

# Pastor sees healthy lifestyle as act of worship

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MARSHALL—[First Baptist Church](#) of Kenova, West Va., is changing its community for the better after the congregation received challenging news from the pulpit concerning obesity.

Pastor Steve Willis of First Baptist Church in Kenova, West Va., speaks to East Texas Baptist University students on the sin of gluttony during a recent chapel service. He told how his church helped facilitate change in its community, leading residents to live a healthier lifestyle. (PHOTO/Jason John Cowart/ETBU)

Before he approached the sensitive subject in a sermon, Pastor Steve Willis sought the counsel of his church's elders.

"The elders told me I could preach on anything but gluttony," Willis told students during a recent chapel service on the [East Texas Baptist University](#) campus. "They were afraid someone would get offended if I called them 'fat' from the pulpit."

After two months prayerful consideration, the elders encouraged their pastor to proceed. Then in 2008, prior to the Sunday when Willis had planned to preach on gluttony, the Center for Disease Control released [a report](#) that named the Huntington area—including Kenova—as the most obese and [unhealthiest city in America](#). Willis saw the report as an affirmation by God he was on the correct path.

"Why can we talk about all matters of sin in the church, but we don't talk about the sin of not taking care of the temples that God has given us?" asked Willis of the chapel audience.

He encouraged his listeners to consider exercise and eating healthy as an act of worship.

"It matters what Christians do to their bodies, our bodies belong to God," he said.

Willis told the ETBU crowd obesity is mostly self-induced because of Americans' diet. "Everyone is eating too many processed foods and not enough good fresh food. If food can stay on the shelf for a year and still be edible, it is not good for you," he said.

The message Willis preached on gluttony at First Baptist of Kenova caught the attention of British celebrity chef, Jamie Oliver. The church was featured last year on Oliver's reality show, Food Revolution, which promotes good health and proper nutrition.



Pastor Steve Willis of First Baptist Church of Kenova, West Virginia visits with a small group after speaking in chapel at East Texas Baptist University. The topic for the day was gluttony, and he encouraged the listeners to understand that how we treat our bodies is an act of worship to God. (PHOTO/Jason John Cowart/ETBU)

First Baptist in Kenova has led its community to promote awareness about the benefits of good nutrition and exercise. A community fitness walk is scheduled each weekday in the church's family life center.

The church recently opened an exercise center for residents to use free of charge, and the kitchen in the church's new facility is used to prepare healthy meals, as well as providing instructions for cooking healthy meals.

"As we got into this as a church, I told my wife, 'I know a little about exercise but nothing about nutrition.' We had members exercising and losing weight, but we still were not addressing the issue of the food that we eat. I was praying: 'Lord, the problem is what we eat. I need help with how to cook healthy.' The next thing I know, I am getting a phone call from Jamie Oliver, who knows how to cook healthy, wanting to partner with us," Willis said. "When Jamie called, I knew the Lord was in what we're doing."

Fellowship dinners at the church have changed. Today, the mashed potatoes and gravy still are on the menu, but healthy options like salads and fruits are readily available. Fresh food is cooked, as well. Snacks prepared for preschoolers during Sunday school now consist of fresh cut fruits—not cookies and Kool-aid.

"Our largest problem in the United States is that we eat too much. As a church, how many resources are we losing due to our inability to control our eating and exercise habits?" said Willis.

"How many hours do pastors spend with people who cannot invest in the kingdom of God because they are physically unable as a result of how they have treated their bodies for 30 years? How much do Christians spend on medical care due to self inflicted diseases?"

Willis believes his message on gluttony is being heard because he presents the truth with grace. "When I have one-on-one conversation with dads, I tell them in love, 'Do you want to pray with your grandchildren when they

graduate from high school?' That hits home with parents about changing their eating habits."

Since appearing on Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution, doors have opened for Willis to share his message on other national television shows like Good Morning America, Nightline and the Larry King Show.

"The greatest thing to me throughout this whole process is God has taken something that even our fallen culture understands is a problem. The world knows this is an issue, and they want the church to speak out on these issues of justice. I have been able to share the good news about Christ and how the Bible is relevant today to hundreds of people who would never step into a church," Willis said.

David Rice, pastor of Crossroads Baptist Church of Marshall, attended the ETBU chapel service, and he identified with the struggle Willis must have faced before determining to preach about gluttony.

"It is really tough to preach on gluttony when you look out and see those people in your congregation that you love who struggle with discipline and indulgences," Rice said.

Will Walker, chair of the kinesiology and exercise science program at ETBU, applauded Willis for addressing the subject.

"It is good to have somebody here on our campus put this subject in a Christian focus to help our students understand it from a biblical view," Walker. "What Pastor Willis said ... reaffirms what we are doing, because we have changed many of our activity classes from a strictly recreational time to a deeper focus on personal fitness."