completed and 29 surveys of NAE denominational leaders. It is not possible to calculate a response rate for the lead pastor or the denominational leader surveys. The numbers of survey invitations sent by denominational partners to lead pastors are unknown; the research firm weighted the results by denominational size. 74% of respondents were full-time paid pastors; 16% were biococial; 8% part-time paid or unpaid and about 4% full-time unpaid. 70% had a housing allowance, 43% had health insurance, and 28% had a retirement plan, pension, or 403b match as a part of their compensation packages. The denominations of respondents were evenly distributed, with struggling the most (46% of pastors leading churches of less than 50 members reported that the congregation’s financial situation was mostly or very shaky); 2) pastors under 45 were considerably less confident in managing church and household finances than their older peers (14% of those under 45 were completely confident as compared to 22% and 33% among those age 45-59 and 60 or over respectively); 3) the majority of pastors (63%) were serving sacrificially in churches that could not afford to provide any additional compensation; 4) 82% of pastors reported a very positive relationship with the people in their churches who determined financial compensation; the biggest personal financial stressors for NAE pastors were related to savings; for retirement (a major concern for 64%), emergency savings (a major concern for 43%), big purchases (a major concern for 42%), and college for kids (a major concern for 34%); 6) many pastors (32%) were unaware of the financial training and services offered by their denominations; 7) denominational leaders had more confidence in the ability of lay leaders to oversee church finances than in their own capabilities; 8) some denominations’ cultures and structures provided opportunities for pastors to share church-related economic concerns but not personal ones.

Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference

Program staff conducted their own research.

The research included 1) 3 focus groups (2 coeducational and 1 women in ministry) were held; 2) an online survey (2232) was issued to 346 pastoral leaders; and 3) over 30 one-on-one conversations (interviews) were conducted. The survey included 53 questions on topics such as position, years in ministry, degrees, preparation for financial responsibilities, debt from school loans, second job to supplement income, compensation, opportunities for vacations and sabbaticals, levels of stress related to finances, financial demands and diminished capacity to do the work of ministry, health indicators of stress, stress related to life situations (such as conflict with spouse, contemplating leaving the ministry, and divorce or separation), and usefulness of grants/loans to address pastoral leader’s financial situation. All research was conducted in 2015.

170 pastoral leaders responded to the online survey, a response rate of 49%.

Only about half of congregations contributed to pastors’ pensions. 60% of pastors who started in ministry during the economic recession led churches that did not contribute to their retirement. Nearly half of respondents carried school loan debt. 67% of clergy reported that they were not fairly and adequately compensated. 54% worked a second job to supplement their income from the congregation. Nearly three-quarters of male clergy who work in second jobs have seminary training or degrees. Almost all (96%) felt that they live in a time when the ministry of the church is not a high priority on people’s agendas. About 80% report knowing someone who left the ministry due to stress, and 67% reported personal financial stress. A majority of respondents said that they were inadequately prepared by judicatories, seminaries, and ministry training institutions to manage personal financial resources, manage an organization’s budgets and finances, and understand and deal with tax guidelines related to clergy. The situation for women pastors was more dire: more were single, fewer served as senior pastors (less money and fewer benefits), and more worked 2 jobs. More women also reported feeling uncomfortable talking about/advocating for their financial compensation than men. Over half of male clergy reported that their congregations were not concerned for their well-being.

Wesleyan Church Corporation

Program staff conducted their own research and worked with the independent researchers from Westleyan University researchers who specialized a subset of economic challenge items.

A survey was distributed to 1,650 pastors. The survey consisted of 100 items including questions about the congregation, annual compensation, personal concerns about pastoral salary, and a series of items focused on economic challenges, among others. Surveys were also sent to a snowball sample of about 1,500 spouses of pastors. A survey of lay was distributed to 1,652 vice-chairs in congregations. Focus groups were also conducted. All research was conducted in 2015 and 2016:

Participation in Original Survey Research Conducted by NEI Projects in 2015 and 2016: Pastoral leaders 25,237 respondents; spouses of pastoral leaders 345 respondents; Lady 2,397 respondents.

Researchers developed a 33-item Financial Stress Scale (also as well as tested the reliability of shortened 9 and 5 item scales based on a subsample of 490 full-time pastors from the initial pastor survey. For these financial stressors, close to a quarter and up to two-thirds reported that each was significant for themselves and their families. More than half of pastors expressed concern about low salaries (60%); medical deductibles/out of pockets costs for the pastoral family (60%); supplemental savings for retirement (65%); no or inadequate continuing education allowances (51%); no time or money for sabbaticals or pastoral retreats (64%); no emergency savings (62%); no life or disability insurance provided by the church (54%); pastor’s spouse working to pay for debt insurance, or other living expenses (81%); medical insurance premium costs (51%); limited opportunity for the pastor's future income (69%); no opportunity to take extended vacations because it is too expensive (69%); and general indebtedness of the pastoral family (58%). Further, 50% of respondents indicated that their entire compensation package was less than $30,000 per year. 44% of lay were unaware of their pastors’ financial concerns. Finally, comments from pastors pointed to the negative emotional effects of stress as well as the time penalty incurred from additional employment as deleterious to ministry effectiveness. Increasing that effect was “shame pressure” from peers who felt that pastors would not be concerned about financial issues if they were “hearing God.” These findings, the report concluded, support a holistic perspective whereby pastors’ spiritual, emotional, physical, relational, and intellectual wellbeing are inter-linked to financial challenges, creating a downward spiral of discouragement and reduced ministry effectiveness.

Denominational Distribution of NEI Projects

Conducted original research and surveys for NEI Projects: 31 denominations; 1,326 projects; Project/Denomination conducted its research; 11 (33%) Protestant; 13 (42%) were Conservative Protestant; 3 (10%) were Roman Catholic; and 1 (3%) was Greek Orthodox.

Types of Researchers/Institutions: 76 researchers and 106 independent researchers who conducted original research and surveys for NEI Projects; 31 denominations; 1,326 projects; Project/Denomination conducted its research; 11 (33%) Protestant; 13 (42%) were Conservative Protestant; 3 (10%) were Roman Catholic; and 1 (3%) was Greek Orthodox.

Inventory of Project Research Methods: Surveys (29 or 93% of projects conducted surveys); Focus Group/Table Conversations/Learning Sessions (13 or 42% of projects conducted focus group); Key Informant Interviews (9 or 29% of projects conducted key informant interview).

Participation in Original Survey Research Conducted by NEI Projects in 2015 and 2016: Pastoral leaders 25,237 respondents; spouses of pastoral leaders 345 respondents; Lady 2,397 respondents.

Key NEI Findings by Categories:

Key economic challenges or concerns included retirement planning and/or saving (26 or 84% of projects); educational debt (24 or 72% of projects); consumer debt (24 or 73% of projects); mortgage energy or credit card debt (23 or 74% of projects); salary/comensation (21 or 68% of projects); emergency savings (18 or 58% of projects); church financial knowledge (18 or 58% of projects); financial situation affects ministry (including anxiety, burnout, living out calling, considering leaving the ministry) (18 or 58% of projects); lay-clergy communication about finances (16 or 52% of projects); personal financial knowledge/planning including tax knowledge (16 or 52% of projects); second jobs (15 or 48% of projects); medical debt (15 or 48% of projects); management of church finances (13 or 42% of projects); health insurance (11 or 35% of projects); denominational resources (11 or 35% of projects); projects; effects on clergy family (11 or 35% of projects); cost of children's education (12 or 36% of projects); housing including mortgages and moves (9 or 29% of projects); effects on women pastors (7 or 22% of projects); effects on racial-ethnic pastors (6 or 19% of projects); effects on women pastors (5 or 16% of projects); effects on younger churches (5 or 16% of projects); and other economic challenges.