

# The sturdy, reliant, self-destructing pastor

*What is it about church life that drives so many clergy to unhealthy behaviors?*

By Ben Guess, Editor  
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The pastor's drunk again. Or eating too much. His marriage needs a tune-up. Her credit cards are maxed out. He hasn't exercised since the seventh grade. But don't worry—the Prozac seems to be working wonders with the depression. Still, the good reverend is keeping up with appearances. And that's a good thing, because she's got more than a dozen appearances to make today.

Several studies have found that religious leaders are prone to significantly higher incidents of substance abuse, obesity, financial difficulties and depression. Clergy now rank among the illustrious "top ten professions" associated with heart disease.

## **What's going on here?**

After several bouts of binge drinking in college, the Rev. James B. Nelson didn't drink alcohol for 20 years. But, at age 40, in the midst of an emerging career as one of the UCC's most prolific authors and beloved seminary professors, he began to make re-acquaintance with old habits. By his early 50s, alcohol had become an emotions-numbing, problem-escaping, relationship-threatening obsession.

On April 19, 1993, he had an epiphany, in addition to a hangover. After a "five-and-a-half-day binge locked in a Minneapolis hotel room less than two miles from home," Nelson knew he needed serious help. The next day, he entered an alcohol addiction treatment facility.

Nelson's story of "accepting the absolute reality of grace" is told poignantly in a new theological memoir about his addiction. "Thirst: God and the Alcoholic Experience," published by Westminster John Knox Press, may be this retired professor's finest teachable moment.

"I often recall Paul Tillich's wonderful words, 'Simply accept the fact that you are accepted,'" Nelson told

United Church News. "Those words were burned into my memory years ago, because of their beauty, but it wasn't until the experience of coming out of my addiction into life-long recovery that I knew with any real depth what those words meant."

Despite his success in religious academia and, by widespread accounts, his warm, likeable and approachable demeanor, Nelson used alcohol to escape fears and feelings of rejection, failure and imperfection.

"I spent years trying to prove my worth," he says. "Alcohol, I discovered, was an answer. It somehow relieved me of my striving, at least for periods of time. And, strangely it was alcohol that gave me the assurance that I was okay as I was."

### **Feeding 'heart hunger'**

In 1998, after 20 years in parish ministry, the Rev. Bob Tschannen-Moran found that his proclivity to feed "heart hunger" with comfort foods had finally gotten the best of him.

With 235 pounds packed on his 5'10" frame, Tschannen-Moran, in his own words, was "half way up the [Body Mass Index] scale toward morbid obesity" and, as a result, he was experiencing the tell-tale signs of a heart attack in waiting—bad blood numbers and, even worse, numbness and chest pains. His doctor gave him six short months to shape up—literally—or begin medication. That's the wake-up call that precipitated his 70- pound weight loss, a bundle he's kept off successfully ever since.

"Over the course of those 20 years, I definitely experienced the stress and strain of pastoral ministry that led to unhealthy eating," says Tschannen-Moran, who spent 15 years as the founding pastor of Good News Community UCC in Chicago followed by five years as senior minister of the cathedralesque First Congregational UCC in Columbus, Ohio. "I certainly did emotion-based eating."

As a pastor, Tschannen-Moran says, "There's anxiety around a wide variety of things, not always well-articulated. You want people to like you. You want people to put money in the plate. You're preaching about the value of love, but never seeing your wife and kids."

Six years later—weighing in at a fairly-constant 162 pounds—Tschannen-Moran is now an avid runner living in Williamsburg, Va., who is teaching others about health and wellness—in its fullness—as a professional "life coach." More than just physical fitness, he's committed to helping others, and himself, to live more

holistically.

"One of the things that I try to teach is the difference between heart hunger and stomach hunger," he explains. "As part of my own transformation, I needed to learn the difference."

### **Saved by ice cream?**

For the Rev. Lark J. Hapke, Interim Iowa Conference Minister, "When I was in parish ministry, the function of my bowls of ice cream at night could easily have been drinks [of alcohol]. I've come to recognize that I've used food as a stress manager." Hapke says she has a history of eating "to feel different," a struggle that has led to significant weight gain—and losses—over the past 30 years.

"I finally came to terms that there's not a diet in the world that going to change my patterns around food, and I've begun a 12-step program on it," she says.

While in parish ministry, Hapke says, "I got very lonely."

"In several communities it was hard to get connected to others beyond my 'role,'" she explains.

"So there is this thing where food becomes your 'friend.'"

Nighttime, she says, would be the hardest time. "When you come home late from a meeting, how do you process all that? How do you unwind and get a decent night's sleep? Because people expect you to be on the job in the morning—and at night."

### **Facing the facts**

Such stories, unfortunately, are not rare. In fact, many studies now show that, for religious leaders, self-defeating behaviors can take on various forms and with different destructive outcomes.

In 2002, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America found that its clergy were far more likely than non-clergy to suffer from clinical depression and financial difficulties. They also experienced higher levels of work-related stress and had an increased likelihood of substance abuse and obesity. A 2001 study of 2,500 religious leaders by Duke Divinity School found that clergy were 15 percent more likely to be overweight or

obese when compared to an already-weighty U.S. population. A 2003 report from the United Methodist Church shared similar findings.

In addition, many clergy are trapped in low-income placements despite high-level debt, a situation often tied to enormous borrowing to pay for a seminary education. In 2003, the average newly-ordained UCC minister entered his or her new vocation with \$33,000 in debt. To make matters worse, far too many clergy—unbeknownst to their congregations—are up to their earlobes in credit card bills.

The Roman Catholic Church, as well as every religious tradition, including the UCC, has felt the scourge from some clergy's well-publicized, immoral, even illegal, sexual abuse.

Some are now examining the contributing factors—both systemic and psychological—that cause many ministers, in a gamut of ways, to disregard their own long-term well-being.

### **Obsessed with 'negative' voices**

The Rev. Richard Sparrow of the UCC's parish life and leadership ministry in Cleveland describes the phenomenon as "enormous and complex."

"If 100 people are in worship on Sunday morning, 99 can say 'great job, pastor,' but it's the one negative person that we take home with us, and we allow that one person to live in our space for at least 24 hours," he says. "Meanwhile, we leave the compliments of the 99 behind, because the negative is what I fear about myself. It feeds on my already shaky self image."

Sparrow says one overlooked, but important-to-understand issue is that, by a substantial majority, most clergy are introverts, but congregations—by their group nature—are extroverts.

"We live and work as introverts in an extroverted world. Some of us do it quite well, but the price we pay is enormous because there is no relief or release from this relentless extroverted system," Sparrow says. "Just think about it—a pastor can be expected to have 'personal words' with 250 people on a Sunday morning."

Sparrow says even the pastor's daily trip to the post office can be fraught with ministry opportunities and, thus, extroverted encounters.

"I can't tell you the number of pastors that have endured threats of being fired just because they didn't speak to someone energetically enough at the post office," Sparrow says, only partly in jest. "There are many in congregations who will say it's easier to find another pastor than it is to find another family that will give well to the church—and that's sick."

## **Compassion fatigue**

Even for the best of pastors, Sparrow says, there is a constant, internal nagging that preys on self-perceived shortcomings, such as the less-than-stellar sermon, the absent parishioner, the sag in attendance, the drop in offering revenue or the criticism at a council meeting.

For the perfection-obsessed pastor, Sparrow says, there is always one more person he should have visited, one more card she should have written, one more justice issue he should have raised, one more meeting she should have attended or one more potential member he should have nurtured.

For example, while some lay persons might feel occasional guilt for not staying in better contact with a much-too-often-forgotten aunt, clergy multiply that same kind of guilt by the number of members in the church—not to mention their members' family and friends, church visitors and those in the larger community. And, besides, the pastor likely has a much-too-often-forgotten aunt, as well.

Says Lisa Thomas, R.N., parish nurse at the UCC's Church House in Cleveland, "In addition to the normal stresses at home, pastors are doing a lot of different things—administration, finances, ministering to folks who are not at their best, and church politics is always enough to drive someone nuts."

"I think it's a pretty thankless job. You wake up every morning with it being the first thing on your mind," she says. "People want their pastor at their beckon call. People want this, people want that. But what I don't hear people saying to their pastor is, 'We're really concerned about your health.'"

Thomas says, to make matters worse, clergy are subject not only to long hours, but also weird ones. "For those who work odd hours," she says, "it's harder to plan and manage life," especially the nurturance of good, healthy habits such as proper diet and exercise.

## **Doing something for self**

As one of two ministers in her household, the Rev. Nancy Nelson-Elsenheimer of the UCC's evangelism ministry team in Cleveland knows that ministry has its pitfalls.

"There's always more to do. There's always one more meeting to attend, one more workshop to plan, one more newsletter article to write. And there's always the problem with logistics—eating on weird schedules."

That's why, despite her lifelong commitment to good health, it was still a life-altering, schedule tinkering experience when, at age 49, she began training to run a 26.2-mile marathon.

Even though she had never before considered the possibility of running such a long distance, Nelson-Elsenheimer had been running more intentionally in recent years, a healthy habit she developed while a member of the UCC's Michigan Conference staff.

"Running became a way to have time to myself," she explains.

Despite its physical benefits, she's found exercise to have a spiritual dimension to it as well.

She says, at times while running, she finds herself singing—and praying—"Guide my feet, while I run this race."

"In June, a marathoner [and fellow church member Kent Kohler of UCC Congregational in Medina, Ohio] said, 'I'd like you to run a marathon with me.'" She recalls. "I never thought I would run a marathon, but I finally said, 'I'll put the date on my calendar and train for it.' But I made my husband Ted swear that he wouldn't announce it from the pulpit."

Initially, she would tell people that someone else had conned her into running a marathon. But, "at some point, I changed and started saying, 'I'm running a marathon.'"

Each day, during training, she saw increased benefits from her newfound commitment to doing something she once thought nearly impossible.

"I'd think 'I've never even run 12 miles before,'" she remembers, "and then I'd run 14." And, in time, she'd actually complete 26.2.

On October 2, 2004, when she crossed the finish line, she felt the love and encouragement of her UCC family. She acknowledges the race was tough, especially the last six grueling miles.

"It was training, and it was the support and prayers of all the people who said they would be praying for me that carried me across the finish line," she says.

### **Taking charge of 'me'**

Sparrow says, it's true, congregations can do a better job of caring for and encouraging their pastors, but most importantly, he says, clergy have to realize that self-care—ultimately—is their responsibility, and it should be part of their long-term commitment to effective ministries.

"It would be good if congregations would say, 'How are we giving support to our pastor as a human being?'—the same kind of support that we all need," Sparrow says.

But, at a broader level, he points out, "Our [clergy] formation program should be of a depth and quality that we are really helping people to become healthy enough to become good pastors. That's the issue. So many pastors want to be taken care of, and that can't happen. We have to take charge of our own health, and we've not done very well until crisis hits, until the doctor says, 'Your cholesterol is too high.'"

Moreover, Sparrow says, we have to confront our desire to portray ourselves—heroically—as pious workaholics.

"Sure, we want people to know we're producing and so, down deep, we hope people will look at us and say, 'Wow, you're working so hard!'"

As a Conference Minister, Hapke looks forward to occasions when she can talk with other ministers about self-care, a topic to which the church—for the most part—only pays lip service, she believes.

"We have to ask one another, 'Are you exercising?' Are you taking care of yourself?' It's not the kind of thing we're accustomed to doing," Hapke says.

"It's not easy, but the reality is that, at times, we have to live with the understanding that people won't like us," she says. "As people pleasers, we've not been accustomed to saying, 'No, I can't attend that meeting."

That's the night I exercise.' or 'That's the night I play bridge.' How do we make those our priorities and be okay with them being priorities?"

## **Rediscovering grace**

Each Sunday in Tucson, Ariz., at the Presbyterian church that James Nelson and his wife attend, the congregation sings one verse of "Amazing Grace" as part of its worship liturgy. Often, Nelson says, he finds himself surprised by how the hymn's words affect him.

"For the pastor who is besieged with notions of criticisms and requests, I know it's tried, true and familiar, but I need to keep hearing it: 'Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me,'" he says. "I find myself deeply moved by it."

However, like any good seminary professor will do, Nelson knows the importance of unpacking the precise meaning of a word.

"Wretch," he explains, "is not the 'despicable' person; it literally means the 'homeless' person—profound homelessness. And isn't that the perennial human question, 'Do I have a home?' 'Do I belong?' 'Just as I am?' É It's the question that fuels the dynamics in every aspect of life, in every local church. That's the thirst for grace."

*The Rev. J. Bennett Guess, editor of United Church News, has been working on this story—at least emotionally—for years. Weighing more than 280 pounds during more than a decade in parish ministry, he dropped 100+ pounds six years ago, a weight loss he has since maintained through proper diet, regular exercise and ongoing reflection about religion and wellness. His journey toward improved health began in 1998 after a caring parish nurse emphasized the importance of clergy self-care—and utilized his then-high blood pressure, cholesterol, anxiety and weight to prove her point.*

## **Good advice for habitual health**

1. **Embrace the value.** The Rev. Bob Tschannen-Moran teaches, "Until we embrace the value of wellness not only to our own health and happiness but also to the integrity of our calling as clergy and as a church, wellness will remain a low priority item."



2. **Leave "la-la land."** Says parish nurse Lisa Thomas, R.N., "You're not doing anyone any favors by ignoring all this, just so you can go to an extra meeting or make an extra phone call. You're living in la-la land."

3. **Honor "Sabbath" as holy**—even on Tuesdays, if necessary. Respect pastor's established office hours and "days off," except in cases of emergency. Encourage or take comp time after interruptions occur.

4. **Look out for false gods.** "I am fully persuaded that the Hebrew prophets had it right," says the Rev. James B. Nelson. "It's not Yahweh versus no god, it's Yahweh versus false gods. We're always worshipping something, and we're always looking for other gods to save us."

5. **Discover your "soul protectors."** "When you're engaged in work at a spiritual level, you are constantly being asked to make yourself vulnerable," says the Rev. Lark Hapke. "Pastors long to know that they have a few 'soul protectors' looking out for them in their congregations."

6. **Say no to clergy-bashing members.** Says the Rev. Richard Sparrow, "Church leaders must name the problem and be willing to say, 'You can't take aim at our pastor.'"

7. **Make health a church-wide commitment.** Self care is not a luxurious pursuit, it's good stewardship. Establish a parish nurse program or healthy congregations initiative. Offer a gym membership as part of clergy's benefits package. Learn more from Barbara Baylor of the UCC's Justice and Witness Ministries at [ucc.org/justice/health](http://ucc.org/justice/health).

8. **Promote healthy eating options** at church meals and meetings.

9. **Set goals with action steps.** Says the Rev. Nancy Nelson-Elsenheimer, "It's basically about setting the goal and then putting one foot in front of the other."

10. **Remember that wellness is comprehensive and incremental.** Promote lifestyle changes that mirror your church's theological values and social justice commitments.

**Learn More @**

Many people, including clergy, have used personal coaches to implement life-changing strategies. More information is available at [LifeTrekCoaching.com](http://LifeTrekCoaching.com) or by contacting the Rev. Bob Tschannen-Moran at 757/345-3452. "Thirst: God and the Alcoholic Experience," by the

Rev. James B. Nelson, is available at amazon.com. "The Parish Survival Guide," published by the UCC's Pilgrim Press, chronicles "how many problems threatening the life of the church, and of individual clergy, can be prevented." It is available at [thepilgrimpress.com](http://thepilgrimpress.com) or by calling 800/537-3394.

### **Join clergy wellness conversation**

During lent, beginning on Feb. 9, participate in an online forum at [forums.ucc.org/viewforum.php?f=9](http://forums.ucc.org/viewforum.php?f=9) to discuss issues of holistic wellness. Moderated by the Rev. Richard Sparrow, the Rev. Bob Tschannen-Moran, the Rev. Lark Hapke, Barbara Baylor and the Rev. J. Bennett Guess, the forum invites clergy and laity to share their personal stories and to offer strategies for achieving balance and health in vocational ministry.