

Our Journey of Hope Equips Churches to Support Cancer Patients

Cancer is perhaps the single greatest health crisis affecting our nation's churches, and yet until now there has not been a coordinated effort to meet the widespread need for spiritual support among Christians facing this struggle.

According to the American Cancer Society, approximately 1 in 2 men and 1 in 3 women will receive a cancer diagnosis in their lifetime. Churches across America are filled with people fighting cancer, either as patients or as caregivers for a loved one.

Yet many pastors and lay leaders find themselves unprepared to meet the growing need for biblical cancer care ministry. Most churches have ministries for people experiencing divorce, financial difficulty and other life challenges but few have a dedicated outreach for cancer.

Our Journey of Hope is a ministry program created by the pastoral care team at Cancer Treatment Centers of America (CTCA) to fill this void. Designed to provide spiritual and practical resources to pastors and ministry leaders for outreach to cancer patients and caregivers, Our Journey of Hope began in 2004 as a one-day seminar for churches.

Reverend Percy McCray, Director of Faith-based Programs at Cancer Treatment Centers of America, played a foundational role in creating Our Journey of Hope.

"As the years went by, CTCA noticed that a large percentage of the patients seeking integrative care at our hospitals identified themselves, not only as religious or spiritual, but as Christian specifically," McCray says. "Understanding that

spiritual support was an important need of our patients, we began purposefully connecting with faith-based communities and their leaders in an effort to bring awareness and resources to the needs of families fighting cancer, regardless of where they sought treatment. We wanted to offer churches the resources to help their members before and after they got to the hospital.”

In 2013, Our Journey of Hope expanded to offer Cancer Care Leadership Training in five cities across the United States: Atlanta, Chicago, Philadelphia, Phoenix and Tulsa. The updated program consists of a two-day training seminar for church leaders provided free of charge at each hospital, followed by an eight-week small group curriculum for starting and leading a biblically-based cancer care ministry.

Each Cancer Care Leadership Training Seminar walks participants through the unique physical, emotional and spiritual effects of cancer and provides key strategies to help church leaders meet those needs. The pastors and ministry leaders who attend have a rare opportunity to interact with and learn from cancer ministry experts and doctors who share their faith, as well as hear the personal testimonies of cancer survivors whose experience with the support of their church family empowered them to overcome their diagnosis.

Additionally, the seminar specifically aims to prepare participants to return home and begin their own cancer care ministries, including specific steps and curriculum resources. The powerful two-day experience includes a behind-the-scenes tour of a modern cancer treatment facility and culminates with a commissioning service for those who are ready to begin cancer care ministries in their churches.

When they return home, these pastors are given everything they need to recruit and train volunteers within the church as cancer care ministers. As a small group, the volunteers go through eight weeks of biblically based lessons that cover

spiritual and practical topics related to cancer. At the end of the curriculum, the new cancer care ministers are paired with patients and caregivers within the church to develop a personal, one-on-one relationship.

Rev. McCray believes Our Journey of Hope plays a crucial role in supporting a patient's well-being during cancer treatment.

"Decades of research strongly suggest that people with a faith in God live longer, happier lives. When it comes to cancer treatment, these people are more likely to be optimistic and choose more aggressive treatment options because they believe God has a purpose for them. Our Journey of Hope gives pastors the specific knowledge and tools to support that faith and provide encouragement for their fight with cancer."

The response to the program has been overwhelmingly positive among the hundreds of pastors and church leaders who have attended Our Journey of Hope training seminars in the last year and a half. Randy Hammond, a cancer survivor who leads the cancer support group at Willow Creek Community Church in the Chicago area, compared the impact of Our Journey of Hope to what his church does

"We have an organization called the Willow Creek Association, which is sponsored by the church, that helps other churches be better churches. And I see the same relationship here. Our Journey of Hope helps churches build better cancer care ministries," Hammond said.

"We are one of only two cancer care ministries in the Chicago area. I've often wondered why other churches aren't doing the same thing that we are in terms of having this ministry in our church. It just seems like the right thing to do. And as far as I know, there isn't anybody else in a position to help a church build a cancer support ministry. And if there were, I would say they probably don't have the amount of resources and experience that you'll get from Our Journey of Hope."

The American Cancer Society estimates that over 1.5 million Americans receive a cancer diagnosis each year. With this ministry program, churches have the opportunity to step into the gap and offer compassionate care to the individuals and families impacted by this devastating disease. Many churches have already made the commitment to provide cancer care ministries to their communities, such as First Baptist Church in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

“Our Journey of Hope has given the church tools and training on how to be really, in a sense, the hands and feet of Christ to those that are in need,” says Carl Harris, lead pastor at First Baptist.

More information can be found on the program’s website at .