

Health

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temple, said Pastor Dallas Lenear of New Hope Baptist Church in Grand Rapids, MI. "We are the most effective change agents."

Lenear said representatives from Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan and the American Cancer Society approached the church about partnering with them on a holistic approach to wellness through the Faith in Wellness Blues Community Challenge program.

The program essentially pits churches against each other in physical challenge competitions in which teams and individuals from churches of similar size tally the hours of their weekly physical activities and track them on a web-site. The church with the most activity over a certain time period qualifies for either a bronze, silver or gold medal designation. The winners earn cash prizes to help fund their church-based health and wellness initiatives.

The first year, New Hope had moderate participation, Pastor Lenear said. In 2013, the church struck gold and the \$4,000 cash prize that came with it.

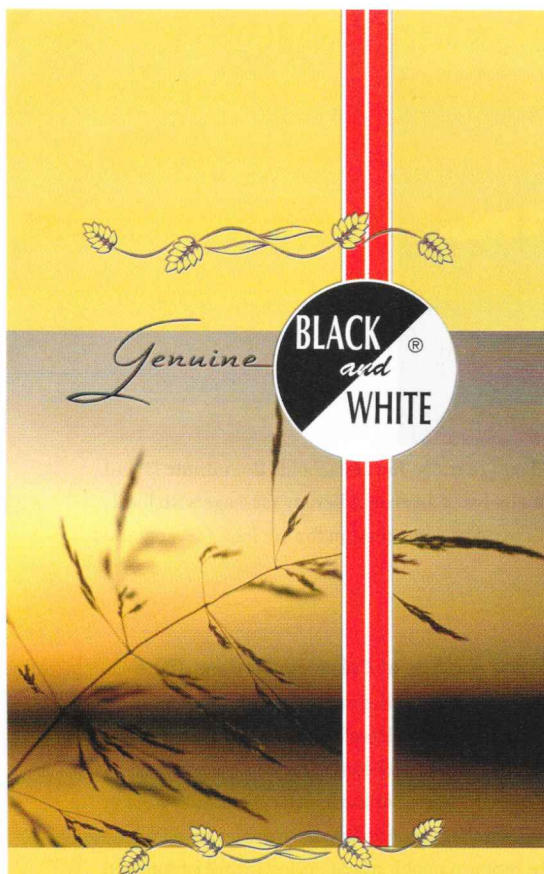


In addition to the money, he said, the one thing that really made a difference was the church members who championed the program. One of them, Aliya Armstrong, had lost her mother and other family members to cancer and was having her own health challenges, Lenear said.

"In addition to leading an exercise boot camp, she recently ran a marathon. She has been a tireless cheerleader in terms of keeping the fire lit under our members."

Monica Motley, director of the Partners in Health and Wholeness (PHW) program, an initiative of the North Carolina Council of Churches, agreed that while the church's role can be critical in encouraging a healthier lifestyle within its faith communities and within the larger community, it's likely to be more successful if various leaders within the church actively lead and model the lifestyle changes being encouraged. "The council and PHW encourage faith communities to work together to impact issues around faith, social justice, equality and health and wellness, and does it by listening to what the community needs," she said.

PHW is one of several initiatives the council operates in partnership with faith, community, health, academic, research and government agencies to provide resources, support, legislative advocacy and education related to the most pressing health challenges affecting marginalized communities in North Carolina—including the Black community.



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