

MINISTRY WITH THE POOR:

UM Churches Make Hunger Relief a Priority

United Methodist churches are famous for their potluck meals—bounteous tables filled with casseroles, mayonnaise-filled salads, and deviled eggs. More importantly, however, a vast majority of congregations also place great emphasis on sharing their food with those in need, a recent survey finds.

Circuit Rider surveyed 324 United Methodist pastors to examine the ways in which congregations are approaching poverty ministry, and consistently found food pantries to be the most common beneficiary, both of congregations' financial contributions and their volunteer efforts.

A majority of congregations (77%) give of their time and energy to food pantries, fifty-nine percent to domestic mission

projects, fifty-three percent to clothing and supply pantries, and fifty percent to homeless shelters. An even higher percentage of congregations (83%) donate money to food pantries, followed by international mission projects (80%), and domestic mission projects (75%).

When pastors were asked what poverty-related issues they feel most called to address, domestic hunger emerged as the top priority, followed by health care and homelessness. Eighty-nine percent of respondents said they preach about poverty at least occasionally.

Asked what percentage of the church budget goes to ministry with the poor, respondents reported an average of ten percent going toward needs in the local community and nine percent to causes beyond the local community.

Despite the relative parity of budgeted funds for poverty relief near and far, pastors reported significantly higher feelings of effectiveness in their local communities. Respondents were asked to rate how much of a difference they feel they are making to help the poor (on a scale of one to ten). On a local level, satisfaction averaged 6.0, but only 3.8 for both national and global levels.

Popularity of various types of poverty ministries did not vary much across different sizes and locations of congregations. Food pantries are the biggest recipients of both time and money for small churches as well as large, rural congregations as well as urban, and across all jurisdictions.

These factors do have an impact, however, on the types of ministries churches are able to run out of their own facilities. Rural churches and those with fewer than fifty people in average worship attendance were less likely to run poverty ministries out of their facilities than were those with more people, larger facilities, and a more populated surrounding community to serve. Urban churches, which are arguably situated in closer proximity to poor neighborhoods, are the most likely to offer all services to the poor, including homeless ministries and after-school programs.

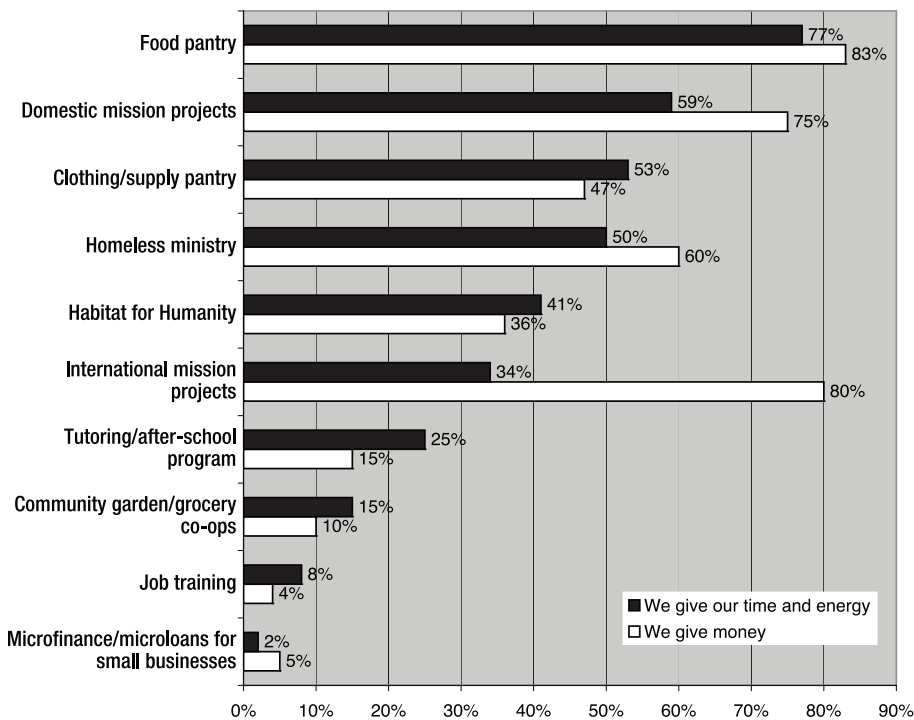
Sixty-nine percent of congregations surveyed host a poverty-related ministry of some sort. Once again, food pantries are the most common. Among write-in responses, pastors listed a variety of ministries that—while not necessarily serving only the poor—offer support for struggling individuals: Alcoholics Anonymous, medical clinics, Meals on Wheels, and community meals.

The “Ministry with the Poor” area of focus emphasizes poor and non-poor working alongside one another and involving the poor in the services that benefit them. According to this research, churches in urban areas and in the Western Jurisdiction are most likely to put that emphasis into practice.

Of respondents whose churches run poverty ministries out of their own facilities, only nineteen percent reported that representatives of the people being served provide leadership for the ministry (lay volunteers were the most common leaders of these ministries). In urban areas, a full third said the poor provide leadership for the ministries, and in the west, thirty-two percent.

Fifty-eight percent of the respondents whose churches run poverty ministries out of their own facilities say that people being served by those ministries participate in serving others “sometimes,” and twelve percent “frequently.” In urban areas, twenty-four percent say the poor frequently help serve, and in the west, thirty-six percent. □

In what types of poverty-related ministries does your church participate regularly?



Circuit Rider asked readers...

What poverty-related issue do you feel most called to address?



“**Consumerism** and its role in keeping others in poverty.”

“**Attitudes** toward the poor and homeless.”

“Addictions and gambling.”

“Disenfranchisement, **outcasts** not encouraged or allowed to participate across economic boundaries.”

“Clean water supply problems.”

“A **‘hand out’** mentality, a sense of entitlement, and a distinct lack of **personal initiative** of any kind in many people seeking assistance.”

“Realizing **how much we have** in abundance and that our God is an **abundant God**, not one of scarcity.”

“**AIDS** and education.”

“Unjust treatment toward **Hispanics in their jobs.** It is like the **slavery** system is back in our midst.”

“The **cycle of worsening credit.** Illness is the #1 cause of bankruptcy, ruining people’s credit, which leads to the inability to qualify for decent housing and jobs in some instances.”

For the next issue’s Clergy Roundtable:

What “new places” is your church creating to reach “new people”?

Send your response to jkelly@umpublishing.org or call 615.749.6385, and we will print as many as possible in the next issue. Responses will be edited for brevity and clarity.

Replies via Twitter

jadowd _I think it’s important to address poverty within our own communities. It’s sad to realize people are suffering in our town.

katiez _Address the hopelessness that keeps people where they are through education and opportunity.

monicamowdy _The poverty related issue for me is working class poor & struggles w/ today’s rising \$ for everything. No access 2 aid.

AJSchlei _Hillcrest UMC may open Wednesday dinners up. Belmont UMC provides school clothes 2 immigrant children

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