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**Report finds faith organizations building community,
improving health through healthy foods**

MINNEAPOLIS, Minn., May 6, 2009 – Parishioners at Guardian Angels Catholic Church in Minnesota do more than donate food to a local food shelf—they actually grow it themselves. The project is one of many case studies highlighted in a new report by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) and funded by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota (Blue Cross) that demonstrate a growing nationwide movement within the faith community to put into practice the belief that healthy foods will help feed the body *and* soul.

The report, *Faith and Food: Action Strategies for Healthy Eating*, found that churches, synagogues and other faith organizations throughout the United States are building community—and healthier lives—by making healthy foods available to their members and others. Faith-based organizations are embracing healthy eating, local foods, and sustainable agriculture and see it as an effective way to improve their members’ health and make a difference in their communities. Examples include hosting farmers markets, connecting members with local sources of halal or kosher foods, and growing produce at a church garden to donate to a neighboring food shelf.

“Faith communities are important supporters of healthy eating because of their strong presence in neighborhoods and their commitment to the well-being of community members,” said JoAnne Berkenkamp, director of IATP’s Local Foods program. “It is our hope that faith members across the country will be inspired by these stories and take action in their own places of worship.”

IATP joined forces with Blue Cross' Prevention Minnesota initiative, which works to improve the health of Minnesotans by combating the root causes of cancer and heart disease, of which unhealthy eating is a leading factor. Physical inactivity and unhealthy eating combined contribute to obesity, cancer, cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Together, they are the second leading cause of preventable death and disease in the United States.

“With two-thirds of Americans overweight or obese, we need many solutions to stop this alarming trend,” said Dr. Marc Manley, vice president and medical director for Population Health at Blue Cross. “If we surround people with healthy food options where they live, work and play—including their place of worship—people will be much more successful in improving their diets. We’re excited to be working with IATP to encourage more faith communities to make healthy foods the easy choice and in turn improve the health of their members.”

Case studies in the report include:

- St. Alban’s Episcopal Church in Bolivar, Mo., manages three gardens and three orchards from which they harvest and provide both fresh and preserved fruits and vegetables for anyone who wants them.
- Guardian Angels Catholic Church in Oakdale, Minn., manages a volunteer-based community garden that provides fruits and vegetables for local food shelves.
- Taqwa Eco-Food, a food cooperative in Chicago, Ill., works to meet the needs of people wanting to purchase local meats raised and processed within the principles of Islam.
- Central Baptist Church and Bethlehem Baptist Church of Columbia, S.C., runs the “Dash of Faith” cooking program to help church cooks prepare healthier foods.
- Sixteen Interfaith Communities in Eugene, Ore., connect urban residents with local farmers and community-supported agriculture (CSA) farms in which residents purchase shares and receive deliveries of harvested fruits and vegetables.
- St. Paul Jewish Community Center in St. Paul, Minn., arranges for members to purchase shares in a local CSA farm that uses farming practices based on Jewish beliefs.
- Plymouth Congregational Church and Stevens Square Community Organization of Minneapolis, Minn., operate a community garden, food shelf and farmers market at the church.
- Central Presbyterian Church in downtown St. Paul, Minn., provides a weekly healthy community lunch program for members and the surrounding community.

- Upper Sand Mountain Parish of northeastern Alabama operates a food pantry, community and church gardens, cannery and healthy eating education program.
- Body and Soul healthy eating program throughout the U.S. helps African-American congregations improve eating among their members.
- The Hindu Temple of Minnesota in Maple Grove, Minn., organizes a weekend healthy lunch program for both members and non-members.

IATP is working to identify and expand opportunities for faith communities to support local foods, sustainable agriculture and healthy eating. They invite others to share the efforts of their own faith community to improve access to healthy food by visiting **www.iatp.org/faith** and adding their stories to complement the case studies highlighted in this report.

A PDF of the complete *Faith and Food: Action Strategies for Healthy Eating* report can be downloaded at **www.iatp.org/faith** or **www.bluecrossmn.com/preventionminnesota**.

The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems. www.iatp.org.

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota, with headquarters in the St. Paul suburb of Eagan, was chartered in 1933 as Minnesota's first health plan and continues to carry out its charter mission today: to promote a wider, more economical and timely availability of health services for the people of Minnesota. A nonprofit, taxable organization, Blue Cross is the largest health plan based in Minnesota, covering 2.8 million members in Minnesota and nationally through its health plans or plans administered by its affiliated companies. Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota is an independent licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association, headquartered in Chicago. Go to www.bluecrossmn.com to learn more about Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota.