Preaching Better Health

African American ministers are using the pulpit to steer their congregations toward better lifestyle choices

By Pat Jordan

After 13 years as the pastor of Long Branch Baptist Church in Greenville, S.C., the Rev. Sean Dogan, a short, stocky man with a sculpted goatee, had given over 400 eulogies for his parishioners, most of whom had died from heart disease, diabetes, obesity or stroke. And after each funeral he'd sat down with friends and families of the deceased to a meal of fried chicken, mac and cheese, and collard greens boiled in fatback.

Then one day five years ago, Dogan had a revelation: It was the food that was killing his people. So on a bright Sunday morning, he stepped up to the altar with a small scale, and for all to witness, the reverend weighed himself.

It was high drama at Long Branch, but Dogan wanted to make a point: Like many in his congregation, he was overweight. The time for change, he declared with fire-and-brimstone urgency, had come.

With that passionate appeal, Dogan joined scores of African American ministers around the country who, from their powerful perches, have been making the health of their congregants a priority. And for good reason: Nationally, nearly 48 percent of African Americans suffer from obesity, compared with 33 percent of whites. And many are at the highest risk for diabetes, heart disease and a host of other obesity-related ailments. Perhaps nowhere are these problems more evident than the rural South, where poverty and illiteracy have conspired to worsen matters. South Carolina, for example, has the tenth highest rate of obesity in the country, and ranks fourth for diabetes.

Now with the help of a burgeoning number of private and public “get healthy” initiatives and grants—or, in the case of churches like Long Branch, a simple good idea—many ministers are trying to turn this tide. And they’re enlisting community foot soldiers to give.

Just 85 miles southeast of Greetville, a predominantly black mill town of 6,000, Fedrick “Dee” Fedrick counts her life milestones to the mill in nearby Laurel Grove. A pharmacist by training, she decided to give back to the community by teaching literacy classes to her fellow workers. She quickly realized that many students had health problems, and the road to recovery — or at least to a healthier diet, too. Her students couldn’t read the medication labels on food packages, and their poor food choices, in large part because of traditions. So in 2010 she morphed her program into a grant-based health program called “Eat for Life,” developed at the University of South Carolina, and began preaching about the importance of healthy food for African American churches. “Our churches bring us out of our toxicity during integration in the 60s, we brought freedom in our churches. It was a priority,” Fedrick said. One of the churches that caught her eye was the Metropolitan AME Zion.

A revelation in church

Fedrick, making her rounds that day, stops her green SUV in front of a red brick church and marvels at the reverend there, the Rev. Angela Boyd. This is a “get healthy” approach. Boyd decided to try a Bible-based approach of “no animal fat, only water, fruits and vegetables for 40 days.” When Fedrick got word of it, she asked the minister to let her come to classes there. Boyd agreed, because the church was looking for a way to teach healthy eating.

Fedrick understood the cultural challenges. She grew up in the mill town years ago, with “colored” water fountains and restrooms. White boys harassed her making sure she didn’t get in their way to school. Now men in their 60s, “telling me how much they like to eat fried chicken.”

“They don’t remember.”

While some things changed, it’s amazing to some remained the same. Like Fedrick’s mother cooked traditional soul food in the kitchen, but with healthy variations at home—substituting chicken and collards for heartier greens, high-sodium items for fresh. Fedrick was out there, showing them how to make healthier meals. Today, Fedrick’s son’s second-grade class has a “SureFire Kitchen” program in school—showing the kids how to make healthy meals with ingredients like chicken and collards in fatback.
Getting results

Back in Chester, Fedrick is sitting in an Italian restaurant chatting about why her Eat for Life courses struck such a chord. “I held discussions throughout the community first,” she says. “Focus groups of movers and shakers.” Her classes swelled to nearly 60 people, mostly women. First, she taught moderation. She assured students they could still cook with fatback, but not as often. She urged them to eat smaller portions. She taught them federal guidelines for sugar intake (six teaspoons a day), cholesterol (300 milligrams a day), and for salt, calories and protein. And with a book she wrote, The Complete Guide to Developing Nutritional Skills, she lectured about everything from how to measure your meat to how to cut the fat content in meals to under 65 grams. “My goal was to give knowledge,” says Fedrick. “What they did with it was up to them.” During her classes Fedrick’s students brought in tasty foods cooked without salt, fatback or sugar. Steamed broccoli with spices. Spaghetti squash as a substitute for pasta.

At the end of her courses, she held an awards night. The woman who lost the most weight received a $100 prize, and to that, the Reverend Angela Boyd and everybody in the room were inspired to shout, “Praise the Lord!”

Looking back at her work at the Metropolitan, Fedrick admits that change was not easy. But it happened. “Thirty percent [of participants] lost weight,” she says proudly. “One hundred percent were cutting back on portion sizes. They had more energy. Their doctors’ results were better.

“That was my goal. To leave someplace better than I found it.”

A Nationwide Effort Gains Momentum

Reaching out to parishioners about their diets is part of a nationwide movement to use faith-based initiatives to improve health. These programs help congregations with health issues in a number of areas, according to an analysis published in the American Journal of Public Health. A few examples:

- Florida State University has a $1.4 million grant from the National Institute on Minority Health and Disparities to improve the cardiovascular health of members of 38 churches in the Florida Panhandle.
- Body & Soul, a program funded by the American Cancer Society and the National Cancer Institute, encourages members to add fruits and vegetables to their diet. Participants include large Baptist churches in Los Angeles and in Hampton, Va.
- To combat obesity, high blood pressure and diabetes among its 11,000 members, the First Baptist Church of Glenarden, Md., provides health screenings, workshops, nutrition classes, group walks and other programs.
- Sponsored in part by AARP, Health Churches 2020 trains religious leaders to work with parishioners to avoid diabetes, obesity, cancer and other diseases.
- Based on findings from the GoodNEWs (Genes, Nutrition, Exercise, Wellness and Spiritual Growth) Trial designed to reduce the risk of heart disease, Better Me Within is a National Institutes of Health-funded program educating women about obesity and diabetes prevention at 18 churches in Dallas.
- More than 200 retired men learn about health issues each month in the Male Health Forum at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, funded in part by AARP Illinois. —Elizabeth Agnew

Delores Fedrick teaches healthy living in South Carolina.