



World Council of Churches

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WCC developing toolkit for health-promoting churches

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WCC Health-Promoting Churches workshop, Charlotte, North Carolina, USA. July 2018. Photo: Qiana Hasberry

A new “toolkit” to empower and enable churches to promote better health in their congregations is in the making. A workshop held 17 – 19 July 2018 in North Carolina, USA, by the World Council of Churches (WCC) prepared the ground for this new resource.

The event was hosted by the Mecklenburg County Health Department and church leaders, and builds on the Village HeartBEAT programme there.

The 30 participants included WCC staff, church leaders, health workers, private sector actors and academics, from Jamaica, Tonga, the USA, Canada and Switzerland.

In line with its Ecumenical Global Health Strategy, the WCC is mobilizing and supporting churches to take wholistic action on health, especially health promotion and prevention of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). The aim of the workshop was to draw from participants’ experiences to create a toolkit for churches to use in developing their health-promotion programming. Elements are to include programme activities, monitoring and evaluation tools, coordination mechanisms and technological support.

Church bodies and congregations have historically been deeply engaged in healthcare delivery, and participants are already implementing a variety of health promotion activities in their churches. Efforts focus mainly on prevention of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), using different approaches in their respective countries.

The workshop included practical sessions for participants to present and discuss their experiences and activities. Churches engage, for example, in nutrition education; promoting physical exercise; screening for diabetes, hypertension and obesity; education and support for alcohol and tobacco cessation; growing fruits and vegetables, health education; and linkages and referral to health facilities.

Even national efforts rely on the churches’ grassroots networks. Eva Mafi, programme manager for the Health Promotion Unit in the Ministry of Health, Tonga, said they “feel fortunate to have an effective entry point into the community” through partnership with churches.

The aim is for a practical but professionally grounded tool. “In God we trust, all others bring data,” was the watchword of Frank Parker of Johnson C. Smith University, North Carolina, emphasizing the need for the health-promoting churches programmes to be solidly grounded in data.

The WCC’s Health and Healing programme recently won plaudits from WHO’s director-general, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who said during recent 70th anniversary celebrations, “As places of community and solidarity, churches and other faith-based institutions can play a vital role in promoting health. Faith leaders carry a voice of authority that sometimes speaks louder than that of governments and other leaders. Our shared vision should be for ‘Health Promoting Churches’ all over the world that help to promote the physical and mental well-being of their people, as well as their spiritual well-being.”

Participants applauded the WCC for organizing the workshop, saying it allowed them to learn from each other and inspired them to be part of a vision that will touch many lives.

Dr Suzanne Jackson of the University of Toronto, who directs the World Health Organization’s Collaborating Centre for Health Promotion, said she was “glad to learn how much churches are doing and collaborating on health, beyond denominational lines.” Dr Mwai Makoka, WCC programme executive for Health and Healing said, “It is inspiring how churches are taking concrete actions to combat disease, starting where they are and with what they have.”