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Taking a Break From the Lord's Work

By **PAUL VITELLO**

The findings have surfaced with ominous regularity over the last few years, and with little notice: Members of the clergy now suffer from obesity, hypertension and depression at rates higher than most Americans. In the last decade, their use of antidepressants has risen, while their life expectancy has fallen. Many would change jobs if they could.

Public health experts who have led the studies caution that there is no simple explanation of why so many members of a profession once associated with rosy-cheeked longevity have become so unhealthy and unhappy.

But while research continues, a growing number of health care experts and religious leaders have settled on one simple remedy that has long been a touchy subject with many clerics: taking more time off.

"We had a pastor in our study group who hadn't taken a vacation in 18 years," said Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell, an assistant professor of health research at [Duke University](#) who directs one of the studies. "These people tend to be driven by a sense of a duty to God to answer every call for help from anybody, and they are virtually called upon all the time, 24/7."

As cellphones and social media expose the clergy to new dimensions of stress, and as health care costs soar, some of the country's largest religious denominations have begun wellness campaigns that preach the virtues of getting away. It has been described by some health experts as a sort of slow-food movement for the clerical soul.

In the United Methodist Church in recent months, some church administrators have been contacting ministers known to skip vacation to make sure they have scheduled their time, Ms. Proeschold-Bell said.

The church, the nation's largest mainline Protestant denomination, led the way with a 2006 directive that strongly urged ministers to take all the vacation they were entitled to — a practice then almost unheard of in some busy congregations.

“Time away can bring renewal,” the directive said, “and help prevent burnout.”

The Episcopal, Baptist and Lutheran churches have all undertaken health initiatives that place special emphasis on the need for pastors to take vacations and observe “Sabbath days,” their weekday time off in place of Sundays.

The Lilly Endowment, a philanthropic foundation based in Indiana, has awarded grants of up to \$45,000 each to hundreds of Christian congregations in the past few years, under a project called the [National Clergy Renewal Program](#), for the purpose of giving pastors extended sabbaticals.

And while recent research has focused largely on mainline Protestant churches, some Jewish leaders have begun to encourage rabbis to take sabbaticals.

“We now recommend three or four months every three or four years,” said Rabbi Joel Meyers, a past executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly, the international association of Conservative rabbis. “There is a deep concern about stress. Rabbis today are expected to be the C.E.O. of the congregation and the spiritual guide, and never be out of town if somebody dies. And reply instantly to every e-mail.”

Some nondenominational evangelical Christian ministers have embraced a similar approach, outlined in two best-selling books by the Rev. Peter Scazzero, pastor of the [New Life Fellowship Church](#) in Elmhurst, Queens.

Mr. Scazzero, 54, is the unofficial leader of a growing counterculture among independent pastors who reject the constant-growth ethic that has contributed to the explosion of so-called mega-churches.

In the books, “Emotionally Healthy Spirituality” and “The Emotionally Healthy Church,” he advocates more vacation time for members of the clergy, Sabbath-keeping, and a “rhythm of stopping,” or daily praying, that he learned from the silent order of Trappist monks.

Mr. Scazzero said that depression and alienation from his wife and four children prompted him a half-dozen years ago to try living more consciously and less compulsively.

“It’s hard to lead a contemplative life on Queens Boulevard,” Mr. Scazzero said. “But the insight I gained from the Trappists is that being too ‘busy’ is an impediment to one’s relationship with God.”

[Clergy health studies](#) say that many clerics have “boundary issues” — defined as being too

easily overtaken by the urgency of other people's needs.

Dr. Gwen Wagstrom Halaas, a family physician who is married to a Lutheran minister and who wrote a 2004 book raising the alarm about clergy health ("The Right Road: Life Choices for Clergy"), described the problem as a misperception about serving God.

"They think that taking care of themselves is selfish, and that serving God means never saying no," she said.

Larger social trends, like the aging and shrinking of congregations, the dwindling availability of volunteers in the era of two-income households, and the likelihood that a male pastor's wife has a career of her own, also spur some ministers to push themselves past their limits, she said.

The [High Mountain Church of the Nazarene](#) in North Haledon, N.J., started with 25 members 10 years ago and grew to 115 before its pastor, the Rev. Steven Creange, noticed strains in his marriage and decided to slow down.

Mr. Creange said he and his wife feel lavishly rested — and much happier — since they began observing Sabbath days on Fridays and making occasional weekend getaways.

"I just don't go to every graduation and every communion anymore," he said. "And people accept it."

In May, [the Clergy Health Initiative](#), a seven-year study that Duke University began in 2007, published the [first results](#) of a continuing survey of 1,726 Methodist ministers in North Carolina. Compared with neighbors in their census tracts, the ministers reported significantly higher rates of arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure and asthma. Obesity was 10 percent more prevalent in the clergy group.

The results echoed recent internal surveys by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which found that 69 percent of its ministers reported being overweight, 64 percent having high blood pressure and 13 percent taking antidepressants.

A 2005 survey of clergy by the Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church also took special note of a quadrupling in the number of people leaving the profession during the first five years of ministry, compared with the 1970s.

Roman Catholic and Muslim clerics said the symptoms sounded familiar.

“We have all of these problems, but imams are reluctant to express it because it will seem like a sign of weakness,” said [Imam Shamsi Ali, director of the Jamaica Muslim Center in Queens](#). “Also, mosques do not pay much and many of them work two jobs.”

Catholic canon law requires priests — “unless there is a grave reason to the contrary” — to take a spiritual retreat each year, and four weeks of vacation.

That vacation regulation has led Msgr. Gus Bennett of Brooklyn to take a camping trip on horseback in the Wyoming wilderness with friends every year for 30 years.

Monsignor Bennett, 87, a canon lawyer, now semi-retired, who spent most of his working years setting up and managing the pension plan for priests and lay employees of the Diocese of Brooklyn, says he has always felt his religious side to be most alive during those nights in Wyoming, “sleeping on the ground, under the whole of creation.”

He does not know how it affected his health. “I just know it made it easier to come back and jump into the books,” he said.

The News Agency of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. Taking a Break From the Lord's Work. By: Paul Vitello for The New York Times on Aug. 5, 2010. Photo Credits: www.churchtimes.co.uk. The findings have surfaced with ominous regularity over the last few years, and with little notice: Members of the clergy now suffer from obesity, hypertension and depression at rates higher than most Americans. "We had a pastor in our study group who hadn't taken a vacation in 18 years," said Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell, an assistant professor of health research at Duke University who directs one of the studies. "These people tend to be driven by a sense of a duty to God to answer every call for help from anybody, and they are virtually called upon all the time, 24/7." A break in a relationship is when a couple takes time apart before deciding if they want to stay together or break up for good. Though the terms of the break differ from couple to couple, often couples won't communicate or see each other for a set period of time, while at the same time remaining attached and therefore not dating other people. However, parting ways is not always the case post-break. Are you hitting a new stage in your life (moving for work, going to school) that has you thinking you may not work together long-term? The point here is to realize whether your problem is a deal-breaker (like your S.O. doesn't want kids and you do). Discuss the Break in Person. Since a break from your relationship involves both partners, the conversation about embarking on one should, too. "Taking a Break From All Your Worries" is the thirteenth episode of the third season from the science fiction television series, Battlestar Galactica. The title is a line from the Cheers theme song, "Where Everybody Knows Your Name" (the working title for this episode, as revealed in Ronald D. Moore's podcast commentary for the episode "Rapture", was "Where Everybody Knows Your Name"). Survivor Count: 41,403.