

Red-clad Catholics hope to send heart-healthy message

When Betty Williams enters St. Bernardine Feb. 11, she will be sporting a red outfit and she's encouraging her fellow parishioners to do the same.

The fashion statement is not in honor of St. Valentine's Day, but to raise awareness about the importance of cardiovascular care and the risk factors related to heart disease.

St. Bernadine's is one of several Baltimore City Catholic parishes participating in the 3rd Annual Red Dress Sunday, created by St. Agnes Hospital, and supported by CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield, NeighborCare, Maryland Physicians Care and Baltimore area churches. It's held each February in recognition of National Heart Month.

The West Baltimore parish is also among 26 participating Baltimore churches of varying denominations that have large black congregations, a segment of society officials at St. Agnes Hospital say is particularly vulnerable to heart disease.

"African Americans are at a greater risk - more than any other population - of developing heart disease," said David Simpkins, vice president of planning, marketing and business development at St. Agnes and co-creator of Red Dress Sunday. "The numbers are especially staggering for women."

Red Dress Sunday was created to teach black Baltimoreans about heart disease and how to prevent it so they can begin to make changes in their own lives, Mr. Simpkins said.

More black women die each year from heart disease than breast cancer, stroke, and lung cancer combined, he said, "making it the number one killer of African-American women in this country."

Though St. Mary of the Assumption, Govans will be participating in the show of support for heart-healthy awareness during its Feb. 11 Masses, the pastor of that

parish urged members of his congregation to wear red ribbons, said Father P. Edward Kenny Jr.

More than a foot of snow covered the streets of Baltimore last year on Red Dress Sunday, so not as many parishioners at St. Bernardine were able to participate in the 2006 event, said Father Edward M. Miller, pastor at the church.

Father Miller is confident the upcoming Red Dress Sunday will be a success at his parish.

"I am sure that a lot of the women will respond and wear red," he said. "Some of the men will wear a red tie or some item to show their support. It is the annual Day of Prayer for the Sick that day also. So the prayers, sermon, etc. will all focus on the healing power of our God, in all aspects."

This is the kind of approach members of the Baltimore health community hope will educate minority men and women in the metropolitan area about steps they can take to live healthier lives, said Dr. Hope Griffin, a gynecologist at St. Agnes Hospital and a member of the American Heart Association's board of directors.

"Heart disease can affect anyone who has a heart," said Dr. Griffin, who is also a heart disease survivor. "We must begin by educating African-Americans - especially women - to change their dietary and lifestyle habits."