

Prescription for spiritual caregivers: **Physician, heal thyself**

September 10, 2010

DURHAM, N.C. (ABP) —Many clergy are caring for others but not taking adequate care of themselves, a recent study by Duke University revealed.

[A survey](#) of United Methodist ministers in North Carolina found them significantly more obese than their socio-economic peers in the general population. Ministers also suffered higher rates for chronic diseases like high blood pressure, asthma and diabetes.

"The condition of your body must be attended to ... a little more ..."
—*Charles Spurgeon*

The lead author of the study, [Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell](#) of the [Duke University Center for Health Policy](#), said mortality rates for clergy are lower than their nonclergy peers due to lower rates of sexually transmitted disease, accidents and suicide.

That creates a false impression that the restraint clergy exercise in other areas of their lives will carry over into things like diet and exercise, she observed.

Proeschold-Bell described “an urgent need” for health interventions in the United Methodist Church and possibly among other clergy to curb obesity and chronic disease.

“Churches and other religious institutions have often been viewed as

structures in which to enact health interventions,” she wrote. “However, this study’s findings indicate that it is critical to improve the health of clergy themselves.”

Clergy are not immune from depression and anxiety, Proeschold-Bell said.

Because congregants put them on a pedestal and assume they have strong enough spiritual resources to handle it, many ministers are reluctant to admit feeling strain. That only adds to feelings of stress and isolation, she said.

Clergy-related issues participants indicated as having the greatest impact on their health included the ability to set boundaries, the perception that the minister is on call 24 hours a day, church health, itinerancy and financial strain.

Participants reported feeling overwhelmed by pastoral needs from congregants and community members and struggling to set boundaries in order to protect their time for self-care practices like exercise and family time.

Barriers to protecting their personal time included the ministers’ “own servant orientation” and expectations by the congregation that they be constantly available. Several noted the expectation of constant availability made it particularly difficult to take vacations.

Other barriers included the tendency of pastors “to put everyone else’s needs before their own and to have unrealistically high expectations for themselves.”

Participants also said unhealthy church dynamics had a large effect on their health.

Several common church situations—such as a small number of congregants

opposing even small changes suggested by the pastor, feuding cliques of church members that polarize issues along group lines and one or more congregants who use intimidation or abusive tactics to oppose the pastor—all had significant impact on clergy stress.

One strength of the study, the first of its kind to compare the health of ministers with people of similar demographics in the general population, was the sample, researchers said.

All currently serving United Methodist clergy in North Carolina were offered participation, and 95 percent completed the survey.

Several participants discussed the importance of taking a Sabbath or spiritual retreat. Some mentioned “religious coping” with stress, such as one minister who reported realizing he was working too hard and “just putting my trust in the Lord and really believing that it’s his ministry, not mine.”

One “interesting but not surprising” finding was that participants repeatedly included spiritual well-being in their definition of good health.

Researchers said peer support is one way for ministers to learn ways of handling the unique demands and stresses of their profession. It is more likely to be effective if it occurs in a way that allows pastors to make themselves vulnerable to each other and ensures confidentiality, especially with pastors who hope to move later to a larger church.