

Rotund reverends, pudgy preachers, and fat pastors

Just in time for the holidays, **LINDA COMPTON** reports on the state of overweight clergy in Holston.



About the author

Linda Compton was Deacon of Counseling for First United Methodist Church of Lakeland, Fla., a church with 4,500 in membership, from 1985 to 2007. She is licensed in Marriage and Family Therapy and Mental Health Counseling. She retired in January 2008 and moved to Hiltons, Va., where she is a member of Hiltons Memorial UMC, Big Stone Gap District.



Is your pastor putting on pounds? If so, he or she is in good company. A 2001 Pulpit & Pew survey found that 76 percent of clergy were either overweight or obese, compared to 61 percent of the general population. But you don't need statistics to convince you that Holston preachers are on the chubby side. All you have to do is attend Annual Conference or Clergy Gathering (or maybe just look as far as your pulpit) to see that overweight is a problem.

Remember that pastors are people like everyone else and have to deal with their issues like everyone else. Everyone also knows that pastors are overworked and underpaid. They're stressed out from visiting the sick, preparing sermons, and praying for the lost. They have too many meetings and are "on call" 24 hours a day. They're obligated to sample the deviled eggs and fried chicken at potluck dinners, and they can't find time to exercise in between the funerals and PPR fights.

But, we must also point out that a "called" pastor has accepted the responsibility to lead his sheep and be their example while leading them to a Christ-centered life. 1 Corinthians 6:19 says, "Therefore honor God with your body." Proverbs 23:2 speaks more vehemently: "... and put a knife to your throat if you are given to gluttony."

Unfortunately, our bodies are visible, whereas other neglected responsibilities may be hidden more easily. If our bodies show we are lax in following our call to keep ourselves healthy, we may actually influence someone to turn away from the church.

The United Methodist Church is also concerned about the health of its pastors and lay workers. Earlier this year, a Board of Pensions and Health (BPH) task force found the denomination pays 16 percent more for health coverage than other entities. Weight and cardiac disease among United Methodist employees are not only higher than the national average, the diabetes rate is also twice the national average.



RICHTER: Less of a man



FOX: Incentive programs

"Friends, we do have a health problem," said Barbara Boigegrain, top executive of the BPH, at a January 2008 briefing.

The BPH responded with several health-related petitions, ultimately passed by the 2008 General Conference. The petitions directed the church's health benefits agency to establish wellness guidelines, collect data, and examine employment systems

including itinerancy and appointment making.

In September 2008, the BPH established a new "Center for Health" that will focus on holistic wellness among clergy and lay workers. The center's goal is to help the United Methodist Church become "the healthy denomination," organizers said.

Bishop Mike Watson, BPH chair and bishop of the North Georgia Conference, announced the creation of the Center for Health at an annual health ministries conference held in Lake Junaluska, N.C.

"As a denomination, we need to empower ministries of health today so that our clergy and laity are able to continue effective ministry tomorrow and in the futures," he said. "Health affects our physical vitality, psychological well-being, spirituality, social connection, and financial security."

'I'm such a loser'

Some clergy do eat healthier and seem to have things under control better than others. The Rev. Richard Richter, pastor at Lighthouse United Methodist Church in Chattanooga District, said he finally got fed up with life as an overweight person.

He wrote an essay for a radio station, titled "The Ultimate New Year's Resolution," and won eight weeks with a personal trainer in early 2007. Richter lost 50 pounds in those eight weeks and has lost 50 more since.

Today, 47-year-old Richter weighs 320 pounds at 6'2". His blood pressure is in the normal range, his former "fatty liver" is normal, and he's dropped five sizes.

"I mentally pictured what it could be like," he said. "I prayed for it to happen. I started diets too many times to count ... I'm glad I finally did something about it."

Richter says he feels like a "new man," through the support of "family, friends, fellow Lighthouseers, and even strangers." Last year, Internet surfers delighted in his web site, *dontfeedthepreacher.com*, which boasted, "I'm such a loser." His web site shared his challenge:

They say inside every fat person, there is a skinny person trying to get out. I don't believe that! I do believe that I have a healthy person longing to get out. Join me on my journey to become less of a man to become more for God, my family, my church, and myself.

Another Holston member tackled obesity in a different way. The Rev. Todd Chancey, pastor at Apison UMC in Cleveland District, submitted a resolution to the Holston Annual Conference, requesting removal of the exclusion for treatment of obesity in the conference health plan. The resolution stated that one in every four Americans are considered to be obese; church leaders are calling for better physical care; and other self-induced diagnoses such as drug or alcohol abuse are already covered by the Holston health plan.

In June, the resolution was referred to Holston's Board of Pension for further study. "It is hard to say which way we will go as we still have a lot of research to do," said Charlie Harr, Holston Board of Pensions chair. "Since only self-insured companies cover this diagnosis, it would mean an increase to everyone in their insurance costs. We have to study this carefully."

Chancey, who says he has struggled with obesity his whole life, decided it was a healthy decision to have the bariatric surgery recommended by his physician. Without coverage in the conference plan, he opted to borrow \$18,000 for the operation — an amount he says is higher than the negotiated fee covered by other health plans.

Since his surgery in July 2007, Chancey, age 46, has lost 85 pounds and is still losing. He's reduced his prescription load from seven to one. "I feel so much better and

can actually do one solid hour of aerobic exercise without panting," he said.

Chancey points out that the money he saves in health-care costs will be recovered within five years, if he stays on a healthy track. If his resolution is re-visited and passed during Annual Conference 2009, he believes the conference will ultimately save money, as well as provide a critical health-care option for obese clergy and their family members.

Models of health

Not all Holston members are in favor of weight-control surgeries, including

Richter, who said coverage might encourage persons to choose surgery when they could "do the work themselves to get healthier."

According to the Rev. Joe-d DowlingSoka, chair of Holston's Health Care Task Force, the conference has not yet addressed obesity.

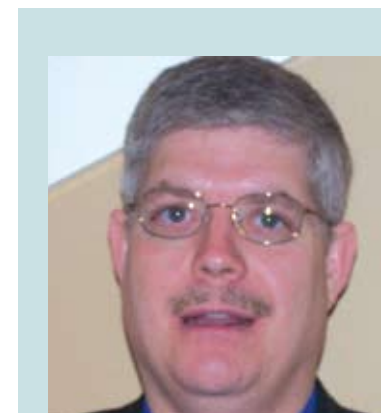
"Our advocacy work is concerning the need to have universal health coverage — as per the United Methodist "Social Principles" — and getting the Holston churches involved in some aspect of health care inadequacies within their community," he said. "We have not addressed the issue of clergy obesity at all. A Health and Wellness Education Subcommittee has been formed to study the issue and bring us information."

The chair of this subcommittee is the Rev. Kayte Fox:

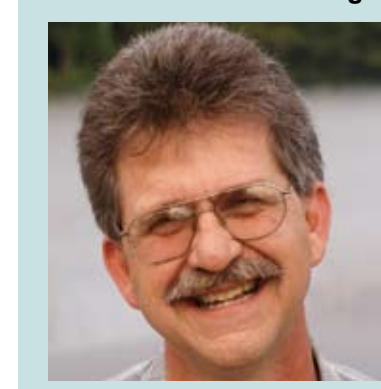
"The Southwest Texas Conference is doing some amazing stuff on encouraging clergy to be helpful — incentives for clergy and churches to support these steps," Fox said. "I'd love to see such an incentive program here. I think the end result would be healthier clergy who serve as better models of health to their churches."

In October, Holston's Outreach/Advocacy Team met and created a Health Care Initiative that will address advocacy, education, and ministry, with a focus on health and healing. In addition to assisting local churches with their health ministries, a goal is to establish a walking program in Holston. ■

United Methodist News Service contributed to this report.



CHANCEY: Bariatric surgery



DOWLINGSOKA: Advocacy