

Clergy Mental Health Survey Findings

March 21, 2023

Background

One of the goals of the Mission Strategy is to nurture healthy communities, where we can care for one another and ourselves. In the context of a widespread mental health crisis, we sought to understand how our clergy is doing and what resources and supports would be most useful in supporting their mental health.

In the Fall of 2022, a survey was sent to all clergy (both active and retired) and received 157 completed responses. In addition to demographic questions, open-ended questions included:

- How have things been good or joyful for you?
- How have things been hard or draining for you?
- Are you having conversations in your ministry context about healthy boundaries and sustainable ministries? If not, do you feel comfortable doing so?
- Can you share if and how you use wellness resources available through the diocese and the wider church, including the support of our regional canons?
- Are there other forms of support you currently have or want to have in the future?
- In what ways have you experienced your identity supporting or facilitating your ministry?
- In what ways has your ministry been made more difficult due to your identity?

The responses were thoughtful and extensive and many expressed gratitude for having been asked, reinforcing that mental health is very much in the minds and hearts of our clergy. In this report, we share what we believe are the key takeaways as well as some concrete next steps to both deepen our understanding of the mental well-being of our diocese as well as how we might address some of the issues raised in this initial survey.

Being the first survey of its kind, there are also some limitations to the data. With a high number of retired clergy responses, the demographics are skewed older than our clergy population. Additionally, clergy of color were very underrepresented so there is necessary follow up work to ensure all voices are heard.

Key Takeaways

1. **Boundaries and balance can be hard to find, as attendance, volunteer numbers and administrative support dwindles.** Clergy respondents reported struggling with declines in attendance and people not returning to church after the pandemic. Additionally, volunteer energy is waning which leaves more for the clergy to do outside of their ministry. There is not enough time or space to nurture their relationship with God and personal spiritual grounding.

Illustrative Responses:

*“The less we acknowledge that the world has changed, the more we are burning out clergy. **We don’t spend enough time on the health of who we are.** Ministries are exhausting; we **must take care of our hearts to get our words out into the world.** What about our relationship with God? Can we do a session on prayer to support me? **Prayer and practice are a reinforcing circle.**”*

*“**Parishioner participation and lay leadership draining off.**”*

*“The disappointment of coming to grips with the fact that, after hoping and praying for the day “when people come back to church after the pandemic” for two years, “they” — **the “they” who lost touch with the church over the last two or three years here — simply aren’t going to return. The feeling of guilt of asking the same small core of parishioners to volunteer over and over, burning them out to try to keep the church functioning,** praying that they know it’s okay for them to step back when they need to and worrying about what we’ll do if some of them will. Struggling to find enough Sunday morning supply coverage to take my full vacation time.”*

*“**Trying to find experts to help dedicated lay people make good decisions about things like: roofs, masonry, sound systems, plumbing, HR issues, Safe Church administration. Why is every church left on its own for stuff like this?** Relying either on “how we’ve always done it,” or the informal networks of “hey, who did you use when you had X problem?” I’ve found some minimal help through the congregational consultants, but as a community we expend an awful lot of energy tracking down leads, vetting companies, and doing the administration of an awful lot of things...energy that is then NOT available for doing any of the mission work we’re also supposed to be doing.”*

“Recruiting people for leadership positions and running administrative functions in the church and the time it takes from preaching and teaching the things I enjoy and feel called creates a big drain on sense of doing gospel work vs maintaining an institution that is no longer valued.”

2. Relationship between clergy and lay leadership is critical to mental well-being. Clergy that had strong partnerships with their lay leadership reported these relationships as a source of joy. On the other hand, some clergy reported feeling pressured and held responsible for elements of church life outside their control. This is compounded by the shift to increasing numbers of part-time clergy positions, which forces fundamental changes in how congregations work and the respective responsibilities of clergy and lay leaders. Fostering these relationships and coaching for healthy and respectful interactions is critical to a sustainable clergy life.

Illustrative Responses:

“Church is dying and lashing out at me. They blame me for dwindling numbers.”

“There is not much noticeable appreciation in the parish for my ministry--despite some incredible successes in the last few years, including significant facilities improvement and increased stewardship, all during the pandemic. People have expressed gratitude for the way I and the staff kept people together during the pandemic, especially when the building was closed--but as soon as we came back together, the same group of nay-sayers started complaining about the same old things. Leadership is tired, and I'm tired, too--but I have to keep being the cheerleader.”

“No; fighting to not be controlled by Vestry members or the ones in the parish who don't want/can't change.”

“Working with vestry and lay leaders who are stressed out about the pandemic declines in church attendance. Although things are swinging back up now, it's not in time to help much with the 2023 budget and it will take 3-5 years before we are back to normal attendance level.”

3. The Church is changing and there is more to do to support the diverse clergy body. The once-common stereotype of a straight white male priest serving a congregation full-time is now a minority, but women and clergy of color as well as clergy in part-time positions expressed that they are still marginalized at times, even by their own congregations. Many of the responses by clergy of privilege reflected self-awareness and a responsibility to lift others up, but other responses reflected that there is more work to be done to live in right relationship with one another.

Illustrative Responses:

Responses from white male clergy:

*"I am also aware that being white bestows unearned privilege to me, and that my BIPOC colleagues experience things very differently, and that **our diocese is not seen as a safe place by many BIPOC clergy. I feel this diminishes the ministry of all of us.**"*

*"I'm a middle-aged white man with multiple advanced degrees. Yes, this privilege has supported and facilitated my ministry in many ways. **I'm working on ways to use this privilege to support and center others who do not share these categories with me.**"*

*"In a diocese in which **every issue is viewed through the lens of race and racism, it's not helpful to be white. It makes conversation and especially action more difficult.**"*

Responses from female clergy:

Sexism is alive and well in our Church. I experience frequent micro- and macro-aggressions in and outside of my parish in ministry settings because of my gender identity,** and also because I look younger than I am. My first year ordained I was cat-called three separate times on the street while wearing my collar and clericals. **Sometimes it is painful to see other -isms addressed in our diocese and Church while sexism remains ever-present and not directly addressed. How can we be more inter-sectional in our work together toward Beloved Community?

I have experienced a lot of pushback that I attribute to misogyny. However, everyone here thinks they are too enlightened to be sexist. I'm not given the benefit of the doubt nearly as much as my white male predecessors and colleagues are. The parishes don't seem to mind ordained people who are

non-white, non-male, non-hetero-- they just will not call them as their rectors. **They are very NIMBY about it-- it's fine, just not here.** When they do, they think they are ready for one when they have not even tried to address **the structural sin of implicit bias that is baked into much of the dominant privileged culture in the US.** The only place I could see this being most effectively addressed is the call process-- trainings aren't the answer to everything, so I'm loathe to suggest it.

BIPOC reponses:

*"I don't think that my identity or "persecuted minority" historical experience was ever taken into account... **there are no consequences for parishes that discriminate. We call it "discernment!"** I could write a book and am taking notes on how I might like to help redeem this experience for others. I do think that our diocese tries to be healing for white people encountering gender identity and sexual orientation challenges. I wish we could try to be healing for people of color too (instead of trying to push BIPOC people to the limit to see just how much they can take). **We need more diverse voices to help BIPOC people in the ordination process the way Diocese of Atlanta, Diocese of LA, and Diocese of NY do.** I am grateful to be ordained and hope I can use my experience to make the experience better for others."*

"My ministry has been made difficult due to my identify in several ways. For one, I am constantly questioned about my motives and expertise even though by all measures I am highly educated and experienced. I am constantly compared to my predecessors and expected to live up to their standards. It appears I have to be perfect in all ways in order to receive the respect due to me as a human being. People usually assume the worst about my decision or actions. They assume I am either ignorant or arrogant. They also avoid talking to me directly, opting to "share" their feelings with everyone else but me."

"Being second guessed, questioned, disagreed, my opinions and input not being taken seriously, feel excluded."

4. Diocesan support is valued, but is insufficient. Many respondents spoke with gratitude about the support they receive from the regional canons, but there was also a recognition that the canons are spread too thin. There was not broad awareness

of resources offered by the Diocese to support mental health and, in some cases, a lack of trust in those resources.

Illustrative Responses:

*"It maybe not be thought of as a wellness resource per se, but the **responsiveness and willingness of regional canons and diocesan staff to step up in cases of emergency coverage...**As a solo priest it has been a huge weight off my shoulders to know that our diocesan staff have my back in this way."*

*"**Regional canon and dean were really great when I needed some pastoral support. Even though our bishops are incredibly busy, they cared for me in ways that really mattered.** I especially appreciated the fact that our dean and regional canon really understood how race factored into some of the situations I was dealing with."*

*"I haven't used much, but do **know my regional canon is there and will always call me back if I need her, just for advice or a sounding board.**"*

"I am very fond of my regional canon, but she has become less and less available. I am attributing it to the impossible scope of her ministry. Still, I do not have any other access to the diocese for support."

*I am hearing multiple clergy colleagues comment that they are having trouble getting on the Regional Canons' calendars, or even getting a response from some of them. This is very concerning. It's clear with all the transitions happening, that the Regional Canons are overworked. **Bishop Gates, if you need to hire a fourth canon--do it. Don't wait. This investment of resources may save clergy leaving parish ministry--especially female and BIPOC clergy. It's worth it.***

*I looked up "wellness resources" on the diocesan website, and didn't find any. At least none under "congregation and clergy support". When I searched for "wellness" the top hit was for a lay employee event that took place in 2017. **I did find "Mental Health, Domestic Violence & Substance Addiction Resources" but under "the Document Library", which was not the first place I would have looked for that.** So I can't say that I'm using any of them, because I'm not sure what they are. How would I look them up?*

*"**Honestly, I have found that I have to create my own supports** and not rely on our Diocese or the wider church to create supports for me. I think part of that*

is me, but sometimes resources provided by our diocese don't necessarily feel safe or feel more like hoops to jump through."

Recommended next steps to build on this work

- 1. Share findings and first steps back to the clergy and with Diocesan Council**
- 2. Establish a mental health task force to continue to assess the mental health status and needs of our community, including:**
 - Create a follow up survey of active clergy (consider making this a regular/semi-annual check-in)
 - Create an accompanying survey for lay leaders
 - Follow up with RJC/BIPOC Committee to discern ways to hear more from clergy of color
 - Curate a list of wellness resources available and make accessible for clergy

Recommended Actions to Address this survey

- 1. Support clergy in nurturing their spiritual well-being and deepening their relationship with God.** Ensure that clergy have accessible (both financial and temporal) opportunities to engage in spiritual development and refreshment. Incorporate prayer and reflection into more diocesan meetings and events.
- 2. Invest in clergy/lay relationship building workshops and 1:1 coaching where needed.** Engage resources that can both broadly teach tools for effective collaboration as well as facilitate conversations in difficult partnerships.
- 3. Improve visibility and accessibility to supply clergy pool and investigate options for shared worship to enable time off.** This was cited as an area of stress and struggle by several respondents. Where those that have been in the Diocese have informal networks that they call upon, others struggle to find supply clergy and feel that Diocesan support in this area would improve work-life balance.
- 4. Investigate ways to reduce administrative burden for clergy such as centralizing certain functions and reducing the frequency of certain meetings.** Respondents talked of needing to serve as both clergy and

administrator and that the administrative burden often goes unrecognized as work. Finding ways to lighten this load will improve sustainability for clergy.

5. **Create affinity groups for clergy with common circumstances, e.g., new clergy, part-time and shared clergy, clergy of color.** The gathering bodies for clergy (Deaneries, Clericus) are driven by geography. This does not engender the relationship building that honest conversation about common struggles can. Offering a way for clergy to connect with others in similar circumstances can create an additional support network and be life-giving.

Appendix 1: Sources of Support

Respondents were asked what resources they use to nurture their mental health. Colleague groups were the most used resource, followed by therapists and spiritual directors. It is important to note that some respondents said that they had struggled to find a spiritual director.

Number of respondents that use/have used:

Clergy Colleague Group	72
Therapist	55
Spiritual Director	53
Clergy Coach or Mentor	27

Other supports mentioned: Other clergy (relationships/not formal groups), other clergy faith groups, friends and family/spouse, prayer and study groups, AA, non-clergy colleagues, fitness/personal trainers, anti-racism coach, psychiatrist and other self care.

Appendix 2: Demographics

Who Participated:

Survey was heavily weighted to respondents that are 55+ so may not accurately convey the sentiments of younger clergy. There were a large number of retired clergy that participated and noted that various questions were not applicable to them.

Age Range/Gender	Male	Female	Other/Unspecified	Total
25 – 35	2	2	1	5
35 – 45	7	9	0	16
45 – 55	4	8	0	12
55+	59	51	8	118
Prefer not to say	2	1	2	5
(blank)	0	1	0	1
TOTAL	74	72	11	157

Racial/Ethnic identity of respondents: 88.5% of respondents were White/Caucasian. Results may therefore not fully represent the experience of the clergy of color.

White	139
Black	4
Asian-American Pacific Islander	4
Hispanic	4
Mixed Race	1
Unspecified/Prefer not Answer	5
	157

Sexual Orientation: Approximately 2/3 of respondents identified as heterosexual. Approximately 1/6 of respondents identified as LGBTQ+, and a similar number either answered with gender or a preference not to answer. Other includes respondents that are celibate or unsure of their sexual orientation.

Heterosexual	98
LGBTQ+	27
Other	2
Unspecified/Prefer not to answer	23
	150

Order of ministry:

Priest: 135

Deacon: 27

Blank: 7

Newly ordained or newly-canonically resident of MA?

Yes: 21

No: 139

Blank: 9

Took COVID Respite:

Yes: 94

No: 59

Blank: 16