

The Fitness Church



Instructor Latrell Bryant leads the Zumba class through an energetic routine. The Zumba classes are just one of the ways Mississippi Boulevard emphasizes the importance of individuals taking control of their physical health.

by Dr. Frank A. Thomas



Dr. Frank A. Thomas is senior servant for Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church at 70 N. Bellevue Blvd and its newest location at 6745 Wolf River Boulevard at Kirby Parkway in the Clark Opera Memphis Center. During a recent healthcare reform forum at the Church Health Center, he and Dr. Scott Morris – the founder and executive director of the Church Health Center and associate minister at St. John’s United Methodist Church – helped explore the topic of what a healthy Memphis would look like. This is the speech Dr. Thomas developed for that session.

Dr. Frank A. Thomas

I continue to be amazed when I get the question as to whether the church should intentionally address issues of the physical health of congregants.

One person asked me did I think that my members wanted to hear about diet and exercise rather than heaven, “breakthroughs,” “blessings,” and “miracles.” “After all,” the person said, “most people are just trying to make it through the week.”

The question threw me off balance because I had shifted on the inside and the shift made my first response to the question obvious to me: “Of course people want to hear about health and diet.”

At a banquet several weeks ago, I heard statistics stating that Memphis led the nation in the rate of infant mortality and obesity. The speaker said that we could cut three trillion dollars from our national debt if we handled obesity as a nation. Obesity leads to high blood pressure, diabetes, strokes, heart

attacks, cancer, etc. and if Memphis was high in obesity, it had to be high in these other areas of health challenges as well.

It was obvious to me that congregants would want to – and need to – hear about diet and exercise based upon the fact that so many Memphians, and Americans in general I might add, are dying prematurely from preventable chronic disease. Sometimes you shift, and that shift makes something obvious to you that is not as obvious to everyone else. The question made me reflect on what I had shifted and I came up with the following:



1) The first thing that shifted was a kind of popular God theology where I did not have to do anything but trumpet God’s almighty power, pray, and wait for God to bestow my “breakthrough,” “miracle,” and “blessing.” Contrary to this theology, I told my members, do not come to the altar and ask me to anoint you with oil, lay hands on you, and heal you of your diabetes if you are not willing to do what the doctor said. Many people will not do what the doctor said or even go to the doctor, and then come to the healing line for prayer and anointing. I realize that there are people who cannot afford to go to the doctor, but I am talking to people who can afford it, but will not take responsibility for their health. Just as God heals through oil and the laying on of hands, God heals through doctors. I shifted from a God who did everything and I did not have to do anything to a God of personal responsibility. I have to fully participate in and take responsibility for my healing. God is not going to bail me out of my lack of responsibility and stewardship of my body.

Associate Pastor Virzola Law practices what she preaches as she participates in a Tuesday night Zumba fitness class at the Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church Bellevue location. (Photos by Earl Stanback)

2) The second thing that shifted was the church has tended to treat the body as an appendage and the soul as what was most important. The church adopted Greek duality about the body and soul – that the body was sinful, lustful, of the earth, while the soul was high, noble, lofty, and of the spirit realm. The church placed the soul over the body. I shifted to a theology of embodiment – that every soul needed a body and the quality of the body affected the quality of the soul; that how one treated one’s body directly affected one’s soul. I dare to believe that body and soul are one – neither is greater and neither is lesser. Despite the fact that the soul is eternal, body and soul are two sides of the coin of life in this terra firma.

3) The gravity of the health challenges in Memphis helped me to shift from emotional response to challenge. People come to church to be uplifted and inspired most of the time, and less frequently to be challenged. Inspiration makes us feel good, and there is a place for that, but it is hard for me to make people feel good with the information that we are eating ourselves to death – that the lack of exercise and sedentary lifestyle is contributing to high blood pressure, diabetes, strokes, heart attacks, etc. Was there a connection between the church’s incessant need to make people feel good and the level of strokes, high blood pressure, and diabetes that I experienced in the congregation? I decided that inspiration and challenge were both cardinal points in my preaching and I was not going to back down from challenging the congregation.

4) My health is my personal responsibility and not the responsibility of the government, the church, or God. I must take the responsibility to educate myself and lower the risk factors to chronic disease and illness. Many assume that health is the “luck of the draw,” or “family genetics,” and many are rolling the

dice hoping that they will not get cancer or some other chronic illness. We can play an active part in minimizing our risk for chronic conditions. We must educate ourselves and be aware that one ounce of prevention is worth one million pounds of care after one gets sick. My goal is the preventive aspects of disease and illness. My health is my personal responsibility.

I began to develop the vision of the "Fitness Church." The vision of the Fitness Church is to teach church family and the community that health is my personal responsibility and within the circumference of my spiritual life, diet, exercise, sleep, and stress reduction patterns, I do all that I can to minimize disease and illness in my life. The Fitness Church teaches that how often one exercises, the levels of stress in one's life, the food that we put in our mouths, and the amount of sleep that we get are moral, religious and spiritual issues. The Fitness Church would promote spiritual fitness, financial fitness, physical fitness, and intellectual fitness.

I do not have the time to go into spiritual fitness, financial fitness, physical fitness, and intellectual fitness. But, in line with the vision of the Fitness Church, I believe church should implement and consider the following:

1) Foods served in the church would support the fitness message, i.e. salads, fruits, nuts, clear liquids, etc; I quote (Dr.) Scott Morris:

"If a church must offer fried chicken in order to draw a crowd, then there is something wrong with its message. The idea of congregational meals as comfort food and, therefore, okay to overeat high fat, high calorie meals, must be rejected. It could be argued that a person with diabetes, heart disease or, for that matter, almost any chronic disease, should never eat at a church."

Churches need nutrition education programs teaching us to eat to live not live to eat and nutritional diet and cooking classes to improve meals in the home and food choices in the public life.

2) Outreach program would center on physical activities such as small groups for exercise, biking, running, bowling, swimming, racquetball, etc. and sports oriented ministry such as basketball, softball, soccer, etc. I quote Scott for emphasis:

"The church must become a place that promotes regular exercise as part of our community. Family life centers must become sites that do not just compete with the park commissions but that incorporate exercise for all age groups in ways that also provide spiritual nourishment. Through walking groups, group exercise, games and other church-based exercise programs, cardiovascular aerobic exercise programs that are based at a church can make Memphis a city where the body is nurtured along with our spirit".

3) Organized program for regular blood donation to give life to others.

African Americans use 65 percent of the blood in Memphis, but we donate less than 35 percent. I would like to see blood donation increase in African-American churches to well over 70 percent of the blood donated in Memphis. It would increase the overall health of the African-American community if we made blood donation as sacred as attendance at the annual choir concert. There is a connection between the willingness to give blood and the conscious decision to take care of ourselves so that we can give blood. Giving blood helps us become conscious of our commitment to personal responsibility for our own health.

4) Bible study programs connected to health and fitness:

I am arguing for a Biblical exploration of health in its totality – health of body and soul. What are the Biblical roots of health? What does the Bible say about diet and exercise? We would explore such texts as 3 John 2 – “I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.” Islam and Judaism have practical guidelines for nutrition as part of instruction from the Koran and The Torah and Talmud.

5) The church must be much more honest and forthright about issues of sexuality. I quote Scott Morris who says it the best that I have heard:

“We must openly and lovingly address issues of sexuality. We would all agree that abstinence outside of marriage is our first choice for teenagers, but it is not working in our communities. Teenage pregnancy, the high rate of STD’s, especially chlamydia and syphilis, and the ongoing threat of HIV/Aids, means the church cannot ignore the issues as we have in the past. Our voice must be clear, it must be forceful and it must be spoken out of love. We must get beyond the notion that the church is not the place to talk about sex. Instead, we must come to see it as the best place to discuss the gift of sexuality given to us by God.”

This also applies to issues of sexual abuse of spouses and the broader issues of mental health. These “dirty” subjects have been ignored by the church far too long. The church must become a safe place for those who are abused and/or with mental health issues to find refuge.

6) We must have a commitment to health from the leaders in our community, especially the clergy. You cannot have healthy churches if you do not have healthy leadership. People often imitate the leadership that they see and clergy must develop a model of self-care. I often ask clergy what is their plan for their own personal self-care?

Clergy health has dramatically declined in the last fifty years. In the midst of the obesity epidemic in America, clergy are 20 percent heavier than the rest of the population. We must build on the strength that clergy bring to their leadership roles and help them use what makes them leaders in ways that give them the tools to care for and nurture their own health and bodies. By helping clergy lead healthier, happier lives, the impact that can be translated by them through their congregations can have a more significant impact than the effect of physicians telling people to lose weight and get more exercise. Improved clergy health, with the aid of healthcare professionals, can play a major step in making Memphis a healthy city.

Healthy leadership includes not just the pastor(s), but the lay leadership, church council, sessions, deacons, trustees, elders, etc. We must ask church leadership to be healthy in their personal lifestyle to model to the church and community the importance of these issues.