

Megachurch pastor steps away from pulpit because he feels far from God, tired in soul

By [Leonardo Blair](#) ⁽¹⁾, Christian Post Reporter



Rev. Howard-John Wesley, senior pastor of the historic Alfred Street Baptist Church in Alexandria, Va. | Photo: Alfred Street Baptist Church

Rev. Howard-John Wesley, senior pastor of the historic [Alfred Street Baptist Church](#) ⁽¹²⁾ in Alexandria, Virginia, surprised his congregation earlier this month with an announcement that he is stepping away from his ministry for a season because he feels far from God, tired in his soul and needed to recuperate mentally and physically.

“From January 1 (2020) to April 1. I am walking away from every responsibility I have as pastor,” Wesley [announced in his sermon on Dec. 1](#) ⁽¹³⁾.

“You can’t pour out of an empty cup. It is very dangerous for your pastor to be on empty,” he told congregants. “I need to take care of me.”

He further noted that: “I’m tired. And I’m tired in a way that one night of sleep ain’t gon’ fix. I’m tired in my soul.”

Prior to making the formal announcement to his 10,000 member congregation, Wesley, who has led the 216-year old church [since 2008](#) ⁽¹⁴⁾, preached on the value of rest in his sermon called “Selah.”

In the sermon he noted how common pastoral sabbaticals are in white churches while pointing out how rare it was in black churches. He argued that many black pastors don’t take sabbaticals because they are afraid attendance might dip and affect the bottom line or the church may just function just fine without them.

Wesley argued, however, that taking time to rest is a biblical requisite for holiness and that busyness, which [recent studies](#)⁽¹⁵⁾ show has become a status symbol of our time, does not honor God.

“The enemy in an attempt to block your holiness, wants to remove rest from your life and push you back into slavery. And here is the greatest deception of the devil – to convince you that the busier you are the more important you are. That the more you got to do, the more high up on the food chain you are. That if you’re working yourself to the bone somehow you are glorifying God. And God says you are not being holy if you don’t know how to rest,” Wesley said.

“Selah. And the word to somebody today is if you really want to be holy you gotta learn how to rest. I don’t know who I’m preaching to right here but don’t you leave vacation days on the table. Don’t you leave PTO in somebody’s hand! You take every mental health day they gave you. It is ungodly not to use up all your vacation,” he said to affirmation from his congregation.

“I fell prey to the satanic trick that busyness honors God,” he said.

Wesley went on to he explain how difficult pastoring is before elaborating further on his need for a sabbatical.

“I’m not leaving you. This ain’t nothing but an admission baby,” he said wrestling back tears. “One of the greatest mistakes of pastoring is to think that because you work for God you’re close to God. That you allow your work to be mixed with your worship, and I feel so distant from God. I feel like Jacob when God wrestled with him. I’m struggling with God with some issues right now. And God gets Jacob because God wants to change Jacob’s nature. But he’s got to get Jacob in a struggle by himself so Jacob will surrender and then the Lord can break him and then his walk will be changed,” Wesley said. “Sometimes God engages you in a struggle so that God can remove you from people to teach you to surrender, so God can break some stuff and make you walk differently.”

Wesley said he believes the call to rest is coming from God.



Rev. Howard-John Wesley reveals to his church that he is tired in his soul. | Screenshot: YouTube/Alfred Street Baptist Church

“The Lord is pulling me away because I’m in this struggle and I’m not surrendered. And the Lord’s trying to change me y’all. Fifty is coming. And I gotta leave some stuff in the 40 that I’m not carrying in the 50. I’ve just got to walk differently and in order to do it, I’ve got to step away. I hear the Lord saying ‘be still.’ So I’m going on a sabbatical,” he said.

While he would not reveal some personal goals he hopes to meet while on the sabbatical because “I believe in boundaries,” Wesley did share some of the spiritual and physical goals he hopes to achieve.

“I want to draw back closer to the Lord. I want to know what it’s like to get back to the place where I spend the first hour of my day on my knees. When you really love the Lord there is something about being convicted of a deficiency in your prayer life that you can’t escape. Sunday worship does not make up for deficiency in prayer. Serving in ministry doesn’t make up for deficiency in prayer. I want to read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation without trying to write a sermon. I want to travel and go sit in the back of somebody’s church and hear the word of God and not be worried about what time we got to get out for the next crowd,” he said.

“I also have some physical goals. Y’all, did you realize this is the only body we get? This ain’t a test run. You wear this one out, that’s it. I want to bring my best self to God. You’d be surprised that the majority of black preachers are in horrible physical condition,” he said. “Their A1C is high, their blood pressure is skyrocketing, their cholesterol is bad, they’re on more medications than they should be.”

A [recent study](#)⁽¹⁹⁾ by Duke University researchers showed that black men who attend church services frequently are nearly twice as likely to be obese than those who never attend services.

The study, "[Investigating Denominational and Church Attendance Differences in Obesity and Diabetes in Black Christian Men and Women](#),⁽²⁰⁾" from Duke's Samuel DuBois Cook Center for Social Equity, also suggested that the development of obesity in black men highly engaged in church life could be influenced by their social networks.

"And this really got me ... when I had my annual physical this year and my doctor told me your numbers are pointing in the wrong direction. And this is what she said to me, 'You can fix them or I can. Stress. And you know the only medicine for stress is rest, diet and exercise. Hear me y'all, unless the Lord speaks to me differently, I ain't gon' die in this pulpit,'" Wesley said.

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Black men who attend church frequently more likely to be obese, study finds

By [Leonardo Blair](#) ⁽²¹⁾, Christian Post Reporter



Pastors worship at the Global United Fellowship gathering in 2018. | Facebook

Black men who attend church services frequently are nearly twice as likely to be obese than those who never attend services, according to a study by Duke University researchers.

The study, "[Investigating Denominational and Church Attendance Differences in Obesity and Diabetes in Black Christian Men and Women](#),⁽³²⁾" from Duke's Samuel DuBois Cook Center for Social Equity, also suggested that the development of obesity in black men highly engaged in church life could be influenced by their social networks.

Social networks in this case refers to a "web" of relationships among individuals.

A lower prevalence of diabetes among Catholics and Presbyterians was also noted when compared to groups such as Baptists, Pentecostals, Methodists and other Protestant groups. This discrepancy, however, might have been impacted by a slight difference in the age group of the subjects studied.

Researchers say these key findings now need to be factored into faith-based health promotions since obesity increases the risk of developing cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

The study was conducted using data from the National Survey of American Life to investigate the correlation between the faith traditions and health outcomes for more than 4,300 African American and Afro-Caribbean Christians.

"Our analysis of NSAL data found no denominational differences in obesity, but did observe an interaction between gender and the frequency of religious service attendance that greatly increased the likelihood of obesity in men, but not women," lead author of the study, Keisha L. Bentley-Edwards, and her colleagues wrote.

The associate director of research and director of the health equity working group at the Cook Center, who is also an assistant professor of general internal medicine, further wrote with her colleagues that "church engagement is an important factor in obesity for black men."

"Concerning diabetes, lower odds emerged among Presbyterians and Catholics compared to Baptists. No interaction between gender and religious service attendance was observed for this outcome. This finding indicates that the odds of diabetes do vary between denominations within the black church and communicate the importance of considering denomination in health promotion and prevention efforts that target

blacks,” the researchers said.

While diabetes is the seventh leading cause of death among Americans in general, researchers note that among blacks alone, it is the fifth. And while one third of all American men and women have been classified as obese, among African Americans alone that rate is 48.4%, the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey says.

“Historically, black churches have been a source of spiritual and social support, but greater religious engagement must also support good health behaviors,” Bentley-Edwards told Duke Today.⁽³³⁾ “Both men and women who are active members of their churches are being pulled in a lot of directions outside of their faith community, which can make self-care a lower priority than what is warranted. We want them to make faith and health priorities in their lives, rather than faith or health.”

While the study highlighted the need for additional research focusing on the health outcomes of African Americans by denomination, it was noted that a recent review of studies examining the correlation between religion and weight found that Seventh-Day Adventists had the lowest body weight.

“Studies of health outcomes among Adventists, a Protestant denomination whose doctrine mandates abstinence from alcohol, tobacco and pork consumption and prescribes a vegetarian diet, reveal links between religion and health,” the authors said.

While adherence to this lifestyle prescription varies among black Adventists, studies show that obesity was higher among Adventists who ate meat. Obesity was also shown to be more prevalent among black Adventists compared to whites, the authors said.

“This may be due to blacks’ entry into the Adventist faith later in life than whites, leading to later adoption of the dietary pre- and proscriptions and later intergenerational uptake of Adventist practices,” they added.

In a discussion of their findings, the authors of the study suggested that one explanation for the prevalence of obesity among black men highly engaged in church life could be their social networks.

“The present study’s findings among black men may reflect social networks differences between men who are and are not highly engaged in church, which can impact obesity development,” the authors said.

The authors pointed to research showing that beyond the age of 32, obesity can be transferred among individuals.

“Developing obesity was seen among siblings and spouses if one person became obese. Among friends, if one became obese, the other had a 57% increased chance of also becoming obese. Male same-gender friendships showed an increased chance of becoming obese when one friend enters that weight group,” the researchers noted.

The study further pointed to gendered roles within the church social context to provide an explanation for the high obesity rate among black men highly engaged in church life who are more likely historically to be involved in leadership.

“Distinct church roles may also encompass distinct, taxing responsibilities for black men and women within and outside of the church. Perhaps a factor in our findings is the superwoman role, a liability and asset-laden phenomenon describing black women’s stress-coping response and its connection to adverse health outcomes like obesity,” the authors contend.

“In the superwoman role, the challenge of being both black and a woman can lead to overwhelm, stress-related behaviors and deprioritization of self-care. Religion and spirituality are inherent in the superwoman role as black women draw strength and resilience from religion and spirituality—a central facet of their lives,” the authors continued.