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HEALTH AND FITNESS

HEALTHFUL LIVING IS GOSPEL TRUTH FOR HERNANDO PASTOR MICHAEL MINOR

By Henry Bailey

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Photo by Stan Carroll

Dr. Michael Minor, pastor of Oak Hill Baptist Church south of Hernando, draws a healthy lesson from the Biblical passage where Jesus fed the multitude with only five loaves of bread and two fish.

"His disciples were annoyed with Him. They were actually on a retreat and one of the reasons they were upset was this was supposed to be their 'downtime,'" says Minor. The lesson? If people make getting proper, regular rest a priority, they'll have more energy and stamina to deal with surprises -- even ones at mealtime that are met by a miracle.

"We need to be good stewards of what the Good Lord has given us," Minor says.

It might take something of a miracle to lift Mississippi out of a health crisis rooted in obesity, but Minor, 46, is trying to do just that. His efforts to promote a health-conscious congregation have received national attention, and will be explored next week in Mississippi Public Broadcasting's television series on obesity, "Southern Remedy: Mississippi's Big Problem."

The four-part series features Oak Hill Baptist at 3440 Wheeler Road near Arkabutla Lake in its second episode airing at 7 p.m. Wednesday. Other cities visited include Jackson and Ocean Springs.

Obesity contributes to the major chronic disease killers in the state: heart disease, diabetes and certain cancers, says the Mississippi State Department of Health.

Minor practices what he preaches in urging churches to play an active role in members' health: "Our view is a 'Trinity of Wellness' -- body, mind and soul," he says.

His schedule would challenge any athlete. In addition to pastoral duties, Minor does consulting work on nonprofit business development and faith-based health and wellness advocacy.

He's busy linking programs of the Healthy Congregations movement, which he chairs, with the National Baptist Convention, the country's largest predominantly African-American Christian denomination with 8.3 million members among some 31,000 congregations.

He's a member of the eight-county Regional Health Council aligned with the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi, and working on a pact between the National Baptist Congress of Christian Education and the American Diabetes Association using his church's "Taste Test Sunday" as a model.

Members of Oak Hill Baptist blind taste healthy and non-healthy versions of the same food and give their results during services. Minor says this program, in its third year, is a simple but effective way to show that small changes to recipes can make foods -- especially desserts -- healthier while still tasting the same as they did before.

"People can do a good job of eating right, but they can get into trouble with desserts," he said.

His church also includes a health lesson in the bulletin each week, allows only healthy fare at church suppers, and has a trail. Minor also wants to add a "one-hole golf course."

The Oak Hill Community Walking Trail is a basic affair around the perimeter of the church, but it tracks the resolve of people with "not a lot of resources but a lot of determination," he said. The sign says: "7 times equals 1 mile on the outer perimeter. 3.5 times equals 1/2 mile."

Fried chicken and sugary soft drinks aren't missed by two regular walkers, Anise Jefferson, 47, of Southaven, and Minnie Wilkinson, 60-ish, of the Hernando area.

"Giving all that up was easier than I thought it would be," said Jefferson, a lifelong church member.

"When he took the soft drinks away, I thought, 'Oh Lordy, how will I make it?'" said Wilkinson. "But then he brought in Crystal Light lemonade and that's just fine with me."

Cleanliness might be next to godliness, but healthiness is pushing for No. 2 here.

"You've got to be healthy to do all the things He wants you to do," says Jefferson.

Minor, a Coldwater native with an educational background that includes a degree in economics from Harvard and a doctorate in education from the University of Memphis, has been Oak Hill Baptist pastor for 15 years and has been pushing healthy living from the pulpit for 10.

"If you do something short-term," results will falter, "but if you do it as a real ministry, people will notice," he says.

The MPB TV series also has a mission -- to modify the way Mississippians take care of themselves, using real-life stories and methods anyone can use to lose weight, says Dr. Rick deShazo, host of "Southern Remedy" and professor of medicine at the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson.

"The program provides new ideas on how to move forward in addressing Mississippi's big problem," he said.

Minor's church, with programs morphing to national models, is seen as part of the solution to that problem. Last year he received a White House invitation to first lady Michelle Obama's Mississippi roll-out of the Let's Move health initiative.

"He's doing great stuff," says Hernando Mayor Chip Johnson, who serves with Minor on the Regional Health Council and ranks him "one of our health champions."

It's a story not unlike the parable of the tiny mustard seed, soaring and branching out to be a tree fit to give rest for the birds of the sky.

"It's all a consequence of what started here at our little country church," Minor says.

For more information on the "Southern Remedy" series, go online at mpbonline.org/radio/programs/SouthernRemedy/index.htm.

Unhealthy leader

Mississippi continually tops the list with the highest rates of childhood and adult obesity among the 50 states. Nationwide, childhood obesity rates have more than tripled since 1980, and there are fears among health experts that today's youth will be the first ever to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents.

The 2010 edition of America's Health Rankings, released in December, showed Mississippi unchanged as 50th and last while Tennessee rose two slots to 42nd place and Arkansas fell eight slots to 48th.

The report assesses the relative health of state populations based on behavioral, environmental and medical measures that include obesity. It is published annually by the United Health Foundation, the American Public Health Association and Partners for Prevention.

In Mississippi, a governor's commission on physical fitness was established in 1992 and still exists. A 2007 state law required every school district to adopt a wellness program. A bill for a statewide council for obesity prevention and management was passed in 2001 but the panel was dissolved in 2006.

Last month, Gov. Haley Barbour vetoed a bill that proposed creating a 34-member council on combating obesity. He said it duplicated programs and would only add to "the fat of state government."

"Why is Mississippi at the bottom of all indicators of good health? There are many possible answers," says Dr. Rick deShazo, host of the "Southern Remedy" MPB TV series and professor of medicine.

Among these he poses poverty, racism, politics, eating too much, moving too little, national agricultural problems and priorities, Mississippi politics and geography.

-- Henry Bailey: (901) 333-2012

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