

Promoting Healthy Eating

Body & Soul Program

Multiple Locations

Many people believe that the body and soul are connected: A healthy body can directly affect the health of the soul, and the other way around. The Body & Soul program promotes this belief and helps African-American congregations improve both their physical and spiritual health.

History

Body & Soul was launched through a collaboration among the American Cancer Society, the National Cancer Institute, the University of North Carolina and the University of Michigan. “The idea was that churches and communities would pick up the program and run it on their own,” says Marci Campbell, Ph.D., professor of nutrition in the University of North Carolina’s School of Public Health at Chapel Hill. Materials were developed, including an instructional DVD and a Web site. A pilot proved successful and was picked up by the National Cancer Institute. The program has been underway for 10 years and hundreds of churches across the United States have taken part.

The motivation

As Body & Soul organizers point out, African-Americans are at higher risk than the general population for developing heart disease, cancer and diabetes. Obesity and inactivity have a direct link to these killers. However, healthy eating and exercise can help. Body & Soul is rooted in the idea of confronting underlying causes and addressing health risks as a church community. People were already gathered at churches to find spiritual health; tying in physical health seemed a natural fit. “I was thrilled to see this program take off,” says Marci. “It was a tremendous opportunity to do some good for more people.”

The project

Body & Soul has four program pillars that congregations are asked to follow. Below is an excerpt from Body & Soul’s Web site:

First Pillar:

A pastor who is committed and involved

Be sure to get the pastor’s support up front. As the leader of the church, the pastor’s support sends a clear message to the congregation. It shows that the program is in keeping with the mission of the church. And it helps church members see the link between physical health and spiritual well-being.

Second Pillar:

Church activities that promote healthy eating

Activities that encourage church members to eat more fruits and vegetables are the heart of Body & Soul. These can include workshops, cooking demonstrations, taste tests and many others.

Third Pillar:

A church environment that promotes healthy eating

Body & Soul is most effective when the church sets a good example. The congregation needs to hear the pastor speak about health. They also need to get information about healthy eating. But sermons, hand-outs, and even classes are not enough. Church members also need to eat plenty of fruits and vegetables at church events. Serving more fruits, vegetables and other healthy foods at church shows that the church “practices what it preaches.” The church is committed to the health of the congregation and healthy eating becomes a part of church life.

Fourth Pillar:

Peer counseling that motivates church members to eat a healthy diet

Peer counseling helps motivate church members to eat more fruits and vegetables. Interested church members sign up to talk with a trained peer volunteer. Church members talk about how healthier eating relates to their life goals and personal values. Peer counselors tailor the talk to the person’s readiness to change. Together, the church member and peer counselor create an action plan for eating more fruits and vegetables. This approach empowers people to take more control over their health.

Lessons learned

According to Marci, the Body & Soul program seems to be most successful when participating churches collaborate with local schools, health departments and state chapters of the American Cancer Society. Having the effort backed by a strong ministerial alliance that connects the various groups is also essential. “A congregation must be motivated,” says Marci. “A strong team or ministerial alliance must be organized with outside support and everyone needs to have the confidence to complete the program and make necessary changes to the diets and habits of church members.”

Marci has been surprised by the weight loss and other health benefits experienced by church members. “Diets have changed and more people are exercising as a result of this program,” says Marci. Church members take this program seriously, including the counseling portion that is designed to provide a positive support system for participants. “People really feel it has been beneficial,” says Marci. “Many are able to discontinue hypertension medication, are losing weight, and are setting a good example for the children.”

Web resource

Body & Soul program: www.bodyandsoul.nih.gov



[graphic used with permission from the Body & Soul website]