



t of Faith

Lighten Up, a faith-based approach to lifestyle change, integrates the diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of disease into communities of faith.

| By Mary Joan Oexmann, MS, RD



Today, healthcare costs represent 15 percent of our gross national product. In 2002, the bill was \$5,440 per man, woman, and child. That's \$21,760 for a family of four! Who pays? We all do. To stay in business, tough decisions are made to decrease or eliminate health benefits, increase employee co-payments, and/or to postpone expensive health treatment. Communities of faith, as all businesses, are struggling to keep their doors open as they also face double-digit increases in healthcare costs.

The latest mortality statistics indicate that a lifestyle of poor diet and physical inactivity accounted for 16.6 percent of all deaths in 2000. Studies have consistently found that 20 percent of the people—smokers, the overweight, and others who do little to watch their health—generate 80 percent of the nation's healthcare bill. It is a critical time for lifestyle change. Multiple approaches to encourage people to accept responsibility and change behavior are desperately needed, including newly emerging faith-based approaches.

Faith, Health, And Lighten Up

Consider these interesting facts. In America, 95 percent of the general public expresses a belief in God, 80 percent believe that good health is a blessing from God, and 66 percent claim to base their entire approach to life on their religious beliefs. Moreover, more than 83% of Americans classify themselves as Christians (see *Figure 1*). With this in mind, it's no stretch to advocate that changing health habits using personal religious beliefs as a springboard—specifically Christian beliefs—offers hope to those who are struggling to lose weight, decrease blood pressure, increase exercise, and restore a sense of purpose and well-being.

That's where Lighten Up comes in. Lighten Up, a faith-based approach to lifestyle change integrates the diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of disease into communities of faith, and is built on the belief that God intends for us to treat our bodies as a holy temple so that we can fulfill our "calling." As we say, God changes hearts, people change behavior.

Figure 1

Membership of Religious Groups In North America*		
Christians	269.4 m	83.5%
Atheists	1.9 m	0.6%
Anglicans	3.1 m	1.0%
Buddhists	3.1 m	1.0%
Independent	82.5 m	25.6%
Jews	6.2 m	1.9%
Orthodox	6.4 m	2.0%
Muslims	4.8 m	1.5%
Protestants	70.8 m	21.9%
Non religious	30.9 m	9.6%
Roman Catholic	78.3 m	24.3%
Other	6.4 m	2.0%

*In millions, Britannica Book of the Year 2004
Percentages total more than 100% as participants put themselves in more than one group.

This issue of *Absolute Advantage* addresses the link between faith and health as well as examines an approach that brings improved health and well-being to members of faith communities by combining the best of what science and faith have to offer. But first, let's get some background.

Agents Of Change

The Bible is filled with stories of unsuspecting people becoming major agents of change, and there is much to be learned through their trials and tribulations. Spirituality includes knowing who we are and how we relate to ourselves, to our God, and to others. And of course, Jesus Christ is the greatest example of all as he leads people by faith to both health and salvation.

When making disciples, Jesus set the example of relying on God (humility), building relationships (love), teaching by example, and encouraging others. The *21 Most Powerful Minutes in a Leader's Day* by John C. Maxell, *Jesus CEO, Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership* by Laurie Beth Jones, and *The Leadership Lessons of Jesus* by Bob Briner and Ray Pritchard, all rely on the example of Jesus to help us become agents of change.

Spiritual leaders and healthcare providers both desire to help people shape their lives for health, but we all know that it is up to the individual to take the information "into the world" through changing the way he or she lives. It is clear where the responsibility lies. However, as leaders, we must be passionate and compassionate to lead people through the barriers of change. We must remain hopeful and patient if people are finally to replace despair with hope and choose health through sensible eating, exercise, and supportive relationships.

Contributing Authors

This issue of *Absolute Advantage* uniquely brings together experts who understand the power of the juxtaposition of physical and spiritual health. First, Brent M. Egan, MD, Professor of Medicine and Pharmacology at the Medical University of South Carolina, will set the stage with his article, "The Great Physician." Dr. Egan's primary interests and expertise are in high blood pressure, obesity, and cardiovascular risk factor clustering known as metabolic syndrome. It is estimated that 47 million Americans currently have metabolic syndrome and that this will accelerate as we grow older. It is not just a serious health issue, but a major economic time bomb. As you will learn, lifestyle change significantly reduces cardiovascular risk. A holistic approach to change with the support of Scripture can be a powerful motivating factor.

Albert H. Keller, DMin, Associate Professor of Family Medicine at the Medical University of South Carolina and Pastor of Circular Congregational Church, UCC, has been a spiritual teacher and leader in the Charleston community for many years. He uniquely offers insight into the integration of spiritual health into the medical setting and physical health into communities of faith. Through "Spirituality...In Sickness And In Health," he will share his understanding of health, wholeness, holiness, and the entire quality of life that makes for human flourishing. You will be encouraged to draw from a combination of physical, emotional, mental, relational, and spiritual resources.

I will then present the nuts and bolts of implementing Lighten Up in the article, "Seeing The Light." The mission of Lighten Up



Not by bread alone —Luke 4:4

is to inspire, teach, and encourage all people to improve health through nutrition, exercise, and spiritual growth. Programs are Biblically based and incorporate current medical recommendations. The program is a research driven protocol that includes health checks, a study of the spiritual fruits, and the application of health principles.

As an illustration, Rev. Arthur M. Jenkins, Rector of Saint James Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina explains the relationship between Lighten Up and the church in his article “Food For The Spirit.” Perhaps our quest for comfort is misplaced in food? At Saint James, Lighten Up fulfills the vision and teachings of both the spiritual leaders and the congregation as we struggle to win the battle between the Spirit and the flesh. As we grow spiritually and focus on what God intends for our lives, the temptations to satisfy the desires of the flesh subside. Truly, there can be a peace, which goes beyond understanding.

Keith G. Meador, MD, ThM, MPH, Director of the Theology and Medicine Program at Duke Divinity School, directs *Caring Communities* in Durham, North Carolina. He is eminently qualified to present the wisdom and effectiveness of embracing the faith community as a place for physical and spiritual healing. His scholarship focuses on pastoral theology interpreted through practices of caring and their formation within the Christian community, as well as the investigation of health ministries as a manifestation of these practices. Health ministries play an important role in the lives of individuals, congregations, and entire communities. *Caring Communities*, a partnership between The Duke Endowment and Duke Divinity School, facilitates such ministries throughout the Carolinas. They are dedicated to the formation of nurturing faith communities and healthcare practices that embody faithfulness, gratitude, and hospitality. He will present examples of partnerships which lead to health in his article, “Developing Communities of Care.”

Next, I will provide an overview of Lighten Up, its history, resources, how it works, and what you can do to help your employees make a lifetime commitment to physical and spiritual health in the article, “Lighten Up Forever.” This article will further detail how people are embracing the process of lifestyle change for eternity. You may begin with purchasing the program guide, you may send a leader to Charleston for leadership training, or you may want a consultant to come to your worksite or community setting.

Finally, I will present my hopes for the future through partnerships with communities, which will increase the spiritual and physical health of all people. Everyone can make changes to

improve their sense of well being, so the goal is to reach all people. Why? Our health has a profound impact on our families, communities of faith, workplaces, country, and world. Through Lighten Up, people are replacing their spirit of independence, which leads to isolation and pride, with mutual interdependence, which can heal whole communities.

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I wish to thank Dr. David Hunnicutt, President of the Wellness Councils of America, for this opportunity to share my thoughts on Wellness in Communities of Faith. I wish to thank the contributing authors who offer unique perspectives but share the belief that healing begins in the soul. I also wish to thank Glenn Miller who helped with photography and editing. To God goes the glory! ★

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Mary Joan Oexmann, MS, RD is the founder and Program Director of Lighten Up, a faith-based approach to lifestyle change. She completed her graduate studies in Nutrition at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, Kentucky. She taught nutritional biochemistry and conducted research in fat synthesis before becoming the Research Nutritionist for the General Clinical Research Center at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston, South Carolina. Areas of clinical research include diabetes, high blood pressure, cholesterol, obesity, and calcium metabolism in children and adults alike. She has now uniquely combined her clinical and research expertise with her spiritual beliefs to create this biblically-based health education program. She combines her passion with her compassion to offer hope to those suffering from a lifestyle which kills.

Mary Joan has authored several books, multiple scientific articles, and a health education column for *The Holy City Chronicle*. Mary Joan has served as President of the National Association of Research Nurses and Dietitians, continues to teach dietetic interns and dental students, and is a frequent reviewer for the *Archives of Internal Medicine*, *Ethnicity and Disease*, and other scientific journals. She is an artist, enjoys sailing with her husband, Paul Mitchell, and loves to cook in Charleston, South Carolina. Mary Joan can be reached by emailing her at maryjoan@lightenupforever.org.



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