

Ladies in red will fill the pews on Red Dress Sunday

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The pastors of three Baltimore City parishes hope to see red Feb. 10 when they look into the pews. That's because female parishioners are being urged to don red in support of the heart-healthy awareness campaign of Red Dress Sunday.

St. Agnes Hospital, Baltimore, launched Red Dress Sunday in 2005 to raise awareness of the devastating consequences of heart disease among women, especially within the black community, hospital spokesman John Welby said.

Only four city churches participated the first year, Mr. Welby said.

That figure has grown to 50 this year, including three Catholic parishes, St. Dominic, Hamilton; St. Bernardine, Baltimore; and St. Ann, Baltimore, he said.

"Each year, more women die from heart disease than breast cancer, stroke and lung cancer combined, making it the number-one killer of women in this country," said Dr. Martin Albornoz, a cardiologist at St. Agnes. "The numbers are even higher for black women."

About 40 percent of all black women have high blood pressure, 50 percent have high cholesterol, and more than 50 percent are physically sedentary, all contributing factors to heart disease, Dr. Albornoz said. "Almost 80 percent of black women are overweight."

Since Red Dress Sunday falls on the first weekend of Lent, Father James P. Kiesel, pastor of St. Dominic, said he would talk about Jesus rejecting the temptation of the devil three times in the desert and relate it to resisting an unhealthy lifestyle.

"Instead of falling into temptation that is so prevalent in this country, we should be cooperating with God's grace and respect our bodies," Father Kiesel said. "God, through his messengers –

doctors and nurses – will minister to us in our needs."

Bolstered this year with sponsors like St. Joseph Medical Center, Towson, and Bon Secours Hospital, Baltimore, St. Agnes hopes to reach as many black women in the region as possible to educate them about the causes of heart disease and how to lead a lifestyle to reduce their risk of a fatal heart attack, Mr. Welby said.

"We knew we could reach a lot of people in the churches," he said. "Pastors will incorporate the message from the pulpit."

Health professionals will also be on hand at many of the parishes on Red Dress Sunday to supply congregants with educational materials and to provide screenings for high blood pressure, high cholesterol and body fat, Mr. Welby said.

"The key here is education," said Dr. Albornoz, 49, a parishioner of Church of the Resurrection, Ellicott City. "The biggest problem in the lower socio-economic areas is there tend to be few opportunities to learn about prevention, and it becomes a secondary issue.

The focus is on education, especially on weight loss. That is a treatable factor that can affect everything."

Long-term obesity also wreaks havoc on the human skeletal system, which will make a healthy work-out program difficult, he said.

In a move to encourage the women of St. Ann to participate in the Feb. 10 Red Dress Sunday Mass, a kick-off breakfast was held for parishioners in December.

"The breakfast was a way to get the women in the parish involved," said Sister Jeanne Barasha, S.S.N.D., pastoral administrator of St. Ann. "It was a good way for them to understand why Red Dress Sunday is so important."

For the first time, St. Agnes will host a second Red Dress Sunday in Prince George's County on Feb. 17.

"So far four churches in that county have signed on to participate," Mr. Welby said. "We want to reach as many people as possible with this campaign. The more people we can educate, the more we can save."