

## How Healthy, Vital, and Resilient are UCC Clergy ?

The fact is, we don't know. The research has not been done. But recent research on the health of clergy within several other mainline denominations (physical, mental, spiritual, relationships and family, financial) showed that:

- ✓ Clergy measured at 9% more overweight than the general public;
- ✓ Clergy cholesterol levels were 17% higher than a control group of business executives;
- ✓ Clergy use of alcohol is significantly higher than the same control group;
- ✓ Clergy score higher on measures of stress than the general public;
- ✓ Clergy scores on measures of depression and anxiety indicate more severe levels of these mental health indices than the general public;
- ✓ Clergy exercise less frequently than the business executives control group;
- ✓ About 50% of clergy (who complete seminary, are called to serve a local church, and get ordained) leave parish ministry within the first five years; 50% of the rest will probably end their career early due to burnout;
- ✓ The top reason that clergy give for leaving the ministry is stress and burnout, with the second reason being unresolvable congregational conflict;
- ✓ An estimated 1600 clergy (across all denominations) are forced out of their parish leadership positions every month by their church members or denominational leaders, due to conflict, misaligned visions for the congregation, and stress-related factors;
- ✓ 85% of clergy surveyed stated that their spouse is working primarily because they cannot meet their financial obligations without a second income;
- ✓ More than 80% of clergy spouses interviewed stated that they wish their husband would leave the ministry because the stress is making him/her ill and having a negative impact on the family.
- ✓ 80% of clergy surveyed stated that they would consider changing professions if they had other marketable skills.

These are only a few findings from recent research by groups such as Pulpit and Pew, The Barna Group, Austin Presbyterian Seminary's review of findings through the Lilly Foundation's "Sustaining Pastoral Excellence" grant fund, and several denominational research projects (ELCA, Episcopal, Methodist, Presbyterian USA).

Is this alarming? Yes! But – The UCC Southwest Conference will soon have an opportunity to participate in some solutions! At its November 2010 meeting, the Church Council of Shepherd of the Hills UCC in Phoenix, AZ., voted unanimously, on behalf of the congregation, to partner with the Rev. Beth Johnson, M.Div., Ph.D. (Counseling Psychology), in a proposed covenanted ministry to increase support for clergy and congregations within the Southwest Conference. At its April 2011 meeting, the Committee on Church and Ministry of the Southwest Conference – UCC (the group that reviews the work of all S.W. Conference ministers) voted unanimously to authorize this new ministry, in covenant with SOH.

Beth has been ordained in the UCC since 1984, served congregations in Connecticut, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, and served in leadership positions in Associations and Conferences. She is currently a member of the SWC Clergy Response Team. Beth has an M.Div. from Yale Divinity School and a Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology (University of Wisconsin-Madison). Her dissertation research focused on the interpersonal dynamics between primary disputants in a severe congregational conflict.

Beth began talking with Rev. John Dorhauer and researching the possibility of creating this new ministry during the Fall of 2009. During 2010, she met, talked by phone, and had email conversations with many of our UCC clergy in Central and Northern Arizona, to "test the waters" for such a ministry. She attended the Fall 2010 Clergy Retreat and spoke with clergy from around the Conference. She has talked with leaders in other mainline denominations about clergy support programs that they have successfully launched; these will serve as "models" for what we choose to do here.

Based on all of this "grass roots" input, Beth is forming a clergy support ministry that intends to include programs to enhance clergy physical and mental health, spiritual renewal, relationships (with colleagues, family members, and congregation), financial health, support for addictions recovery, continuing education, support for clergy spouses, and creating a data base on our clergys' health. If you would like to have more detailed information sent to you, contact Beth with either your email or "snail mail" address. She can be reached at: [revbethjohnsonphd@gmail.com](mailto:revbethjohnsonphd@gmail.com). Watch for more details about this exciting new ministry in future "In the Loop" articles.