

Health



MANY BLESSINGS

As obesity spreads in the USA, many churches are creating health and wellness initiatives to better educate their congregations. BY COLLIN NASH

PPASTOR RONALD L. GODBEE had a painful time growing up in Detroit, MI. The emotional hurt Godbee endured was inflicted by the helplessness and sorrow he felt watching his father, Ronald Godbee Sr., get hit with four heart attacks, three open-heart surgeries and two strokes before he was 50. Godbee Sr., now 72, had his first heart attack at 29, said his son, a pastor at the River Church in Durham, NC.

A year after Godbee came to the River Church in 2011, he joined with congregants in the health field to reach out to the North Carolina Division of Health for help in initiating a wellness program at the church.

The sadness he felt seeing his father go through all those surgeries planted in him a burning desire to protect others from the

emotional pain he grew up with, Godbee said. "I saw my dad's chronic condition as a blessing."

Turns out Godbee's decision to reach out to the public health agency also was a blessing.

As part of a statewide Eat Smart, Move More movement, the agency provides a 100-page publication, *African American Churches Eating Smart and Moving More: A Planning and Resource Guide*. Recognizing that the church is perhaps the ideal place to begin to get the word out to African Americans about improving their health, the guide provides resources and planning tools intended to foster collaboration between faith leaders and community health partners.

As obesity has spread in the United States, doubling over the past three decades, people of color have been disproportionately affected, according to a 2003-2004 National Health and Nutrition Examination survey. Armed with a mission to close the health gap, increasing numbers of public health entities are seeking help from the pillar of the African American community: the church.

For Godbee and the members of the River Church, the Planning and Resource Guide was a godsend.

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"I'm always looking to minister to the mind, body and soul because Christ is holistic," Godbee said. "Without the physical man, the spiritual man cannot move forward. We have to care for the container to help us bring forth the spirit of God."

The North Carolina Division of Public Health is among of the many health-related agencies across the country teaming up with churches to sow the seeds of healthy lifestyles in the African American community.

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan and the American Cancer Society have partnered with Black churches in Grand Rapids, Flint, and the southeast Michigan.

The messages imparted through church-based health programs may have a more lasting effect on individual behavior change by making the link between living a healthy lifestyle and taking care of God's

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