

# off the campus



## Weight Loss as a Matter of Faith

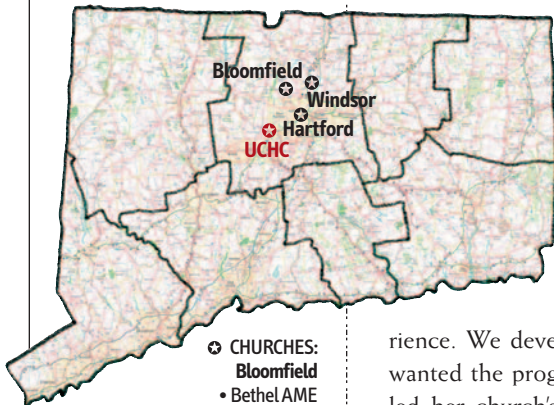
For women struggling to lose weight, it helps to have the Lord on their side. That's the theory behind SisterTalk, a weight-control program at predominantly African American and Black churches in the Hartford region.

"It puts weight-loss science into the language of faith," says Judith Fifield, Ph.D., professor of family medicine. "We partnered with the churches, working with pastors to identify volunteers to deliver the program at their churches," says Fifield. She is principal investigator for the program, which is a clinical trial to see if a weight-loss program using a faith-based approach for African American and Black women in their churches is effective, compared to standard weight-loss programs. The study was funded with a grant to St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center by the Donaghue Foundation with support from the Connecticut Health Foundation.

"We made our own videos and inspirational journals," says Rev. Brenda Lammie of the Bethel AME Church. She was a member of the original steering committee that developed SisterTalkHartford. "It was a phenomenal experience. We developed such camaraderie no one wanted the program to end," says Lammie, who led her church's program with its weekly support meetings that focused on nutrition, cooking classes and exercise.

SisterTalk was developed by Brown University researchers to address the problem of obesity in the African American and Black community. Despite cultural adaptations, the program wasn't as effective as expected. "The Brown researchers decided to move the program into African American and Black churches and we translated it into a faith-based pro-

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR JUDITH FIFIELD; BARBARA HEADLEY; TANZANIA COOPER OF PHILLIPS METROPOLITAN CHURCH; AND LISANDRA GONZALEZ, SISTERTalkHARTFORD PROJECT MANAGER; GATHER AT FAITH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH IN HARTFORD WHERE HEADLEY IS SENIOR PASTOR.



- CHURCHES:
- Bloomfield
- Bethel AME
- Gethsemane Missionary Baptist
- Hartford
- Faith Congregational
- Faith Seventh Day Adventist
- Metropolitan AME Zion
- Mount Moriah Baptist
- Mount Olive
- Phillips Metropolitan CME
- St. Monica's Episcopal
- Shiloh Baptist
- Union Baptist
- Windsor
- Hopewell Baptist

gram," says Fifield. "We talked about setting goals, tracking behavior with journals, all elements of a standard weight-loss program. The pastors and volunteers developed materials, with references to scriptures and the Lord's advice to treat the body like a temple, and be a good steward of one's health."

"Women's self-esteem soared," says Lammie. "We shared recipes. We realized food is a big part of our church, with community breakfasts every Sunday. Members of the Kitchen Committee began to make sure there were fruits and low-fat offerings along with the grits, biscuits and bacon."

"More than 72 percent of members returned for follow-up measures. After about six months, one-fourth of the members lost an average of 11 pounds," says Fifield.

"For science, working in partnership with the community is new," says Fifield. "If you really want to change behavior, it's more likely to happen if you involve people and give them some control over the program." —By Kristina Goodnough