



This month's Guest Editor

Mary Joan Oexmann, MS, RD
speaks with WELCOA President
David Hunnicutt, PhD,
about faith, healing, and the
importance of a healthy
spiritual walk in living a life
of significance.

Walking The Talk

Recently Mary Joan Oexmann, Founder and Program Director of Lighten Up, a faith-based approach to lifestyle change, sat down with WELCOA President Dr. David Hunnicutt to discuss the importance of bringing spirituality into the areas of diet, obesity and getting Americans to lead a healthy lifestyle.

Mary Joan how did you first get into the field of nutrition?

OEXMANN: I began at the University of Kentucky with interests in medicine and philosophy. It was the late sixties, about the time of Adelle Davis. She wrote about nutrition for the popular press. I became interested in her books for lots of different reasons but I decided to take a general course in nutrition. I enjoyed the combination of science and food. As a graduate student, I taught nutritional biochemistry and did research on fat synthesis in rats. It is ironic that when I completed my education, I first wrote to top businesses throughout the country to encourage them to consider nutrition and health education for their employees. This was over 30 years ago. No one was interested!

I then wrote to medical schools because my minimum requirement was a good library and described the job I wanted. I wanted to combine teaching, clinical care, research, and the running of a kitchen. This led to a single job interview in Charleston at the Medical University of South Carolina. They were setting up a brand new General Clinical Research Center. I embraced the vision and it became the perfect fit.

What has been your experience in bringing into focus spirituality-based health education? What are people's reactions to this idea?

OEXMANN: I was one of those “hatch, match, and dispatch” Christians. You know the kind. Churches are very good for Christenings, weddings, and funerals. My spiritual walk didn't really begin until about 10 years ago when I read the Bible during a 35-week course at Folly Beach United Methodist Church. With this, I decided to be “obedient”. I didn't know exactly what that meant but I responded positively when my pastor asked me to do a sermon. Rather than say, “You must be nuts!” I agreed and did a sermon on “Treating the Body as a Holy Temple”. After the service, two people gave me their cigarettes and quit smoking. Bringing together Scripture and health messages had power!

People respond with mixed reactions. The academic community was cautious and waited for results. In time, Lighten Up clearly became an avenue to take health care to the community and reach the underserved, one person at a time. The faith community frequently welcomed Lighten Up as a Godsend. It probably depends on that personal spiritual journey. Lifestyle change is very personal. We're talking about the way you live your life! If you are a student of the Bible, you begin the Lighten Up health walk in your comfort zone. The zone is much more comfortable than the health care system which offers white coats, big intimidating buildings, and diet sheets. The priority becomes getting right with God who provides the strength to change. The



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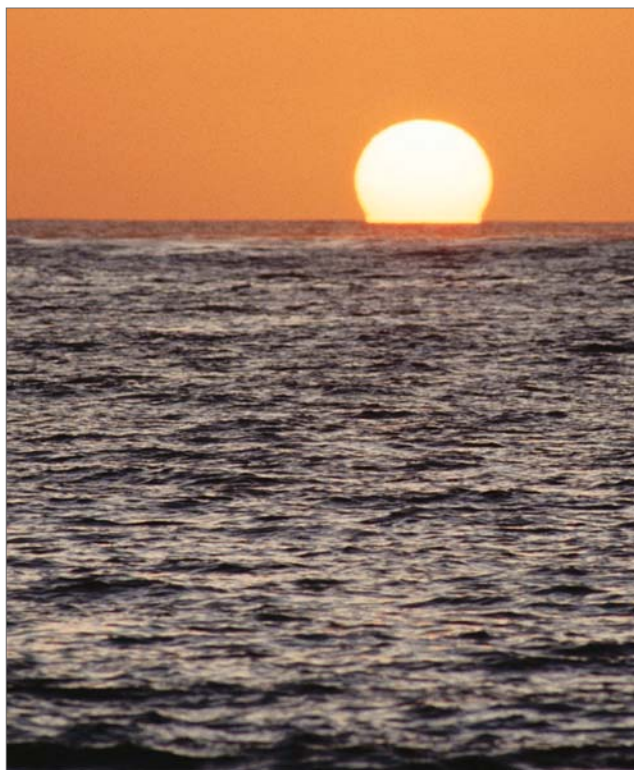


sequence is God changes hearts people change behavior. Lighten Up changes the way people think. The response is positive when people realize that spirituality is all about relationships – how we connect to God, others, and ourselves.

Tell us about the history behind Lighten Up?

OEXMANN: I am a research nutritionist. In the General Clinical Research Center I designed and implemented complex research diets for a multitude of clinical studies. Foods were analyzed and weighed to the nth degree. Dietary education and collaboration was frequently part of that formula. So, when Dr. Brent Egan, one of the authors in this issue of Absolute Advantage, approached me about helping to write a grant, I said yes. It just so happened that it was timed with my becoming a young student of the Bible and the lay leader in my church.

Originally, I think the intent was to provide health education in a church, because that's where people meet. It wasn't until a dream about Psalm 103 and the day before I left my "secure" job to step out on faith to do Lighten Up that the selection of Scripture became clear. The health information was based on a book I wrote in 1989 and included such topics as risk factors, food labels, food composition, and the food decision process. If health were simply about balancing food and exercise, America would not be facing today's obesity health crisis. People have got to change the way they think! For many, Scripture offers the wisdom and motivation to go far beyond the limits of diet sheets that just don't work. People routinely go on and off diets in the short term without accepting that lifestyle change is really



about the way we live our lives for the rest of our lives.

Changing the way we think offers hope to the way we respond to health information.

The connection with Scripture was Galatians and Peter about the battle between the Spirit and the flesh and the spiritual fruits. Eureka. That was it! I would base the spiritual aspects of the program on love, knowledge, peace, faith, kindness, joy, self-control, and Godliness. Spiritual fruits are easy. Love and joy make you feel really good. But, all of us have problems and a need for God when our lives are filled with what I call sour grapes, which includes indifference, ignorance, chaos, doubt, and sorrow. Our food intake gets out of control not from a physical hunger (the growling stomach) but a spiritual hunger. Rev. Arthur Jenkins addresses some of those concerns in his article, "Food for the Spirit" in this issue of Absolute Advantage. Turning to food for comfort does not fill a spiritual hole. So, the marriage between my experience as a research nutritionist and the spiritual realm began.

It's a beautiful blending of good health science and spiritual principles. What kinds of results has Lighten Up produced?

OEXMANN: Our health checks include measurements of weight, body fat, blood pressure, and fasting bloods for triglycerides, cholesterol, HDL, LDL, VLDL, and glucose. Measurements were made at baseline, after the 2 month program, and at one year to evaluate both the short term and long term safety and effectiveness. The average age of participants is 54 years. About 80 percent are female and 50 percent are African American. In terms of risk, 70 to 80 percent are either overweight or obese, 50 percent have cholesterol levels greater than 200 mg/dl, 50 percent have high blood pressure, and about 20 percent have diabetes. We are reaching a high-risk group. Participants are decreasing their risk for cardiovascular disease by about 30 percent primarily through reductions in blood pressure, cholesterol, and weight. That's exciting stuff!

That's remarkable. Now how many people are using the Lighten Up program on a national level?

OEXMANN: Lighten Up is a grassroots operation. I began at one small church and the program expanded by word of mouth. My first priority was to design, implement, and test the program. With funding from The Duke Endowment, I was able to train parish nurses to implement the program in multiple churches of many denominations in both North and South Carolina. I have now shifted from a research model to a service model, which makes this an ideal time for expansion. In answer to your question, there are about 100 locations, which include churches, community centers, and worksites that have implemented the program. Over a thousand people have completed the program. The tools are developed so when the desire is there, the program can be successfully implemented.

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When you look at the seriousness of the obesity epidemic and the poor health of Americans, and combine it with most people’s lack of understanding of spiritual health, are you optimistic about the health status of Americans or are you concerned?

OEXMANN: Well, I am very, very concerned about the seriousness of the obesity epidemic. There are serious physical, economic, and spiritual consequences. Everyone suffers from the consequences because when you are in pain, I am in pain. If the country is bankrupt, we are all bankrupt. One of the most important things people consider when committing two months to Lighten Up is thinking of others. Shifting from our self-centered nature to one of thinking of others opens new doors of healing to all people. Lighten Up is for everyone. If your health is good, it is important to mentor someone in need through compassion.

One thing about God, I believe He does not waste anything. When two gather in His name, good will come. Throughout Lighten Up, I had to let go of my agenda. When I planned a health check for 20 people and only two showed up, I was con-

tent and saw healing take place. When I planned a health check for 20 people and 60 showed up, all needs were met. There was enough fish and bread to go around. These experiences keep me very optimistic. Who would have thought that I would have the opportunity to help you put this issue of Absolute Advantage together? I believe it’s God’s timing. It is my nature to be optimistic and I encourage all people to be and remain hopeful. We cannot legislate how much people should weigh. But when we get rid of blame, shame, and guilt hearts change, one person at a time.

What do you see for the future? How do you see this program evolving, maturing, and changing?

OEXMANN: Well, I think that the main change is that I’ll be working as a consultant to help people implement the program as opposed to me actually doing the program over and over again. What happens is churches usually say, “Mary Joan, you do the program so well, why don’t you just conduct it at our church.” But it’s not about me doing it, it’s about people working together to embrace change. I’m delighted to be a consultant to a person or a group of people to get them started, to encourage them, and to give stories of inspiration and hope, but as the program grows, it will be necessary for other people to take over that role so that the program can grow and develop more fully. If you will, it is time to make disciples.

Do you see any controversial aspects of a program like this being placed into a worksite?

OEXMANN: No, not really. I suppose you could shake in your boots because of the mixture of Scripture and health education. One of the miracles people talk about is that Lighten Up began under the umbrella of a medical university. That’s groundbreaking but was made possible because Lighten Up began as a research study. The informed consent included an extensive paragraph that included, “If you are not comfortable reading the Bible, this may not be for you.” I have always been honest about what Lighten Up is. My goal is to encourage all people to improve health through nutrition, exercise, and spiritual growth to decrease cardiovascular risk factors. The program book is packed with my 30-year experience as a nutritionist including cooking tips and recipes. My goal is to see people embrace the process of achieving physical health through a spiritual window. It is a time to be bold. It really is a natural fit when you look at the history of churches being leaders in providing healthcare to the masses. Hospitals today were built on the nurturing spirit of our faiths. Perhaps some of you are thinking, it’s about time! ★



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