

# The Pastor's Health

A mutual ministry  
of service

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## Let's start with a short quiz.

Be honest. Don't overthink your reactions.

Everyone else on the missions committee can make a Thursday meeting at 6:30. The pastor says he can't. The group reschedules, even though it means delaying the meeting by two weeks. On Thursday evening, you're walking your dog in the park and see the pastor at his daughter's soccer game. What do you think?

- A. His selfish priorities inconvenienced everyone else.
- B. His daughter would have understood that he was serving God.
- C. He was right where he should have been.

You have a spare hour while your child is at a birthday party after preschool and decide to squeeze in a class at the gym. There's your pastor sweating it out on the elliptical in the middle of the day. What do you think?

- A. That's an hour when she could have been calling on shut-ins who rarely have visitors.
- B. Clearly she's thinking of herself rather than the people she's called to serve.
- C. Good for her!

You meet your pastor at the best breakfast place in town to talk about some church committee business. You say breakfast is on you and order the Five Favorites Platter—pancakes, bacon, hash browns, eggs, and cinnamon roll. Your pastor orders fresh fruit and whole wheat toast. When you say, "Have some real food," the pastor sticks with the original order. What do you think?

- A. Why the judgment of my choice?
- B. What happened to common gratitude?
- C. Mmm. "Just a minute. I'd like to change my order."

In scenarios like these, pastors don't always make it to the "C" choice. It's not easy for clergy, who care about people and want to have positive relationships, to make choices they know will disappoint people or bring their own behaviors under scrutiny. Often pastors are the most unhealthy people in the church both because of the expectations they have for themselves and the expectations congregations have for them. When one young pastor's wife with a new infant and a preschooler with autism bravely told a church leader she needed her husband home in the evenings more often, he responded, "You knew it would be like this when you went into the ministry." End of discussion.

Fifty years ago, clergy were in the top five healthiest professions in America. That is no longer true. In the midst of the obesity epidemic, clergy are leading the statistics. As many as 40 percent are obese. Part of the problem is everyone tries to feed pastors. In the South, where I live, it's their best fried chicken and chocolate cake, along with super-saturated sweet tea. I'm sure every region has its popular "but this is a special occasion" dishes that seem to bypass the guidelines for healthy eating, and on their end, the pastors feel they will hurt someone's feelings if they say no thanks. Church meals, organized for relationally beneficial reasons, tend to be heavy on the carbs and certainly don't skimp on desserts.

### A Compelling Calling

Pastors also face the challenge of when to exercise, nurture personal relationships, or explore hobbies apart from work. If meetings are scheduled around the convenience of most church members with daytime, weekday jobs, that means a lot of evening and weekend commitments for the pastors. Yet is it truly "safe" to go to the gym in the middle of the day or decline an evening meeting for a family priority?

These days you'd have to look long and hard to find someone who goes into church ministry with the idea that it's a good "job." It requires long hours, unpredictable intrusion into personal space and plans, tasks for which seminary doesn't train you, and heavy emotional investment into other people's problems. Dozens or hundreds of people may all think you owe them something, and a small group, if ticked off by something you can't foresee, can make your life miserable. For all this, you are likely to have more education than most people in the congregation but earn less. No, it's not a good "job." Yet it is a compelling calling, and obedience to God is what brings clergy into the service of God's people as shepherd and leader.

This sense of spiritual calling is also what sabotages clergy health. It's what allows pastors in each moment to choose what they perceive as the spiritual value in another person's life, or the life of the church, as more pressing than health values in their own lives. In this moment, they will skip one more child's soccer game to finish a sermon, smile and share one more piece of cake with a shut-in congregant, say yes to one more Saturday morning budget session instead of a hike, or answer a late-night phone

call and find themselves at a parishioner's house unexpectedly trying to talk someone into setting down the gun.

The moments add up to weeks and months and years of neglecting their health for the sake of ministry. For a long time, many pastors will say that they find fulfillment in their work and perceive their health to be good. But the pounds pile up. Blood pressure rises along with the stress. Depression levels increase. Chronic disease sets in. The numbers tell us that clergy are in fact considerably *less* healthy than the general population.

Clergy are no different than anyone else when it comes to the need to live a healthy life. We know that our bodies and spirits speak to each other. What affects one affects the other. And clergy are also no different than anyone else when it comes to needing support and encouragement to live a healthy life. The communities they serve and care for can also serve and care for them.

### A Mutual Ministry

On the clergy side, pastors must see that taking care of self is taking care of the ministry. It is not time *away* from ministry for a lesser calling. Faithfulness to the call to ministry does not mean faithfulness to the busyness of ministry tasks but faithfulness to the God who calls—the same God who created us body and spirit and continues to relate to us through body and spirit. The incarnate Christ we follow was born, lived, died, and rose with a body. We are in relationship with God through our bodies and our spirits. When our spirits don't know how to pray, the Holy Spirit does (Romans 8:26). When our embodied lives make us weary and burdened, Jesus gives rest for our souls (Matthew 11:28–30). We honor God with self-care not only for the spirit but also for the body, and that helps keep us fit for faithful, healthy service.

On the congregation side, we must remember that pastors are whole persons with the same finitude we all face. In the US, most churches have fewer than 100 people attending on a typical Sunday with one paid pastor who wants to provide vision for service and outreach, teach and preach regularly, and give personalized spiritual care in particular situations. The shape of work might look different for clergy in larger settings, but it is common for pastors across the board to report working 55–75 hours per week on a regular basis. Pastors only stretch so far; like rubber bands, eventually they snap and pain ensues. People in the congregation often see only the snapshot of the pastor that intersects with their individual lives—a conversation or meeting here and there; they don't see the whole movie and the toll the work may be taking on the pastor's physical, mental, emotional, and relational health.

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Ministry is not a spectator sport, something pastors are called to and the rest of us watch. The New Testament offers us one picture after another of the mutuality of ministry, from Jesus sending out the earliest disciples in pairs to preach and heal in Luke 9, to the missionary endeavors of the book of Acts where the names always come in pairs or lists, to the exhortations of Paul's epistles for the people of God to care for one another at every level of relationship. "Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor" (Romans 12:10). "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). "Bear with one another ... forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you" (Colossians 3:13). "Always seek to do good to one another" (1 Thessalonians 5:15).

Prioritizing clergy health is an opportunity for ministry partnership. When both clergy and congregation embrace the value of the health of the pastor in all dimensions of life, rather than seeing ministry as spirituality and service compartmentalized into a job, the effort will bear fruit not only in the life of the pastor but in the life of a faithful congregation. It turns out that clergy who set good examples for healthy living are as effective at leading in matters of health as they are in matters of spiritual well-being. If we focus on clergy health and start to improve the health outcomes of our spiritual leaders, we see improved health for entire congregations.

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*Rev. G. Scott Morris, MD, is founder and chief executive officer of Church Health in Memphis, Tennessee. This is the largest faith-based, not-for-profit primary health clinic in the United States, providing health services to over 30,000 patients who are working but uninsured. Dr. Morris is a physician and United Methodist pastor.*



# PARTNERSHIP FOR BETTER HEALTH

Rev. Eldrick Davis, pastor at Gardners United Methodist Church in Fayetteville, North Carolina, believes that one of the “The biggest factors that we pastors have to deal with is excessive stress of the body, mind, and spirit.” Unfortunately, Rev. Davis explained, “One my coping mechanisms in dealing with stress is overeating. I’m thankful that I didn’t turn to alcohol or drugs, but my weakness was food and I’ve spent a lifetime struggling with my weight.”

It wasn’t until joining an initiative of the United Methodist Church called *Spirited Life* that Rev. Davis’s health journey started in earnest. What made *Spirited Life* so helpful was the presence of a monthly health coaching appointment paired with Rev. Davis’s decision to get the church that he was pastoring at the time involved in his health journey. “The church had a walking track in front, so I came up with the idea that other people could join me in walking, and for every lap that we walked, we could put it in the bulletin. Church members could then make a donation in honor of whoever they wanted to support in the laps they were walking. So we went from just putting my health information into the bulletin to engaging the congregation’s health as well.”

For Rev. Davis, the weight loss journey has always ebbed and flowed, but what finally made it meaningful was his willingness to open up to the congregation and share his struggles, his hopes, his accomplishments, and even his failures along the way. As Rev. Davis’s weight loss journey continues, he emphasizes that we’re “All here to minister to the body, spirit, and soul. The culture around health begins to change when you do it together. It creates a culture of support for everyone involved.”

Rev. Eldrick says, “A congregation’s pastor-parish committee would serve the church well to say to the pastor, ‘You are our shepherd, and we want to do everything that we can do to help you, to encourage you, to pray for you, and to strengthen you, because when you are strong you are able to better serve us.’ For example, if I was a member

of a church I would give my pastor a free membership to a health club nearby to encourage exercise and stress management. Or, our denominations could work on creating partnerships with local health outfitters for complimentary or discounted clergy memberships. I truly believe that from the top down we have to create a culture of partnership for better health.”



Rev. Eldrick Davis