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U.S. Surgeon General commends Adventist focus on holistic well-being

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Jan. 31, 2012 Orlando, Florida, United States....Elizabeth Lechleitner, with reporting by Rainey Pack

In a show of solidarity with hundreds of Seventh-day Adventist health professionals, health ministry leaders and pastors from North America this week, United States Surgeon General Regina Benjamin advocated a "holistic approach" to well-being.

"If we really want to change and reform healthcare in this country, we need to prevent people from getting sick in the first place," Benjamin said during her January 28 keynote address at the North American Division's Health Summit in Orlando.

Benjamin, who helms the National Prevention Council established through U.S. President Barack Obama's health reform act, said the administration's vision is to change the nation's healthcare system "from a focus on disease and illness to a focus on wellness and prevention."

"Health does not occur in the doctor's office or hospital alone," Benjamin said. "Health occurs where we live, where we learn, where we work, where we play and where we pray."

The surgeon general commended the Adventist Church's ability to marshal widespread support and participation among its members. She noted the similarities between the church's InStep for Life program and U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move! campaign, a national initiative to fight the epidemic of childhood obesity. With InStep for Life's added element of faith, the program has "inspired congregations and communities nationwide," Benjamin said.

"I continue to be impressed by the innovative thinking that's going on in the Seventh-day Adventist Church to make health something you live, and not just something you hope for," she said.

The denomination is among some 50 other faith and community organizations that pledged in 2010 to support Let's Move! Last year, Adventists at hundreds of churches, schools and hospitals nationwide participated in Let's Move! Day by logging steps toward a goal of one million collective miles of physical activity.

Church members were able to double that goal and reach two million miles in 2011, said Katia Reinert, director of Health Ministries for the North American Division. Adventists in North America also planted more than 100 new vegetable gardens and farmers markets last year. For low-income families who struggle to feed their children over the summer months, church members also helped establish feeding sites at Vacation Bible Schools and other church events.

The Adventist Church in North America will in 2012 continue to focus on increasing physical activity among Adventists and community members and improving access to affordable healthy foods, Reinert said.

"It is our hope that every Adventist church will become a center for health in the community by using our resources to motivate people to experience a full abundant life and by improving the health and well-being of children, families and communities across North America," she said.
With obesity rates doubling in adults and more than tripling in children since 1980, the need to raise awareness is more urgent than ever, health professionals said. Research indicates that more than 20 million U.S. children under the age of five are now overweight.

Obesity is often the "underlying cause" of heart disease, cancer and hypertension, and is the "number one risk factor" for Type 2 Diabetes, said Dr. Albert Reece, dean of the School of Medicine at the University of Maryland.

"We are now number one in the world with regard to obesity," Reece said. "The United States wishes to be and likes to be number one in everything, but this is not one area that we can be proud of."

Adventist world church President Ted N.C. Wilson, who holds a master's degree in public health from the church's Loma Linda University, commended health summit organizers for bringing a spiritual perspective to health and well-being.

"These kinds of events and those that focus on the healthful way of living that points us to the Master Physician are vitally important for God's church," Wilson said.

The North America Division Health Summit runs through February 5.