

# Black churches team with hospitals to push better diets

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CLEVELAND (RNS)—For Deborah Taylor, keeping her body fit and eating well is a way of honoring God.

So, when Taylor, a financial assistant for [University Hospitals Ireland Cancer Center](#), heard about the hospital's Body & Soul program for black churches to help their congregations get healthier, she took action.

Soon, Taylor's congregation, Faith Temple Church of God, launched a healthy-eating initiative and began hosting weekly workout sessions.

"You have so many people in the church who are walking around with diabetes and high blood pressure. Many are obese," Taylor said.

Sylvia Benford works out with a group of women in the Faith Temple Church of God's aerobics class at the Fatima Family Center in Cleveland. (RNS PHOTO/Thomas Ondrey/The Plain Dealer)

Across the city, more than 60 black churches have started the program in an effort to combat African-Americans' higher risk of developing cancer.

The program, supported with \$200 grants to individual churches from the [American Cancer Society](#), is based on research findings that healthy eating and other wellness initiatives drive down the risk of cancer, according to Allison Payten, cancer program coordinator for Ireland Cancer Center's community outreach department.

Research funded by the [National Cancer Institute](#), which followed 15 churches nationwide, found more than a decade ago that church members significantly increased their fruit and vegetable consumption through congregation and pastoral support. A cornerstone of the national program is to encourage people to eat five to nine servings of fruits and vegetables a day.

High fruit and vegetable consumption decreases the risk for cancer and a host of other ailments such as high blood pressure, diabetes and stroke—all of which the African-American population is at higher risk of experiencing, according to the study.

In Cleveland, the program is changing lives. LaVita Hatten lost 70 pounds when her church, Freedom Christian Assembly, began a “Biggest Loser” contest. She still makes frequent stops at McDonald’s, but orders the grilled chicken sandwich and a salad instead of a hamburger and fries.

Pastor Milton Bradford at Good Hope Baptist Church lost 20 pounds—even though he admits he occasionally sneaks fried chicken for lunch.

And Sylvia Benford rarely misses her weekly aerobics class organized by Faith Temple Church of God. Now, she doesn’t get winded walking up a flight of stairs.

Their stories are just a sampling of changes happening across the city, Payten said. “Each church is unique.”

The program “empowers members to take charge of their health,” she said.

Good Hope Baptist Church began the Body & Soul program last July. Church members hosted a kickoff where they learned about exercise and how to prepare healthy foods.

Previously, church gatherings meant everyone bringing their specialties,

such as fried chicken, potato salad, greens, ham hocks, and macaroni and cheese.

“We always had salad, but most of our meals would be heavy,” said church member Bertha Fuqua.

Fuqua, who had attended one of the hospital’s Body & Soul training sessions and organized the church Body & Soul kickoff, enlisted folks to bring lower-fat alternatives to social gatherings. A personal favorite, she said, is beans flavored with onions and peppers instead of fatback.

Considering “the number of people at our church with diabetes and the number of people who are cancer survivors and the number of children at our church who are overweight—I came out (of the training session) totally convinced and wanted to move forward,” Fuqua said.

Bradford, the Good Hope pastor, began including advice and encouragement in his weekly sermons, giving the congregation witty one-liners to live by, like “We’re not digging our graves with our teeth.”

“We’ve got to avoid that,” Bradford said. “It doesn’t matter how much you are in your faith if you can’t breathe.”

The church’s weekly bulletin includes a health tip or a low-fat recipe. Last summer, members brought in extra vegetables from their gardens to share, and now the church is planning its own “Biggest Loser” contest.

At Freedom Christian Assembly, registered nurse and church health ambassador Simone Ray recalls frequently talking to people about their health before starting the Body & Soul program.

“They would want prayer, but prayer would not work,” she said. “You have to do something physical to get something.”

The program, started at Freedom Christian in 2007, includes getting

together for weekly walks and promoting healthy eating. When the church held its “Biggest Loser” contest, more than 20 people signed up, and the winner, Hatten, won \$500.

To win, Hatten not only changed what she ordered at McDonald’s, but also began going to the gym twice a day and talking to fitness trainers. She cut back on carbonated drinks and reduced portion sizes, too.

Soon, the 318-pound Hatten was pinning up her clothes to keep them on. She could see her ankles for the first time in years. Now, at 247 pounds, Hatten rarely misses a workout and says she’s still losing weight.

Working with the church, Hatten said, has made a difference.

“It sparked a fire in me,” she said.

—*Sarah Jane Tribble writes for The Plain Dealer*