

Portly pastors make up more than a third of American clergy, study finds

January 12 2015

More than a third of American clergy members are obese, with stress, longer hours, being underpaid and lack of self-care among the reasons, according to a Baylor University study. But the pastoral profession has some built-in prevention methods that can help clergy be healthier if they take advantage of them.

Clergy who take a day off each week, take a sabbatical or take part in a support group of other pastors lower their odds of being obese, according to the study—"Occupational conditions, self-care and [obesity](#) among clergy in the United States"—published in the journal *Social Science Research*.

"In many religious traditions, the theology actually mandates at least one day a week to recuperate," said lead researcher Todd W. Ferguson, a [doctoral candidate](#) in sociology in Baylor's College of Arts & Sciences. "Also, some pastors have the opportunity to be part of a small, intensive, introspective group of other pastors, and that can help with stress. There are structures in place that can actually help them cope and lower their chances of obesity."

Ferguson and other Baylor researchers analyzed data representative of 539 clergy from varied denominations and [religious traditions](#). They drew upon the Random Sample Leader Survey, part of the U.S. Congregational Life Survey.

Historically, clergy have been among the healthiest of major professions,

with only teachers having lower mortality rates, but recent research shows that clergy's obesity rate has climbed to 30 percent, according to Pulpit & Pew, an interdenominational research project on pastoral leadership.

Granted, "Pastors are an integral part of the most intimate aspects of community life— marriages, deaths, births—and these often entail food," Ferguson said. "It's part of the culture."

But the reasons for clergy obesity are not that simple. Clergy are in a relatively high-status occupation, yet many are compensated poorly compared to other professionals with similar education levels. Pastors may have no other option than to be bi-vocational. The study showed that 10 percent lead more than one congregation, while 15 percent are employed in a second job of another type.

The stress of an additional job—plus the long hours and demands of pastoring—may make it difficult to have a lifestyle that includes nutritious foods, exercise and time to recover from physiological stress that leads to weight gain.

"Pastors are 'on' or 'on call' at all times. The role or identity of a pastor is something you can't just shut off," said Ferguson, a former associate pastor in a Houston Baptist church. "And you are in an organization that relies partly—or even fully—on volunteers rather than a paid staff, who can leave on a whim."

Researchers used a "distress index," assessing clergy members' stress levels by asking how often in the past year, they:

- Had too many demands made on them by congregation members
- Experienced stress because of dealing with critical congregants
- Felt lonely and isolated in their work

- Experienced [stress](#) because of the challenges they faced in their congregation
- Worked more than 46 hours per week

Some congregations give clergy sabbaticals ranging from many months to many years, allowing for rest, professional refreshment and renewed motivation. And previous research shows taking part in spiritual support groups is associated with a lower risk of obesity for men in particular.

The study showed that 20 percent had taken a sabbatical in the past 10 years, while 43 percent are involved in a support group that focuses on their personal concerns or struggles.

Provided by Baylor University

Citation: Portly pastors make up more than a third of American clergy, study finds (2015, January 12) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-01-portly-pastors-american-clergy.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.