

## Church Groups Lighten Up with Help from Bible

by Wevonmeda Minis

"All right. Lighten Up now!" says the pastor's wife at Emmanuel Baptist Church. Isadora White repeats the words with increasing energy as more people arrive and pass her pew. White's energy and encouraging tone show she's present for an important purpose. In fact, everyone gathered at the James Island church is there for the same purpose - better health.

First, the group prays to God for strength and guidance - just as they might at any church meeting. Yet this gathering is a bit different. This is a meeting of Lighten Up and the first thing you notice is that it is being led not by the pastor or a church member, but by Mary Joan Oexmann, an MUSC nutritionist.

The 10-week program is designed to help people lose weight, lower blood pressure or cholesterol levels, and adopt lifestyles more likely to keep them healthy. Their meetings are held in churches around the Holy City.

Lighten Up participants follow Biblical teachings for inspiration. That includes the strength to exercise refrain from eating fried foods and push themselves away from the table. A workbook of Bible verses to read, journal spaces to write in and tips to overcome common excuses for poor nutrition are included. Health facts, recommended daily dietary allowances and help with decisions on what to eat are in the workbook as well.

During meetings, members share information on program challenges and how they met them. And they ask other members to call and encourage each other between meetings.

Oexmann, a nutritionist for 25 years, developed the program with MUSC pharmacologist, Dr. Brent Egan. She was considering leaving the nutrition field to become a minister. Then she learned Egan wanted to expand the blood pressure monitoring program -- Heart and Soul - and saw an opportunity to use both nutrition and religion to serve people. The opportunity she saw became Lighten Up.

Folly Beach Methodist, her own church, was the first to try the program. Next Plymouth Congregational Church, where the Rev. James Fields is pastor, tried the program, and it began

taking off, she says. Fields is very helpful is assisting Lighten Up - a different kind of health program to make contact with the community.

"First of all, the program is based on the spiritual fruits in recognizing where we all get our strengths," says Oexmann, referring to guidelines from Galatians and II Peter. The fruits - love, knowledge, peace, faith, kindness, joy, self-control, and godliness - help participants set, meet and stick to health goals.

For example, the week a group focuses on knowledge, one of the fruits, they also focus on Bible study. Their health message that week would be seeking truth - learning to read food labels and be a smart shopper. Additionally, Lighten Up, which may give members weight reduction challenges such as "lose five pounds for Christ for Christmas," has no diet sheets, but gives nutrition guidance.

At the first meeting participants get a health check during which health professionals measure their weight, height, body fat, blood pressure cholesterol, blood sugar and pulse. They use the information to advise participants on individual risks of heart attack and stroke and how diet and exercise can help. Weekly weight and blood pressure monitoring also is available. And there's a final health check to note progress at the end of the program.

While many people in the program are overweight, Oexmann stresses it's not designed to help only them. White, the pastor's wife, does not need to lose weight but wants to improve her eating habits and get more exercise. Her husband, the Rev. Alex White, wants to become more aware of nutrition and has managed to cut back on one of his favorite foods - Vienna sausage.

Oexmann says the couple is among 200 people who will have completed Lighten Up by Thanksgiving. New groups will begin in mid-January when she also will start training leaders so that the program can expand.

"I think that many health programs are based on the details rather than the big picture. Since all help comes from God, you should start there," says Oexmann.