

# *Church of the Brethren*

## *2008 Pastoral Study Project*

---

### **Study Overview**

This study of clergy across the denomination on a variety of issues was initiated by the Brethren Academy to provide guidance in evaluating the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program and in determining future priorities. Additional participants/consultants in this project have been the Academy's sponsoring partners, Bethany Theological Seminary and the Church of the Brethren (Office of Ministry), and District Executives of the denomination. Christian Community, Inc. conducted the study under the direction of the Brethren Academy.

The Pastoral Study Project is an effort to better understand the needs, concerns, and effectiveness of pastors. The study results will influence decisions about training for ministry through Bethany and through the Academy, about continuing education, about ministerial leadership policies, and about denominational and district programming.

We received 505 completed surveys from clergy and 463 completed surveys from lay church leaders. Approximately half of the clergy and church leader surveys were completed online through a survey process hosted by zoomerang.com; and approximately half were completed on paper and mailed to Christian Community. Thirty-two pastors were interviewed, and 21 church leaders were interviewed. The surveys were completed in the fall of 2008, and the interviews were conducted by telephone in 2009.

This study reveals some important information about pastoral ministry in the Church of the Brethren including the following:

- The Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program has obviously had a very positive impact on those who participated in it and on the denomination as a whole.
- Overall clergy morale in the denomination is higher than reflected in previous studies, though lay church leaders in the congregation rank their pastor's morale higher than the pastors rank it! Perceptions of morale in the congregation correlate with the size of the congregation; both pastors and lay church leaders rank the congregational morale higher in larger congregations than in smaller congregations.
- There are reasons to be concerned about the future of our congregations relative to membership/attendance, hospitality, and stewardship matters. Clergy do not give themselves high ratings in their ability to work effectively in those areas, and church lay leaders agree.
- Clergy rate their own effectiveness relatively high in preaching, worship leadership, pastoral care, and knowledge of the Bible and theology. Church lay leaders do not give as high a rating to the preaching of clergy as clergy give themselves. Clergy do not give themselves high ratings in handling

conflict, in stewardship, in work as change agents, in dealing with evangelism and church growth, or in dealing with sexuality issues.

- Clergy do not have as high a connection to church entities beyond the local level as denominational leaders would like to see. Clergy feel the highest level of connection to the district, to their district executive, and to other clergy in the geographical area.
- The vast majority of clergy feel that the ministry has been a blessing to their lives, but a significant minority acknowledge that it has not been a blessing to their spouses or to their children.
- While most clergy rate their physical health as good or excellent, significant numbers do not exercise on a regular basis and acknowledge that they do not have the healthiest of eating habits.

### Survey Respondents

Seventy-three percent of the survey respondents described themselves as “senior pastor” or “pastor” with the remainder spread fairly evenly among the titles of associate pastor, interim pastor, youth pastor, retired pastor, and “other” (Minister of Nurture, Pastor of Congregational Outreach, etc.). Those retired pastors responding to the survey are still actively involved in some kind of pastoral service to a congregation. The average pastoral respondent has been in the ministry for 20 years with the range going from one year to 59 years. In terms of educational background:

**Check all that were part of your training for the ministry.**

College	71%
M.Div.—Bethany	34%
EFSM	6%
TRIM	13%
Ph.D.	1%
D.Min.	5%
District Reading Program	27%
Other (including M.Div. at another seminary)	28%

Eighty-one percent of the pastoral respondents were male, and 19% were female. Only 10% of the respondents were younger than 40; 54% were between 40 and 59; and 36% were 60 or older. Twenty-nine percent experienced a call to the ministry before the age of 20; 51% experienced their call between 20 and 39; 18% experienced the call at 40 or later; and 2% did not give responses to that item that could be categorized. In terms of the size and location of the congregations pastored by respondents:

**The average worship attendance at my church is:**

60 or under	39%
61–99	23%
100–199	26%
200 or higher	12%

**I would describe my church's location as:**

Rural	44%
Small town	29%
Suburb	14%
Urban	10%
Inner City	3%

Thirty-nine percent pastor congregations without any persons of non-white ethnic background; 54% pastor churches with one to ten percent non-white; and only 7% with greater than ten percent non-white.

The church leaders who responded to a complementary survey were primarily board or leadership team chairpersons, moderators, treasurers, annual conference delegates, or deacons. Sixty-one percent of the church leaders were male, and 39% were female. In terms of average worship attendance, church location, and ethnic composition, the responses of church leaders were very similar to those of the pastors.

**Compensation, Insurance, Sabbath Rest**

Forty-seven percent of the clergy respondents are paid on scale for full-time service or are paid proportionately to the scale for part-time service. Based on our interviews, it appears that most of the three percent who indicated being paid more-than-scale were receiving housing allowances instead of a parsonage and counted that as part of the cash compensation for purposes of the survey. Although not intended to do so, the scale appears to function as a ceiling on compensation. In our interviews, even those being paid less than scale expressed appreciation for the scale, saying that it represented a target toward which the congregation could aim and saying that their compensation would be less if the scale did not exist.

Some lay persons who were interviewed expressed the opinion that the automatic increases provided in the scale keep clergy from being more motivated to help the congregation grow because their compensation has no relationship to their performance. One lay person who came to the Church of the Brethren from a denomination with a different compensation system shared this observation: "I appreciate the fact that the scale protects clergy and motivates some churches to pay more than they otherwise would. Unfortunately, the fact that most churches do not have the resources to pay more than scale and don't even think about paying more than scale means that compensation has no relationship at all to performance. I see some not very productive clergy in my district who are getting paid as well as some who really make a difference. Clergy in this denomination have no motivation to help congregations grow."

**Check one description regarding your compensation.**

Free ministry (expenses paid only)	4%
Full-time: paid on-scale	30%
Full-time: paid less-than-scale	19%
Full-time: paid more-than-scale	3%
Part-time: paid proportionate to scale (i.e. 50% of scale if hired half-time)	17%
Part-time: not paid proportionate to scale	20%
Retired	2%
Other*	4%

*\*(Full-time scale prior to this coming year; scale minus extra vacation time to lower salary; co-pastors/full-time contract less than scale; no compensation presently; free-ministry—no expenses paid; stipend \$325/month; interim; semi-retired part-time: paid proportionate to scale; free ministry—pay own way; share one FT position paid on scale; \$300/month)*

The elimination of the denominational health insurance plan has been of great concern to denominational leaders. Clergy were asked how difficult it has been for them to get health insurance coverage since the denominational plan was eliminated. Sixty-six percent said they were not covered by the denominational plan at the time it was eliminated; 21% said it was not difficult to obtain new coverage; 11% said it was difficult but that they have coverage now; and 2% said that it was difficult and that they have no coverage at the present time. Twenty-six percent of the pastoral respondents are covered by a spouse's insurance plan, and 19% are covered by Medicare.

Nine percent of the clergy respondents continue to carry some debt from the cost of their education for ministry. The debts range from \$1,000 to \$60,500 with \$27,000 the average.

The denomination has a policy on Sabbath Rest. Eighty-one percent of the responding clergy were aware of that policy; 19% were not. Twenty-three percent of the respondents indicate that they have taken a Sabbath Rest, though that figure is not reliable since it includes some who said they were not aware of the policy! The average amount of time taken for a Sabbath Rest was ten weeks. Most of the clergy who have not already taken a Sabbath Rest indicate that they do not have a plan to take such a rest in the future.

There were written comments from some lay persons and also interview comments that expressed concern about the Sabbath Rest policy. The lay concerns about the policy centered on the expense to the church of providing coverage while the pastor was gone and on the programmatic difficulties created for the church. One lay person said: "It was a disaster in our church. We were right in the middle of discussing a major expansion of our church building when the pastor almost demanded approval of a Sabbath Rest. We lost our momentum for the expansion, and it created bad will in the congregation. I'm not opposed to the policy, but I think pastors have a responsibility to be careful about the timing of such a major absence."

**Sustaining Pastoral Excellence Program**

Seventy-three of the clergy respondents (14.5%) indicated that they had participated in the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program. Those clergy who have participated in that program (either Vital Pastors or Advanced Foundations of Church Leadership) clearly derived significant benefit in terms of personal growth, increased vitality for ministry, and improved positive

feelings for the denomination. Clergy who participated in the program were asked to rank the help they received from the program across a number of areas using a scale from 1 (not at all helpful) to 7 (extremely helpful). Here are the percentages of clergy in the program who gave a rating of 5, 6, or 7 to these items:

Deepening my spiritual foundations	80%
Providing me with greater energy and vision for ministry	84%
Strengthening my relationship with other clergy	94%
Better equipping me to bring about positive change and transformation in my congregation	76%
Improving my physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health	80%
Equipping me to improve the health of my congregation	84%
Improving my understanding of the dynamics of congregational life	78%

On items on the survey related to the level of connection felt with various denominational agencies and personnel, those in the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence Program clearly felt a closer level of connection at every level than did others completing the clergy surveys. They also reflected greater confidence in their ability to bring about congregational change than did other clergy completing the survey.

In interviews, almost all of the participants mentioned they were very appreciative of the *support* that came from being with other pastors. Some viewed it as a spiritual and personal support group, while others perceived it more like a great resource in strengthening one another's ministries. Many still make the effort to maintain a connection with their group by varying degrees—some meet once a month, others quarterly, and some once or twice a year (being geographically close makes it easier for some to meet more often). Here are a few comments from participants about the support experienced:

- “A community of solid collegial support developed among pastors.”
- “Strengthened the connection and bonding with other pastors.”
- “An opportunity to get interaction with other pastors; get to really talk about what’s going on.”
- “Helpful to worship in each other’s setting and get feedback from other pastors (instead of just ‘you look nice’ comments from laypeople).”
- “*Concretized* the camaraderie and relationships between the participants during the monthly meetings; refreshing to get to know other Brethren in the final retreat.”
- “Helped each other develop worship series, share themes and text, and encourage one another in spiritual goals related to worship services.”
- “Established a good working relationship with those in the cohort, shared personal issues and the need for prayer.”
- “Helped a second-career pastor get to know others who have been pastors for 25 or more years.”
- “Discovered it was easy to connect and appreciated the wide age and experience range.”

Many believed the key to this program was its *intentionality*. By making it a priority to intentionally form a group, develop an inquiry topic, travel together, read several books, and continue discussing their experiences with one another, the program strengthened their ministries. The following comments relate to the intentionality of the experience:

- “Enabled to spend some major time focusing on areas one would normally not to get to focus on, particularly culture changes and pastoral skills; especially great to have other colleagues there to share the experience.”
- “More disciplined about reading and expanding my mind in pursuing the topic of inquiry.”
- “Readings helped realize a need for greater ministry to the community (not just a means of reaching a numbers goal).”
- “The way to assist (congregants) in their spiritual growth is to lead by example; I’m in the process of creating a spiritual formation group in the congregation.”
- “Valuable to connect with a group of other pastors and being intentional about supporting one another.”
- “Glad to spend time with other SPE cohorts and learn about their topics and experiences. I want to not just understand these issues but really chew on them with other church leaders.”

The Sustaining Pastoral Excellence Program sparked the implementation of some *meaningful and practical changes* in their local congregations, such as:

- Strengthened emphasis on prayer in the congregation.
- Incorporated a model from a foreign church: have a pre-worship prayer time and invite anyone who wants to come.
- Understanding people better (where they are coming from and becoming aware of differences in the congregation).
- Explored imagery of story and art and applied this in worship and other concrete applications within church life.
- Awakened need to focus more on God (to be more passionate and vital) and not on the denominational structure.
- Now emphasizing the development of lay leadership and using their spiritual gifts.
- Desire to have more high quality hands-on training—seeing the potential for people who show spiritual giftedness for leadership training (helped move someone in the church to licensed ministry).
- Learned how to be a great advocate for mission work that the church needs to do. For example, using traditional Church of the Brethren language to emphasize the need to work outside the church walls.
- Applied lessons in keeping spiritually centered in the tough times of conflict from visits with pastors in other countries.
- Increased awareness of the continuing needs in the areas of peace and justice (racism, sexism, etc.).
- Awakened a new way of looking at the world (i.e. privileged vs. non-privileged).
- Formed a visionary team in the congregation, composed of various ages, as a result of the readings and study; in the process of developing a long-range strategic plan.
- Dealt with how to meld hearts and minds into a more heartfelt Christian spirituality and obtained a better understanding of where people were coming from spiritually.

- Found new forms of worship that brought vitality; exposure to new thinking of emergent church development “enriched imaginations.”
- A group of 60 people from local congregations attended a workshop with a Christian author who studied why people leave churches-this was a very practical result of Sustaining Pastoral Excellence

The experiences in Sustaining Pastoral Excellence led some to do serious reflections and to make *life-changing decisions* about their own ministries that they would not have made without the program. For example:

- Three clearly said they would not be ministers today if not for the program; they gained new energy and a confirmation of being on the “right track” for their lives.
- During the 2 ½ year program everyone in one cohort left the church they were originally at, and the changes were viewed as positive ones for the pastors and the churches.
- One person, for example, shared being very excited about the result of the decision to change congregations. The previous congregation had not formed or embraced a vision for meaningful ministry. The pastor went to a smaller congregation in an urban setting, which has a deeper sense of community and mission and has been on the “cutting-edge” for years. It was a far better match for the gifts of the pastor.
- A pastor talked in an interview about the program coming at a crucial time. It helped the pastor struggle with vital questions: “Do I want to do ministry anymore? If not you, who? If not now, when?” The program had a profound impact and resulted in the person staying in the ministry with new energy.
- One spoke about a clear change in leadership style as a result of the program-no longer feeling compelled to follow the latest fad or program claiming to cure the ills of the church. The pastor is now working with those who are ready and is finding astounding spiritual growth.

## Clergy Role and Morale

Clergy were asked to rank their satisfaction with their current work as a pastor on a scale from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 7 (extremely satisfied). **Seventy-nine percent ranked their satisfaction with a 5, 6, or 7.** Only two percent checked a 1 or 2. They were also invited to rank their satisfaction with compensation on the same scale, and 76% chose a 5, 6, or 7. This reflects higher morale than previous studies in the denomination have shown. There was a clear correlation between satisfaction with work and satisfaction with compensation with those most satisfied with compensation also most satisfied with their work.

The perception of lay persons completing the surveys was that the morale of their pastors was high. In fact, **88% of the lay persons ranked their pastor’s morale with a 5, 6, or 7.** Thus the lay perception of the morale of pastors was higher than the pastors themselves reported!

Both clergy and lay persons were asked to rank their perceptions of the morale of the congregation on the same seven-point scale. Eighty percent of the clergy ranked the congregation’s morale with a 5, 6, or 7; 78% of the lay persons ranked it in the same way.

The size of the congregation did not correlate with the morale of clergy. It did, however, correlate with the perception of congregational morale by both clergy and laity. The larger the congregation, the higher the perceived morale was by both clergy and laity returning surveys.

Twenty-seven percent of the responding clergy felt that their church views them primarily as a caretaker of people and existing programs while only 10% viewed themselves primarily as caretakers:

<b>My church views me primarily as:</b>	
a caretaker of people and existing programs	27%
a leader or change agent helping the congregation reach out and improve its ministries	14%
both a caretaker and a leader	59%
<b>I view myself primarily as:</b>	
a caretaker of people and existing programs	10%
a leader or change agent helping the congregation reach out and improve its ministries	22%
both a caretaker and a leader	68%

Those who felt they were seen by the church as simply an employee or a caretaker were less likely to have high satisfaction in their work as a pastor. On the other hand, those who believed their church viewed them primarily as a leader or change agent were much more likely to be satisfied in their work.

### Concerns about the Future

There are good reasons to be concerned about the future of our congregations relative to attendance, hospitality, and stewardship matters. Consider the following facts from the study:

- Only 33% of responding clergy serve churches growing in average worship attendance. Only 21% of the church leaders returning surveys are in churches growing in average worship attendance. This suggests either that the church leaders and the clergy responding were often from different congregations OR that clergy and church leaders differ in their assessment on this item!

The larger churches (200 or more in average worship attendance) are more likely to be experiencing growth. The smallest churches (60 or under in average worship attendance) are the most likely to be experiencing decline.

- Over a third of clergy feel their churches are initially warm toward new people but can't integrate them effectively. Twenty-two percent of the clergy acknowledge that their churches have cliques or exclusive groups that can make one feel unwelcome; 31% of church leaders feel there are cliques or exclusive groups in their churches. Churches with an average worship attendance between 61 and 99 were the most likely to have pastors and church leaders who perceive the presence of cliques or exclusive groups.

- Only 48% of clergy describe their churches as having a sound financial base. Church leaders were less optimistic with only 34% feeling their churches have a sound financial base.

Here are some of the comments shared in interviews that relate to these concerns:

- “We really don’t train people for evangelism and church growth in this denomination. It’s like we don’t even consider it as important. But if we keep losing members like we have for the last 25 years, we will cease to exist. What’s wrong with us that this isn’t a bigger priority for the seminary, the district, and the denomination?” (Pastor)
- “When we were searching for a new pastor, we didn’t receive a single profile from a pastor who indicated thinking that evangelism was a priority. And we looked through thirty profiles.” (Lay person)
- “People in my generation thought that the pastor shouldn’t talk about money. It wasn’t emphasized when I was trained for ministry. But now I see the poor stewardship in my congregation harming our ability to grow and to support denominational programs, and I am not prepared to give the help I should.” (Pastor)
- “The one thing that I think was lacking in Sustaining Pastoral Excellence is that we didn’t talk in any depth or get any new insights into how to reverse the decline in membership in our congregations. I’m increasingly thinking that we don’t grow because we don’t teach people how to reach out. That should be seen as part of congregational health, but I don’t feel that we adequately addressed it.” (Pastor)
- “I think people who have grown up in the Church of the Brethren fail to recognize how poor the hospitality is in many of our congregations. I spent one fall going to several different churches in our district on Sunday morning, and three-fourths of them did not make me feel welcome.” (Lay person)

## **Skills for Ministry**

Being an effective minister involves working in a broad range of areas, and it is virtually impossible for a person to be equally skilled in all areas. Clergy were asked to rate their effectiveness on a scale of 1 (not at all effective) to 7 (extremely effective) in a number of areas. Here are the percentages who rated their own effectiveness with a 5, 6, or 7 in each area:

- 93% felt themselves effective in preaching
- 90% felt themselves effective in worship leadership
- 84% felt themselves effective in pastoral care
- 83% felt themselves effective in knowledge of the Bible and theology
- 76% felt themselves effective in congregational hospitality
- 75% felt themselves effective in work with spirituality

There is a rather sharp break between the above areas in which clergy felt reasonably effective and the areas in which they were less confident:

- 59% felt themselves effective in handling conflict
- 56% felt themselves effective in stewardship
- 55% felt themselves effective as change agents
- 55% felt themselves effective in Brethren heritage
- 47% felt themselves effective in dealing with social justice issues
- 47% felt themselves effective in work with youth
- 47% felt themselves effective in dealing with sexuality issues
- 45% felt themselves effective in evangelism and church growth
- 42% felt themselves effective in work with young adults

The lay persons who completed the church leader surveys gave reasonably similar rankings to clergy but did not give as high marks for preaching or for worship leadership as clergy gave themselves. This is consistent with what Christian Community has found in studies in other denominations. Preaching and worship leadership are so much a core part of ministerial identity, that there is an overall tendency for clergy to rank themselves higher in those areas than people in their congregations rank them. Though this study did not include surveys of visitors, other Christian Community studies have found that visitors give even lower marks on preaching and worship leadership than are given by persons who are already members of a congregation.

Overall the clergy who were part of the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program ranked their own effectiveness in most areas higher than did other clergy, and church leaders who had a pastor who had been part of Sustaining Pastoral Excellence likewise gave higher ratings to the effectiveness of clergy. Those in the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program were especially likely to rank their effectiveness higher on spirituality, handling conflict, and being a change agent. Those in the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program did not see themselves being any more effective than others in stewardship, dealing with sexuality issues, or evangelism and church growth.

While already seeing themselves as strong in preaching and worship leadership, those were among the top areas in which clergy indicated the strongest desire for further training (71% and 73% respectively rating their desire for further training as a 5, 6, or 7 on a seven-point scale). Here are the percentages indicating a 5, 6, or 7 to describe their desire for further training in the following areas:

- 73% have a strong desire for further training in preaching
- 73% have a strong desire for further training in handling conflict
- 72% have a strong desire for further training in the Bible and theology
- 71% have a strong desire for further training in worship leadership
- 70% have a strong desire for more training in evangelism and church growth
- 69% have a strong desire for further training in being change agents
- 63% have a strong desire for further training in pastoral care
- 57% have a strong desire for further training in hospitality
- 57% have a strong desire for further training in young adult work
- 53% have a strong desire for further training in stewardship
- 48% have a strong desire for further training in dealing with social justice issues
- 46% have a strong desire for further training in youth work
- 40% have a strong desire for further training in Brethren heritage

- 39% have a strong desire for further training in dealing with sexuality issues

Clergy who had been in the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program were more likely than others to indicate a strong desire for more training in evangelism, youth work, young adult work, stewardship, and dealing with sexuality issues. It would appear that the experience of the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program increases their desire to improve their skills in areas of perceived weakness.

## **Health and Well-Being**

Several items on the survey related to the physical health and the overall well-being of clergy. Here are the most significant findings of the survey in this area:

- Eighty-six percent of the responding clergy rated their physical health as good (64%) or excellent (22%). Some of them, however, are not doing all that they could to maintain or improve that health, as other responses indicate! Eight percent rated their physical health as fair, and 6% rated it as poor. Ratings of physical health correlated strongly with age—younger clergy were the most likely to rate their health as excellent, and older clergy were most likely to rate it as poor.
- Two-thirds of the clergy feel that they have healthy eating habits, getting the nutrition that they need; but that leaves one-third who acknowledge that they do not have healthy eating habits.
- Thirty-six percent have a regular program of exercise; 64% acknowledge that they do not.
- Sixty-nine percent get an annual physical; 31% do not. The study did not ask for specifics about what tests were a part of the annual physical.
- Seventy-three percent say that the ministry does not harm their physical health; 14% say that it does harm their physical health; and 13% were undecided. In interviews, several persons expressed the observation that the pace of ministry makes it difficult to maintain a regular program of exercise. Several also said that busy days combined with evening meetings created a significant temptation to eat too many fast food meals!
- Whether working full-time or part-time, almost no clergy report that they work fewer hours in a week that the congregation expects. Sixty-two percent feel they work the number of hours expected by the congregation, and 38% feel they work more than the number of hours expected by the congregation. Among full-time clergy, virtually none indicate working less than forty hours a week; 38% work 40 to 49 hours a week; 43% work 50 to 59 hours a week; and 19% work 60 or more hours a week. In the interviews, several clergy made the observation that there are several lay persons who donate significant amounts of time to the church and shared the observation that clergy probably should work more than forty hours a week. One expressed it in this way: “This congregation has at least thirty people who give fifteen or more volunteer hours a week to the church and at least another fifty who give between ten and fifteen

hours a week. These are people who work forty, fifty, and sixty hour weeks at their secular employment. I don't want to burn myself out, but I don't think it's fair for me to define my work week as only forty hours when so many people volunteer so much time."

- Eight percent indicated that they experience high levels of stress on a daily basis; 20% said that they experience high levels of stress on a weekly basis; and 64% said that they experience high levels of stress on an occasional basis. Only 8% said that they almost never experience stress. Twenty-three percent said that they could benefit from help in better handling or avoiding stress, and 34% said that church members could help them with stress by being more supportive. In interviews, several pastors shared the observation that stress is part of life today not only for clergy but for most people.
- Eighty-three percent said that most of the time they feel richly rewarded for their work as a pastor. Only 6% said that they do not feel richly rewarded most of the time, but 11% were undecided on this item.
- Eighty-nine percent feel that the ministry deepens rather than harms their spiritual life; only 4% felt that the ministry harms their spiritual life; and 7% were undecided.
- Seventy-three percent feel that their work as a pastor has been a blessing to their children; 17% felt that it had not been a blessing to their children; and 10% were undecided on the item or indicated that they do not have children.
- Seventy percent feel that it has been a blessing to their spouse; 26% felt that it has not been a blessing to their spouse; and 4% were undecided on the item or are not currently married. In interviews, a few clergy said that the ministry had played a major role in causing their first marriages to end in divorce. Some clergy in the interviews indicated the strong feeling that congregations still have expectations of clergy spouses that are unfair. One put it this way: "My wife continually feels that she is being judged by people in the congregation. What she wears; how much she volunteers in the church; and how she handles our children are all matters on which she feels like she's being graded. This is very unfair, and it hurts our marriage."

## **Denominational Connections**

Clergy do not have as high a connection to church entities beyond the local level as denominational leaders would like to see. Clergy felt the highest level of connection to the district as an entity, to their district executive, and to other clergy in the geographical area. Connection to the Annual Conference was not as strong; and connections were even weaker to the General Board (old terminology), Bethany Seminary, the Brethren Academy, Association of Brethren Caregivers (old terminology), and On Earth Peace. Here are the percentages of clergy who gave a 5, 6, or 7 to their sense of connection with each of the following:

- 77% with their district
- 73% with their district executive

- 62% with other pastors in their geographical area
- 55% with other pastors in continuing education experiences
- 55% with Annual Conference
- 41% with Bethany Theological Seminary
- 33% with the General Board (old terminology)
- 27% with the Brethren Academy
- 27% with Association of Brethren Caregivers (old terminology)
- 27% with On Earth Peace

Those who had been in the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program, almost without exception, felt a stronger connection than other clergy with every level of the denomination and especially with the Brethren Academy and Bethany Theological Seminary. Those in Sustaining Pastoral Excellence felt an especially strong connection with other pastors who were in that program with them.

## Concluding Observations

These conclusions are those of the author of this report, Steve Clapp writing on behalf of Christian Community, and are not necessarily the conclusions of denominational agencies or leaders. These observations are based both on the current study and on knowledge of past studies in the Church of the Brethren and in other denominations.

**1. Clergy morale, on the whole, is higher than I expected we would find in this study.** With the number of pressures pastors face in our time and the results of some other studies of clergy, I thought that we would find more clergy with low morale. I am delighted to have been proven so wrong. Almost 80% of the responding clergy ranked their morale as a 5, 6, or 7 on a seven-point scale, and only 2% ranked it as a 1 or 2. This actually represents an improvement in clergy morale over earlier studies that have been done in the denomination. The morale of those who have been in the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program was the highest, and that has obviously contributed to the overall morale within the denomination.

**2. The sense of connection with church entities beyond the local level is not as high as one would like to see.** Those who have been through the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program have the strongest sense of connection. To put this in perspective, however, it is important to note that these figures are similar to those reflected in studies of other denominations. We are living in a time in which it is more difficult for pastors and lay persons to develop a strong sense of connection to organizations like the Annual Conference and national agencies of the church. It should also be noted that, because of our relatively small size as a denomination, we only have one seminary and one academy. The percentages who felt well connected to Bethany and to the Brethren Academy in this study are higher than the percentages who feel well connected to any single seminary in other denominations, according to other studies.

In a time of tight finances and shrinking resources, it's easy for organizations and agencies beyond the local church to fall into the trap of seeing local churches as existing in good part for the support of the organization or agency. This kind of thinking, however, is self-defeating. Our interviews with clergy and church leaders make it clear that these people feel best about organizations and agencies when they perceive that those organizations and agencies exist for

the sake of the local church and to make possible ministries that no congregation can do on its own.

**3. The response rate from clergy was about 50%, which is very strong and indicates a representative sample from the denomination by routine statistical tests. Still there are always some differences between the clergy who respond to a study and those who do not.** The clergy who choose to respond to this kind of study are likely to be stronger clergy serving stronger churches than those who choose not to participate. Thus it is likely that problems in churches reported in this study may be even deeper in churches not represented in the response. As shared in the report, issues of evangelism, hospitality, and financial strength are significant. Clergy fortunately have some self-awareness of the need for more training in evangelism and church growth. Indeed clergy being more effective in that area is crucial for the future of our denomination.

The difficulty of many churches in assimilating new members and the presence of cliques or exclusive groups in many congregations suggests that our hospitality may not be as deep or effective as many clergy and lay persons want to believe that it is. There is a tendency for people to think of hospitality as the smiles and handshakes on Sunday morning rather than an attitude that permeates the whole church and opens up social networks to new people. Our efforts at evangelism are not likely to be successful if the hospitality of our churches is not deepened. As one pastor expressed it, “New people in our church can feel like they’ve barged into someone else’s family reunion!”

Interviews and comments suggest that clergy are concerned about the financial strength of their congregations but are inclined to view that more as the responsibility of the church membership and church leaders than as a pastoral responsibility. Yet the reality is that healthy stewardship is intimately related to a healthy spirituality, and clergy are the ones in the best position to have influence in this area. It is the opinion of this author that greater financial strength in our congregations is unlikely to come about without an increase in the willingness of clergy to gain training in this area and to offer guidance to the congregation.

**4. It concerns the author of this report that there are areas in which many clergy rate themselves as not being especially effective but that many of those same clergy are not especially interested in continuing education experiences that would help them with those deficiencies.** Fifty-five percent of the clergy felt themselves effective in understanding and interpreting Brethren heritage. The 40% who would like more training in that area are primarily those who already see themselves as being effective. Overall 38% of the responding clergy do not see themselves as effective in terms of Brethren heritage and do not place a priority on more education in that area. Those in that 38% were especially likely to have received their training from a source other than Bethany or the Brethren Academy. We need to be conscious of this in terms of the future of our denominational identity.

A similar situation exists in regard to dealing with sexuality issues. Only 47% of the responding clergy felt effective in that area. The 39% who want more training in that area are primarily those who already see themselves as being effective. Overall 45% of responding clergy do not see themselves as being effective in the area of human sexuality and do not place a priority on

more education in that area. Yet we know that people in Church of the Brethren congregations have no automatic immunity to teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, or divorce. Tensions over the place of gay and lesbian people in the life of the church continue to be a significant issue at every level of the church. More training in this area would be a significant benefit to clergy, if they were willing to participate in it.

**5. Overall this study shows an extremely positive impact from the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program.** It has clearly helped clergy morale and clergy practices. Those who have been through the program are also more in touch not only with their strengths but their weaknesses, and they are more open to training that would help them in areas of weakness. The strong impact of mutual caring and support that has been part of the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program gives a model that we should utilize wherever possible in the life of the church.

**6. The vast majority of clergy feel that their ministry has been a significant blessing to their lives, but a significant minority acknowledge that it has not been a blessing to their spouses and children.** We need to seek more ways at the national, district, and congregational level to nurture the family life of clergy. That *may mean* workshops and support groups outside of the local congregation, but it *certainly means* efforts to improve congregational practices. Unfair expectations of clergy spouses continue as a problem in some congregations, and clergy need to be encouraged by congregations to nurture their own family life.