

Cancer: Breaking Through the Church's Wall of Silence

Cancer is a word no one wants to hear. Yet statistics show half of all men and a third of all women will receive the bad news.

Churches should be a sanctuary for support. However, in many cases, people suffer in silence as they cope with their illness.

Now, the Cancer Treatment Centers of America is offering a free program to break down the wall of silence.

Breaking the Silence

After years of counseling cancer patients, Rev. Percy McCray knows they bear a burden unlike people fighting other illnesses.

"Psychologically and emotionally, cancer patients, particularly people of faith, are struggling with their faith at that point," he explained. "'What did I do wrong? Is there something I did that caused God to punish me?'"

Thanks to his training, McCray knows the importance of encouragement. One conversation helped him realize others need to learn these skills too.

"The patient shared with me that they were impacted more by the support they received at the bedside of our hospital than they did at their local church," he recalled.

It wouldn't be the last time he heard that. McCray said typically, churches deal with issues like addiction and marital problems very effectively. But it can fall short when it comes to meeting the needs of parishioners who are struggling with healthcare issues, particularly cancer.

“And therefore, they really struggle with, ‘What do I say? When do I say it? How do I say it?’” he explained. “And so what happens is one of the number one dynamics that takes place with a cancer patient and their caregiver is that they begin to feel a sense of isolation and that people begin to avoid them altogether.”

Journey of Hope

To bridge this gap, McCray and his associates at the Cancer Treatment Centers of America elected to offer complimentary cancer ministry training to representatives of churches across the country so they can better meet the needs of their brothers and sisters with cancer.

It’s called Our Journey of Hope.

Cancer Treatment Centers of America offers free training for two people from a church who use what they learn to raise up cancer ministries in their home congregations.

Participants learn the basics of the disease and treatments in order to focus on what it’s like for the patient.

An added incentive for a church is that the training is free of charge. That includes the two-day seminar, food, lodging, and materials.

“We did not want to limit the ability to have the average church receive this training because of lack of resources,” McCray said.

LaWanda Long attended the seminar years ago and now passes on what she learned to volunteers at Atlanta’s Enon Baptist Church.

“When we announced we were going to start this ministry, I want to say we started out with 12 to 15, and all of them had a personal relationship with cancer. Either they were a cancer survivor or caregiver of a cancer patient,” she said.

Long teaches the volunteers one night a week for eight weeks. At that time they are ready to take on a cancer patient who has come forward requesting assistance.

She said the extensive training ensured the patients will be cared for responsibly.

"Sometimes people don't know what to say to those who are battling cancer. Sometimes they say, 'Oh, I have a loved one who had cancer. They had that same symptom and they died,'" Long said. "Wrong thing to say."

"I think the main thing we're trying to train people is to have empathy, to listen, to not try to fix it but just to be there, to realize that God is everywhere and God will have a witness in every situation," she added.

Practical Support

She said so far the cancer ministry at Enon is a success.

"A lot of times people don't understand the impact that cancer does to a family and to a person. It's more than just a physical detriment. It attacks their spirit. It attacks their soul," Long said.

Lisa McDermott attends Enon. She remembers suffering through nearly five months of chemotherapy for breast cancer.

"With me it was strictly fatigue," she said. "I just could not get off the couch ... just down."

She asked the cancer ministry to help her with daily needs.

"It makes a real difference when you're just too sick to do anything," she said. "You don't feel well. You don't want to do the dishes; you don't want to get up. You've got groceries to get; you don't want to go drive anywhere. So it's a good, it's a great ministry."

McDermott dealt with one main point person who recruited others to pitch in.

“Everything makes a difference—phone calls, cards, letters—just to know that people are thinking about me, praying for me, caring about me,” she said.

Ministry to the Overwhelmed

The cancer ministry made such an impression that McDermott wanted to get the training.

“We put packages together for everyone that we find out about that’s referred to us. I got one, too,” she laughed. “All kinds of things in a little care package: books and journals and socks to keep warm, hats, all kinds of things, just beautiful things, jewelry.”

As Nefertiti Dixon’s mother fought ovarian and colon cancer, the ministry stepped in.

“Oh, goodness, words can’t explain,” she said. “They were awesome. Just when you think you’re by yourself, you’re not.”

Although her mother lost her fight, the cancer ministry made those final days easier.

“Helping just around the house, food, things that my mom would need,” she explained. “She would need errands run, medicine. Sometimes she just wanted someone to sit with her and talk, just companionship.”

They also helped Dixon with things like meals, which lifted a burden. As a working mom with two children, she became overwhelmed with the pressure of caring for her sick mother.

While cancer will likely continue to strike far too many, churches now can choose to help those within their midst who are dealing with the disease.

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