



THE **HEALTHY**
Renegade
PASTOR

ABANDONING AVERAGE IN YOUR
HEALTH AND WELLNESS

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THE HEALTHY RENEGADE PASTOR

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The author has added italics to Scripture quotations for emphasis.

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To all of the pastors who are ready to get healthier, live more fully,
and accomplish the unique purposes God has set before them.

Authors' Note: Through the process of writing of this book, the three of us have taken our own health to a new level. As we've collaborated with one another and shared our stories of abandoning average in our physical health, we have learned much from each other's personal journeys. While the thoughts, anecdotes and principles presented in these pages represent the contributions of all three authors, we've chosen to fuse those contributions into one voice for clarity's sake. **Unless otherwise noted, the voice in the pages ahead is Nelson's.**



*Abandoning
Average*

Abandoning Average: A Tale of Two Pastors

If you want to be successful in life and you have no role models, look at what the majority of people are doing and do the opposite. The majority is always wrong.

EARL NIGHTINGALE

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.

GALATIANS 6:7

Tired. Stressed. Sick. Overweight. Do these words describe you? For the vast majority of pastors, they are the norm. Over the course of our years as church leaders, too many of us have sacrificed our health and wellbeing on the altar of ministry. We have lost the vibrancy—and the waistlines—we once had, opting instead for the poor, counterfeit version of health that has become acceptable in our culture. It's no secret that, as a nation, we are facing a health crisis. I'm sure you've heard the statistics, but let me remind you of just a couple:

- Time trend forecasts predict that by 2030, 51% of the population will be obese.¹
- Researchers predict that such rates of obesity will result in an additional \$66 billion in health care expenditures, 7.8 million new cases of diabetes, 6.8 million new cases

of stroke and heart disease, and 539,000 new cancer diagnoses.²

Those are staggering numbers, but they are just the tip of the iceberg for you and me. Among church leaders, the picture is even bleaker:

- A recent Pulpit and Pew study of 2500 clergy found that 76% were overweight or obese.³
- Clergy have one of the highest death rates from heart disease of any occupation.⁴
- 40% of pastors say they are depressed at times, and worn out “some or most of the time.”⁵

We tell ourselves all kinds of lies to justify how far we’ve fallen:

- *I’m not that overweight. Lots of people are much bigger than me.*
- *I don’t have time to work out.*
- *I’m busy doing God’s work, so he’ll take care of my body.*
- *When it’s my time to go, I’ll die. There’s not much I can do about it in the meantime.*
- *This condition runs in my family. It doesn’t have anything to do with my lifestyle.*
- *All pastors are stressed out. It’s part of the job.*

At first, we believe ourselves. We convince ourselves that we are doing okay compared to the next guy and we forge ahead, blinders firmly in place. But eventually, the consequences of years of poor health decisions catch up. It’s inevitable. When they do, our bodies suffer and our ministries suffer. We end up fat, chronically sick, dependent on

pills to regulate our bodies' systems, and stressed to the point of burn-out or even depression. None of this is good for us, our churches, or God's greater kingdom. No matter how much we like to try, we can't get away from the truth Paul spelled out so clearly in Galatians:

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked.

A man reaps what he sows.

—Galatians 6:7 (emphasis added)

Two Paths Diverged

The lives of two great pastors I know provide the perfect case study for the slippery slope to ill health that can happen so easily in ministry. If you read *The Renegade Pastor: Abandoning Average in Your Life and Ministry*, then you've met these two before. In case you haven't, allow me to reintroduce them:

Alex and Rob are both faithful, well-intentioned guys whose lives were on similar trajectories when they were young. They were both called to ministry during college and went on to attend comparable seminaries. Now, each of them pastors a mid-sized church in the Midwest. Like you and me, both Alex and Rob started out in ministry with grand visions of what the future would bring. Each was in his prime, healthy and vibrant. They both wanted to change lives and grow the kingdom. Over the years, though, Alex and Rob's paths have diverged—both in terms of the churches and personal lives they have led and in their ability to fulfill their calling due to their different health journeys. (To learn more about how Alex and Rob's ministries and personal lives have taken drastically different paths, read *The Renegade Pastor: Abandoning Average in Your Life and Ministry*, Regal, 2013.)

Alex and Rob both still want to be on fire for God's work and to be filled with the energy and vitality it takes to do that work well, but Alex is beginning to face some health challenges that are slowing

him down. With each passing year, he finds himself thicker around the middle, less energetic and less able to get excited about running after what God has called him to. On the other hand, Rob wakes up every morning feeling strong and refreshed, ready to use the full measure of his life to passionately pursue the visions God has given him. What's the difference?

Maybe the pseudo-last names I've given them for purposes of this case study will be a clue: Alex Average allows the busyness of his days to direct the decisions he makes (or fails to make) about his health. Because he's so consumed with the pressures of ministry and home life, his physical wellbeing is on autopilot. He eats whatever he can grab between meetings; he never has time to get to the gym; and he's constantly stressed as he scrambles to get his message together for the upcoming weekend. (Go to HealthyRenegade.com to learn how to reduce stress by creating a preaching calendar.)

Over the last decade, this reactive health lifestyle has resulted in fifty pounds of unwanted weight, knee pain, high blood pressure and not a few bouts of depression. Alex never planned to get into a position where his health compromised his ability to fulfill the potential God put within him; the problem was, he never planned not to.

Rob Renegade, on the other hand, adopted a different mindset about his health many years ago. Looking around and seeing his fellow pastors struggling with weight, illness and stress, he decided to walk a different path. He began to understand that if he wanted to be fit to serve for as long as possible, he needed to start cooperating with his creator to keep his body ready for the task. So, Rob made some simple changes. He became more mindful about his eating habits; he became intentional about working more physical activity into his days; and he started proactively managing his rest and his stress levels. Now well into middle age, he has more energy and vigor to fulfill his calling than he did when he first graduated from seminary. His health has become a tool that works for him rather than an obstacle that keeps him from God's best.

Average vs. Renegade

In his classic spoken word recording *Lead the Field*, Earl Nightingale said, “If you want to be successful in life and you have no role models, look at what the majority of people are doing and do the opposite. The majority is always wrong.”⁶ When it comes to being a pastor, I couldn’t agree more. If you want to grow a healthy church and have a happy personal life, you cannot do the things an average pastor does (as I discuss in detail in *The Renegade Pastor: Abandoning Average in Your Life and Ministry* and in my ongoing Renegade Pastors coaching network. For more information, go to HealthyRenegade.com). The same truth applies to your health. If you want to live a life full of the physical vitality you need in order to be able to do all that God has called you to, then you must decide to go renegade with your health. In other words, commit to being a healthy renegade pastor.



Are you ready to live a life full of the physical vitality you need to be able to do all that God has called you to?
Time to go renegade.

A renegade is someone who has abandoned average in favor of excellence; someone who rises up against resistance, mediocrity and conformity. He’s not contrarian for contrarian’s sake. He’s not looking for a fight with other people, but with the devil himself. He’s not critical or cynical, but analytical in his thinking about what works and what doesn’t. A renegade pastor is obedient to the word of God and passionately abandoned for the kingdom. He has made a decision to step out of the status quo and get back to the business of reflecting God’s glory in every single aspect of his life.

On an individual level, the renegade pastor is someone who lives in a state of faithful pro-activity. The renegade’s church is healthy and growing, as is he. The renegade pastor is a hard worker, but he knows how to work efficiently and manage his time for maximum benefit, avoiding unnecessary stress and all of its negative effects. He

has quality relationships in his life. He is intentional about keeping his body—his most critical tool for ministry on this earth—healthy and strong. He knows how to identify godly health goals and pursue them. And, unlike the average pastor, the renegade has peace about his health, his work and his future. He experiences the fulfillment that comes with embracing the life God has called him to.

<div>The Renegade Pastor</div> <div>- Defining Characteristics -</div>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Abandons average• Challenges status quo thinking• Lives a pro-active lifestyle• Stands against resistance and mediocrity• Remains healthy and full of energy• Passionately abandoned to the will of God• Dedicates time to rest and growth• Experiences fulfillment

VERSUS
The Average Pastor
- Defining Characteristics -

- Frustrated
- Overweight
- Short on time
- Low on energy
- Dealing with chronic, lifestyle-related health issues
- Lives a reactive life
- Unable to say 'yes' to God's purposes
- Not experiencing fulfillment

The differences between an average pastor and a renegade pastor are strikingly clear. So the question then becomes: *Do you want to be average or do you want to be renegade?* And if you are ready to go renegade, how do you bridge the divide between these two dichotomies? What can you do to develop a lifestyle that look less like Alex's and more like Rob's? The answers lie in the pages ahead. (For more insight into what distinguishes a renegade pastor from an average pastor, including a list of the Seven Commitments of a Renegade Pastor, visit HealthyRenegade.com.)

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Abandoning Average: Get Unstuck

Though no one can go back and make a brand new start,
anyone can start from now and make a brand new ending.

CARL BARD

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith.

HEBREWS 12:1-2

Are you stuck in a rut? That's how Alex Average feels most of the time. Maybe you can relate to a typical day for him. See if this sounds familiar: You get up early and check your messages and emails, only to find that there is a problem waiting for you that has to be dealt with immediately. Once you put out that early morning fire, you take a quick shower and kiss your family goodbye while you are stuffing some breakfast into your mouth. There's no time to spare; you are already late for your first appointment. You fight traffic to get to work and settle in for a long, hard day.

After you leave the office (later than you intended to, of course), you swing by the hospital to encourage a sick church member.

Starving, you grab a snack from the hospital vending machine to tide you over. Traffic is a mess and you get home frazzled. You eat a quick, not-so-healthy dinner and spend a little time with your family. Once everyone is in bed, you regroup and put a few more hours of work in. When you finally get to bed yourself, you lay awake thinking about issues in the church and mentally preparing to-do lists for the next day. The following morning, the alarm goes off bright and early. You drag out of bed and do it all over again.



Your present does not have to equal your future.

Maybe you have grand visions in the corners of your mind about losing some weight and getting healthier. But as the days continue to roll by, your plans for eating better, resting more and exercising get pushed further and further down the priority list. Like Alex—like most average pastors—you feel stuck. You are practicing a lifestyle that has predictable health consequences, but you don't have the time or energy to break the cycle.

Here's some great news: your present does not have to equal your future. No matter your current state of being, you can get unstuck and move toward living the life of excellence God has called you to. Change is possible. Both of us (Nelson and Steve) used to be right where you are, but with some key decisions, intentional action and a lot of grace, we were both able to break out of unhealthy lifestyle ruts and start living as renegades in passionate pursuit of God's purposes. Here are our stories.

Steve's Story

My weight problem started as a child. I (Steve) was more than just a little husky. I was fat. I weighed one hundred pounds in the first grade, which was incredibly unusual in 1963. Unfortunately, I had started developing bad eating habits almost as early as I began eating. Most of the food I ate was either fried or loaded with sugar. The only thing that saved me from debilitating childhood obesity was my love of sports. I got involved with football at an early age and ended up being good at it. So, even though my diet left a lot to be desired, I was able to keep my weight somewhat in check thanks to my activity on the football field.

Football also gave me the chance to go to college. While several small schools wanted to recruit me, I ended up accepting a full scholarship to Liberty University. Stepping onto Liberty's campus as a freshman, I assumed that I would eventually become a coach or maybe a businessman. However, shortly into my first year, I felt a clear call from God to go into full-time church ministry. While I loved playing college ball, suddenly I knew that nothing other than pastoring would bring me contentment and joy long-term.

My life at Liberty became consumed with football training, weekend games and doing all I could to prepare to be a pastor. I discussed my call with my girlfriend, Debbie, who later became my wife. We both agreed that we were meant to go into ministry together. We were young, ambitious, energetic and ready to live out our newfound passion.

After graduation, I made a terrible decision—one that would have negative effects on my health, my calling, my ministry, and my personal life. I decided that I was finished with exercise. After over a decade of football drills, cardio conditioning, and weight training, I was tired of the exertion. And I figured that, since my football days were behind me, I didn't have any reason to work out anymore. My

new passion, my all-consuming drive, was ministry. I wanted to start a church and I threw myself into the process full-force.

The good news is that the new church began to grow. The bad news is that I began to grow right along with it. Even though I stopped exercising like a college football player, I never stopped eating like one. So I kept growing and growing and growing—until I finally topped out a little over 340 pounds.

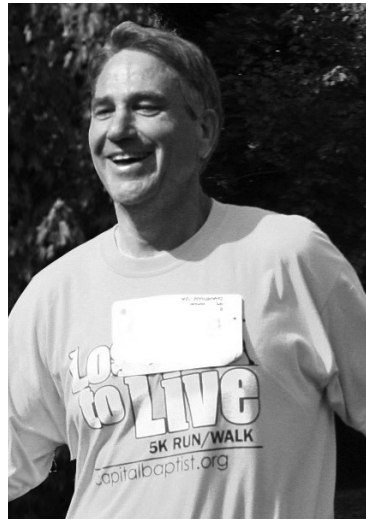
Letting my weight get out of control was one of the easiest things I've ever done. People in my church brought me food all the time. If I mentioned that I liked something specific (like Hershey's Milk Chocolate Bars), I would be showered with that very thing. My busy, sporadic schedule led to a lot of fast-food meals. Not to mention, I spent most of my days sitting down. I was either at my desk, in the car, or in meetings. Add in an ongoing addiction to ice cream, which I had to have every night to ease the stress I felt, and I was whipping up a recipe for disaster.

In Galatians 6:7, Paul wrote that if you sow to your flesh, you will reap corruption. That is exactly what I was doing. I was sowing to my flesh by overeating and under-exercising. In the process, I was corrupting the body God had given me. I ended up with three major diseases: high blood pressure (aka the silent killer), high cholesterol, and diabetes. Before I realized it, I was facing a future of medications, doctor's appointments and possibly an early death.

My ministry was growing and prospering. I had a beautiful family who loved me. And I was walking around afraid I would drop dead at any moment, leaving both in distress. The worst part is that, deep down, I knew I was responsible for my condition. I felt humiliated, desperate and alone. I wanted nothing more than to change the reflection in the mirror back to that healthy, vibrant man I used to be.

Today, with intentionality and God's help, I have lost 130 pounds, and have completely reversed my high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes. I am disease free! Plus, out of this experience, God has opened the door for me to create a wonderful ministry called *Losing to Live*. In fact, it was through *Losing to Live* that Nelson and I grew closer, as he was struggling with some of the same challenges.

Before & After



Nelson's Story

A few years ago, I ranked among the millions of people in America who desperately need to embrace a healthier lifestyle. As a church leader, I had spent my entire career building God's kingdom, but in the meantime I had let his temple—my body—fall into disrepair. My physical health just wasn't of much concern to me, even though I had read Paul's words in 1 Corinthians many times:

Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body.

—1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Like most people, I connected these verses with sexual sin and sexual sin only—but they have a much wider implication. I slowly began awakening to the reality that my body is the living, breathing, and walking-around temple of God's spirit. So is yours. And that reality has implications for how we care for ourselves. We are the dwelling place of the Alpha and Omega. Our skin, bones and fleshy guts are home to the Most High. That's a humbling thought, isn't it?

For most of my adult life, I had been able to keep my weight around 185 pounds. Unfortunately, after starting The Journey Church in New York City, that number began to tick up into new territory. I began putting on a few extra pounds every year. Before long, I hit 275. When I saw that number on the scale, I was shocked. I knew I was heavier than usual, but I had no idea I'd let my weight get so out of control.

Even still, the real breaking point didn't come for me until I became a father. After my son was born, I couldn't ignore what I was doing to my body any longer. I remember saying to myself, "I'm not going to be able to chase him around, because I'm so out of shape."

That led me to begin considering everything else my weight and its consequences would keep me from doing in the future, if I didn't make a change. So, I made a decision to take control of my health and then put a definitive plan of action behind that decision.

I started by making simple modifications to my eating habits. Then, I committed to changing myself from being someone who didn't even like to walk very far to becoming someone who could be considered a habitual runner. If you had told me a few years ago that I would start running several times per week and actually enjoy it, I would have called you crazy. But I had left myself little choice. I had to get active. A friend recommended a running program called *Couch to 5K*. As the title implies, the program takes a person who is used to almost no physical activity at all and guides him or her through an incremental process that results in being able to run for thirty minutes without stopping.

The first day I laced up my sneakers and cued up my iPod to give the program a try, I had a hard time running for sixty seconds straight. I remember stumbling back into my New York City apartment—after more walking than running—and saying to my wife, Kelley, “I don't know if I can do this. Maybe it's not for me.” But after a day's rest, I tried it again. And then again. And then one more time. And slowly but surely, my endurance began to build. After about eight weeks, I was running for the full thirty minutes. Now, running has become an important part of my life. I miss it when I don't get it in. I'm not saying that I'm always eager to jump into my running shoes. Sometimes I still have to force myself out the door. But even on those days, I always finish my run with a great sense of satisfaction that I am doing my part to keep this body that God gave me in prime working condition.

As they say, the truth will set you free. Thanks to a new perspective on God's plan for my body, my entire mindset toward physical health has shifted. If God has entrusted me with this earthly

vessel—not to mention all of the work and plans he has for me while living in it—then where do I get off trashing it by eating what I want and sitting around letting it atrophy? Where do you? How can we stomach treating ourselves so poorly that we can't fully engage in God's purposes for us?



God wants us to live full, active lives accomplishing the things he put us here to do. We have a responsibility in cooperating with him to make that happen.

Of course, there are a lot of excuses that have become our defense to these types of questions: we have a family history of hearty eaters and big bellies (I loved using that one); we're just big-boned; we don't have time to exercise; and on and on we build our case. All of these excuses—and the hundreds of others we create in a desperate attempt to stay within our carefully constructed comfort zone—keep us from embracing the truth that God wants us to live full, active lives accomplishing the things he put us here to do. We have a responsibility in cooperating with him to make that happen. Life is too short and too precious, and God has invested way too much in us, for us to sit around squandering our potential and letting little things like poor food choices and lack of exercise hold us back from all that he has in store.

Today, I have lost over eighty pounds and completely changed my long-term health trajectory. If I can get the upper hand on my weight and health issues, so can you. You have everything you need to get from where you are to where you want to be. Decide to honor God with your entire being, including the body he has given you. Speaking from the other side of the (ongoing) journey, I can tell you that taking the necessary action to get your physical health under control is more than worth the effort. There's no better gift you can give yourself or those who love you.

Before & After



Deciding to Go Renegade

Like both Steve and I, you have to come to a point in your life where you can admit that you are sick and tired of being sick and tired. We were fed up with how we felt, just like you are. We wanted something different for our lives and for our futures, and we want that for you as well. Consider this verse from Isaiah:

Do not remember the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing. Now it shall spring forth, shall you not know it? I will even make a road in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

—Isaiah 43:18-19

God says that he will do *a new thing*. Don't dwell on your past. So, you have made some bad health choices. We all have at some point in our lives. God says to forget those things and look ahead to the future.

You may be thinking, "Okay, I went to seminary. These verses don't have anything to do with physical health." Are you sure? God wants to do a new thing in every single one of us *in* and *through* Jesus Christ. He is an *unstuck* kind of God. During his ministry on earth, Jesus constantly met people where they were, forgave them, helped them break free from their current circumstances, and showed them a new way to live. He wants to do the same for you, in every way—even, and maybe especially, in your physical health. Are you ready?

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Healthy Renegade Pastor Profile

Ben Emmons

South County Church, Lorton, VA

I am thirty-seven years old and have had the honor of serving God in full-time ministry for thirteen years. I have always struggled with eating a lot of unhealthy food. For me, being a pastor did not encourage an inactive and unhealthy lifestyle; it simply supported the one I already had. I was unhealthy and overweight for the first six years of my ministry. It was a sad day when I had to face the fact that I had let myself get to the point of weighing 321 pounds.

In 2007, the Holy Spirit convicted me for not practicing what I was preaching. I came to realize that I lacked self-control and discipline. I believe the Lord was telling me that I would die at a young age, leaving my wife without a husband and my children without a father, if I didn't change things in my life. This was a wake up call for me. I immediately began living according to my new conviction that I needed to honor God by caring for my physical body. Over the next year, I lost 131 pounds, and for the first time I experienced the abundant life that Jesus described in John 10:10.

This transformation was not easy. I was addicted to food. I have always had a huge sweet tooth, so for me avoiding unhealthy foods has always been difficult. I was and still am tempted to be a stress eater. When things got out of control in my life or I was overly stressed, I misled myself into believing that food was the answer to my problems and anxiety. It was not until I went through this lifestyle change that I learned to fully trust God and stop looking to the pantry to solve my problems.

Being a pastor in full-time ministry can certainly make living healthy and making good food choices more difficult. As pastors, I believe we have bought into the cultural philosophy that accepts, and even seems to encourage, overweight spiritual leaders. There is always food at our church activities, gatherings, and small groups,

and my church has a great spread of food (healthy and unhealthy) on Sunday mornings at our main church services. It seems like church life centers around eating. Let's be honest, something special happens when you eat together.

However, at our church we have begun to break the cycle of unhealthy eating. Instead of doing away with eating altogether or going 100% donut-less, we make sure we have healthy options available. Some examples of these healthy options are fresh fruit, oatmeal, vegetables, and hard-boiled eggs. Our church has an amazing hospitality team and it seems like they are always going out of their way to include as many healthy options as possible for our people.

I am thrilled to tell you that all of my hard work and dedication to changing my life and health has paid off tremendously. I have gone from not being able to run a quarter of a mile in 2007 to running seven marathons, countless half marathons and participating in two half ironmen competitions. I am no Ironman world champion or Olympic gold medalist runner, but I am happy to report that I am in the best shape of my life. As of the date of this writing, I am celebrating my 2000th consecutive day of running at a least a mile. That's a huge change for me!

I believe that getting people moving is so important. We started a group at our church called the South County Movers, which currently has about forty people in it who gather each Saturday to walk, run, or crawl depending on their physical abilities. Typically, we exercise together for about an hour every week. The best part is that we encourage accountability for improved physical health.

I am constantly reminding my church that honoring God by caring for their physical health is critical and biblical. I talk with my people about how their food choices are important to God and to his design for their futures, and about the fact that they need to care for His dwelling place and build their strength to serve him with greater efficiency. In reality, everything we do can be brought back to the

idea that God cares about our health holistically. The designer cares about the design.

Eating healthy and exercising is just the way I do life now. Every day, my goal is to honor God with my nutrition and through physical exercise. I changed my life and you can too! God wants you to be healthy, and I have a feeling that you want to be healthy as well. What's stopping you?

Ben's Advice: Balance, boundaries and healthy habits are critical for future success. It is okay to say no!

Before & After

