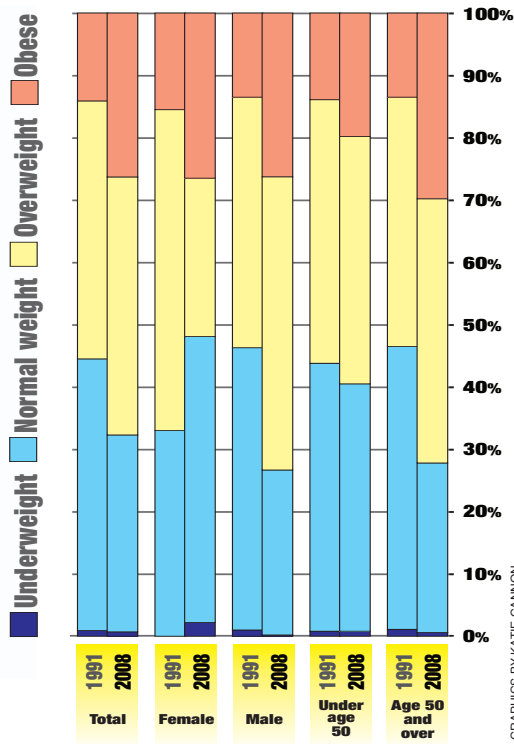


Changes in weight among pastors: 1991–2008



GRAPHICS BY KATIE CANNON

GO FIGURE

JACK MARCUM

What the research shows

The upward trend in weight among pastors affects the church most obviously through its relationship with health. In the 2008 survey fewer obese than non-obese pastors describe as “excellent” either their physical health (11 percent, compared to 43 percent for the non-obese) or their mental health (30 vs. 45 percent), and more are “very concerned” or “concerned” about their physical health (54 vs. 26 percent).

Such health effects have financial consequences, not only for the Board of Pensions, which provides health insurance, but also for congregations that pay for that coverage. There may also be financial consequences for obese pastors themselves: more obese than non-obese pastors report being concerned about medical costs (52 vs. 39 percent), income (48 vs. 35 percent), and debt (46 vs. 32 percent).

On the positive side, some obese pastors are taking steps to improve their health: 21 percent are in formal weight-loss programs and 39 percent belong to fitness centers. These individuals may well reverse their own weight gains, and such efforts should be supported. However, the overall trend toward more obesity in the United States—rising to 27 percent of all adults in 2007 and showing no signs of abating—suggests that the social environment will make it extraordinarily difficult for pastors as a group to lower obesity rates anytime soon. □

Pulpit heavyweights

Recently in this column I discussed decades-long membership losses in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), but this month I’m addressing an area in which the PC(USA) is growing: the weight of its pastors. Surveys taken 17 years apart show that:

- **The average weight of pastors increased to 192 pounds** in 2008, up from 181 pounds in 1991.
- **The share of pastors who are obese almost doubled** over this period, from 14 percent to 27 percent (based on body mass index, or BMI, scores).*
- **In contrast, 31 percent of pastors were of normal weight** in 2008, down from 44 percent in 1991.
- **The overweight-but-not obese percentage stayed the same**, 41 percent in both years, as did the tiny underweight share (less than 1 percent).
- **Rates of obesity increased** among both men (14 percent in 1991, 26 percent in 2008) and women (16 percent; 26 percent), and among those younger than 50 (14 percent; 20 percent) and those 50 or older (14 percent; 30 percent).

* Weight categories are those commonly used with the body mass index, which takes height as well as weight into account: Underweight, BMI of 18.5 or less; normal weight, 18.5 to 24.9; overweight, 25.0 to 29.9; and obese, 30.0 or greater.

The 2008 Survey of Pastors may be found at www.pcusa.org/research

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