

Diet Help from On High?

Faith-based weight-loss programs are getting results. Could one work for you?

By Rona Cherry



Catherine Rector couldn't remember the last time she liked the way she looked. Overweight for most of her life, the 5-foot-4 Nashville accountant had tried -- and failed at -- dozens of weight-loss programs. By 2001, at 32, she weighed 280 pounds, wore a size 32, and found it more and more difficult to walk short distances. Increasingly worried about her health and about finding clothes that would fit, Rector, a regular churchgoer who had attended Christian schools, decided to try the Weigh Down Workshop, a Bible-based weight-loss program that offered a class at a local church. In three months she shed 53 pounds -- without counting calories or carbs or exercising.

Now 39, she has lost 150 pounds, wears a size 6 and is confident she'll never backslide into obesity again. "I replaced my wanting food with filling myself up with my relationship with God," she says.

Millions of overweight individuals have taken the same path. The movement, overwhelmingly Christian, is a phenomenon that takes a spiritual approach to a growing health crisis. With obesity at epidemic levels -- more than 60 million Americans and climbing -- and spirituality huge in the lives of many, religious leaders are increasingly delivering a message to the faithful: God wants you to lose weight.

If you've ever wondered "What Would Jesus Eat?" you need only turn to the best seller by that name, from Florida physician and evangelical Don Colbert. (Answer: Plenty of grains, vegetables, fish.) If that doesn't work for you, try *The Hallelujah Diet, Body by*

God, The Maker's Diet or one of dozens of others that have made best-seller lists in recent years. Besides books, there are DVDs, newsletters, cookbooks, and TV shows. "Most Americans are overweight and many go to church and that's where they look for answers," says Jonathan Merkh, senior vice president of Thomas Nelson Publishers, a leading publisher of religious books, in Nashville. "We move hundreds of thousands of books every year through churches and television ministries."

The Birth of a Movement

Fifty years ago, the *Christian Century* reports, Presbyterian minister Charlie Shedd published *Pray Your Weight Away*. Blending positive thinking with a sharp rebuke of fat (which he condemned as a sign of sin), the book included an exercise routine that, among other things, instructed readers to perform karate kicks while reciting the third chapter of Proverbs. It became a best seller. Others followed.

Meanwhile, in 1972, about 10 years after the founding of Overeaters Anonymous and Weight Watchers, Carol Showalter, a Presbyterian pastor's wife, founded the first Christian counterpart. Called 3D: Diet, Discipline & Discipleship, it has attracted more than a million people in 20 countries. More programs followed, including the Texas-based First Place (founded in 1981), which combines a rigid food plan (called a "live-it" rather than a "diet") with Bible study and prayer.

The Weigh Down Workshop, the program Catherine Rector attended, was created in 1986 by Gwen Shamblin, a fundamentalist Christian dietitian, who believes overweight people have mistaken a spiritual emptiness for a hunger for food. Though a dietitian, Shamblin doesn't believe in counting calories or fat grams ("it makes you focus on food and accelerates your love of food"). Instead, she urges people to tune in to physiological cues and eat when a growling stomach indicates true hunger -- then simply stop eating when they are full. If they aren't sure that the longing for food is true hunger, she says to wait a little longer and in the meantime fill themselves with scripture and prayer.

Nutritionists have criticized Shamblin's Franklin, Tennessee-based "eat what you want, stop when you're full" program. "Obesity is a serious disease," says Felicia Stoler, MS, RD, a New Jersey sports nutritionist and exercise physiologist. "If you have a serious weight problem you should be working with someone with specialized nutritional training to make sure you are getting the right foods or nutrients." Shamblin, who is also an RD, says that anyone considering the program should first check with his or her doctor. The method worked for Rector: "If I feel like I might have the munchies between meals, I pick up my Bible and start reading it or simply pray."

Does Faith Work?

To date there have been no rigorous scientific evaluations of the various programs, so their effectiveness and healthfulness are difficult to quantify. But that doesn't mean they don't work for some people. "Motivation can be short-lived," says Marc David, a Boulder, Colorado, nutritional psychologist and author of *The Slow Down Diet: Eating for Pleasure, Energy, and Weight Loss*. "When faith comes into the equation, and you're

inspired to be on a diet, inspiration can carry you long past the boundaries of motivation."

One reason faith-based dieting has become so popular may be because churches provide a communal environment where members can be accountable to themselves and the group. Jackie Egan, a 39-year-old North Branch, Minnesota, mother of two, says she not only was overweight and wearing size-20 pants but also suffering from severe postpartum depression when she decided to try the Body by God program at a local church last January. "I had tried all the other diet plans in the past and didn't expect much," she admits, adding that she wasn't a Bible believer at the time. The group met weekly for seven weeks and Egan says she felt reborn. "I not only went down six dress sizes, but I experienced a lot of emotional healing, and now I regularly read scripture," she says. "The program rocked my world. I guess you could say it saved my soul."