



The United Methodist Clergy Salary Study-Qualitative Analysis

Theological Reflections

HeeAn Choi, Ph.D.

Division of Ordained Ministry
General Board of Higher Education and Ministry
The United Methodist Church
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When people are called to ministry, salary is not the first thing that they consider in their hearts. The common assumption in Christian ministry practice from pastors is to expect to “leave everything behind,” including material possessions and personal comforts. Discussions of pastor salaries have long been taboo in Christian ministry practices in many denominations. While salaries are the first and the most important issue for personal well-being in secular society, salaries are the last and least important issue for a pastor’s well-being in the practice of ministry. As a result, very little research has been conducted on this issue. In fact, this study is the first research on pastor salaries in The United Methodist Church that considers crucial multifaceted contexts, such as race, gender, conference context, seniority, and others.

As shown in this report, we have discovered several crucial findings. In the following, we would like to evaluate the results and share some reflections that we see coming out of this research.

First, average pastor salaries have met the standard of living inflation and even exceeded it 2% per year. This shows the collaborative efforts of the Bishop and the Cabinet of the annual conference and local churches concerning pastors’ well-being. Despite a long taboo in terms of discussing pastors’ salaries in Christian churches, The United Methodist Church has tried to break that taboo by setting up the standard of living for pastors, with continuous support in maintaining that standard of living increase from 1997 to 2008. However, as we found in page 7, “the percentage of full-time pastors in the data decreased from 89% in 1997 to 79% in 2008” and the numbers of non-full time pastors have increased from 3% to 17%.

This phenomenon might be explained several ways. One hypothesis is that due to the decreasing numbers of UMC church members, the UMC has merged conferences and closed churches. Many local churches could not find the same financial resources as they had in the past. Another factor might be the economic difficulties of current years. Even if churches have the same numbers of church memberships, many church members have struggled to maintain their level of financial stewardships in the church. In some cases, a full-time pastor is asked to stay on in a church in this kind of difficult financial situation, and he/she understands the situations of the church and accepts a part-time position because of his/her commitment to the church and community. These findings bring up multiple questions. First, even though the UMC supports average pastor salaries to meet the standard of living, how it can sustain pastor salaries with fewer opportunities for full-time appointments? Second, who has priority for full-time appointments then among local pastors? Is priority



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dependent solely on seniority? With the limited data and resources available, this research cannot collect the sufficient information about part-time appointments at this time. However, we believe it is an important topic for further research.

Second, we found that race and gender are very important factors. Within the study, 76% of pastors are male and 88% of pastors are Caucasians. If we compare the actual numbers and percentage of pastors in each race and gender, the figure is below.¹

Percentage in each race and gender

Race	Male	Female
Caucasian	63%	25%
African American	5%	2%
Asian	2%	1%
Hispanic/Latino	1%	0%
Other	1%	0%

Raw numbers in each race and gender

Race	Male	Female
Caucasian	14,393	5,741
African American	1,049	543
Asian	553	148
Hispanic/Latino	260	91
Other	148	56

Even though in this study the number of female pastors has increased from 20% in 1998 to 29% by 2008, within the study, the number of non-Caucasian pastors has not shown the same change. What does it mean, then? One of the possibilities is that, compared to other racial-ethnic female clergy, the statuses of Caucasian female pastors have gradually improved and have been accepted more than other racial ethnic pastors. This implication is

¹ The numbers are accurate for the study sample, but not necessarily for The United Methodist Church as a whole, since the study sample underrepresents some categories of pastors (notably part-time/other local pastors). Our intention in showing these raw numbers is to have some sense of visible comparisons. However, it cannot give us the complete picture of the UMC pastors. We would like to ask GCFA to provide more data if they have representative number trends, such as part-time employment and female pastors, for further research.



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that the “raw” differences of pastors’ salaries between male and female are actually those of pastors’ salaries between Caucasian male pastors and Caucasian female pastors. Other racial-ethnic clergy shown have not had much impact on this gradual decrease. It might not affect the gender gap among other racial-ethnic groups.

However, even Caucasian female clergy’s salaries are not higher than those of other racial-ethnic male clergy, with the exception of Hispanic/Latinos. This means that a gender gap persists regardless of race and over race. At the same time, even though the gender gap between Caucasian male pastors and Caucasian female pastors shows the biggest gap among all races, Caucasian pastors make the highest salaries overall. This implies that the racial gap is comparable to the gender gap.

It is true that this quantitative analysis can show some positive developments in terms of seeing a decrease in the gender gap for pastor salaries. Over time, as female pastors gain seniority, we expect the gap to narrow. At the same time, this research also discovers that it is hard to expect to have equitable compensation between male and female pastors in all races in the current situation and in the near future. A gender gap still exists regardless of race, while a racial gap persists along with gender gap. Below, we will discuss more of the complexities of this conclusion.

Before we move to the next point, we would like to point out one interesting result. In figure 6, Asian female clergy get the highest salaries among other racial groups, including Caucasian female pastors. Is this true? First we want to emphasize that these are essentially “raw” averages. We suspect that there is some discrepancy between reality and these statistics. There are three plausible explanations that we would like to offer. First, within the study, there are very few Asian female clergy (148) compared to Caucasian female clergy (5,781). There is a larger margin of error for Asian female pastors, so their salaries could be less than recorded. Second, from the Status of Racial-Ethnic Minority Clergywomen research in 2004, it is said that “the salary support has a very strong relationship to survey respondents’ likelihood of staying in or leaving The United Methodist Church.”² If we agree with their claim, does this mean that Asian female clergy who stay in The United Methodist Church are the people who are satisfied with their salaries? Third, in that same research, many Asian female pastors shared their struggles with having a hard time obtaining their positions. Many Asian female pastors may not have full-time appointments and do not receive pension plans. Therefore their records are not recorded in this research data. It is

² Dr. Jung Ha Kim and Dr. Rosetta Ross, “The Status of Racial-Ethnic Minority Clergywomen in The United Methodist Church,” submitted to the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, 2004, p. 43.



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possible that Asian female pastors have many fewer opportunities for full-time appointments than Caucasian female pastors. We believe this issue requires further research and that there is a need to confirm the reality of this situation. Without supporting information, this piece of the study might perpetuate myths or lead to certain kinds of racial conflicts.

Third, “congregational size is the largest differentiating factor for pastor salaries, reflecting the importance of appointment for pastor salaries.” This is the conclusion that we expected. The bigger and larger churches pay more than smaller and poorer churches. We also concluded that younger and lower-status pastors are assigned to congregations that pay less in salary. However, we find that the correlation between seniority and congregational size is not very high (0.32). Our question, who is being preferentially assigned to larger churches? From a broad perspective, it appears that males are not preferentially assigned to larger churches more than women, so size does not explain the gender gap. Note that this finding considers all congregational sizes. However, from the study of Lead Women Pastors Project survey, 99% of senior pastors in the big churches (more than 1,000 in membership) were Caucasian and male. “There was only one Asian and one African American male senior pastor and one African American female pastor in the big churches.” There are no racial ethnic female pastors, with the exception of one African American female pastor. Furthermore, “there is possibly only one woman serving the top 100 of the largest United Methodist Churches” including Caucasian female pastors.³ It may still be true that females are unlikely to be assigned to the very largest churches without impacting salaries overall because it appears not to be the case that males are preferentially assigned to larger churches than women, so size does not explain the gender gap in our statistics. However, the gender gap exists. How do we have to explain this, then?

We also conclude that the race gap is evident. The bigger churches in suburban, large-town, and rural areas prefer to have non-people of color, and tend to pay better than the smaller church at these locations. How do we explain this? We wonder if the bishop and the cabinet prefer to appoint Caucasian pastors to the bigger churches in suburban, large-town, and rural areas, since these congregations prefer to have non-people of color, and tend to pay better than the smaller church at these locations. How do we challenge this pattern? Congregation size is a critical part of determining pastor salaries. It is important to do further research on who is in the bigger churches and what are the determining factors to be a pastor in the bigger churches.

³ Rev. Dr. HiRho Park and Rev. Dr. Susan Willhauck, “Lead Women Pastors Project Survey Summary,” submitted to the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, 2009, p. 2.



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Fourth, seniority is the most crucial factor in determining pastors' salaries. People who have less seniority have the tendency to go to churches with multiple charges and smaller congregations. As we expected, seniority itself gives pastors a better opportunity to increase their salaries. When we consider seniority, it is true that the gender gap between pastor salaries has decreased. However, there are questions: Who has seniority, and how do people obtain seniority? It is said that gaining seniority in The United Methodist Church is not easy. According to the Anna Howard Shaw Center research, Female Clergy Retention Study I & II,⁴ female clergy show a pattern of leaving their full-time ministry because of the lack of support, family issues and other reasons. Because of this, they have difficulty in gaining seniority steadily. From the current research, "The Status of Racial-Ethnic Minority Clergywomen in The United Methodist Church," racial-ethnic female clergy "are more likely to switch their denominational affiliation if they perceive a lack of salary support, depending largely on how long and how far they can sustain themselves in their own ministry, often all by themselves."⁵ Gaining seniority is the most important factor for determining pastor salaries, but for female clergy and racial ethnic clergy, gaining seniority requires more than just staying in the ministry. It requires personal and communal supports from the pastors themselves, families, friends, and their communities. Many people of color and female clergy share that they do not receive sufficient support or any support, and they have had to sustain their ministry by themselves. It seems that gaining seniority is a great struggle for them.

Furthermore, this leads to another question about seniority. In gaining seniority, is it required that all people (pastors) have the same amount of experience (including work experiences and educational background)? In the case of the lead pastors, "there were seven males and one female who became a lead pastor in their first appointment and the most frequent experiences of women pastors prior to serving as a lead pastor of a large church have been as associate pastors, district superintendents and candidates for the episcopacy."⁶ Without further research, this case cannot be used to generalize the assumption that female clergy and racial-ethnic people tend to have more work experience and other qualifications in order to have the same opportunities in all UMC appointments. However, we suspect that without the additional work experiences and higher educational backgrounds, female clergy

⁴ The Anna Howard Shaw Center is currently conducting Female Clergy Retention Study II (2010–2011) and expects the full analysis in 2012.

⁵ Kim and Ross, "The Status of Racial-Ethnic Minority Clergywomen in The United Methodist Church," 21.

⁶ Park and Willhauck, "Lead Women Pastors Project Survey Summary," 2.



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and racial-ethnic clergy would not have achieved the same level of appointment and would not have obtained the same salary level as their (Caucasian male) counterparts.

When we consider gender and race in seniority from this complex perspective, we cannot conclude that this decrease reveals a positive or negative expectation for equitable pastor salaries between female clergy/racial ethnic clergy and non-female/non-people of color in the near future. With respect to gender, if salary is tied to seniority and more women are entering the ministry with respect to men, it must be the case that the salary gap will decline over time. However, that does not address the question of how much the salary gap will decline and whether this decline is adequate from a social justice point of view. We still find a gender gap of 4–5% even after taking into account congregation and personal characteristics. With respect to race, it is clear that the race gap is obvious. Without intentional research into methods of gaining seniority and what obstacles female clergy and racial ethnic clergy might have in order to gain seniority, we should not expect that the gender/race gap will naturally decrease over time.

Our other findings in terms of gender are positive, with the numbers of female pastors in The United Methodist Church increasing, and it is expected that these numbers will continue to increase. In the last two decades, large numbers of females have pursued and earned theological education degrees. While the numbers of female clergy have grown, the numbers of racial-ethnic clergy have not grown at the same rates. This does not mean that racial-ethnic people do not earn theological degrees. In fact, many racial-ethnic students have entered and have been educated in theological institutes globally. However, within this study, the numbers of racial-ethnic clergy have not increased. This might imply that the status of racial-ethnic clergy in general and racial-ethnic female clergy in particular has not been improved for the last ten years in terms of financial resources, and that an improvement cannot be expected without significant efforts from The United Methodist Church as a denomination.

Generally, conferences also reflect the same patterns, in terms of gender and race, for pastor salaries. This means that the discrepancy of the gender/race gap is not a local problem, but a significant problem that The United Methodist Church must deal with as a whole. Without intentional efforts, this problem will not disappear over time.

Salary negotiations are common practices that people exercise in a secular society. However, these are often the least comfortable subjects for pastors to discuss. This subject is difficult to put on the table between pastors, the bishop, and the cabinet of the annual conference/ local church. “Whatever God gives us, we receive it with grace and



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thankfulness.” This is a general attitude that Christians try to practice. Because of these tendencies, many pastors receive their salaries humbly. Females and racial ethnic people have less tendency to negotiate salaries and often easily accept whatever churches offer, with a sense of compassion toward their communities. It is great that The United Methodist Church works hard to set up the standard salaries and protect pastors’ well-being that way. However, there are still many other supports that are needed to sustain pastors’ well-being within The United Methodist Church structure. We would like to offer several suggestions.

Suggestions for further research:

This research is a quantitative one. We used several factors, such as gender, race, seniority, conference contexts, and others, to determine the status of pastor salaries. However, we found that these factors need to be examined and interpreted if we want to show the complete picture of pastor salaries and as a way to explore the gender and race issue more deeply.

First, it is necessary to examine how female pastors pursue their callings and what they expect their salaries to be. What are trajectories of the salary that they expect? How does salary impact their ministry? What are the patterns of their appointments? How do they gain their seniority? If they have none, why not? What are the obstacles they have experienced in sustaining or giving up their ministry?

Second, we need to require the same questions of racial-ethnic pastors.

Third, using this research as a comparison, we suggest finding common patterns that emerge between gender and race, in order to better understand salary differences.

Fourth, there are many part-time/ local pastors and associate pastors who receive much lower salaries than their contemporaries in other churches. Who are they? How did they get these positions? Was this their own choice? If not, why not?

Fifth, we concur with the recommendation from the report “The Status of Racial Ethnic Minority Clergywomen,” for “annual conference institute policies to more equitably affirm the ministry of all UMC clergy through compensation and promotion.”⁷ Our research also finds that in terms of race and gender, the United Methodist Church needs more intentional efforts to provide equitable compensation and promotion for racial-ethnic pastors and female pastors. The gradual decrease in the gender gap/race gap in terms of

⁷ Kim and Ross, “The Status of Racial-Ethnic Minority Clergywomen in The United Methodist Church,” 55.



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salary would not occur without intentional supports.

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