

Poverty-medicine clinic preaches the gospel of fitness

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MEMPHIS, Tenn. (ABP)—Fitness can, literally, be a life-and-death issue for people in underprivileged communities. So a Christian medical ministry in one of the nation’s poorest big cities is preaching the gospel of fitness through local churches.



Participants in the Church Health Center Congregational Health Promoters program receive crucial health information.

Minister and physician Scott Morris founded the [Church Health Center](#) in 1987 as a ministry to the uninsured poor in Memphis, Tenn.—the urban hub of the poverty-ridden Delta region of western Tennessee, northwestern Mississippi and eastern Arkansas. He quickly discovered that, to improve the area’s health outcomes, he’d need to start with its health inputs.

“Dr. Morris found that many of the people who were coming to our clinic ... had issues that were preventable or manageable,” said Sheridan Smotherman, the Church Health Center’s supervisor for congregational health ministries. “And he, being a United Methodist preacher, felt that the church would be the best place to start.”

Many diseases with life-threatening consequences—heart disease, diabetes, hypertension—are brought on or made worse by poor diet and lack of exercise. Such conditions are more prevalent in low-income communities—particularly in heavily African-American areas such as the Delta.

Morris knew churches in such communities often are the best means for educating people in ways that bring about behavioral changes. So, he turned to the church, creating the Church Health Center Congregational Health Promoters program shortly after founding the clinic.



The Church Health Center has a corps of about 600 health promoters in congregations throughout the metropolitan area.

“Dr. Morris had spent some time in Africa and was inspired by the village health worker, a respected person in the village who was often asked to give advice about health matters,” said Butch Odom, the center’s director of faith-community outreach. “The basic idea of training congregational health promoters is to find those men and women in congregations here in Memphis and train them to be good resources of health and wellness information, to detect problems people may be having and then be helpful in referring them to area agencies that can offer assistance.”

Today, according to Smotherman, the Church Health Center has a corps of

about 600 health promoters in congregations throughout the metropolitan area. The promoters begin with an eight-week training session that provides a broad array of information designed to improve health outcomes.

“We talk about a lot of generic ... concerns like nutrition,” Smotherman said. “We talk about hypertension—how to manage and prevent hypertension. We talk about taking medication correctly; everybody at some time in their lives has taken medication. We talk about diabetes, because it is a disparity in this area. We talk about prenatal and well-baby care. We talk about mental and emotional health.”



Butch Odom



Sheridan
Smotherman

The promoters also are trained in how to connect those in their

congregations with community resources that can help them—such as government and private programs to help them gain access to health care they otherwise wouldn't have.

Promoters also are offered continuing-education courses a couple of times a year.

In addition to the practical training, Smotherman said: "We also have a spiritual component to it. We offer spiritual reflection, so they're able to see it as a ministry rather than just an organization or an auxiliary of their congregation."

The spiritual component fits naturally with the Church Health Center's mission, which views caring for physical health as a biblical imperative for the church, Smotherman said.

"I really believe that the church has a lot of strength. So any time you need to get any information out, the best place to go is the church," she said. "And we, of course, believe that healing is part of the ministry of the church, and the mission of the Church Health Center is helping the church to reclaim its biblical commitment to our bodies and our spirits. So we help congregations to see the connection between faith and health."

Just as the clinic part of the center's ministry has expanded to thousands of patients in the 23 years since its founding, so has the wellness facet. In addition to multiple programs geared toward promoting congregational health, the organization also operates a comprehensive, 80,000-square-foot fitness center in a facility that was once a health club for employees of Memphis' Baptist Hospital.

[GmzVzsn9Mic](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmzVzsn9Mic)

Besides exercise equipment and instruction, the facility also offers nutrition and cooking classes. Membership dues are on a sliding scale based on

income and family size.

Exercise experts from the center also sometimes offer classes at local churches, such as courses on walking. But, Smotherman said, the congregational-health-promoter programming emphasizes education. "People need to know why they need to walk, and then they need to know when is the best time to walk, how is the best way to walk," she said.

Bringing health education directly to Memphis' churches has produced many success stories, Smotherman said. But one hits very close to home for her.

"I'd been working with breast cancer awareness, and the mammography van was going to community churches," She said. "So, I decided, well, I'll take it to my church.

"My mother was 78 years old; she hadn't had a mammogram since she was 75. She just felt she didn't need it anymore."

Smotherman said that, since the mobile unit was coming to her own church, she'd go ahead and get a mammogram. And it revealed she had cancer. It was caught early enough that a mastectomy prevented worse problems.

Smotherman's mother now is 82 and helps educate other women about breast-cancer awareness.

"Had it (the mammography van) not come to the church, she would not be here," Smotherman said.