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Article On Lighten Up

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Treating the **BODY** AS A TEMPLE

MUSC, Churches Spread the Gospel of Healthful Living

By Karen Doyle, Photographs by Michael Mauney



Erselle Chillis and Mary Joan Oexmann in Chillis' front yard rose garden.



Oexmann in her James Island home kitchen.

By all accounts, Erselle Chillis is a strong, independent woman. At 87 years young, she's often found riding her lawnmower or pushing her wheelbarrow around her yard at home near Charleston, SC.

When it came to losing a few extra pounds and reducing her blood pressure and cholesterol, however, she decided she needed the added strength of a higher power.

"You have to pray about it, you really do," she says, her voice clear as a church bell. "I had the faith to know that if I asked His help, He would help."

Chillis is one of more than 800 success stories of Lighten Up, the faith-based health initiative of the Medical University of South Carolina. Now in its third year, Lighten Up has been embraced by the congregations of over 35 churches in North Carolina and South Carolina. One or more members of each participating congregation is trained on the program's philosophy of treating the body as a temple of God, then returns to the fold to share Lighten Up's practical guides to healthy living.

"When people put God first, they realize they are making changes for a higher purpose," says Lighten Up director Mary Joan Oexmann, a 25-year nutritionist and a member of MUSC's faculty. "Change is a very personal thing; but guilt is not an essential nutrient. We help people feel good about themselves, build on the success of Christian disciplines, and understand that there's no quick fix."

The ten-week program includes an initial health screening; eight weekly meetings featuring Bible study, prayer and health education; and a follow-up health screening to determine participants' progress. A typical weekly meeting may include a study of I Timothy 4, group discussions on perseverance, and lessons on making healthy life choices. Participants pay weekly, voluntary, tax-deductible donations of \$7.00 (\$70 total).

With funding from The Duke Endowment, a subsequent initiative, Lighten Up Forever, was developed. This follow-up program shows



The Rev. James R. Fields in his church.

people how to continue-for a lifetime-the healthy habits they've established. Participants of both programs receive a bimonthly newsletter with recipes, some scripture, general health information, and tips to keep them motivated and on-course.

"It's really a worthwhile program," says the Reverend James Fields, of Charleston's Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ. "You realize what harm you do to yourself when you practice gluttony-which, of course, is a sin."

Plymouth Congregational was the second church to join Lighten Up, and its congregants have been "very intense" about the program, Fields says. "Just about everybody found some way to change their habits." He adds that he himself has learned to control his diabetes, reduce his blood pressure, and lower his cholesterol. He also has lost, and kept off, 15 pounds.

Lighten Up is built on faith, and there was some concern for handling the delicate balance of church and state issues within an academic institution. Most who know Oexmann, however, understand that faith is a major part of her life; indeed, she says, "the most important book on my desk is the Bible."

Some in the university community were skeptical at first, she recalls, but the success of the program won them over: "They're extremely supportive."

Her goal at first was to serve 200 people in the first two years. By speaking to as many churches as possible, as often as possible, Oexmann was able to reach her goal in half the time; at the end of the first year, nine churches, and 232 people, were taking part in Lighten Up.

Participation has increased nearly 100 percent annually. In 1999, 11 more churches, with 202 participants, joined the program. Last year, ten more churches, with 248 participants, signed up.

Its most recent good news came "out of the blue," Oexmann says. In July 2001, the International Society on Hypertension in Blacks (ISHIB) bestowed its Outstanding Community Service Award to Lighten Up, for the program's success in reaching ethnic minorities at very high risk for cardiovascular disease. "To be recognized by a national organization like that is very exciting," says Oexmann. "We are absolutely thrilled."

So is the congregation of Vandalia Presbyterian Church, in Greensboro, NC, which has just joined the Lighten Up bandwagon. A congregational nurse in a neighboring church had recommended the program to Lois Bazhaw, Vandalia's parish nurse, who was – and is – concerned about her church members' health.

"There are too many people with high blood pressure, too many fat little kids running around," Bazhaw explains. "Lighten Up shows me definite outcomes and gives me guidelines for each member's individual needs. The timing (to join) was perfect."



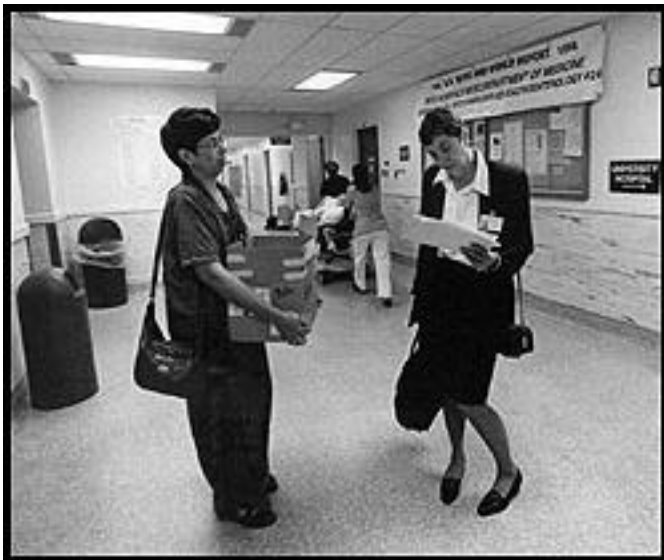
Preparing for a health check at Folly Beach United Methodist



Health Check at Folly Beach United Methodist



Oexmann's home at James Island – getting ready to walk with Ruth Singleton and Ercelle Chillis.



Lighten Up staff members Rhoda Ascanio and Mary Joan Oexmann near their offices in MUSC complex



Ercelle and Mary Joan out walking.

Bazhaw firmly believes in the interdependent relationship between body, mind and soul, likening the balance of the three to a three-legged stool. If one of the components is removed, the stool – and the person on it – become unbalanced.

“It's about lifestyle change, not just weight management,” Bazhaw emphasizes; about asking God “to grant the patience to do what's right for my body.”

“Lighten Up helps people keep up their emotional stamina,” she continues. “It's almost like a support network with regular meetings that put responsibility on the individual: 'You make choices every day of your life - who am I going to eat with? What am I going to eat? And how much?' Lighten Up allows people to focus on who they are, where they are and where they want to be.”

“It's all about self-control,” Chillis agrees. With a family history of high blood pressure and diabetes, she joined Lighten Up expecting “a lot of exercise and jumping around.” What she found, instead, was common-sense guidance and age-old wisdom. “I enjoyed it so much, once I got the hang of it,” she says, two years later and fifteen pounds lighter. “Now I look in the mirror, and I like myself.” Chillis went through the program at her niece's church, St. James Presbyterian, and has since gotten her own church, First Baptist

of James Island, involved.

Such word of mouth has been Lighten Up's best promotion, says Oexmann. “We have people calling us from churches and academic centers from across the country.... We've only just begun.”

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