

## Public forum to discuss role of religion in health care reform

By Lindsay Melvin

Tuesday, September 22, 2009

How often you exercise and the quality of food you put in your mouth are not just health issues, but moral, religious and spiritual ones as well, said Rev. Frank Thomas, pastor of Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church.

That's why it's up to the spiritual leaders of Memphis to address the health of this city, he said.

Thomas will join founder of the Church Health Center, Dr. Scott Morris, as a presenter of a public forum on faith and health care at 7 p.m. Thursday at the Church Health Center's Hope & Healing facility, 1115 Union.

As the pros and cons of health care reform are being slugged out in town halls across the country, panelists will discuss the role of the faith community in molding a healthier Memphis.

"There's a whole lot we can do without sitting around and waiting for someone to make a decision in Washington," said Church Health Center director Ann Langston.

Speakers, who straddle both the spiritual and medical world, will solicit questions from the audience.

The forum will feature panelists, including Rev. Gary Gunderson, author of several books on community health; Dr. Rick Donlon, director of Christ Community Health Services, which serves the poor and uninsured; Dr. Kenneth Robinson, pastor of St. Andrew's AME Church and County Health Officer for the Memphis and Shelby County Health Department; and Renee Frazier, executive director of the Healthy Memphis Common Table.

The Church Health Center and The Commercial Appeal are sponsoring the event.

The discussion will focus less on whether to support reform than on what steps the faith community can take to make the Bluff City a healthier community.

"(Regardless) of whether you're for or against it, the church should speak," Thomas said. "We have a massive role in education."

The Church Health Center serves the working uninsured, receiving 36,000 patient visits each year.

Claiming to be the largest faith-based clinic of its type in the country, the center has national reach, as people from numerous states travel to Memphis to study the center's model.

Since 1988, the Church Health Center has trained more than 750 Congregational Health Promoters, who are taught to start or strengthen health ministries in their congregations.

The program has included blood pressure checks after services and improving the nutrition of meals served in church.

But Langston says there are still huge numbers in Memphis not being reached.

"There are a lot of people who don't even know what prevention means," Langston said. "It's not just getting shots and an annual checkup. Walking is prevention."

There are between 2,000 and 3,000 congregations in the Memphis area, she said.

To turn around a city that often tops lists for the highest rates of obesity and infant mortality, it's going to take the help of many more church leaders, Langston said.

"This is the role of the faith community," she said.

-- *Lindsay Melvin: 529-2445*

## **THE FORUM**

**Topic:** What would a healthy Memphis look like, and what is the role of the faith community?

**When:** 7-9 p.m. Thursday

**Where:** Hope & Healing, 1115 Union

**Cost:** Free and open to the public

**More information:** 272-0010

