



The Episcopal Diocese of Olympia

The Episcopal Church in Western Washington

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Clergy Wellness Fall 2020 Diocese of Olympia

REPORT ON FALL SURVEY DATA

1/4/21

The Rev. Canon Alissa Newton
Canon for Congregational Development and Leadership
Formation

From the Office of the Bishop

1551 Tenth Avenue East | Seattle, Washington 98102
206-325-4200 *telephone* | 206-325-4631 *fax* | 800-488-4978 *wa* | *online at*

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Background and Summary

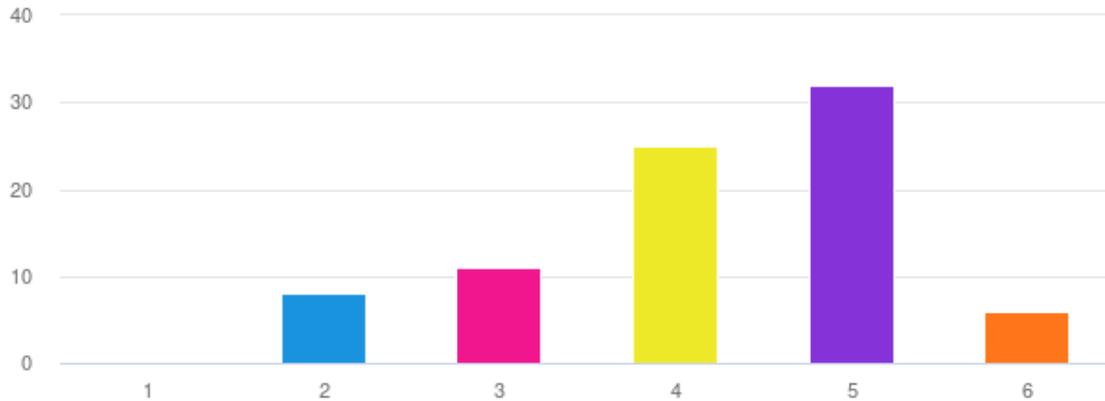
The global pandemic of COVID-19 and all that followed in its wake in the USA has put unique stress on clergy. Many clergy have found themselves suddenly separated from their congregations, forced to learn technology skills that were never part of their job descriptions, and working under conditions that they could not have imagined before March of 2020. While clergy are trained to deal with crisis situations, this crisis is unique in that it is happening to congregations and clergy simultaneously – that is, clergy are being expected to provide leadership, comfort, pastoral care, and support to their congregations while also experiencing the same trauma as their congregants: dislocation, isolation, fear, and other stressors such as needing to homeschool children or finding that they are in a high-risk health group.

In fall of 2020, the Office of the Bishop for the Diocese of Olympia sent out a survey to active clergy in order to assess their levels of stress and wellness. The purpose of this data collection was to prepare for a webinar for lay leaders orienting wardens, vestries, and bishop's committees to the unique challenges faced by clergy beginning in March of 2020 with the global COVID-19 pandemic and exacerbated by political, social, and racial realities that became more exposed in the months that followed. It was our hope that in the act of asking these questions of our clergy, we both learn more about how they are coping and begin conversations among both clergy and lay leaders about how there can be mutual support and care between clergy and their lay leaders during this difficult time.

The following report has the data we collected from 82 active clergy currently serving congregations in the Diocese of Olympia. The results from each of the 14 multiple choice questions are included, as well as a summary of the open-ended question which concluded the survey.

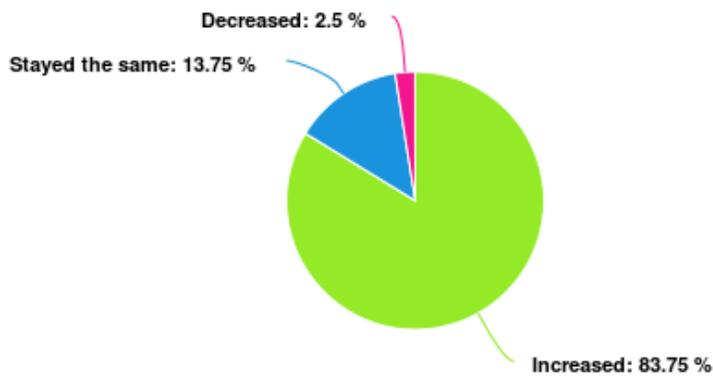
Survey results: multiple and forced choice questions

1. I would rate my current mental health as (scale from 1=poor to 6 = excellent)



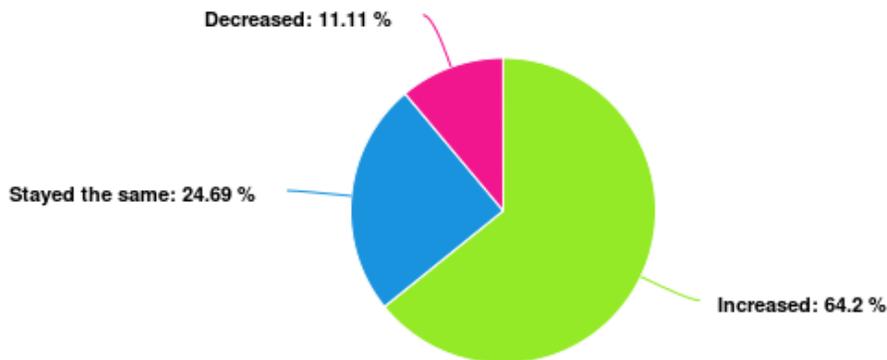
None of our clergy rated their own mental health as 1, poor. 8 clergy rated at 2, 11 at 3, 25 at 4, and the majority of 36 at 5, with only 6 rating a 6.

2. In the past 9 months my ministry/vocation related stress has (pick one)



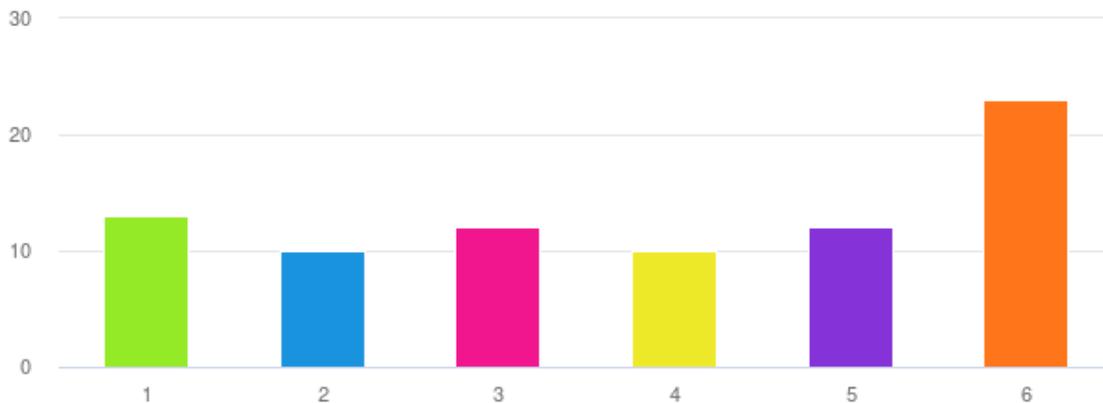
The vast majority of clergy report increased ministry or vocation related stress since March 2020.

3. In the past 9 months my home and personal life related stress has (pick one)



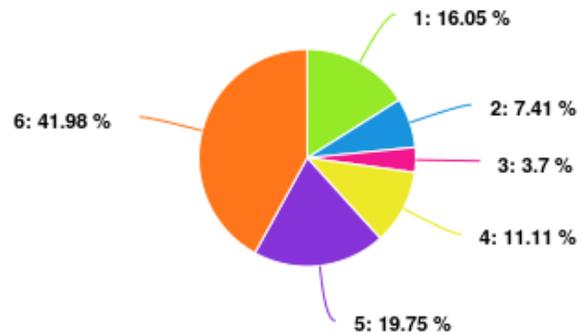
Over 60% of our clergy also report increased stress at home or in their personal lives.

4. In the past 9 months I have considered quitting ministry or retiring early (scale from 1=very frequently to 6 = never)



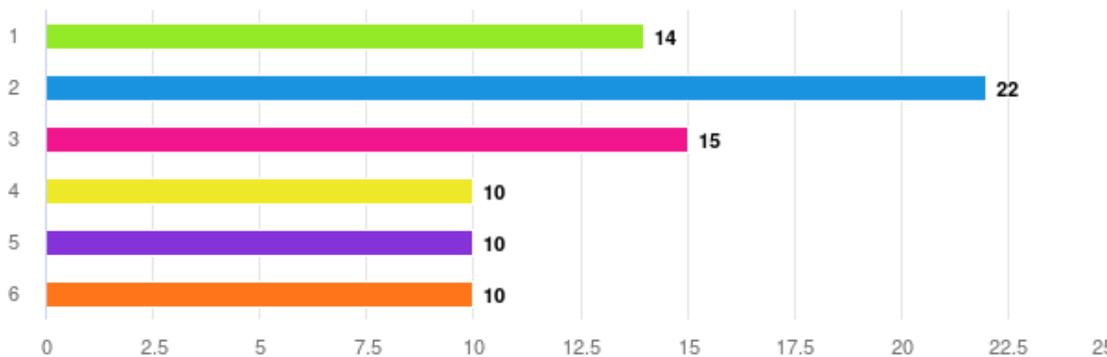
Numbers for those who have considered quitting or retiring early are as follows: Thirteen clergy scored at 1, very frequently considered. Ten scored at 2, and twelve scored at 3. On the less frequent side, ten clergy chose a 4, twelve chose a 5 and twenty four chose 6, or never.

5. In the past 9 months I have considered leaving my current call and looking for a new one elsewhere (1=I am actively seeking a new position to 6=I have not considered this at all)



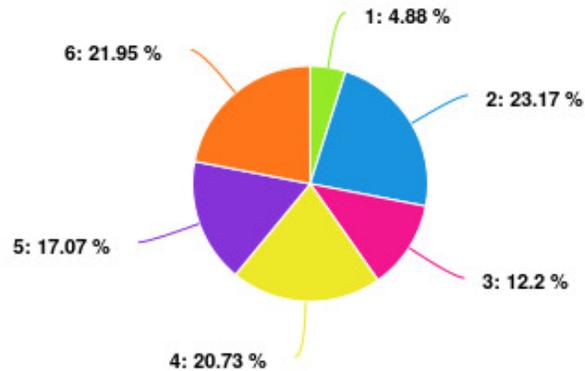
Just over a quarter of clergy responding have spent significant time considering leaving their current call and looking for a new call elsewhere in the past nine months.

6. In the past 9 months lay leaders in my congregation have checked in with me about my stress levels and/or mental health (1=never to 6=frequently)



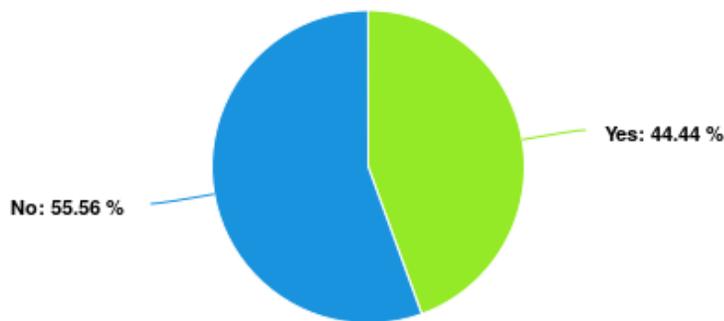
The majority of clergy responding report infrequent to no check-ins from lay leadership about stress levels or mental health since the pandemic began.

7. In the past 9 months I have felt supported as a whole person by lay leadership in my congregation (1=never, 6=frequently)

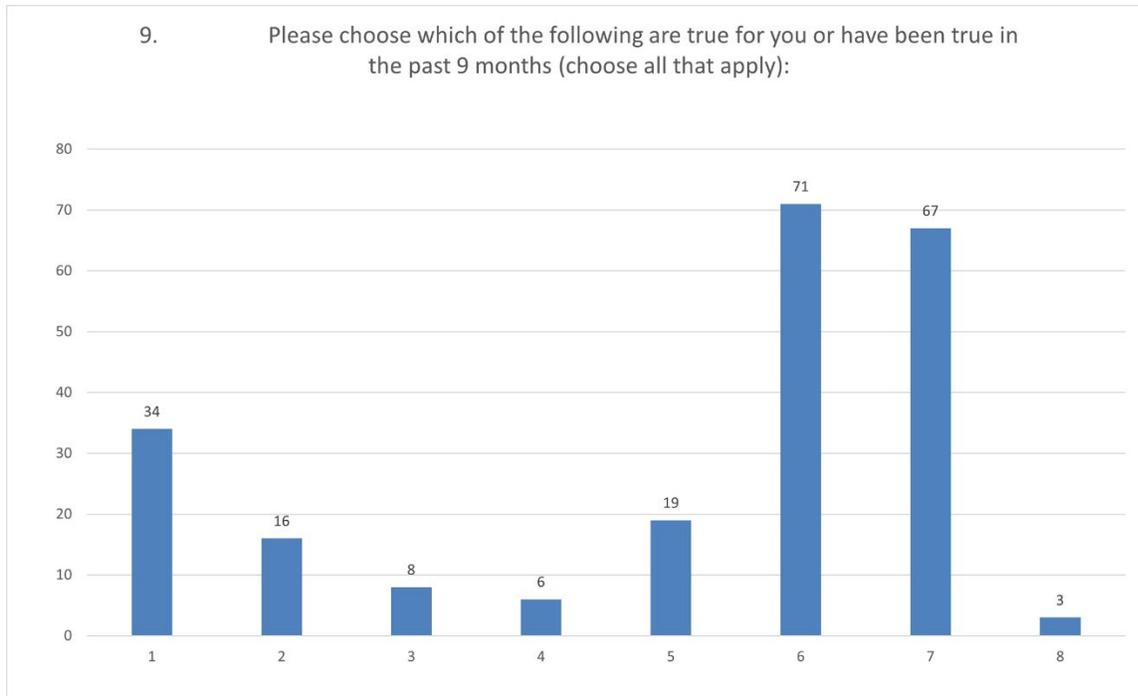


The pie chart was quite divided on this question – our clergy report a variety of different experiences with feeling supported as a whole person by their lay leadership.

8. In the past 9 months lay leadership (vestry/BC) has encouraged me in self care practices (i.e. made sure I take days off or encouraged time away to recharge)



Over half of our clergy have not been encouraged by lay leadership to engage in self-care practices.



1= a. I am in a high-risk health category

2= b. I have school aged children who are now learning at home

3= c. I have lost childcare resources for my young children

4= d. I identify as BIPOC

5= e. I have children/spouse/close family who identify as BIPOC

6= f. I have had to cancel vacation, travel or sabbatical plans

7= g. I have had to rapidly learn new technology skills that I did not need or use before

8= h. I have a spouse, partner, or close family member who is an essential worker

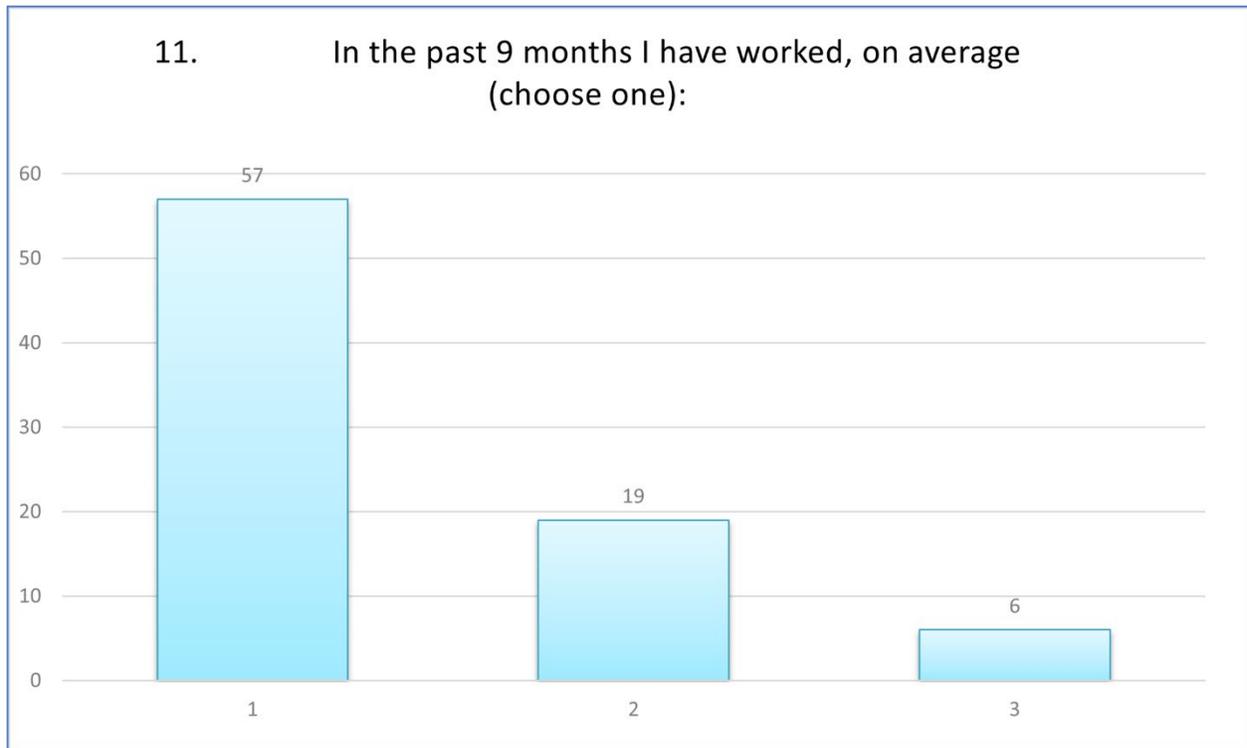
This data makes it clear that most clergy are dealing with multiple additional stressors simultaneously.

10. In the past 9 months(choose one):



- A. I have felt pressure from members of my congregation to re-open church for indoor worship
- B. I have felt pressure from members of my congregation not to re-open church for indoor worship
- C. I have felt pressure from some members of my congregation to re-open church for indoor worship and from some members not to re-open church for indoor worship

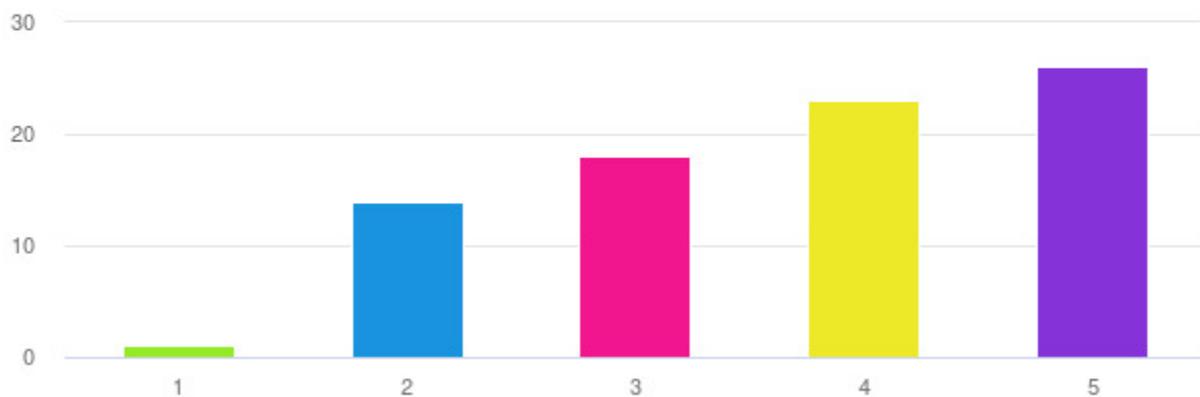
Most clergy feel pressured in both directions when it comes to re-opening for indoor worship.



1. More hours than in previous months
2. The same amount of hours as previous months
3. Less hours than in previous months

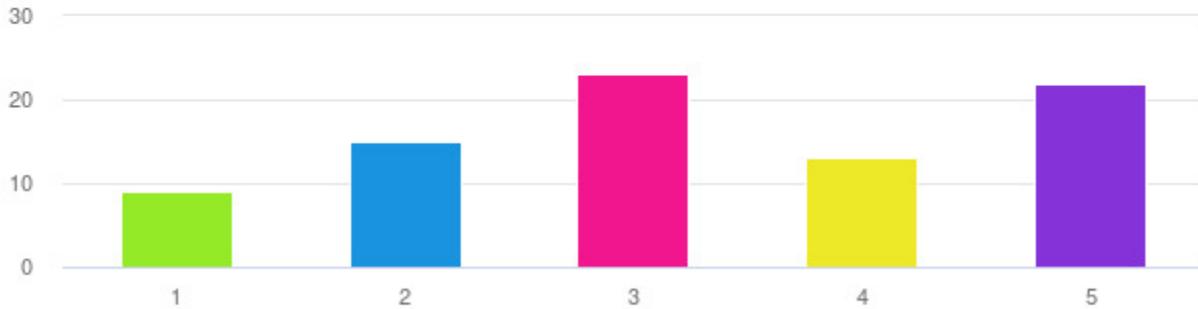
Most clergy respondents are working more hours than in previous months.

13. I feel supported in ministry by the lay leadership (vestry/BC) in my congregation: (1 to 5, 1=never, 3=sometimes, 5=frequently)



Overall, most clergy scored 3 or higher on this scale of feeling supported in ministry by lay leadership.

14. In the past 9 months the lay leadership in my congregation(vestry/BC) has encouraged and displayed flexibility in helping me to balance the demands of my personal life, mental health, and the work of ministry in congregational life. (1 to 5, 1=never, 3=sometimes, 5=frequently)



As a contrast, scores were not quite as definitive for feeling encouraged in the balance of personal life, mental health, and ministry work.

so many times when we doubt, not only ourselves, but the very relevance of the church and our vocation!”

- Exhaustion: Many clergy expressed feeling exhausted and overworked, and how difficult it has been to learn new ways of doing almost every aspect of their jobs. “That our role as clergy is changing and we are having a hard time adapting to it. That we can't give when we are depleted. That we feel guilty about our feelings of sadness, tiredness, acedia and spiritual shipwreck. That we feel shame of not being "strong" enough, or "spiritual" enough, or "pastoral" enough.”

There were two responses to the open-ended question that expressed more positive things – joy in collaboration with congregation and its leaders, and that this had made them a better priest.

Some Questions and Conclusions

The data gathered here paints an unsurprising picture of a clergy body that is under real and constant stress. Many of our clergy are experiencing multiple stressors both at work and at home. Many are either actively or casually considering what it would be like to leave ministry or find a new position.

Overall, our clergy reported feeling fairly supported in their work life and ministry by congregational lay leadership. This data differs from the data generated by questions about how supported our clergy feel as whole persons, or in managing the balance between work/vocational life and personal/home life. This suggests to me that our lay leadership are not yet comfortable or aware of clergy as whole human beings who may need support outside of work hours or to be encouraged to focus on personal life and home life as needed.

None of this is a new dynamic in the church, but the crisis of pandemic has the potential to worsen the mutual ministry relationships between our clergy and lay leaders if concrete information and support is not offered.

Our Clergy Wellness for Lay Leadership Webinar was a first attempt at offering outside diocesan support and training on a broad scale for our lay leaders who need to understand the unique stressors clergy are under during this time and may need permission to be openly supportive toward clergy in terms of days off, time for renewal, and asking clergy what they need. It is also important for lay leadership to be aware that not staying in touch with how their clergy are doing and finding ways to support their clergyperson in practices of self-care, home support, and sabbath taking could result in a clergy departure, an event which has the potential to further destabilize a congregation during an already destabilizing time.

This data also generates some questions. For example, we do not know how the numbers of clergy currently considering leaving or retiring compare to similar numbers before the pandemic. We do not know how church finances or size affects the wellness of our clergy positively or negatively, or how other factors such as age, family status, race and ethnicity, may play in. What we can see is that being a clergyperson is incredibly challenging and clergy here in the Diocese of Olympia are both meeting this challenge and being deeply impacted by it.

It is my recommendation that the Office of the Bishop continue to check in with both clergy and lay leadership in our congregations about stress levels, workload, and how these groups can engage in every improving mutual ministry and mutual support.

Submitted with care and gratitude,

The Rev. Canon Alissa Newton

Canon for Congregational Development and Leadership Formation