

From Winning the Food Fight
By Steve Willis with Ken Walker
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Round 1

The Call

Mondays get a bad rap. People typically grumble about the first day of the workweek, reflecting their yearning for more time to kick back, relax and forget the world's cares. The naysayers overlook the fact that Mondays offer all kinds of possibilities. You can resume productive activity, renew relationships in the marketplace, and move forward in meaningful occupations or other pursuits. For Huntington, West Virginia, a divinely inspired telephone call one Monday in the summer of 2009 changed the course of our history. That call got us up off the mat and into the fight.

Although I am involved in this story, I am just a bit player in a drama that reaches from coast to coast, involving every town, city, county and state in America—a nation that is slowly committing suicide. We are not killing ourselves with drugs, alcohol or guns, although each of those plays a sad role in our social deterioration. The elephant in the room—the always-present beast that most everyone knows is there but no one wants to openly acknowledge—is fat. Whether in the form of butter dripping from yeast rolls, juice oozing from a slab of prime rib, double-cheese pizzas, or sugary sweet cakes piled high with icing and topped off with softball-sized dollops of ice cream, too much fat is a killer. Overindulging in calorie-rich, processed foods inflicts worse damage than most terrorists can conceive. America is in a food fight, and right now we are losing. Until we started to change our ways, Huntington was faring as poorly as anyone in this battle.

The toll I witnessed in our church shook me to the core. Simply persuading church leaders to let me address the problem in the summer of 2008 took considerable discussion, explanation and prayer. If there's one thing Americans do not appreciate, it is someone pointing out the damage caused by gluttonous habits. Nearly a year after we formed an initiative to help those who were severely overweight, we realized we needed help. Some folks were struggling to shed more than a few pounds. Ironically, many had hit the exercise trail like Olympic athletes. However, they hadn't adjusted their eating routines, and it was showing.

After our first "Big Losers" groups (we originally called them "Biggest Loser" groups, but changed the name because of trademark concerns) ended in late spring of 2009, I didn't know what to say or how to offer further help. I discussed my frustrations with my wife, Dee, who pointed out that she wasn't a nutrition expert either. Finally, one Sunday I prayed, "Lord, we need help. We need somebody to come and teach us nutrition. It's going to cost a lot, and we

don't have the money to pay someone for that. So we're looking to You."

The next day, my assistant buzzed my office: "Pastor Willis, there's a man named Jason Skweres on line two. He says he's with ABC Television."

Wonder what he wants? I thought. After Jason introduced himself and explained he was with GCM Productions, a company based in Los Angeles, he asked if I knew Jamie Oliver. I hesitated. The name was unfamiliar to me.

"Have you ever heard of *The Naked Chef*?" That rang a bell. "I'm pretty sure I've heard of that show," I replied. "My wife watches the Cooking Channel. I imagine he's been on there."

"We heard about what you're doing there," Jason said, referring to media coverage of our weight-loss effort. The frequency of the stories about our church's health kick had increased exponentially after the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) issued a report pinpointing our area as the unhealthiest in the nation. One local story even wound up on network television. Apparently, we were one of the first groups or organizations in our area to attempt to address the problem.

"We work for Jamie," Jason continued, explaining that his boss was the executive producer. "He read about the CDC report that showed your area was the worst in the United States for obesity problems. He wants to come to Huntington and teach people about nutrition. He hopes to focus on helping cooks in the school lunch program prepare healthier meals and film a mini-series about it. It would be something like the one he did in 2005 about the junk food served in Britain's school lunch program. We could use a local contact to introduce us to people around town, and we hope you'll get some benefits from learning about healthy cooking."

"When are you coming?" I asked. "In two days." Talk about a quick answer to prayer!

Jamie didn't come to film the bulk of his first *Food Revolution* mini-series for six more weeks, but in the meantime the crew had plenty of groundwork to do. They needed to explain their concept to school officials, political and community leaders, and news media. After meeting with Jason and several other producers, I felt confident that they were here to help—not to poke fun or expand the stereotypical image of Appalachians as poor, backward hillbillies. Believe me, that has been done too many times. Having grown up about 60 miles east of Huntington, I've heard more jokes and misconceptions than I care to remember. I can tell when someone wants to take potshots at us. These guys didn't.

We're Number One!

The CDC report that lured Jamie Oliver to Huntington still makes me shudder. Local purists protested that the city itself wasn't labeled the nation's fattest; it was really a five-county area spread over three states. True, but everyone here knows that residents of West Virginia, Ohio and Kentucky living along the Ohio River freely interact, work and travel among the three states. With Huntington at the center of this five-county area, that distinction was barely worth noting. The fact was that our city and its nearest neighbors were suffering from the nation's highest rates of obesity and numerous resulting illnesses. My personal experience bore out those statistics. People were dying—and many were members of my church.

Lots of places boast about being first in athletics, academics, job creation, housing sales or retail profits. Reign at the top of one of those lists and a sense of pride fills the air. Because success

breeds success, being first in one category often leads to greatness in another. Unfortunately, the same can be said of negative environments. Our area was leading the nation in the types of statistics where you *don't* want to be first. When it comes to poor health, the old “We’re #1!” chant doesn’t exactly rev up the fan base.

According to the CDC, we were *first* in the nation in the percentage of adults who did not exercise (31 percent), *first* in the prevalence of heart disease (22 percent), and *first* in the percentage of people who had diabetes (13 percent). Nearly half of those over age 65 did not have any of their natural teeth left (first place in that category too)! We were *first* (as in *worst*) in high blood pressure, circulation problems, kidney disease, vision problems and sleeping disorders. Did I mention that we were *first* in rates of depression? While other cities may have come close to our percentages in some categories, no one else touched the whopping 46 percent of adults who were obese.

Think about that. Nearly one of every two adults in our area was obese—not just overweight, but obese. An “obese” person is someone with a body mass index (BMI) of at least 30. The chart below demonstrates how to calculate BMI using height and weight, with a healthy BMI being less than 25. That means a man who is 5 feet, 10 inches tall needs to weigh 173 pounds or less to meet this standard. Anyone of that height who weighs 209 or above fits the definition of obesity. Right now, many are gasping, “You’ve got to be kidding!” That is because we are so used to overweight people that many folks consider healthy people to be too skinny—possibly even wondering if they suffer from a strange disease or eating disorder.

By and large (pun intended), America as a whole is not far behind the Huntington area in most categories. We may be the worst, but we are encamped within the most obese region (the Southeast) in the most obese nation in the world. In 2010, an expert panel conducting research for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) asserted that obesity posed the single greatest threat to public health in this century. Former Surgeon General Richard Carmona once stated it more strongly: “Obesity is the terror within,” he said during a lecture at the University of South Carolina. “Unless we do something about it, the magnitude of the dilemma will dwarf 9-11 or any other terrorist attempt.”

In a separate interview, Dr. Carmona stated, “Obesity is absolutely at the core of the chronic disease crisis. When we look at the relationship of obesity to other diseases that plague society today (such as asthma, cancer, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes) obesity increases the incidence of each of them, and can even accelerate some of them. Losing weight is not about trying to emulate models in fashion magazines, it’s about being healthy. If we could only address one major public health issue as a nation, I would focus on the obesity crisis. Weight loss could have the greatest impact in decreasing the chronic disease burden in America.”

Dr. Carmona may sound like an alarmist, but ring the bell he should. The CDC predicts that one out of three children born in America in the year 2000 will develop Type II diabetes. We’re not talking about the common cold; one in three Americans will be in the high-risk category for heart attacks, strokes, blindness, nerve damage and amputations. In addition, the American Cancer Society warns that up to 60 percent of cancers are related to lifestyle choices, such as how well we eat and whether or not we get adequate exercise. The evidence keeps piling up. Whether it is cancer of the breast, colon, uterus, esophagus or kidney, obesity increases our likelihood of dying from these diseases.

Ironically, even though we all know that overeating is bad for us and too much weight may kill us, each year we spend increasing amounts of money eating out. This habit even spills

over to our pets. One in four American dogs and cats is now obese. I sometimes wonder when animal rights activists will start picketing fast-food restaurants and all-you-can-eat buffets to call more attention to this sad state of helpless pets (after all, they don't feed themselves). Meanwhile, children in Africa are dying for lack of food and other necessary resources. Imagine trying to explain that one on judgment day!⁷

Dr. David Kessler served as Commissioner of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration under Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton. A pediatrician, Dr. Kessler has also served as the dean of the medical schools at Yale University and the University of California, San Francisco. He is an alumnus of Amherst College, the University of Chicago Law School, and Harvard Medical School. Given his résumé, perhaps we should listen to what he has to say about our nation's love affair with food: "When we talk about the complexity of American foods, we aren't referring to the kind of complexity traditionally associated with fine cuisine or regional or ethnic cooking. The American concept of complexity is built on layering and loading [with sugars, fats and salt], rather than an intricate and subtle use of quality ingredients." In *The End of Overeating*, Kessler suggests that major changes need to take place in American food systems—or else our nation is heading for a health care disaster. I have seen what disaster looks like in Huntington—and as I mentioned earlier, though we might be the worst in the country, most states are statistically just a few years behind.

We are in quite a conundrum. While we overeat, the bulk of the foods we consume do not give us the nutrients we need. We have tons of choices at our fingertips, but instead of improving our health, our food is destroying us. What *are* we going to do? What *can* we do? In the face of such a monumental problem, any one individual's attempt to address it may seem futile. I used to feel the same way. When I raised the issue in our church, I never dreamed that one day my sermon would be broadcast nationwide. Even as I prepared the outline, I asked myself, *What can one person do in the face of such a staggering situation?* At that moment, I had to gather my resolve and determine to do what I could and leave the rest in God's hands.

After all, if history has taught us anything, it is this: If a few passionate individuals invest their faith and energy in a cause greater than self, then the One who is greater than any human being can use those individuals to bring about real change—a revolution. History is full of revolutions that have changed the destinies of peoples and nations. I saw no reason why the same could not happen here and now. So as I led our church to participate in *Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution*, I appreciated the deep spiritual significance of the program's title.

Overcoming Suspicion

Given our negative health statistics, you might expect that someone who wanted to help us turn things around would be welcomed cordially. Not so. Suspicion, misgivings and sometimes outright hostility greeted Jamie's producers as they circulated around the Tri-state area. Many people were reluctant to accept the fact that we were in such bad condition. The last thing they wanted was more negative attention brought to our doorstep.

At first, no political leaders would endorse such a show, fearing it might portray the area in a bad light. Few others were willing to dip their toes in the water. Overall, I'd characterize the attitude as: *If there's a problem here, we can fix it ourselves.* I managed to convince a few community leaders that the producers were decent folks and didn't want to harm us, but it took awhile for many residents to warm up to the idea.

The disc jockey with the area's most popular radio station spent the first few episodes carping at Jamie, symbolizing those who greeted the outsiders with clenched fists. The negative reactions, blunt disbelief, and "Who are you to come in here and tell us anything?" attitude weren't acts for the cameras. Neither was the critical reception Jamie received at the elementary school cafeteria featured in the early episodes. (I couldn't get too upset with the skeptics. Changing the way we eat costs money, arouses controversy and stirs the pot, so to speak. Some resistance was probably inevitable—and even though such friction can be quite uncomfortable, it often sparks progress.)

Still, if you think that dealing with this kind of reception to a well-intentioned effort is easy, it is only because you haven't faced such opposition. More than once, Jamie asked if he could take a break to blow off steam or confide in me about the pressures he was facing. Not only did he have to wade through emotionally laden opposition, but also his series would air before a national audience. Without some breakthroughs, the effort could collapse. Besides there being millions of dollars on the line and network executives expecting a first-class production, Jamie had staked his reputation on this show. Tackling the project also kept him away from his wife and three children (they have since had a fourth) for several weeks. As a father of three who has spent considerable time away from home on mission trips and ministry travel, I understood his angst.

Jamie Oliver is essentially the same person in real life as he is on TV, although he turns up the personality when the cameras roll. That isn't phony; I do the same thing when I step into the pulpit. When you're passionate about something, you get excited when you have an opportunity to tell others about it. Besides, if I don't communicate passion for the topic on which I'm preaching, few listeners are going to care what I say. It's the same way for Jamie. If he isn't witty, charming, interesting and vivacious when filming material, viewers will reach for the remote control a few minutes into his program. Fortunately, despite early obstacles, that didn't happen with our show in Huntington. The series drew anywhere from 3.91 million to 7.51 million viewers during its six-week run in the spring of 2010, peaking during the second round of the NCAA basketball tournament. The program impressed the industry too, capturing that year's Emmy Award for "Outstanding Reality TV Program."

Jamie featured a part of my obesity sermon (which I delivered again for the cameras) in the first episode, turning me into a celebrity of sorts. I learned that the speed with which this happens can turn your head and change your world. ABC flew me to New York the week of the debut for a whirlwind publicity tour. For two days I got "the treatment." They provided me with a limousine, a driver, and a schedule jampacked with more than 20 appearances, including *Larry King Live*, *The 700 Club* and *Good Morning America*. Backstage at *The Late Show with David Letterman*, I saw people fawning over stars like Justin Bieber and Ben Stiller—that kind of attention can change anyone's outlook. Frankly, it was flattering. When I returned home, I had 2,000 emails waiting for me. In the weeks that followed, hundreds of people from around the world called to say, "What are you doing? We've got the same problem here."

This attention tempted me to cross the line between modesty and self-promotion, making me think for a moment that I was *someone special*. Fortunately, I have a loving wife who was kind enough to caution me against that. Noticing my head had grown one size too large, one night Dee said, "Remember, you're still Steve Willis, pastor of a small-town church." That brought me back to earth and still reminds me of my mission. I don't want to be a celebrity or promote Jamie Oliver—even though he is a talented, creative individual. My purpose is to spread the same passion that drives this renowned British chef: encouraging people to eat healthier so that we can all reap the benefits.

Christians love to talk about stewardship. Far too often, though, the discussion is restricted to money—usually to the giving of a tithe (a tenth of our income) to God’s work. However, biblical stewardship encompasses much more, such as our time, talents and health. We are to treat our bodies with respect. We should eat to live, not live to eat. God gave us food to sustain life. Cramming ourselves with an overabundance of fatty meats, pizza, snacks and sugar-laden treats is not good stewardship. It is a prescription for disaster—especially when we combine that kind of eating with a lack of exercise, inadequate sleep and stress.

A Universal Picture

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Cor. 6:19-20). The church’s record in following these words is dismal. Far too many of us remain chained to the bondage of obesity, gorging ourselves on delicious goodies and exercising little restraint or wise *physical* stewardship.

This behavior is every bit as careless as wasting our money, and in fact is often the cause of unnecessary health care expenditures. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services expect U.S. health spending to increase at an average annual rate of 5.8 percent between 2010 and 2020. That means that in 2020, health spending will reach \$4.6 trillion and consume nearly one of every five dollars spent. Such staggering figures ought to alarm us. Even worse, the people we should expect to lead the way are sometimes the worst offenders. Consider a report released in May 2010 as part of a seven-year, \$12 million study at Duke University. Two researchers found that the obesity rate among United Methodist clergy ages 35 to 64 in North Carolina was close to 40 percent—10 percent higher than other residents—and that middle-aged clergy (both male and female) were diagnosed with diabetes, arthritis, high blood pressure and asthma at significantly higher rates than the rest of the population. Diabetes and other chronic ailments often translate into reduced life spans.

“The truth is we’ve got an epidemic in the United States,” says Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell, an assistant research professor at the Center for Health Policy, Duke Global Health Initiative. “We didn’t find, at this point, significantly higher rates of heart attacks. But unless these obesity rates are brought down, that is inevitable.”

Extrapolate from this snapshot of North Carolina’s Methodist pastors and you have a glimpse of all denominations nationwide. The view from the pew isn’t much better. A 2010 Northwestern University study demonstrated that religious people are slightly more likely than the non-religious to be obese. However, whether it is moms or dads, brothers or sisters, Jews or Christians, rich or poor, nearly all American people groups are hooked on fast food, junk food and couch potato habits that are leaving us overweight, stressed out and dying too young.

Yet what is many pastors’ reaction to this scenario? A seemingly insignificant story illustrates the problem. In the summer of 2010, I attended a pastors’ luncheon but had to leave before it ended. One of our associate pastors remained and later related a joke another pastor had told after the meal. It concerned a minister who had died at the age of 60 from problems related to obesity. Twenty years later, two friends who had lived healthy lives before dying in their 80s showed up at the pearly gates. Greeting them with a wave of the hand, the minister smiled and

said, “Good to see you. But I’ve been enjoying life up here for 20 years. What took you so long?”

The story prompted hearty laughter from most of the pastors there, but our associate pastor remarked, “It may have been good for him, but it wasn’t so great for his family.”

I know what he meant. My father’s father died at the age of 64, primarily because he smoked two packs of cigarettes a day. I never enjoyed an adult conversation with him, because lung cancer took him away far too early. I sorely missed his presence at my high school and college graduations, as well as on my wedding day. I never had the benefit of his counsel during life’s major transitions. I never knew the joy of seeing my grandfather at family gatherings and special occasions as I matured. Please hear the soft tone of my voice right now. You may think you’re nobody special, and that nobody appreciates you. That is wrong and a self-centered way of looking at life. Many other people depend on you, admire you, and look to you for guidance, reassurance and love, even if they fail to express it.

Please know that overeating hurts more than our adults. Look at what it does to our children. According to a 2010 CDC report, childhood obesity is one of the nation’s most prevalent concerns. The number of obese adolescents in the United States has increased by more than 300 percent since 1990. One study found that nearly 80 percent of children who were overweight between ages 10 and 15 were still obese at 25. The CDC report pointed out that obese children and adolescents are targets of early and systematic social discrimination. The psychological stress resulting from this discrimination can cause low self-esteem and hinder academic and social functioning.

Eating isn’t wrong. It’s just that eating too much and choosing the wrong things is an abuse of God’s good gifts. What I have discovered in leading our church to make changes in this area is that victory comes in small, almost imperceptible steps. Fried chicken still shows up at our potluck dinners, as do mashed potatoes and yeast rolls. But so do healthy salads, low-fat entrees and sugar-free desserts. Winning the food fight is a long journey that lasts for years—but it starts with a single step.

Setting an Example

Thanks primarily to Jamie Oliver’s getting on the phone and calling a number of his friends, during the first phase of filming *Food Revolution* our church raised more than \$100,000 needed to finish our family life center. We had already invested \$1.3 million in the building, and we were committed to avoiding debt as we completed it. That final influx of funds enabled us to offer walking and exercise classes during the winter of 2010—one of the coldest, most bitter seasons I can remember. Without the center, we likely would have seen more backsliding in our fight for healthier living.

Although many churches aren’t large enough to afford such facilities, they can still offer exercise classes or encourage members to seek them out. No matter what size the church, it can ask members to consider bringing healthier alternatives to its potlucks. Offering members wise guidance, scripturally based teaching, and the opportunity to alter their health habits is the best step pastors and church leaders can take. It generally isn’t helpful to lecture members, browbeat them or speak on the topic too often. An overbearing emphasis can drive people away.

When it comes to promoting healthy choices, the most important thing every pastor can do is set a good example. That will take courage; as Proeschold-Bell noted in the Duke study, refusing to sample parishioners’ pies, cakes or cookies runs the risk of offending them and

provoking worse problems. I hope I don't come off as a frowning, judgmental, humorless prig. I still enjoy a good joke, cutting up with friends, watching football, relaxing with a good book, and taking family outings. I don't see foregoing eating meat. Occasionally, I will even eat a piece of fried chicken. However, there is a huge difference between occasionally enjoying a slice of pepperoni pizza and daily heaping unhealthy, calorie-laden choices onto our plates.

As we, as church and community leaders, attempt to inspire others, we must remember that many people will take two steps forward and one step back. Others will give up, either because they get too discouraged or because they are not willing to make tough choices. Remember, too, that doubters will seize on any failure as a reason to poke holes in our efforts or proclaim, "I knew it wouldn't work." Such comments usually reflect the speaker's failure or deep-rooted desire to maintain their chicken-wings-and-cheeseburgers status quo.

Although we still have plenty of parishioners who struggle with their weight, and some who joke that Jamie's show was a waste of time, today we also have people who once were anywhere from 40 to 80 pounds overweight and are now running distance races—and winning them. Five months after the mini-series aired, nearly 70 members competed in a 5K to raise funds for a local food pantry. Collectively we've lost more than a (literal) ton of weight. I am especially proud of Elizabeth Bailey. The wife of an Army reservist, she has lost more than 75 pounds. With faith, discipline and determination, she turned her situation and life around. Today she leads others to do the same.

We are one modest-sized church in a town of 3,500 just west of Huntington. Many people would label us ordinary—and that should encourage everyone who reads these words. People who think they need some kind of superhuman strength before they move forward aren't likely to change. Those who don't think their extra weight is that big a deal won't change much either. But those who have recognized the need and committed themselves to doing something about it have found success by following common-sense steps that come day by day. In the rounds that follow, I will outline a plan for change and suggest ways you can address the problems that face our nation. Whether or not you need to lose weight, this book will help you start on a healthier path that will bring healing to our land. Trust me—it's a whole lot deeper than a plate of food.

Remember that this book is training you for a fight. It will be a struggle. Just like in a 12-round heavyweight contest, each round will push you to reach new heights. Twelve rounds. That is what champions do. Don't throw in the towel and quit reading halfway through. Don't ever say, "I can't do this." Keep fighting.

As we move to Round 2, I am going to explain how I was called into the ring through a personal wake-up call that eventually revolutionized my thinking about food. God had to shake me up and make me realize that people dying before their time is not His perfect will. It all began with a poke in the belly.