

The Wonderful Works of God

by Victoria Radin

Mary Joan Oexmann, MS, RD
Designer and Program Director of
Lighten Up



Mary Joan Oexmann, with 28 years of experience as a nutritionist, appears to be the picture of good health. She believes that good health is God's desire for everyone. Armed with the grim statistic

that 65% of Americans are either overweight or obese, she seeks to implement the *Lighten Up* program in as many churches and community organizations as possible. It was developed as a faith-based approach to lifestyle change.

Six years ago, the Lord led her to leave her secure job as the research nutritionist with the General Clinical Research Center at the Medical University of South Carolina to step into uncertain waters to design a biblically-based health education program which became known as *Lighten Up*. Mary Joan says that the story behind this transition changed her life forever.

"About six years ago, I was attending Folly Beach United Methodist Church. My husband and I participated in a 35-week Disciple Bible Study. At its end, I decided that I would be obedient to the Lord, whatever it meant. Within the first week, my pastor asked me to give a sermon. I remembered I said I would be 'obedient', and so I said 'Yes'. Also, by coincidence, that was the week that our Discipleship group was reaching its end and we were talking about each other's gifts and talents. Everyone independently decided that I should be a minister. None of them knew that the following Sunday I was going to be giving the sermon. I did the sermon on

'treating the body as a holy temple'. At the conclusion, two people handed me their cigarettes; they quit smoking. 'Obedient', I thought.

"A week after that, a doctor contacted me about designing a biblically based health education program. 'Obedient', again I thought. We designed what was originally called, 'Heart and Soul', a health intervention program.

"I was concerned about leaving my secure job to step out in faith to do this new program. The word 'Obedient' kept coming to me. Four days after we found out that we had funding, I had a dream. In the dream, I was walking on the beach at Folly beach near where I live. I heard the ocean in the background and then I heard the words 'Psalm 103' four times! The first thing I did was check the Bible when I woke up."

Knowing that this Psalm was the Lord's Word to Mary Joan, she committed it to memory: "Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases, Who redeems your life from destruction, Who crowns you with loving kindness and tender mercies, Who satisfies your mouth with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's." (Psalm 103)

"I said, 'OK, this is what I'm supposed to be doing.'" It would still be a couple of months before making the transition from research to doing *Lighten Up*. As a nutritionist, she knew what health topics needed to be covered, but she wasn't sure how to incorporate a Bible study.

"On the Sunday before I was to start this new job, I was in Sunday School, and what were we talking about?—Spiritual fruits! So, that was it. It made perfect sense to me. That would be the way to incorporate the Bible Study into the program. The whole

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program was inspired and pulled together within a very short period of time. It was use, what memory verses to have. I've been faithful to that and it's been an incredible blessing. That's the history and it continues to unfold.

"The mission of *Lighten Up* is to inspire, to teach, and to encourage people to improve health through nutrition, exercise, and spiritual growth. Where does the inspiration come from? It comes from God. The program is biblically based on the Spiritual fruits of love, knowledge, peace, faith, kindness, joy, self-control, and godliness."

They always start with prayer, read a Scripture, and have a 'spiritual challenge' question – things that are not "yes" or "no". Oexmann says that's where the spiritual growth takes place; this is where the inspiration aspect of *Lighten Up* begins.

As part of the program they do a "Behavior Change Checklist". At the end of the day, they look through the items and check "yes" or "no" for each item. The very first thing on that checklist is "I put God first". At the beginning of the day, did you start out by speaking to God or acknowledging Him?

By way of explanation, Mary Joan says, "I truly believe that if you put God first He will give you the power and strength to be lifted up and to be able to handle the temptations of food, the temptations of excess, which is what so much of our health problems are about."

To date, they've reached over 60 churches. They start by doing a health check including weight, percent body fat, blood pressure, and a complete lipid and glucose profile. The health check is very important for people to know their risk, set goals, and monitor their progress.

Mary Joan likes to train leaders in the church or organization to conduct the sessions. She believes that it's important for

just a matter of deciding what Scriptures to

the program to be directed from within the church. They have developed a videotape with the health information to make it easier for leaders.

"When a church decides they want to do *Lighten Up*, I like to have three people from that church: One who is spiritually strong to lead the spiritual aspects of the program, one person with a health background who has a greater measure of comfort concerning the health information, and one person who 'knows everybody', who's a shaker and maker in the church, who can set the date and time and get the people out. If you share the burden of conducting the program, it leads to greater success."

Lighten Up has spread by word of mouth. The first year they reached nine churches and 200 people. About 84% of the people are either overweight or obese; about 50% have high blood pressure; about 50% and elevated cholesterols, and about 18% have diabetes. They're reaching a high-risk group.

For more information about the program, contact Mary Joan at 843-792-3047 or email lightenup@musc.edu. Visit *Lighten Up* online at www.lightenupforever.org.