

Christians preach healthy eating

Condemn gluttony as deadly vice

By Bobby Ross Jr.
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SUNDAY-MORNING worshippers at Fellowship Church used to satisfy their spiritual hunger with God and their growling stomachs with Krispy Kreme doughnuts.

Then pastor Ed Young preached a series of sermons on the biblical principle of the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit.

"People loved the Krispy Kremes, but the more we started thinking about this, we were saying, 'We can't talk about this on the one hand and on the other hand have all these doughnuts,'" Mr. Young said. These days his 18,000-member suburban Dallas church touts healthy eating and physical fitness.

In the Bible Belt, fried-chicken fellowships and pot-bellied pastors are as much a part of the culture as NASCAR races and sentences that start with "Y'all." Churches traditionally have not worried much about waistlines.

As Autumn Marshall, a nutritionist at church-affiliated Lipscomb University in Nashville, Tenn., explained, most evangelical Christians don't drink, smoke, curse or commit adultery.

"So what do we do?" she said. "We eat."

Although the Bible frequently condemns gluttony, Miss Marshall said, "it just appears to be a more acceptable vice."

A 1998 study by Purdue University sociologist Kenneth Ferraro concluded that church members were more likely to be overweight than other people.

Mr. Ferraro analyzed public records and surveys involving more than 3,600 people. Broken down by religious groups, Southern Baptists were heaviest, and Jews, Mus-

lims and Buddhists were less likely to be overweight.

"In many respects, a lot of the Christian religions, especially the fundamentalists, just have not made the connection yet that you can dig a grave with a fork," Mr. Ferraro said.

That's readily acknowledged in "High Calling, High Anxiety," a new book by the Rev. O.S. Hawkins, who heads the board that administers medical and retirement plans for Southern Baptist pastors.

The top two medical claims paid by the denomination's health-insurance program in 2002 were for ailments such as back problems and high blood pressure, often the results of obesity or a sedentary lifestyle.

"It seems the secular community is sounding the alarm over the evils of obesity, but Christian churches do not seem to have heard the message," Mr. Hawkins wrote.

He cited denominational statistics that showed 75 percent of Baptist pastors eat fried foods at least four nights a week and 40 percent snack two or more times a day.

"Baptists definitely hold the heavyweight title in ministry," he wrote.

The Rev. Byron McWilliams once fit that bill. Two years ago, when he weighed 260 pounds, the pastor of First Baptist Church in Buna, said he didn't dare address the subject of healthy eating to his South Texas congregation because he would have felt hypocritical.

"I realized I was probably more of the problem than the solution," Mr. McWilliams said.

So, the father of three started running and limiting himself to 2,000 calories a day. He shed 50 pounds and 6 inches from his waistline.

"It was pretty amazing as to how quickly the body—the way God has designed it—responds to regular exercise and eating correctly," he said.