

Churches stressing health and fitness: Wellness churches

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Larry Swain, a Pittsburgh minister, is happy that he's lost more than 50 pounds in a year and a half. He credits several factors, especially wanting very much to wear a smaller tuxedo at his daughter's wedding. A doctor's visit also showed his cholesterol and blood pressure were at unhealthy levels.

It didn't hurt to hear a pointed question from a guest speaker at his Pittsburgh Baptist Association meeting. "He asked me, 'Larry what are you doing to take care of yourself?'" recalled Swain, executive minister of the association.

Spurred to slim down, Swain received a \$300 "wellness grant" from the American Baptist Churches USA, which has asked its clergy to take better care of themselves. Some other denominations sponsor fitness walks or runs during their conventions. Books like *Body by God* have been best sellers.

Two newsmaking studies on obesity released in March prompted Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy G. Thompson to declare in a news conference that "our poor eating habits and lack of activity are literally killing us, and they're killing us at record levels." An analysis published March 10 by the *Journal of the American Medical Association* said deaths caused by poor diet and sedentary lifestyles rose by 33 percent from 1990 to 2000. Another study by the Rand Corporation, based in Santa Monica, California, predicted that within 20 years obesity-related diseases will cancel out health strides made through medical advances.

With about 65 percent of Americans overweight, some denominations were already working to get clergy and congregants to lose the fat. For example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America hired a physician as a consultant three years ago. Dr. Gwen W. Halaas, the ELCA's director of ministerial health and wellness, found that its ministers and lay leaders were more overweight than the average American and were more prone to be under stress, depressed and less physically active. Teaming with the Mayo Clinic, the ELCA created a Web site and newsletter focused on healthy

living.

More than half of 6,000 clergy, lay leaders and seminarians have responded to an online survey on health risks, she told the ELCA bishops in March. Figures from clergy indicated a rise in cases of high cholesterol, high blood pressure and cancer. New data from seminarians proved troubling. "More than half have health risk factors related to lifestyle behaviors, including a higher rate of elevated blood sugars than found in our pastors and lay leaders," Halaas reported.

Health-conscious church members follow fully the commandment "to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love others as we love ourselves," said Halaas. "What we have, through our American culture, ended up doing is really forgetting or suppressing that 'love yourself' phrase." To set an exercise example at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly last year, 227 participants rose early for the "Run Walk 'n' Roll," logging 2,500 miles in four days.

Southern Baptists have stepped onto the fitness path by conducting health screenings at annual meetings. The denomination's Annuity Board launched a Web site for medical plan participants that includes a health assessment, "virtual trainer" and calorie counter among its options. Last June at the SBC meeting in Phoenix, more than 300 showed up for a first-time, 6:30 a.m. "Run for the Son." It will be expanded to a one-mile or five-kilometer event this June in Indianapolis.

When people aren't running, some are reading up on religiously flavored regimens. *Body by God*, by Dr. Ben Lerner, has been on the *New York Times* and Christian retailing best-seller lists. The author said he wrote his tips on exercise, diet and reducing stress as "a supplement to the Bible." He encourages readers to eat foods on his "Food by God List"—which includes fruits, vegetables, turkey breast and lean beef—and to reduce their diet of "Food by Man"—fast and fried foods and refined sugar.

R. Marie Griffith, an associate professor of religion at Princeton University, said no definitive research exists on whether religiously based fitness programs are more successful than secular ones. "Everybody's got a pitch that our way is the best way," said Griffith, who has a forthcoming book, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity*. "I don't think we really know." But she said the more holistic focus on mind, body and spirit has become popular both in religious circles and outside them. "I think it does make sense that people bring all these aspects of their lives together," she said. -*Religion News Service*