

# SHORT TAKES

## Stress Takes Heavy Toll on Pastors

United Methodist clergy have an “alarming” prevalence of obesity and its related chronic diseases, says Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell, research director of the Clergy Health Initiative, a \$12 million, seven-year effort funded by The Duke Endowment to improve the health and well-being of United Methodist elders and local pastors serving churches in North Carolina.

A study published online in May in “Obesity,” the journal of the Obesity Society, found that the obesity rate among United Methodist clergy ages thirty-five to sixty-four is close to 40 percent—10 percent higher than for other North Carolina residents. In the study, Proeschold-Bell and her co-author, Sara H. LeGrand, found that middle-aged male and female clergy were diagnosed with diabetes, arthritis, high blood pressure, and asthma at “significantly higher rates” than other state residents.

Job stress seems to play a key role. Five major stress factors for clergy are mobility, low financial compensation, inadequate social support, high time demands, and intrusions on family boundaries. “Clergy recently reported that these combined stressors decrease their engagement in healthy behaviors,” the study said.

The Rev. Carol Goehring, director of connectional ministries and church revitalization for the North Carolina Conference, said the study’s “glaring” results are hard to ignore. One of the stress-related findings for the conference to consider is “a higher-than-anticipated feeling of isolation among our pastors,” she said. Often, pastors do not feel comfortable about turning to church members to talk honestly about the unsatisfactory parts of their lives.

The sense of call also has an impact. “There’s an enormous desire to please God first,” she explained. “This is an extra level of responsibility and care. All these generate higher levels of stress.” The expectation that



**The Rev. Chuck Cook, a United Methodist district superintendent in North Carolina, models healthy habits as a participant in Duke Divinity School’s Clergy Health Initiative. A UMNS photo by Reed Galin.**

clergy should “do it all” blurs the boundaries between church and personal life and can lead to a lack of exercise, poor eating habits and little preventative health care, Proeschold-Bell said. “Eating is one of the few acceptable things that pastors can do” to cope with stress.

The Clergy Health Initiative wants to understand why the health of clergy is worse than that of average citizens and create tools to help both church leaders and the clergy themselves improve the situation. For example, district superintendents

can help shape healthy pastor behavior by checking in with clergy to see whether they are taking a day off each week, using allotted vacation time, and scheduling annual physical exams, she said.

“It’s just not enough to work with the pastors alone,” Proeschold-Bell said. “What we’re finding is congregations are expecting pastors to be available around the clock. It’s that mindset that’s part of the problem.” □

—Linda Bloom, UMNS

## Plans Underway for General Conference 2012



## Leaving First Appointment Hard on Young Clergy

“I expected it to be really difficult,” said the Rev. Sara Baron, “and it was much worse than I thought it would be!”

After four years as pastor of Morris (N.Y.) United Methodist Church, Baron is moving to her second pastoral appointment—and living through her first transition. Baron’s first appointment was a historic, rural church in a town with less than 2,000 people. Now she’s pastor at Park Terrace United Methodist Church in Apalachin, N.Y., a larger, suburban church that uses video clips and PowerPoint in its services.

“The bishop who appointed me to my first church was thinking of me, and my gifts, and made a really good match,” Baron said. “And the bishop, in appointing me here, also made a really good match. I will be using very different skill sets.”

For the Rev. Shalom Agtarap, her second appointment meant not only leaving a church family but literally leaving family. “Because my appointment was so close to my home church, my sister and a good friend were sharing the parsonage with me. Now I am in a four-bedroom parsonage with only myself to come home to.”

Agtarap had been serving the past two years as a licensed local pastor at two United Methodist churches in Seattle. After being commissioned last month as a provisional member of the Pacific Northwest Annual (regional) Conference, she was appointed to Ellensburg First United Methodist Church, two hours from Seattle.

Agtarap said leaving wasn’t only hard on her, but also on her congregation. One of the churches she served expected her to succeed its older senior pastor. Upon learning



**The Rev. Shalom R. Agtarap was appointed to Ellensburg (Wash.) First United Methodist Church two hours away from her first appointment. Photo courtesy Sara Baron.**

that Agtarap was appointed elsewhere, the congregation was upset at the decision.

In addition to growing up with a United Methodist pastor father, Agtarap cites her participation in The Upper Room’s Academy for Spiritual Formation as preparing her for the life of an itinerant pastor. She said the program equipped her with the tools and perspective necessary for dealing with all the transitions she’s experienced, be it adjusting to full-time work after being a student, moving, or figuring out what she needed as a person to be fully present as a pastor.

—Joey Butler, UMCCom

The Commission on the General Conference has selected “Make Disciples of Jesus Christ to Transform the World” as the theme for General Conference 2012, scheduled for April 24–May 4, 2012 at the Tampa (Fla.) Convention Center. The official logo has been selected as well.

The theme echoes The United Methodist Church’s mission statement, “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”

“We sensed that people across the church are longing for clarity about our mission, and we believed that the theme of the General Conference should reinforce and celebrate that mission,” said Jim Harnish, a member of the commission and chair of the committee. “We hope that the Spirit of God will use this theme to unite and energize our people to fulfill this mission and enable us to set clear priorities for the use of our resources.”

Peter D. Weaver of the Boston Episcopal Area has been chosen to deliver the Episcopal Address on behalf of the entire Council of Bishops, which comprises 69 active bishops and 91 retired bishops from the U.S., Africa, Europe, and Asia.

However, as of press time, no decision had been made about the number of delegates for the 2012 General Conference, according to the secretary of the General Conference, Rev. L. Fitzgerald Reist. That number can vary between 600 and 1,000. Reist said he is awaiting analysis of the 2009 membership statistics to see how the size of the General Conference may affect representation. He anticipates that no decision will be made before November 2010.

For more information, visit the official General Conference 2012 website at <http://gc2012.umc.org>.

—UMCom

# Conflict Common Over Pastor's Role



A pastor's leadership role is the most common cause of church conflict, found the Congregational Leadership Survey, conducted by the General Council on Finance and Administration in 2008. Sixty-four percent of congregations surveyed said that they had experienced a conflict over the issue in the past five years, and 44 percent considered it "serious," in that people left or withheld funds because of it, or that a staff member was dismissed because of it.

The next most common areas of conflict were finances (62 percent) and worship (58 percent), though these were less often considered serious (24 and 25 percent, respectively). The survey found that the larger the congregation, the more likely that the pastor's leadership role would be a source of conflict, while mid-sized congregations are more likely to experience conflict over how worship is conducted.

Source: Congregational Leadership Survey, GCFA, 2008

*Do church conflicts ever make you question your call to ministry?*

**"Sadly, yes."**

@Victoria1920 via Twitter

**"Always just reinforced it for me. They needed a strong leader."**

@ta\_barlow via Twitter

**"Is the Pope Catholic?"**

@expatminister via Twitter

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## Did you know?

- 80 percent of pastors say they have insufficient time with their spouse and that ministry has a negative effect on their family.
- 33 percent say that being in ministry is an outright hazard to their family.
- 75 percent report they've had a significant stress-related crisis at least once in their ministry.
- 40 percent report a serious conflict with a parishioner once a month.
- 40 percent of pastors have considered leaving the pastorate in the past three months.
- Pastors who work fewer than fifty hours per week are 35 percent more likely to be terminated.

Source: *Pastors at Greater Risk*, by H.B. London Jr. and Neil Wiseman, Regal, 2003

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—from the series introduction by William C. Placher<sup>1</sup> and Amy Plantinga Pauw, general editors

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