

10 Tips to Creating a Successful Faith-based Health Initiative



Faith communities can be an excellent venue for promoting healthful nutrition and fitness practices among the members. Results of these initiatives can flow into the community. Consider these tips based on successful faith community research and the experiences of the “FaithCommunitiesalive!” initiative.

1. **Assemble an advisory group (engagement committee).** This group will provide input and support for the initiative. Having a group of enthusiastic and committed individuals from a variety of backgrounds (educational entities, public health, health care, parish nurses, etc.) and ages is a key to success. For example, including young adults, mothers of young children and retired elders will provide different perspectives.
2. **Identify the faith communities to be part of the initiative.** Interest can be gathered through personal contact, surveys or other means.
3. **Identify a leader or co-leader and engage volunteers.** After a leader or co-leaders for the committee is/are in place, gather the rest of the committee through a variety of methods, including announcements to the faith community and sign-up sheets. An enthusiastic committee is vital to the success of the initiative because this group promotes communication with the project leaders and their congregation.
4. **Engage the clergy and at least one church staff person.** Having pastoral support and involvement has been shown to be key to successful faith-based initiatives reported in the literature. Church staff typically meet regularly and can communicate about the program to the rest of the staff and get their input and support.
5. **Get approval from the faith community leadership group.** Get any necessary approvals from the faith community leadership board (or church council) for becoming involved in a health-promoting initiative.
6. **Assess the policies and environment of the faith community.** Do policies related to food or fitness already exist? What environmental supports are available within the faith community (gym, kitchen, garden)? What equipment is available? Checklists for determining this information are available. (See the resource section for more information.) Customizing the program to members’ interests will increase the level of community involvement.

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7. **Assess the interest of the faith community.** Use or adapt a survey (paper or online) to find out the interests of the faith community members. Do they want face-to-face classes, emails, newsletters, exercise groups and/or health screenings? What health-related programs are of interest? Visit with the bulletin assembly group or secretary to determine the best method for distributing information. For example, paper surveys could be distributed with the service bulletin and collected at the end of the service with a basket.

8. **Develop a plan with policy, environmental and educational goals.** After your interest surveys and environmental scan, help each faith community identify goals.
 - Start with doable goals so the process is not overwhelming.
 - Determine the resources (human and financial) that are needed to carry out your plan.
 - Be sure to include the specific action steps needed, the timeline and the person responsible.
 - For example, try to set one policy-change goal and one environmental-change goal. Write the policy, solicit input from faith community members and get approval for it from the faith community governing committee/board for the faith community.

9. **Communicate regularly.** The volunteer faith community leadership groups should meet regularly face to face and communicate in whatever manner suits the dynamics of the group (email, phone, text, social media, etc.). Consider creating a communication tool, such as a newsletter or blog, to highlight the results. The advisory group/engagement committee should be available to provide ongoing support and coaching for the volunteer-led groups. Communication among/within the committee, the leadership and the faith community is key to successful interventions.

10. **Assess the outcomes of the initiative.** Various methods can be used to assess your goals continuously. You may realize a need to adjust your timeline or simplify your goals. Use your assessments as ways to plan for the future. What worked? What didn't work? Who else do you need on your committee? What additional resources do you need?

References and Resources:

Body & Soul: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): www.cdc.gov/prc/stories-prevention-research/stories/churches-impact-food-choices.htm

Faithful Families Eat Smart. Move More. North Carolina Cooperative Extension: www.eatsmartmovemorenc.com/FaithfulFamilies/FaithfulFamilies.html

FaithCommunitiesAlive (NDSU Extension Service and partners): <https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/FaithCommunitiesAlive>

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