

Church leads the way to more healthful diets

First AME opens a weekend produce market, serving up fresh food and nutritional information.



Worknesh Ayele, left, and her daughter, Hiwot Tesfaye, shop at the church's produce market Sunday at Western Avenue and Adams Boulevard in South Los Angeles. (Francine Orr / Los Angeles Times / September 20)

By Teresa Watanabe
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Dorothy Carson figures her diet of frequent fried chicken and virtually no fresh produce finally caught up with her in July, when she was hospitalized for a stroke-like condition.

After two months in recovery from blurred vision, Carson returned to church at First African Methodist Episcopal Church a few weeks ago. That very same day, she said, the church launched a new open-air fresh produce market to bring healthful foods and better diets to the residents of South Los Angeles.

So there she was this weekend, scooping up fresh cucumbers, avocados, green beans, grapes and other produce she said she never would have dreamed of eating before. Carson said she now consumes about six daily servings of fresh fruits and vegetables. Her weight and cholesterol levels are down.

"It's like an angel brought this to me," Carson, 58, said of the market. "It has really helped the community. . . . Now we are finally eating well."

FAME Assistance Corp., the church's nonprofit economic development and social service arm, officially unveiled the market Sunday at Western Avenue and Adams Boulevard. The festive grand opening featured elected officials, live entertainment, food booths and the mainstays of the show: bins and bins of fresh produce.

The new market, open on week ends, seeks to bring healthful fare and nutritional education to what one community activist called the "food deserts" of inner-city Los Angeles. The Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, a nonprofit economic development organization, has launched a campaign to attract major supermarkets to South and East Los Angeles and the northeast San Fernando Valley. Even some liquor stores, long the bane of inner-city neighborhoods, have begun offering fruits and vegetables.

FAME Assistance Corp. plans to expand healthful-foods education to 10 churches in the surrounding area under a three-year, \$500,000 state grant targeting African American women and children, according to the nonprofit's president, Denise Hunter. Possible initiatives include church forums and workshops, support groups, a cookbook, bulletin boards providing nutritional information and success stories about people who had changed their diets and improved their health.

More than two-thirds of African Americans in California are overweight or obese, more than 40% have cardiovascular diseases, and their high blood pressure rates are among the highest in the world, according to the state Department of Health Services. African Americans are also more likely to have diabetes than whites of similar ages.

In a 2003 survey, the state found that 44% of African Americans reported eating two or fewer servings of fruits and vegetables a day.

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Francine Orr / Los Angeles Times / *September 20, 2009*

Balloons in hand, Jamie Smith, 9, and her brother Justin Smith, 5, check out the fresh flowers as they shop with their mother at the First AME Church's fresh produce market in Los Angeles.

More than three-fourths of those surveyed said the biggest obstacle to buying more fruits and vegetables was the difficulty in finding them in their neighborhoods.

"People have been talking about eating better and living healthier, but it's hard to do that when you don't have access to those healthy foods," said Elliott Petty, the alliance's director of its grocery project.

Hunter, too, said that a grant to educate people about healthful was "incomplete" without offering them a way to buy those foods. So FAME hooked up with Coast

Produce Co., a Los Angeles firm that had donated fruits and vegetables to the church's summer enrichment program for youth.

The firm is setting up a nonprofit arm, Fresh Hope, to take fresh produce to underserved communities and eventually supply local jobs, long a vision of its owner, John Dunn. He said his philanthropic impulses were in part fueled by his Christian faith, adding that finding a partner like FAME seemed divinely ordained.

"For us to find a counterpart with the same passion and belief as us -- I do believe there's a higher power that brought us together," Dunn said.

Dunn, a fourth-generation Korean American, said he also hopes to use the market as a way to bring the neighborhood's ethnically diverse residents together.

Over the weekend, the market drew patrons of every race and offered produce appealing to particular populations: black-eyed peas and okra requested by African Americans, chiles and Mexican squash for Latinos, plantains for Caribbean immigrants. Weekly entertainment will feature local talent: a four-piece salsa band played Saturday, and the Crenshaw High School jazz ensemble performed Sunday.

The Rev. John Hunter, First AME's portly pastor, said he planned to lead the push for more healthful eating by personal example. Hunter said he would aim to triple his daily consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, from two servings to six, and lose a quarter of his weight. But he said changing the church's food culture would be a challenge: Just recently, he said, a church member gave him a banana cake at Bible study as a "sign of love."

"Food is such a part of our fellowship," he said. "Some people say AME stands for Africans Meeting and Eating."

Loretta Holliman, a longtime FAME member, said the market has motivated her to consume so much salad that her friends are buzzing about her new eating habits. The market, she said, has become a social meeting place.

"We're calling people and reminding them to come to the market," she said. "It's a place to eat good food and see good friends."

teresa.watanabe@latimes.com

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