

# Faith-based program is an effective tool for cardiovascular disease education, study finds

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HeartSmarts, a faith-based community education and outreach program, is an effective method for teaching underserved communities about heart health in New York City, according to a study published in the *Journal of Religion and Health*. Based at the Ronald O. Perelman Heart Institute at NewYork-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center, the program marks its fifth year of collaborating with local churches to improve understanding of cardiovascular disease, the leading cause of death in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Led by Dr. Holly Andersen, director of education and outreach at NewYork-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center and clinical associate professor of medicine at Weill Cornell Medicine, and Dr. Naa-Solo Tettey, coordinator of cardiovascular health education and community outreach at NewYork-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center, HeartSmarts aims to reduce [cardiovascular disease](#) in the New York metropolitan area's underserved communities by developing a coalition of faith-based and community partners. The program uses a unique, faith-based curriculum that references biblical scripture in covering topics such as major risk factors for heart disease. Representatives are recruited from churches and other organizations to teach them about [heart health](#). The graduates of the program become health ambassadors who take the lessons they have learned back to their congregations and pass on their knowledge to their respective communities in a formal instructional environment.

According to the study, 199 participants from 14 church sites completed the ambassador-led sessions, with 137 providing detailed feedback via an open-ended survey developed by New York-Presbyterian and Weill Cornell Medicine researchers. One of the researchers' primary goals was to assess the use of scripture to educate participants about cardiovascular health. Responses to the survey suggest this approach was well received. One participant wrote: "[The approach is] ideal, and points the way to taking care of our bodies—it is like using scripture to backup science."

"While our message has a strong spiritual component, it is important to note that most participants said that what they learned most was how to live a heart healthy lifestyle," said Dr. Tettey, the lead author of the study. "The responses we have received suggest that this innovative approach is seen favorably by the people we are trying to reach."

Although this program focused on participants who attend religious services, there is also potential to reach their social networks which includes individuals who do not attend formal church services. In addition, the course is modified each year based on feedback from participants to ensure that it remains relevant to its constituents.

"In the five years since we began this program, we have received so much positive feedback and seen so many success stories," Dr. Anderson said. "We hope to continue to develop these innovative approaches that reach patients directly in their communities by collaborating with people and institutions they trust most."

Provided by New York-Presbyterian

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