



FAITH-BASED PROGRAMS FIGHT HUNGER

By Leesha Lentz

RDs are making a difference in their communities.

Many faith-based organizations are taking an active role in serving their members and the greater community through nutrition and hunger relief programs. Whether it's working in a garden, trying out a new healthful recipe, or serving at a local food bank, participants in these programs are learning about the importance of good nutrition and a healthful lifestyle—the cornerstones of a healthy mind, body, and spirit. At the helm of these programs are RDs and other nutrition professionals who are looking to broaden their reach and help more people outside of the office or clinical setting.

This article highlights three RDs who work with faith-based communities to develop nutrition and hunger relief programs, as well as offers advice and tips on how dietitians can become more involved in their own communities.

Serving in the Community

For many dietitians, health and wellness begins in the garden, which is why some faith-based organizations are starting to encourage their members to participate in cultivating and harvesting plants. This is especially important in food deserts, where it's harder to access fresh, wholesome foods.

Denine Rogers, RD, LD, FAND, owner of HEPSA Living Healthy, has helped implement a community garden at Lithia Springs United Methodist Church in Lithia Springs, Georgia, a food desert section in Douglas County. The 5,700-square-foot garden is nurtured by volunteer master gardeners in the area, as well as community volunteers, who broke ground at the end of April. “The harvest is starting very slowly, but eventually what

we'd like to do is to teach the community not only to eat healthfully but also to respect the environment and learn how to garden so they can cultivate their own gardens in their backyards,” Rogers says.

According to the church's blog post, the three main goals of having the community garden are to “provide free fresh vegetables to a local pantry for distribution to community residents; provide educational sessions on home gardening, cooking with herbs, composting, and health and nutrition; and serve as a demonstration garden for the community and especially for students at the local Annette Winn Elementary School [in Georgia].”

As a volunteer master gardener herself, with a specialty in herbal medicine, Rogers plans on offering classes that focus on bringing those herbs into the kitchen. “I'm going to be teaching people about herbs and drying them and explaining how they can use them in cooking, substituting them for salt,” she says. “A lot of times when you go to soup kitchens or get donated goods, there are very salty products, so we want to give them an alternative where they can learn to use herbs and mix them to suit their own tastes.”

Alison Kaufman, MS, RDN, LDN, director of hunger and nutrition at Jewish Family & Children's Service (JF&CS) in Waltham, Massachusetts, oversees several programs directed toward vulnerable populations, ensuring they have access to good nutrition. “There are many groups of clients JF&CS serves: seniors, people with disabilities, and low-income families,” she says. “Each of those groups has specific nutritional needs that we can help meet. For example, our food pantry is called JF&CS Family Table, and it's the largest kosher food pantry in New England. We serve anyone in need and also serve that particular niche for people who need kosher food and Jewish holiday food and are struggling.”

Kaufman was hired in 2008 to help Family Table become a source to not only meet people's spiritual needs with food, but also their nutritional needs by including healthful, local foods, as well as offering nutrition education. In last year's survey that asked whether clients had greater access to healthful foods, 80% responded that they have greater access to fresh vegetables, while 74% said they had more access to fresh fruits, according to Kaufman.

JF&CS is also focused on food preparation, offering information on how best to prepare healthful foods. “We provide recipes every month that use ingredients from the food pantry, meet nutrition guidelines based on the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, and are cost-effective,” Kaufman says.

Recently JF&CS released a cookbook it created in partnership with Project Bread. “We've been offering cooking classes to families living in homeless hotels for the past five years, because they had no cooking facilities beyond access to a microwave or mini-fridge,” Kaufman says. The cookbook, *Home Cooking Without A*

Kitchen, is the result of those cooking groups and is a resource for any family being housed in a hotel. JF&CS offers the cookbook online; it can be found at www.jfcsboston.org/cookbook.

Kelly Moltzen, MPH, RD, coordinates nutrition efforts for the Bronx Health REACH initiative of the Institute for Family Health in New York, and founded and chairs the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics' (the Academy) Hunger and Environmental Nutrition (HEN) DPG Food and Spirituality Committee. "Bronx Health REACH has had a faith-based outreach initiative since its inception in 1999," she says. "It started the coalition to address health disparities with a couple of key faith community leaders. They were instrumental in the development of a number of different programs that were done with churches around healthful eating and healthful lifestyles."

One such program is Fine, Fit, and Fabulous, a 12-week diabetes prevention program that teaches healthful eating and physical activity through a spiritual lens. According to its website, the program has reached almost 500 individuals from 22 churches, with an average weight loss of 4.6 lbs per participant. The website offers a toolkit both in English and Spanish; it can be found at www.bronxhealthreach.org/our-work/faith-based-outreach-initiative/fine-fit-and-fabulous.

"Bronx Health REACH's faith-based initiatives are grounded in the spiritual understanding of seeing and respecting the body as a temple of God," Moltzen says.

Moltzen and her colleagues also work to ensure community members have access to healthful foods through projects such as the Healthy Bodegas initiative. In addition, Bronx Health REACH is working with church leaders and pastors to spread the word about farmers' markets and Health Bucks, which are "incentive coupons distributed by the New York City Health Department that faith-based institutions can use to encourage members to go to farmers' markets and buy more fruits and vegetables," Moltzen explains.

How to Get Involved

For RDs looking to become more involved in working with their own faith communities or learning about the connection between faith and food, Moltzen recommends the books

Making Peace With the Land and *Soil and Sacrament* by Fred Bahnson, director of the Food, Faith, & Religious Leadership Initiative at Wake Forest University School of Divinity.

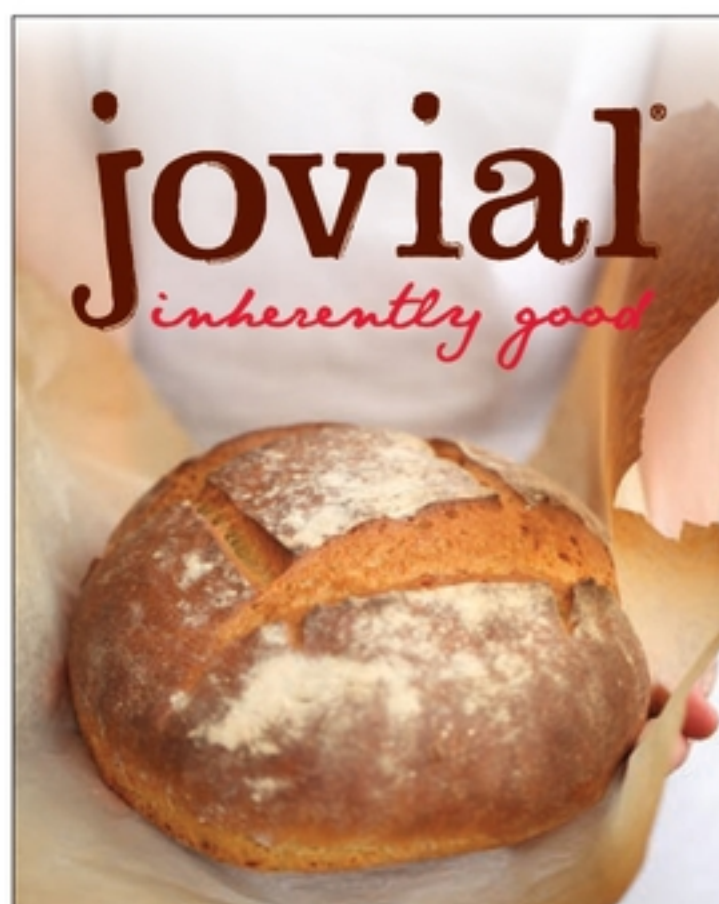
Moltzen's Food and Spirituality Committee conducted a survey last year and collected information about food and faith projects nationwide. The survey found that some RDs are using a holistic approach in their daily practice, focusing on spiritual, physical, and emotional health and wellness, while dietetics students are incorporating food and faith into research projects and college campus ministry programs, Moltzen says.

Moltzen says the committee, formed about one year ago, is considered informal, although it's working on a fact sheet about food and spirituality and hoping to include resources on the HEN DPG website (www.hendpg.org) in the future for those interested in learning more about programs and getting involved. "Our committee wants to showcase the great work faith communities are doing around food initiatives and encourage dietitians to look at food using a spiritual lens," she says.

Rogers suggests dietitians use their own talents or niche areas to become involved with community work, which benefits not only the community but also themselves. "I think dietitians need to expand their horizons and focus not only on clinical programs but also on community-based programs," she says. "If you like gardening, become a master gardener and use that information to educate people on gardening, and on the importance of healthful foods, hunger, and taking care of the environment."

At the end of the day, as noted by Kaufman, RDs who work in their faith communities can effect change. "I think it's important that the public has access to sound nutrition information, and it's easy for people to be misguided by information that isn't evidence based. We have the chance to be a voice for sound nutrition information for the most vulnerable populations," she says. "That's what I really love about my job: the ability to effect change on such a scale in the community, and I think any dietitian who gets more involved would find it similarly rewarding."

— Leesha Lentz is a freelance writer based in Pottstown, Pennsylvania.



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