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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
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Study guide:

Pastors embrace call to live healthier lives

By Robert C. Blezard

The data is in, and it's not looking good for our denomination's rostered leaders—pastors who serve as ministers of word and sacrament and lay leaders who serve as ministers of word and service (associates in ministry, diaconal ministers, deaconesses). On the whole those who serve our churches are less healthy than the general public, which itself is struggling with some of the world's highest obesity levels. Fortunately, we can do something to help us all get healthy.

Exercise 1: Go challenge

Portico offers free health assessments that not only help leaders be more aware of health and wellness, but also can earn them hundreds of dollars off their annual deductible from Portico health plans. Have your rostered leaders (and eligible staff who are on Portico insurance) taken the Go Challenge? How can your congregation help encourage or inspire your leaders to take it?

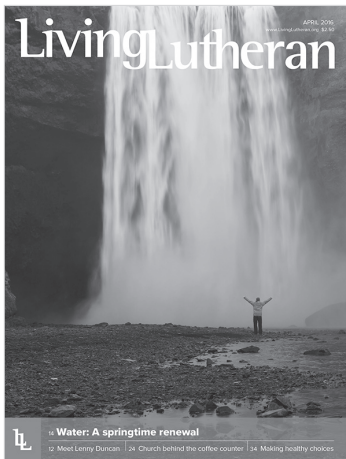
Exercise 2: Get a life!

Some leaders are unhealthy because they fail to cultivate outside interests that can provide them with better work-leisure balance. This is a good idea for everybody, but especially for clergy who may tend to let the job consume them. Taking up a hobby, or rediscovering a long-dormant interest, is an excellent step for a leader who overworks. How are you doing in this regard? How could your congregation encourage healthy leisure activities not only for clergy but for everyone?

Exercise 3: Move it!

Most Americans don't get enough exercise, and that is a statistical certainty for rostered leaders. Medical studies show that even small amounts of regular exercise can dramatically improve wellness and help prevent illness or disease. Does your congregation encourage fitness and exercise as part of its life together? How can it do a better job? How can you encourage your clergy and staff to take better care of themselves?

Here's one way: Portico offers a fitness club benefit for those who are



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Study guide: **Healthier lives**

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covered under their plan. Portico will reimburse members \$20 a month if a member joins an eligible gym and works out eight times in a month. Do your leaders participate? Can you encourage them?

Exercise 4: Free time

Nonstop working leads to emotional, spiritual and physical problems for many clergy.

- Does your rostered leader get a day off every week? If not, why not? If so, does the congregation insist—not just encourage but actually insist—that the leader take it?
- Does the congregation support the pastor's time off by not calling or contacting except in true emergencies? Does the congregation step up to the plate and provide leadership so the pastor doesn't have to do it all? How can your congregation do better?
- Similarly, does your rostered leader get adequate vacation time? Four weeks is a minimum standard in our church. Does the congregation insist that the leader take it?

Exercise 5: Potluck poundage

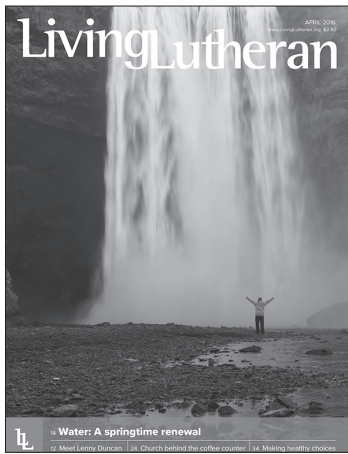
Lutherans like to eat, but often we like to eat the wrong things. Some clergy say they put on weight because the food served at church socials and potlucks are often calorie-dense and nutrition-low. The same applies to the food—cake and cookies are a staple—served at home visitation.

Examine the food at your congregation's gathering. Are there low-calorie options, such as fresh fruit, salad or a veggie platter? Are there vegetarian or vegan options? How can your congregation do better to improve the diet not only of the pastor but also the congregation as a whole?

Exercise 6: Weighty matters

Overweight and obesity have become an epidemic problem in our country. The Centers for Disease Control says 34 percent of adults are obese, and that obesity costs our nation \$147 billion a year. "Obesity-related conditions include heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and certain types of cancer, some of the leading causes of preventable death," according to the CDC website.

How much of a problem is overweight and obesity in your community and congregation? Could your congregation lead efforts to help people become aware of the problems of being overweight and to take steps to tackle them?



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Exercise 7: Your weight

The Body Mass Index is a good shorthand measure of how much extra weight an adult is carrying. It's simply a number calculated by your weight and height. A BMI of less than 25 is "normal" and may serve as a good target for fitness and weight loss. To find your BMI and learn what it means, type "BMI calculator" into an online search engine and you will find a calculator from a reputable clinic, hospital or government agency. Make it a goal to eat sensibly and exercise more in order to drop your BMI number by number, closer to 25. For fellowship and support, form a group of like-minded folks who can journey together.

Exercise 8: Healthy culture

It takes time and lots of work to change a church's culture. But little steps taken consistently over a long period of time can help create a culture of health and well-being that can improve the lives of clergy, staff and members. Which of the following ideas might work in your congregation? How could you make it happen?

- Articles in the newsletter on healthy eating, exercise and quitting tobacco.
- Fitness clubs in church, such as yoga, jazzercise, Zumba, walking groups.
- Weight-loss support groups, such as Weight Watchers or TOPS (Take off Pounds Sensibly).
- Healthy potlucks, featuring nutritious and low-calorie foods.
- Seminars and workshops, led by exercise trainers, nutritionists, etc.
- Books in the library on diet, exercise and stress-reduction.

For action: Make a plan to implement some of these ideas immediately, six months from now and next year. Give it to your congregation council or pastor for implementation.

Pastors embrace call to live healthier lives

When asked what she did for fun outside of church, Karol Hendricks-McCracken, pastor of New Salem Lutheran Church, Turtle River, Minn., couldn't answer.

"Well, teach confirmation," was her response to the question from a health coach provided by Portico Benefit Services. According to the coach, teaching confirmation wasn't an acceptable answer.

Portico provides benefits for ELCA rostered and lay employees. Every year Portico invites plan members to complete a health assessment, which provides financial incentives for plan members who participate in healthy lifestyle activities.

The 2014 Portico health self-assessment (the most recent results available) found that ELCA clergy and rostered laypeople are at risk for high blood pressure (56 percent), poor emotional health (59 percent), poor nutrition (71 percent) and being overweight (72 percent). It also found that 58 percent aren't getting enough exercise.

After taking the assessment in 2014, Hendricks-McCracken realized she and her husband needed to pay closer attention to their health. "We became very serious about it, and over about a year's time we both lost 30 pounds," she said.

So when the health coach asked about taking time for herself, Hendricks-McCracken realized that, although she was paying attention to her eating habits and exercise, she had ignored an important aspect of her health. She started making time to knit, which helped reduce stress.

"Keeping my stress level down means taking time for myself," she said. "I have time to center myself. Before I was just running on adrenaline." To address these health concerns, Portico launched the ELCA wellness reformation to invite ELCA rostered and lay employees to pursue healthier lifestyles in 2016.

But long, stressful days aren't the only culprit affecting pastors' health. Church events often feature an abundance of food.

Erika Uthe, pastor of St. John Lutheran Church, Ely, Iowa, suffers from an autoimmune disorder so



Photo: Footprints and Glitter Photography

Patricia Decker, a pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, works out in a Zumba class that occurs weekly at the church. The class helps her and members stay on top of their fitness goals.

staying healthy is a must. "I know that on Sunday mornings there will be sweets. I know that at annual meetings there will be a lot of casseroles filled with potatoes and cheese, so I choose to bring something green, like Brussels sprouts or kale salad, to introduce something new to the table," she said.

In addition to bringing new items to the table, Uthe has learned how to remove things from her plate. The mother of two realized after the birth of her first child that she couldn't do everything. By relying more on her congregation, Uthe discovered that she could achieve more balance in her life.

"I really think of it as taking something off my plate for the sake of the greater mission. By making room for other people to use their strengths, we're all healthier and better," Uthe said.

Leading by example

"There is a high level of stress that our leaders are carrying," said Tammy Devine, ELCA wellness manager. "There's also the sense that their schedules don't allow them the opportunity for the amount of lifestyle changes or good choices they would like."

Devine encourages clergy to focus on their God-given strengths and gifts instead of feeling responsible to lead every project or task in a congregation. “We, as leaders, are to mentor and model a life that is different from society, to be countercultural,” she said.

Nine years ago Stephen Talmage, bishop of the Grand Canyon Synod, was shocked to learn he needed quadruple bypass surgery. Realizing that stress was a major factor affecting his health, Talmage vowed after his surgery to alter his lifestyle.

“That really began my journey trying to maintain a healthier lifestyle in the midst of a job that is very unhealthy,” he said. “The life of a bishop is just not healthy because you are constantly responding to high stress environments.”

Although he continues to travel a lot, Talmage sets aside time every day for cardio exercise and does his best to eat right and get more sleep.

In the synod’s January e-newsletter, Talmage wrote about his health journey, sharing how he sees himself as a witness to synod pastors and lay leaders. “One, they know I had a health crisis. Two, the majority of them know they’re not as healthy as they should be. If they see that I can own my own struggle and take responsibility for it, and not in a self-righteous way but in an honest way, then I believe and I hope that it is an encouragement to other rostered leaders to steward their own bodies,” he said.

Patricia Decker, a pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, struggled with her weight most of her life. Several years ago she decided to confront it once and for all and lost 71 pounds. Her congregation has been supportive and many members have been inspired to make changes in their lives.

“It sparks conversation about health and some members who struggle with their own weight loss have felt that they could strike up a conversation about that now,” Decker said.

A weekly Zumba class at the church helps Decker and other members keep on top of their health goals.

Decker also takes her own food to church events. “It’s so much easier because it’s about being at the church with people and being part of the fellowship. I’m not there to eat, I’m there to be with people,” she said.

Portico’s Go! Challenge provides resources for congregations to help support their leaders as they work toward a healthier, more balanced lifestyle (visit the “Call to Live Well” section at porticobenefits.org).

“It’s been exciting to see that leaders across the country are talking more publicly about the importance of healthy living,” said Jeff Thiemann, Portico president and CEO. “They’re making healthy changes and they’re sharing the journey with those they lead.”

For a study guide, see livinglutheran.org.

Percentage of ELCA clergy and rostered laypeople at risk for certain health conditions

Risk	Percentage
High blood pressure	56.2
Poor emotional health	59.5
Not enough exercise	58.0
Poor nutrition	71.5
Overweight	72.5



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