

Preaching health in the heartland of fried food

By Campbell Robertson / *New York Times News Service*

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HERNANDO, Miss. — Not much seems out of place in the Mississippi Delta, where everything appears to be as it always has been, only more so as the years go by. But here in the fellowship hall of a little Baptist church on a country road is an astonishing sight: a plate of fresh fruit.

"You get used to it," said Arelia Robertson, who has been attending the church for almost eight decades.

Despite a dirge of grim health statistics, an epidemic of diabetes and heart disease and campaigns by health agencies and organizations, the Delta diet, a heavenly smorgasbord of things fried, salted and boiled with pork, has persisted.

It has persisted because it tastes good, but also because it has been passed down through generations and sustained through such cultural mainstays as the church fellowship dinner. But if the church helped get everybody into this mess, it may be the church that helps get everybody out.

For over a decade from his pulpit here at Oak Hill Baptist in North Mississippi, the Rev. Michael Minor has waged war against obesity and bad health. In the Delta this may seem akin to waging war against humidity, but Minor has the air of the salesman he once was, and the animated persistence to match.

Years into his war, he is beginning to claim victories.

The National Baptist Convention, which represents some 7 million people in nearly 10,000 churches, is ramping up a far-reaching health campaign devised by Minor, which aims to have a "health ambassador" in every member church by September 2012. The goals of the program, the most ambitious of its kind, will be demanding but concrete, said the Rev. George Waddles Sr., the president of the convention's Congress of Christian Education.

The signs of change in the Delta may be most noticeable because they are the most hard-fought.



Photos by William Widmer / *New York Times News Service*

Members of Bel Mount Missionary Baptist Church pray in Marks, Miss. The church recently had its first Taste Test Sunday, where women put out low-fat foods to convince members that healthy cuisine can have flavor.



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A sign in the kitchen of First Baptist Church in Clarksdale declares it a "No Fry Zone." Bel Mount Missionary Baptist Church in the sleepy hamlet of Marks just had its first Taste Test Sunday, where the women of the church put out a spread of healthier foods, like sugar-free apple pie, to convince members that healthy cuisine does not have to taste like old tires.

Carved out of the fields behind Seek Well Baptist Church in the tiny town of Lula is a new community garden. The pastor, the Rev. Kevin Wiley, is even thinking about becoming a vegetarian, a sort of person he says he has never met in the Delta.

Many pastors tell the same story: They started worrying about their own health, but were motivated to push their congregations by the campaign that began in Minor's church.

"I'm not going to say it has to be done by the church," Wiley said. "But it has to be done by people within the community. How long is an outsider going to stay in Lula, Mississippi?"

Certainly, others have been trying to help.

Mississippi finds itself on the wrong end of just about every list of health indicators. It is first among states in percentage of children who are obese, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. It is first in rates of heart disease, second in the number of adults with diabetes, second in adult obesity, near last in the percentage of adults who participate in physical activity, near last in fruit and vegetable consumption and dead last in life expectancy.

On almost all these scales, the Delta is the worst part of Mississippi. The state has fought this by putting healthier meals in schools, working with mayors to create parks and farmers markets and paying for public awareness campaigns.

Playing a part in the answer

But the solution is not just a matter of telling people to live healthier, said Victor Sutton, director of preventive health for the Mississippi State Department of Health. The Delta is one of the poorest areas of the country, and its problems are deep and varied. The church is part of that whole equation.

"It's not going to be the answer," he said, "but it's going to be one of the answers."

Minor was born in the Delta but left for Harvard and a stint selling cars in Boston. He returned to Memphis and in the middle 1990s became the pastor at Oak Hill outside Hernando, about an hour south of Memphis.

If Minor had never left, he probably would never have noticed it. But he saw it immediately when he returned.

"There were a lot of people not only in this church, but in churches that we fellowship with, that were ..." he searched for the right phrase, "of good size."

When he began preaching his health gospel right from the start, he was met not by outright resistance — that would have been rude — but by a polite disregard. This is the way people have always cooked here, church members said, and they ignored him.

He argued that while the food may be the same, people's lifestyles had changed, and few put forth the physical effort that life in the Delta once required. Preparing pork chops used to involve raising and slaughtering a pig; now it requires little more than a trip to the grocery store. But he eventually realized he would have to adjust his strategy.

Around 2000, he began enlisting his ushers and those from other churches to go after hesitant pastors with a baldly practical line of argument.

"Your sick members can't tithe," he said with a laugh.

A fight against food, habits

At Oak Hill now, as in several other churches around the Delta, fried foods are banned. Greens are boiled with turkey necks instead of ham hocks. Sweet tea and soft drinks have given way to bottled water. A track was built around the church for organized walks, which members say are pretty well-attended.

Traditional Delta cuisine might not even be where the real fight is. The old fare has already been giving way to the new, just as at Taco Bell and Wendy's. The restaurant singled out as "the bane of our existence" was a Chinese buffet.

"I think the most resistance will be with your youth who say McDonald's is so tempting," said Johnnie Carter, who is helping lead the health push at Bel Mount, driven to get involved after she had a heart attack at the age of 41. But, she added, "you'll have your older folks who say, 'I've been eating this way all my life.' It's around the board."

As Taste Test Sunday was wrapping up at Bel Mount, those who had just left Silent Grove Missionary Baptist across town were heading toward a traditional Delta buffet place called the Dining Room. Silent Grove has not joined in Minor's fight — after all, the Dining Room is run by the pastor's son.

"Once you taste it, you're hooked," said James Figg, a 69-year-old driving instructor, polishing off a tasty-looking pile of greens, fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, and peach cobbler. Still, even he said he was making only one trip through the buffet line in these days of hospitalizations and funerals.

"When you get up to get seconds, you think about burying Brother So-and-So last week," Figg said, looking wistfully at his near-empty plate. "And you leave it at that."

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