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Study guide

Fit & faithful

Wellness programs enrich and extend congregations' ministries

By Robert C. Blezard

Charged with promoting the well-being of God's people, churches have traditionally tended to focus on spiritual health. But a growing movement among churches emphasizes physical health as well. In the process, they are helping people not only to have healthier bodies, but also to form new and deeper connections to their spiritual side.

Exercise 1: Health crisis

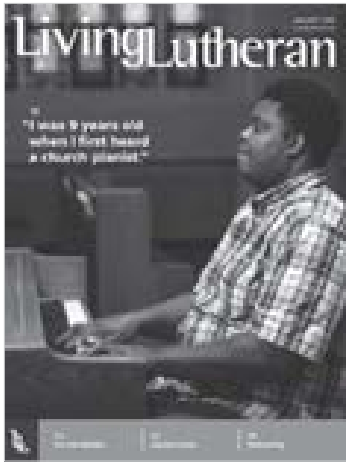
Experts and statisticians say the overall health of Americans has been slipping in recent years, with rising numbers of overweight and obese people, along with an increase of many chronic conditions, such as diabetes and heart disease. Doctors tell us that regular exercise can help us not only control our weight, but also improve our overall health and help us manage many chronic health conditions.

- In your lifetime, what evidence have you seen that Americans are less healthy? Does it alarm you? Surprise you? Sadden you?
- Why is it an extension of their mandate to care for people that churches focus on the physical well-being of their congregants?
- For what reasons are churches well positioned to educate God's people about healthy living, including diet and exercise?
- What ministries has your congregation supported that teach or assist people to live more healthfully?
- What opportunities exist in your congregation that make it ripe to start or expand a health ministry? What health experts, enthusiasts or leaders in your congregation might help make that happen?
- What health-related ministries would you like to see in your congregation? For action, put together some ideas, contact potential leaders and participants, and see if you can get it going.

Exercise 2: Your health

For many people, rising levels of obesity and chronic diseases aren't abstract statistics, but a daily personal struggle.

- If you are comfortable sharing, what health challenges have you been facing, either personally or among your family and friends?



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- Besides your doctors, where have you gone for education and support?
- Are others in your congregation facing the same issues?
- What role might your congregation have in educating, gathering and supporting you and others with health concerns? How could you help make that happen?
- What health-related ministries would you like to see in your congregation? Why? How could you and others encourage your leadership to start them?

Exercise 3: Fitness buffs

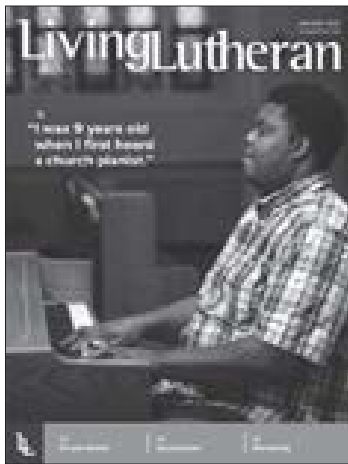
Whether it's running, hiking, biking, lifting weights or using the exercise equipment at the local gym, many people enjoy exercising for strength, stress-relief, endurance and overall health. They report satisfaction in the discipline of regular exercise.

- Share your experiences of regular exercise. How did you get into it? Why did you stay at it? What benefits have you enjoyed as a result?
- There's a saying, "Exercise adds years to your life and life to your years." What experiences have you observed or had that lead you to believe this is true, or perhaps not true?
- Medical experts report that regular exercise can assist in giving people more energy, better sleeping habits, stronger bones and joints, lower blood pressure, better metabolism and other benefits. What has been your experience or observations with this data?
- Doctors say regular exercise, along with healthy dieting, can help manage weight, but also help with such chronic conditions as heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure. What have you observed or experienced when it comes to the benefit of exercise in managing chronic health conditions?
- What "fitness buffs" do you have in your study group or congregation? Could they share their experiences? How might they assist in starting a health ministry? How can your study group help make it happen?

Exercise 4: Community-building

Most churches encourage their congregants to gather in smaller groups for common interests and purposes. Lutheran Men in Mission and Women of the ELCA groups are common in congregations, along with quilting groups, generational Bible studies and youth ministry. No matter what the group, they all prove the truism that it's more enjoyable to do things together than alone.

- What smaller groups gather in your congregation? How does the church facilitate their formation and continuation?



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- How do the small groups enrich the faith lives of the people who participate? How does it enrich their social interaction? What other positive benefits do participants enjoy?
- How do the small groups enrich the overall life of the congregation? What do they add to congregational vitality and strength?
- In what ways are groups focused on exercise and physical well-being suitable extensions of the small group work that congregations have traditionally encouraged?
- Some congregations have groups of members who meet at a local mall for “mall walking” (where it’s warm and inside the elements), while others have hiking/biking groups. Some have yoga, Zumba or jazzercise classes. What health-related small groups do you have in your congregation? Looking at your own or the congregation’s needs, what groups would you like to see formed?
- How would this contribute to the health and well-being of participants? How would it affect the congregation’s overall vitality?
- In addition to the health benefits, how might classes help in building friendship and community? Why is this important for a church?

Exercise 5: Community partners

Your community likely has plenty of health-related resources and expertise, whether it’s a local fitness center, hospital, dance studio, martial-arts center, yoga group or experts in such fields as nutrition, diet, exercise, disease management and psychology. As partners in health ministry, many could provide support or leadership to your congregation.

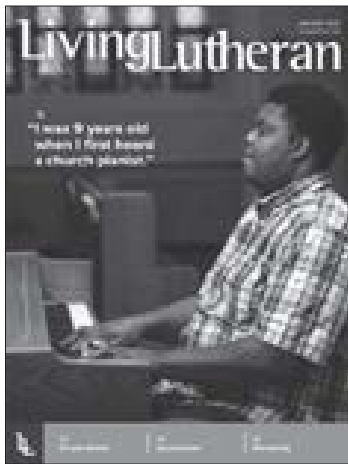
Brainstorming as a study group, list all the health-, diet- and exercise-related resources and experts in your community.

- What might each of them bring to your congregation? For instance, could they hold an occasional talk, or a regular class for education (as in nutrition or disease management) or participation (such as yoga or martial arts)?
- Which in the list has a clear connection to the congregation—perhaps an employee or enthusiast who is a member?

For action: Come up with a sheet of ideas for starting and mainlining wellness ministries in your congregation. Give it to your pastor or congregation council for consideration.

Exercise 6: Body-spirit connection

Although some Christians talk as if the body, mind and spirit are totally separate and at war with one another, many modern Christians are rediscovering ancient forms of prayer and exercise that help bring better



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harmony to mind, soul and body. Murray Finck, retired bishop of the Pacifica Synod, discovered that a daily routine of stretching and exercise not only rescued him from chronic back pain but also helped bring him into a peaceful, prayerful, meditative state. Finck shares his story and techniques in his book *Stretch and Pray: A Daily Discipline for Physical and Spiritual Wellness* (Augsburg Books, 2005).

- In your experience, what is their interconnection between mind, body and spirit?
- Is it helpful to consider the body, mind and spirit as separate, disconnected entities? Has this thought been part of your life? Where did it come from?
- When we think of optimal health, why is it best to think of physical health, spiritual health and mental health together? How does the health of each support and assist health in the other two?
- Like Finck, many who regularly practice yoga and other stretching techniques report having less stress in life, more mental resilience and more abundant energy. How does that sound to you? In what ways would these benefits improve your life?
- Whether through yoga or stretching or regular exercise, have you experienced a greater harmony between your body, mind and spirit? Would you be interested in giving it a try?
- How might your congregation establish a stretching or yoga ministry? Who among your membership or in your community might help? Put together an action plan and make it happen.

Portico resources

If you or your congregation is thinking about a health and fitness ministry for greater vitality of body, mind and spirit, Portico has plenty of resources to help get you started. Go to porticobenefits.org and click on "Call To Live Well."

Be sure to check out the "Wholeness Wheel."

Fit & faithful

Wellness programs enrich and extend congregations' ministries

By Erin Strybis



Photo: Courtesy of Cindy Senarighi

FOUR years ago, Siiri Branstrom was afraid to attend First Lutheran Church, Duluth, Minn., where she was a member. After her divorce, worship there felt strange and uncomfortable. “I would just get so sad in the sanctuary,” she said. “I was in a really [rough] place.”

On Sundays she hid in the nursery, where she cooed over the babies and served as an attendant. It wasn’t until she started yoga classes at nearby Elim Lutheran Church, Duluth, Minn., that her anxiety dissipated and her heart began to heal.

“I don’t hide anymore since participating in Yogadevotion,” she said. “What it did was give me more of a true connection with my faith as a Lutheran.”

Wellness programming is becoming a common sight in ELCA churches. Daily, congregations open their doors to members and neighbors who stretch, dance, lift, sweat and pray together. While many come to get physically fit, Branstrom’s story and others like it show that these activities offer additional benefits.

Holy community

In 2011, Chris Shaver approached leaders of St. Enoch Lutheran Church, Kannapolis, N.C. (stenoch.org), hoping to use their space to teach a fitness class to the community. The hourlong REFIT class incorporates dance, weights and Christian music and closes with a devotion and prayer.

“I wasn’t a member there and they didn’t know me at all,” Shaver said. “They were so gracious and offered me the use of their fellowship hall free of charge, and I was completely blown away.”

Today Shaver teaches REFIT at St. Enoch three times a week. Participants range from 14 to 84 years old and come from varied faiths—Pentecostal, Baptist and more.

Lutheran Debbie Shepherd has taken REFIT since the beginning. Her work as a private caregiver is demanding and incorporating time for self-care helps her recharge. What she loves most about the class is the community: “From the time you walk through the doors you feel a sisterhood. No matter what size you are, what shape you are, you feel welcome.”

Exercisers support each other through it all—celebrating whenever someone gets a promotion and bearing one another’s burdens, she said, adding, “There’s so much joy, even in our darkest times.”

When Shepherd’s son went missing after a drug overdose, she was terrified. That evening at REFIT,

the class prayed for her family. “I have never got that from any other group before outside of church,” she said. “It means the world to me.”

Shepherd is in touch with her son, who is in recovery. She is grateful for her REFIT community that continues to support her family, especially Shaver, “one of the most awesome women I’ve met in my life.”

In strengthening the health of others, Shaver herself has benefited. “This congregation has blessed my life,” she said. “This humble act of faith led my husband and me to join this body of Christ, and we are so glad we did. They have wholeheartedly supported this ministry, and I am truly thankful they opened their hearts and arms to us.”

“You want to participate in the church”

Miles away in Temperance, Mich., exercisers are building community while marching to the beat of a different drum—their own.

Twice a week Lynda Currie can be found at St. Luke Lutheran Church drumming an exercise ball set atop a 17-gallon bucket (stlukeschurch.net). For 45 minutes she and her classmates groove to songs like “Rockin’ Robin” or “Cotton Eye Joe” while following instructor Abby Holmblad’s routines. “It’s the best thing I ever discovered,”

**“From the time
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Photo: Courtesy of Debbie Coffman



Photo: Courtesy of Chris Shaver



Photo: Courtesy of Abby Holmblad

As they participate in wellness programs at ELCA congregations, people improve their health, build community and even grow in faith. Wholy Fit exercisers at First Lutheran Church, Moline, Ill. (left); REFIT exercisers at St. Enoch, Kannapolis, N.C. (top right); and cardio drummers at St. Luke, Temperance, Mich.

Currie said. “Abby has so much energy, she makes you want to participate in the church.”

Although the class isn’t expressly religious, Holmblad is an active member of St. Luke. When she initially started cardio drumming, only a handful of parishioners attended. As word spread, the class and congregation began to grow.

“Several of the drumming participants have expressed interest in the church, attended services and became members,” Holmblad said.

That’s true for Currie, who first heard about cardio drumming—and St. Luke—at her YMCA. She began attending classes, then checked out Sunday worship. “I’d been looking for a church for a long time,” she said. With welcoming members, a mix of traditional and contemporary worship and an established friend group, St. Luke was the perfect fit.

A few months after Currie and her husband became members, he died. As she grieved, her cardio drumming community was there to comfort her. “They were kind of my support group. ... It’s just a wonderful group of women,” she said. “Somewhere up there [God] had an idea for me and it worked out just fine.”

Committed to exercise—and each other

A similar sense of friendship is shared by the women and men of Wholy Fit at First Lutheran Church, Moline, Ill. (firstlutheranmoline.org).

“Half of our class is widowed, and I think it’s good for them to be part of something,” said instructor Chris Sederstrom. “It gets people active and moving and in conversation.”

Participants range in age from 60 to 93 and appreciate the opportunity to exercise among friends, added First’s secretary Debbie Coffman.

Initiated four years ago by First’s parish nurse,

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“The body is not insignificant for who we are as God’s people. In fact [our bodies are] integral to who we are.”

The gym pastor

Her passion for fitness is a catalyst for outreach

By Erin Strybis

When Ginny Price began her call as pastor of New Hope Lutheran Church, Columbia, Md. (newhopelutheran.org), one of her first agenda items was to join a gym. “I take to heart the ‘body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you ...’ and have faithfully exercised for many years,” she said, quoting 1 Corinthians 6:19. “Little did I realize the much larger impact this would have on me, the church and the community.”

Between weight sets, Price read books like Bryan Stevenson’s *Just Mercy* and Michelle Alexander’s *A New Jim Crow*. The books garnered interest from fellow gym-goers, leading to talks on racial justice and faith.

Price developed a close friendship with 28-year-old Steven Lewis, who spoke candidly with her about his concerns as a young African American man living in the era of Freddie Gray. “It was a really difficult time,” she remembered.

One day, Lewis told Price he wanted to do something to “proactively strengthen the relationship between the black community and the police.” Price agreed. Together, they formed Conversation in Come-UNITY. The bimonthly meetings connect members of their gym, New Hope and the community at large for discussions on racism, white privilege and current events. The talks have been a source

of racial healing and reconciliation for all involved, Price said.

This led the duo to organize Come-UNITY Kickball, an annual game bringing together police with their community, particularly people of color, and Potluck with the Police, an opportunity to share a meal and stories of race relations.

Now, after two years of community organizing, Price said “the gym has changed. ... We’re more connected because of this.” And at New Hope, members embrace racial justice as central to their ministry.

From the pulpit, she often asks the congregation, “Where is your gym?” meaning, “Where is the place you have an opportunity to minister to people in ways you would never imagine?”

Today, Price continues to be a fixture at the gym. In fact, she’s so popular there, she’s often interrupted while writing sermons on the step machine. Price, for one, is grateful for the opportunity for outreach.

“I have become, in effect, a gym pastor,” she said. “Meeting people where they are at the gym, discovering and sharing God’s love, exercising physical and spiritual muscles, has produced much fruit in unexpected ways and places.”

Ginny Price, pastor of New Hope Lutheran Church, Columbia, Md., hula-hoops at Come-UNITY Kickball.



Photos: Courtesy of Ginny Price

Dreamed up by Price and her gym buddy Steven Lewis (left), the kickball event connected neighbors with the police.



the program's hallmark is its wholistic approach to wellness. Held every Tuesday morning, Wholy Fit incorporates exercise and health education, plus time for fellowship, devotions and prayer.

Sederstrom and her co-instructor lead a 50-minute routine, offering participants modifications based on fitness level and opportunities to use props. "Anyone who wants to hula-hoop can hula-hoop," she chuckled.

On the fourth Tuesday of the month following class, Wholy Fitters share lunch and conversation. "Whether it's a sign-up list for a salad bar, potato bar, homemade soup or gourmet grilled cheese, sharing food has become a highlight of the program," Coffman said.

No matter the day's agenda, participants' abiding commitment to showing up for themselves—and each other—is evident. Wholy Fitters support each other with rides and call to check in when someone can't make it, Sederstrom said. "At certain ages, it's hard to go and make new friends," she added. "This is the Holy Spirit working in this."

Wholy Fitters often invite friends, neighbors and even grandchildren to join them for workouts. Because of this, First has gained a couple new members and attracted interest from other churches. "We've been contacted by some women from other churches in the last year and a half," Sederstrom said. "They're thinking they'd like to do it. ... [We're glad] to share our agenda and format."

Fitness in and for the community

At First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muskegon, Mich. (firstlutheranmuskegon.com), you'll find chair yoga, cycling and even pickleball on the monthly calendar. But its most unique and visible wellness program is a one-time event combining three forms of exercise. For nearly 15 years, First has hosted a triathlon in August.

Coordinated by First's pastor, Bill Uetrich, the event attracts an average of 20 athletes from the congregation and community. Racers compete individually or in teams to complete a 1-mile swim, 11-mile bike ride and 2-mile run around Muskegon's Bear Lake.

An avid triathlete himself, Uetrich was inspired by one of First's youth to start the event. "We were having a fundraiser for our building campaign; it was called the Iron Man and involved men ironing shirts," he recalled. "One of the kids thought it was going to be a triathlon. I said to him, 'Let's plan one!' He was 12 around then."

At First's last triathlon, the same young man won, Uetrich said.

In addition to fostering relationships at First, the event has given the congregation a larger profile in Muskegon, thereby attracting some newcomers. But bringing in new members isn't really the point. "[The triathlon] is part of a wholistic approach to ministry that says the body is not insignificant for who we are as God's people," Uetrich said. "In fact [our bodies are] integral to who we are."

In Uetrich's eyes, stewardship of the body is a faith issue, which is why First is committed to offering year-round wellness programs. Though others might shy away from it, the congregation is "willing to talk about the significance of our bodies and what that means for our faith and life together," he said.

Healing bodies and souls

When Cindy Senarighi had a "deeply profound experience of God's presence" following a yoga class, the former nurse, ELCA pastor and registered yoga instructor knew she had to share it with others. The experience stirred her to develop Yogadevotion (yogadevotion.com), which combines the Hindu practice of yoga with Christian devotions. The class, hosted at over 35 congregations in the Twin Cities, incorporates movement, prayer and meditation.

Senarighi said it helps participants make connections between their physical and spiritual health. "We have the highest theology of the body in the Christian church and the lowest practice," she said, listing off the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and baptism. "Yoga helps you love your body whatever shape it's in and treat it the way God would have you treat it."

She is quick to note that Yogadevotion is not "Christian yoga" but an opportunity for Christians

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Yogadevotion, a program fusing the Hindu practice of yoga and Christian devotions, is offered at more than 35 congregations in the Twin Cities.

and others to practice yoga and experience “God’s healing presence.”


Although she began teaching the classes in 1999 while serving at St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Mahtomedi, Minn., today Senarighi runs Yogadevotion LLC full time. It’s a practice that’s touched the lives of many—including Branstrom and Joyce Reimers.

A member of Amazing Grace Lutheran Church, Inver Grove Heights, Minn., Reimers counts Yogadevotion as vital in her recovery from colon cancer. “I’ve almost died twice in my life,” she said. “I’m healed. ... I do believe it’s because of prayer and working out and yoga.”

A spry, strong and joyful 74-year-old, Reimers believes her life outlook has shifted dramatically since she began attending Yogadevotion. The reflections and stretching help her let go of things and become “a more peaceful person.”

Though, like Branstrom, Reimers first began practicing Yogadevotion outside of her home

congregation, she fell in love with the program and asked her pastor to bring it to Amazing Grace. “We’ve been doing it [at Amazing Grace] over a year now,” she said. “It’s just a marvelous thing.”

Reimers especially appreciates the distinct sense of community in her Yogadevotion group. “Sometimes it feels like the whole group is experiencing something at the same time,” she said. “I believe it’s the Holy Spirit.” 

We thank everyone who responded to the reader call for this story. We regret that we’re unable to highlight every response. Download a study guide for this article at livinglutheran.org by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab.



Erin Strybis is a content editor of *Living Lutheran*.