

Teaching Healthy Cooking to Food Service Staff

“Dash of Faith” Program

*Central Baptist Church and Bethlehem Baptist Church
Columbia, South Carolina*

Two Columbia, South Carolina, churches have taken an innovative approach to healthy eating education and getting used to the change of menu was only a matter of time!

History

In 2006, the University of South Carolina (USC) Office of Research and Health Sciences, in conjunction with the South Carolina Cancer Disparities Community Network and the USC Cancer Prevention and Control Program, sponsored the “Dash of Faith” program. The program was designed to educate cooks from two area churches about healthier food preparation. The cooks—paid employees of the churches—prepare meals for church celebrations, funerals and everything in between. Central Baptist Church and Bethlehem Baptist Church volunteered to participate. Brook Harmon, a dietician with the Cancer Prevention and Control Program, led the project.



The motivation

Before “Dash of Faith,” a dinner at the two churches would typically include fried foods and large amounts of salt. According to Johnnie Mae Rich, Director of the Catering Ministry at Central Baptist Church, “Many people in our church have high blood pressure, high cholesterol or diabetes, and that’s partly because of what they’ve been eating.” Church menus and ingredients only added to the health woes of many of the parishioners. It was time for a change. “Before this program, we didn’t think much about healthy foods,” says Johnnie Mae. “We wanted to become more aware of how we cooked our food and how that affects our health.”

The project

To assess the project’s ultimate impact, Central Baptist Church served as the “experimental” group and Bethlehem Baptist Church as the “control” group. Once the participants at Central Baptist had finished the program, Bethlehem Baptist would then take its turn. About 12 church cooks at Central Baptist were identified and asked to participate. Brook Harmon met with the cooks to identify their cooking backgrounds and skills. Cooking classes began, and so did the fun!

Nutritionists from nearby South Carolina State University taught the majority of the classes. A hands-on approach made for exciting and engaging classes that occurred two to three times a month for five months. Participants were eager to learn and rarely missed a class. Each week, they learned about healthy alternatives and menu preparation. The students prepared different recipes and sampled their creations. Lessons included what to avoid and what to substitute for high fat ingredients. Olive oil, a mono-saturated fat, became a substitute for cooking with butter. Recipes that included more fruits and vegetables were introduced. Fried food recipes were replaced with baked recipes, including alternative chicken recipes. The students learned how to switch from excessive use of salt to more herbs and alternative spices.

Changing the foods they had grown to love over years of church dinners was difficult for some of the students. According to Central Baptist member Isabel Law, “The food didn’t taste good at first.” The cooking students were apprehensive about adapting to these new flavors. Because of this, the seasoning portion of the class was shifted to the beginning of the program. Over time, alternative herbs and spices won over the taste buds that had been so accustomed to salt.

Lessons learned

Mary Gilmore is the Repast Committee chair at Bethlehem Baptist Church, and her responsibilities include planning and preparing funeral dinners. As part of the “Dash of Faith” program, she learned many different ways to serve healthier meals at her church.

Not only did she learn to cook differently, but her shopping habits also changed. She significantly cut back on the amount of store-canned fruits and vegetables she had been using for the dinners, and instead purchased more fresh foods. “The class was so wonderful, and now everybody seems to like the food,” Mary says. “Dash of Faith” participants had fun watching their congregations’ reactions to the new meals and wondered if anyone noticed the decreased use of salt. Johnnie Mae, Mary and Isabel continue to use what they learned within their respective churches.

The women are convinced that using fresh fruits and vegetables makes their food taste better. Not frying as much and using less salt has led to healthier diets for congregation members. Johnnie Mae claims that “this program showed me that we have a responsibility to cook healthy meals at our church, especially if church members have medical problems. Healthy eating can always help.” Isabel feels good that their dinner choices can have a positive impact on people’s health. “Changing the way you eat affects all of that,” she says. All three women say they are also eating healthier at home. “I’ve learned to appreciate food so much more,” says Mary. “I wish the classes didn’t have to stop!” Taking healthy menus to the next level, Mary even brings cake with no icing to funeral dinners.

Isabel hopes that they have raised awareness for those with unhealthy eating habits. She feels that as a church, they should be taking care of their members in every way possible, including serving a healthy meal at church events. Participants would like to continue the classes, with the cooks teaching the congregation members new methods. Mary gives one final piece of advice: “Stay away from salt!”

Web resources

Central Baptist Church: www.centralbaptistcolumbia.org/index.html

Bethlehem Baptist Church: www.bbc1867.org/index.php

School of Public Health, University of South Carolina:

www.sph.sc.edu/news/dashoffaith.htm

