

H.O.P.E. INITIATIVE AND THE NATIONAL BAPTIST CONVENTION

The National Baptist Convention USA (NBCUSA), incorporated through its Congress of Christian Education, is committed to ensuring all National Baptist churches have health and wellness ministries. A major component is the NBC **Health Outreach and Prevention Education** (H.O.P.E.) Initiative, which is a partnership among churches, medical professionals and public health organizations. H.O.P.E. adopted the “Mississippi Model” for faith-based health and wellness mobilization championed by an association of NBCUSA church Usher Federation (UF) ministries in Northwest Mississippi.

Through H.O.P.E., the NBCUSA reaches out across their denomination to educate and inspire Baptists to commit to healthier lifestyles through health and wellness education; referral sources and collateral material; and facilitators and resource persons.

The framework of the H.O.P.E. Initiative began in Northwest Mississippi in the late 1990s. As NBCUSA churches worked to include health and wellness in worship, they found that, while people liked the idea of improving health, they didn't know what to do. So, in 2002, the UF created a health and wellness observers calendar. Pulling information from Healthy People 2000 and other public health research organizations, the calendar was fashioned to include monthly observances.

It worked fairly well the first year, but usage took off in the second year. In the second iteration of the calendar, they added more options and ways for people to make healthy choices. Next, the UF created a companion guide to go along with the calendar. Both pieces provide easy-to-understand tips on how to incorporate health into worship and daily lives. For example, September includes Sickle Cell Sabbath and November includes Diabetes ID (I Decide) Day.

The signature event of the calendar and guide is Taste Test Sunday, focused on diabetic safe desserts. The event includes a blind taste test of desserts made with and without sugar. Organizers found that men in the congregation couldn't tell the difference and even preferred the diabetic safe desserts. In the past year, other diabetic safe foods have been to the taste test and have proved popular. Along with the calendar and guide, the NBC created the What's Cooking? Initiative with the American Diabetes Association aimed at promoting healthy ingredients in meals.

No Fry Zones

In addition, some Baptist churches have created “no fry” zones in their congregations. One

church in Mississippi resisted the change initially but eventually made the switch thanks to the leadership of their pastor.

Dr. Michael Minor, a special health assistant to the president of the National Baptist Congress, said the idea of the no fry zone was a way to get his foot in the door, talk about health and wellness and demonstrate how the church could take a stand. He viewed the fry ban as similar to when churches stopped using wine for communion to help congregants with alcohol issues. “We are trying to work with people who have health challenges and keep others from having those challenges,” Dr. Minor said.

Using Church and Community Grounds to Benefit Health and Wellness

The Church and Community Garden Project promotes the development of gardens to increase access to and consumption of fruits and vegetables. It has the added bonus of helping congregants become physically active through gardening and allowing for shared use of the land for exercise and play.

In addition, some congregants wanted to walk around church grounds, so ministers have been encouraged to measure off distances so congregants can track how far they are walking. Some ministers have gone so far as to create paths linking churches, grounds and cemeteries to ensure congregants have safe places to walk and exercise.

“The bottom line is we need to spend more time focused on reaching a common ground and making lives better,” said Dr. Minor. “We can all rally around health to make our community better. Who wouldn't want a healthier nation?”

Health Ambassadors

After the NBC published the calendar and the guide, congregants began exploring ways to benefit their communities as a whole. That sparked the creation of health ambassadors, representatives of each church that are trained as health promoters.

In addition, the NBC created the “First Ladies for the First Lady,” a group of local church first ladies advocating on behalf of *Let's Move!*. To mark the two-year anniversary of *Let's Move!*, First Lady Michelle Obama spoke at Northland Church in Longwood, Florida and asked the National Baptist Convention to train and deploy 10,000 health ambassadors in 10,000 churches by September 2012. By the end of April, 2012, NBCUSA state and district affiliates representing more than 3,000 churches have committed to this training.