

## **What's Church Got to Do with It? The 3 Most Important Things the Church Can Do in 2013**

**by Kevin W. Cosby**

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There are many national and global concerns that people believe the church should not address. Yet as these issues impact the health of our communities, they affect the health of our churches. After all, our congregations are comprised of the residents of our communities. So, what's church got to do with rising levels of obesity, gun violence in our communities, and low regard for education as a door out of intergenerational poverty? Everything!

Observers within and beyond the walls of the Church may assert that the Church should confine its concern to spiritual matters. But what's more spiritual than being physically, mentally, and financially able to carry out the Lord's work?

### **What's Food Got to Do with It?**

One of the great entertainers of the early-twentieth century was Ethel Waters. She appeared in many Broadway plays and several movies during the early days of film. In the movie *Cabin in the Sky* she immortalized the song "His Eye Is on the Sparrow." Waters was a deeply committed Christian. In her autobiography, *To Me, It's Wonderful* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), Waters shares the obstacles she overcame to achieve success. Ironically, the greatest battle of her life was not against racism, sexism, or poverty. Hers was a private battle that 58 percent of all Americans are presently fighting.

At one point in her life, Waters was 200 pounds overweight. Everyday activities became obstacles. When she sang, she wore a microphone around her neck because her stomach was too big to effectively position her in front of a mike stand. Waters said her battle with weight motivated her to shed those 200 pounds, and she lived to sing and minister many more years.

By contrast, consider the life and early death of Chicago's first African American mayor. Harold Washington ignored the high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and 100 pounds of excess weight that precipitated a fatal heart attack in November 1987. Washington had planned to serve his city for many more years, but his plan was cut short by an unhealthy lifestyle.

What relationship does faith have to fat, exercise to evangelism, or Christ to cholesterol? Health, diet, and nutrition do not fall outside the realm of the Holy. Many of the things we are called upon to do for Christ presuppose good health and fitness. When we are physically fit, we are better able to carry out the work of our Lord and Savior. Therefore, nutrition and health literacy are vital to Christian education.

Most African Americans identify with the diet of our heritage and culture—high fat, high salt,

and high cholesterol foods. We fill our plates with food that clogs our arteries and ask God to bless our suicide attempts that we made via knives, forks, and spoons.

Black folks boldly declare, “Ain’t nobody telling me what to eat! I’m gon’ eat what I want until I die.” One middle-aged black man who suffers from multiple illnesses after a lifelong poor diet responded to such logic, “Yeah, I used to say that, too. The problem with that is you may not die. You may just get sick as hell and wish you were dead.”

The people in the Bible ate what nutritionists now recommend: diets high in fiber and calcium and low in animal fats and plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables. Today we have many influences steering us toward unhealthy eating. The media coaches us into thinking we are hungry when we are not. Fast- and junk-food advertisers give a subtle message that eating their food will not cause weight gain by using models who are slender and healthy-looking. They also continually show us images of fast-food and greasy restaurant fare that lures our children toward unhealthy eating and convinces us that we should eat their offerings because we do not really have time to cook healthy meals.

There are many ways churches can support individual believers’ efforts to become healthy. Churches can encourage and support healthier lifestyles in the foods we serve at our many church events. Baked chicken instead of fried; vegetables cooked in olive oil, chicken broth, or turkey broth instead of swimming in pork fat; fresh fruit for dessert instead of cakes and pies laden with sugar and fat.

A person who struggles with eating right and exercising also needs a support group. Support groups can help members resist the messages and mindsets encouraging people to eat unhealthy foods in an undisciplined manner. One program model is the Underpound Railroad Program, a program designed to provide ongoing support for those who eat compulsively, binge eat, or who otherwise have maintained a pattern of unhealthy eating habits. An Underpound Railroad Program of Nutrition (URPN) can help persons escape their bondage to overeating or unhealthy eating and enter into a lifestyle of freedom that accompanies a disciplined plan of eating. I created this program and you can obtain information about it by contacting St. Stephen Church.

## **II. What’s Social Isolation Got to Do with It?**

The Newtown, Connecticut tragedy struck the heart of our nation. We were outraged that twenty innocent babes could be murdered while learning their lessons at school. But the fact is that thousands of young people are dying—physically, societally, and educationally—one by one, every day. Yet there is no outrage or public outcry.

The church should be concerned about the eternal salvation of our young people dying in the streets, but we also must be concerned that they do not become walking dead because they live without hope. Too many of our young people have become walking dead they have become socially isolated and believe that they have no hope for a better life.

We need such measures as conferences or workshops for black teenage boys called “How to Respond to the Police.” We all know that the police officers will defend themselves with any

means of force deemed necessary, some zealously so. But young people need to know how to avoid the provocation of police brutality. We can get them out of jail, but we can't get them out of the cemetery. Church leaders also need to meet with mayors and police chiefs to develop more community policing and to push for laws against the sale of non-registered guns and to push for gun buy-back initiatives.

Churches can develop programs that draw our young people out of the social isolation that kills their future. But we first must climb down from our high ecclesiastical horses to find out what the community needs and what will attract them rather than determining what they need based on our own filtered assessments.

For example, we must ask questions like, Why do black males go to church? And what must we do to bring black men into our church this year? In three decades of pastoral ministry I have discovered that black men attend church for practical reasons as much as they do for spiritual reasons. They are seeking practical solutions to existential problems. They are not concerned with identifying the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, nor are they interested in hearing a sermon on pre-, post-, or a-millennialism. They want to know how to overcome sexual temptation, how to stay sober, how to reenter the workforce after prison. They want lessons in money management, home ownership, business formation, and job skills. Their immediate physical and social needs supersede their concerns regarding eternity.

Some of the ways St. Stephen Church has attempted to do this is by building and operating a halfway house for recovering addicts, reserving church custodial positions for parolees who need a job, stepping out in faith and going to court with brothers as character witnesses, providing affordable transitional housing, facilitating support groups with other black males, providing job skills training and parenting classes, and providing a fitness center to facilitate physical well-being.

St. Stephen's CAMP (Christian Addiction Ministry Program) has taken addicts and nurtured them to become productive again. My own administrative assistant is a recovering cocaine addict. Some have become ordained deacons and others have gone on to raise families successfully.

The challenges that result from social isolation are not a concern only for urban churches. Suburban congregations—of every race and ethnicity—can partner with urban churches. This is not simply an urban problem. Urban trends eventually filter to the suburbs, so it's everyone's problem.

A Jewish proverb says that if you do not teach a child a trade, by default you teach him to become a criminal. Another step of action is for churches to be open during the summer months, offering tutorial programs that will prepare youth to excel academically.

Ministerial organizations can rally for the judicial system to sentence first-time, nonviolent offenders to faith-based training programs that will help them be retrained and resocialized. Our church has sent a vital message to the black community, "We're here for you," by keeping our physical plant in "the hood" and not moving to the suburbs, and by purchasing the liquor

stores, night clubs, and drug houses in the neighborhood and transforming them into viable businesses, thereby creating employment and socialization.

These strategies have worked for our church, but there is much more that God wants us to do. Through His help and grace we will do them. But we also need tithes and offerings to finance them. Which brings me to the third thing churches must do in 2013.

### **III. What's Education Got to Do with It?**

For nearly ten years I have labored without compensation as president of Simmons College of Kentucky. Since then we have successfully restored the 132-year-old school as an institution of significance in West Louisville. Today, SCKY offers West Louisville residents a way out of intergenerational poverty and dependence.

SCKY offers GED tutoring and testing, dual enrollment options with local colleges and universities like the University of Louisville, Jefferson Community College and Technical College, and Campbellsville University, and financial assistance through Pell Grants and other funding options.

St. Stephen Church has invested heavily into the vision of restoring this once-fledgling Bible college into a fully-accredited institution of higher learning. While every church cannot use its resources to help build a school, most churches are well able to make their space available for satellite classes, GED tutorials and testing, and other educational opportunities. They can also partner with the NAACP, the Urban League, and other groups to provide free SAT, GRE, LSAT, and MCAT test preparation classes.

Church leaders must help restore our cultural vision of education as a leg up and a way out. Why should the church be concerned with the education level of its members and those in the community? Educated people tend to have more career options. Persons with more career options tend to be more fulfilled and are less likely to engage in criminal behavior. They are more likely to root themselves in the community where they are gainfully employed. They seek the welfare of their community as they are often invested there through home ownership. They have more income at their disposal and can invest in vital community ministries through their local church.

### **Conclusion**

We cannot fix what we will not face. What must be faced is that Christians are becoming unhealthier every day. Our blood pressure, blood sugar, and cholesterol levels are skyrocketing along with our weight. What must be faced is our lack of preparedness for the job market, our low education levels, and how those factors contribute to high poverty and high crime. What must be faced is the fact that the fracturing and fraying of society kills first and often those children and young adults who are mired in hopelessness and about whom no one is concerned.

A physician's primary concern is gaining the correct diagnosis so that an illness can be cured. Once the correct diagnosis is given, the problem then becomes whether we are willing to follow the prescribed cure.

Will our people die because we are not willing to do what is needed to help them get better? Will we become useless and atrophied because we refuse to face the truth of our condition and follow an adequate treatment plan?

The Church has everything to do with the physical, mental, emotional, educational, financial, and spiritual health of its congregants, for it is all of these components that make human beings whole. Our marching orders for 2013 and beyond are clear: forward.