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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.

Taking a break in a relationship does not necessarily mean a breakup. But in a lot of cases, it ends up in a breakup as one of the partner realizes the relationship is not worth staying. Sometimes, when a couple is going through a hard time and they find it difficult to leave each other, they both decide to take a break from the relationship. A break from all the responsibilities of the relationship, a break from all the fighting and arguing, a break from the commitment, a break from feeling like they need to take care of their partner. Taking a break in a relationship does not necessarily mean a breakup. But in a lot of cases, it ends up in a breakup as one of the partner realizes the relationship is not worth saving. When you take a break, you are putting your relationship t