



*Saint James Episcopal Church
James Island, Charleston, South Carolina*

Food for the Spirit

By The Reverend Arthur M. Jenkins

Lighten Up makes a difference at Saint James Episcopal Church by offering foods that heal.

In a day now gone by, James Island was a place where one knew the time of the next tide as readily as the time of day. The life of the island moved as much by the ebb and flow of the tide in the marsh as it did by the comings and goings of her inhabitants. I don't mean to paint this day gone by as a pristine time in particular. It just was. Today, there is a different tide that measures island life. It is the tide of cars going and coming between beach, home, and city. Now on James Island, one has to know when to move with the tide of commuters just as one used to know the tides of the marsh. Just as those who still measure their life on the water know by tide or current when to launch the boat and when not to, today on James Island the necessary knowledge is of the tide of the traffic as the indicator of the flow of life. Again, as before, this just is.

Saint James Church is the Episcopal parish serving James Island. Initially begun as a Chapel of Ease from Old Saint Andrew's Church in 1730, Saint James waxed and waned with the agricultural life of a low country coastal island. Having several growth spurts that coincided with the population, Saint James woke up with James Island in the late eighties with the challenge brought on by Hurricane Hugo and the completion of the James Island bridge, linking the island more directly with Charleston. As Charleston City and James Island grew, so did the life and mission of Saint James. With the rising and ever changing tide of population and all it encompasses came the symptoms of lives misdirected and hurting.

The Situation: American Obesity

A billboard advertises a popular interstate restaurant: COMFORT. FOOD. Using a trendy advertising ploy, the message tells us there is comfort because there is food available. Comfort Food. Isn't that what too many Americans find themselves seeking today? Comfort Food? From what do we need comfort? The symptomatic answer to that question is as varied as there are people and circumstances. I need comfort from my impossible job. I need comfort after my over-scheduled day. I need comfort from my impossibly self-centered family. I need comfort from the voices that wake me at night. I need comfort from my past. Why am I so uncomfortable?

The cause of our discomfort is that we live unreconciled lives. We are unreconciled with our past, our actions, our mistakes, and our shame. We are unreconciled with the past hurts and disappointments dealt us by others. We are unreconciled with the life we have lived and therefore we wrestle and fight. Finding no way to win the battle and calm the past we have become skilled at finding ways to numb the pain. Many of us use highly-processed foods high in carbohydrates. Americans have become skilled at comforting ourselves and medicating emotional pain with food. We don't respond to hunger, we respond to pain!

The Mission of Saint James

The mission of Saint James, as any other faithful Christian church, is both simple and profound. It is simple in that the church exists that people may come to know Jesus as Savior and Lord and have a living, healing, encouraging relationship with Him.

The mission is profound in that it is the place where that living, encouraging relationship helps people meet the demands and needs of life. Obviously, the variables of need that people bring to the church are staggering. There is no one, neat, quick, or even slow fix. The message summed up in Galatians 5:1, "for freedom Christ set us free," has as many variable applications as there are people.

One of the scenes we use at Saint James to paint the whole picture of our Kingdom Community is that we are to be a Spiritual Hospital. That means that we believe we are to be a place where, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we take seriously our



The Ministry Center for worship and education at Saint James Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Lord's words when he says that he has come to heal the sick, give sight to the blind, raise the dead, and set the captives free.

It is because of that mission, that vision of Saint James being a Spiritual Hospital, that God brought us together with Mary Joan Oexmann, MS, RD. Mary Joan, a nutritionist and researcher at the Medical University of South Carolina, has an unusually well-focused call from God. Her well-focused call is a program called Lighten Up. When I first met Mary Joan it was easy to see that she was faithful. That is, she has a living and encouraging personal relationship with Jesus Christ. What was not initially evident was just how much of a zealot she is for her ministry in Lighten Up. Now mind you, I am not against zeal when it is directed correctly. I was just a bit surprised and impressed at her passion and focus on this Christian, faith-based approach to physical health. For us at Saint James, Mary Joan provided an answer to the ever-present question in the connection between life and faith. The question is: "How do I connect faith, life, and health?"

We preachers love to tell people, "Do this and don't do that." We love to tell them, "This is how you should live." Too often the faithful folk who come, cry out, "Yes, but how?" Lighten Up is an answer to that question.

Christianity is relationship, not religion. The message of God through His only Son, Jesus Christ is that we are designed to have fellowship with Him. And we are also designed to need and have fellowship with each other and to be whole within ourselves.

But, that fellowship has been broken. A Scriptural description of this broken fellowship tells us the flesh is at war with the Spirit. In the vernacular, this simply means, "I want what I want, when I want it," even if it is not good for me. We all experience moments of life when the head says no, but the heart says yes. Or the head says no, but the stomach says yes. These are the symptoms of the unreconciled life described above. You can read about it in Romans 7:14-25, Galatians 5:16, and Romans 8:9.

The Solution

The message of Christianity is that because of what Jesus Christ did on the Cross and Resurrection we have offered to us a means of reconciling our relationship with our Heavenly Father, with those around us, and with life itself.

In a society hell bent for self-actualization, in a society told too often that the power is within, in a society that heaps on guilt when one just can't seem to muster the ability to respond, Lighten Up is a refreshing message. Lighten Up carries the message of the Gospel, the Good News of God through Jesus Christ, that help actually must come from outside of us and that it has arrived in the person of Jesus Christ. Lighten Up teaches that when we come to Jesus Christ, the urge to find comfort or numbness in food is short-circuited and the hurts, wounds, and disappointments of the past may be healed.

This is the strength of Lighten Up. It not only has the message, it also has a method. When focused on physical health, and in particular obesity, this is how one lives out the message. Just like Homer's Iliad and the Odyssey, the two may not be separated. If separated, they become ineffective. The message alone is power without a plan. And, the method alone is just a plan without power.

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Message and Method

At Saint James, in our call to be the Church, the Body of Christ, and a Spiritual Hospital to minister to the pressures of life on James Island, Saint James joined Mary Joan Oexmann to offer Lighten Up. As with any new program, Lighten Up met with mixed acceptance. Was it just another diet? Could this really help? “Oh, I’ve tried it all before,” were all comments I heard. Nevertheless, Mary Joan persevered. By the time the Lighten Up program had been through two cycles, the news of results spread. And that is the point, isn’t it? Results? There are many great messages. There are many great methods. But it is ONLY results that matter. It was with results that Lighten Up gained credibility and participants.

Over forty different people have participated in health checks to identify cardiovascular risk and monitor their progress. The group reflects the general population in having legitimate concerns about blood pressure, cholesterol, and weight. Individual results include significant weight loss, reductions in blood pressure and cholesterol, and finally adapting a lifestyle, which includes exercise and sensible eating. Reaching out to the whole congregation, Mary Joan and dietetic interns prepared a couple of Wednesday night suppers. There were the concerns... the dreaded “diet” food. After all, most churches do have the reputation for singing and eating very well. It turned out that everyone enjoyed the meals and probably learned something along the way. People are learning that lifestyle is a process to be embraced. There are no quick fixes. Sounds like a spiritual walk!

Just as Lighten Up has found acceptance by many other churches across all denominational and geographic boundaries, it has found acceptance at Saint James. Now we are excited and even singly focused with Mary Joan. We now see Lighten Up as a means of ministry, not only within the church, but also more importantly, to our community at large. As the attendant pressures and demands of life grow on James Island and as people turn too easily to the comfort and the instant gratification of food, Lighten Up is a Godsend. It will continue to be a ministry and a program that teaches people that it isn’t just what you eat, it is also why you eat.

Lighten Up And The Future

As Saint James moves into a new season of ministry with a newly finished Ministry Center and a growing congregation, Lighten Up will be an important part of our ministry offering. I am sure there are many of you who read this article who know the message intimately. Just as I am sure many of you also know the method. I wonder if you have seen the results of the symbiosis of the message and the method that is Lighten Up. As Saint James grows in the Grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, our invitation to you is to “come and see.” Next in our prayers is to offer a Lighten Up Leadership Training Conference where you may come and see and take this faith-based health program back to your business, church, or group.

Isn’t it true that we all live in a culture turned in on itself, where it seems often that the tides are changing too fast? We enjoy the fruit of our information technology age, but at the same time we are held hostage by its impossible demands. How do you deal with it? Today, as more and more Americans are choosing to deal with these life demands by numbing the pain with food, the Gospel of Jesus Christ and Lighten Up offer food that heals forever.★

ABOUT: Rev. Arthur M. Jenkins

The Reverend Arthur M. Jenkins has served as Rector of Saint James Church, an Episcopal Parish in Charleston, South Carolina for the last six years. The church mission is “Proclaiming God’s Grace in Jesus Christ.” After working 12 years on the family farm and building a large pork production facility, he answered our Lord’s call to ministry in the mid-eighties. He attended Virginia Theological Seminary and was ordained at Saint James Church in 1991. He served as Rector of Christ Church, Fitchburg, Massachusetts, Diocese of Western Massachusetts, from 1993-1998, when he returned to Saint James Church. An evangelical, Arthur’s ministry continues to be rooted in the Word of God and his interests are in the ministries of reconciliation and relationships. He encourages all people to find their ministry through the recognition of God-given gifts and talents. Arthur and his wife Kay have two children, Kate and Lawson. You can reach Arthur Jenkins at ajenkins@saint-james.org.



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