

Program aims to heal hearts and souls

By Laura Raines, *Pulse editor*, Published on: 03/23/08

Rose Foster, RN, a home health nurse, and Mary Thrash, a home health aide for Visiting Nurse Hospice Atlanta, have more than 60 years of combined experience in caring for and educating patients. Now they're doing the same for their church congregations.

Both have started Search Your Heart programs at their churches. Sponsored by the American Heart Association, Search Your Heart is a heart-health and stroke-prevention program for African-Americans and Hispanics.

These populations have high risk factors for heart disease and stroke, and awareness of the problem needs to be increased.

"The American Heart Association was looking for ways to reach masses of people, and what better way than by going through the churches?" Thrash said.

Thrash learned about the program from Foster, visited her church and saw it in action. She then started a Search Your Heart group at her church, Lamb of God Missionary Baptist in Atlanta.

"It started with a committee of one — me — but now we have two other home-health aides, a dietitian and other members who help promote the program."

Using American Heart Association seed money, the group ordered education materials, which come in easy-to-use modules. They have done heart and stroke-awareness workshops, performed blood-pressure and blood-sugar screenings, held nutrition classes and brought in guest lecturers.

"Most people won't go to the doctor unless there's a problem, but when we see high readings, we tell them they need to go to their doctor and get checked out," Thrash said.

When she sees church members Thrash asks about their doctors' appointments and whether they are feeling better.

"The women's ministry group has gotten involved by serving bran muffins and fruit at our workshops. A lot of us have started eating better, and the youth have started a walking group on Saturdays," Thrash said.

Thrash said that the program has made the congregation more aware of good health and diet and gives church members someone who can questions about health.

"It always gives me a warm glow to know that I'm helping someone else feel better," she said.

Last year, Foster brought information about Search Your Heart to her church (Mount Tabor Baptist in Atlanta) after hearing about the program from a friend who worked for the AHA.

"We're a small church, but the good thing about this program is that you can order the materials and be reimbursed for them, even if only a small group participates," Foster said. "The church liked the idea and tapped me to head it since I'm a nurse."

Foster has performed high-blood pressure screenings and led workshops on diabetes and smoking cessation.

"With the diabetes session, we used a PowerPoint [presentation] to talk about the disease and then taught healthy diet information," she said.

Foster plans to do another session about high blood pressure next year and will add workshops on cholesterol and stress reduction.

"As a nurse, it gives me a lot of satisfaction to bring education to my community," she said.

