On a Saturday morning in October 2007, the Rev. Scott Patterson said goodbye to his wife and daughter as they left for a weekend of shopping in Frankenmuth, Mich., a town famous for its retail outlets, chicken dinners and year-round Christmas displays. At the time, the Pattersons had no idea their lives would soon be altered by glioblastoma — an aggressive type of brain cancer.

When Diana Patterson awoke that Sunday, she quickly realized something was wrong. She tried to read, but couldn’t make sense of the words. And she knew the young woman across the hotel room was her daughter, but she couldn’t remember Jessi’s name. The cancer wasn’t apparent at first. After tests in Michigan and back home in Cleveland, the doctors were baffled. Maybe it was a virus, they said, or an undetected form of cancer that would show up in the future.

Right before Christmas, a specialist ordered another MRI, “just in case,” Scott recalls. The scan revealed the cause of Diana’s speech and memory problems — a small tumor.

The church responds

Diana began treatment in January — surgery, then chemotherapy and radiation. Like many families dealing with a serious illness, Scott and Diana adjusted to a new “normal” — different priorities, different routines.

Scott did his best to fulfill his duties as the minister at Dover Congregational UCC in Westlake, Ohio, and the congregation rallied around the pastor and his wife. Members sent cards and notes, offering prayers and encouragement. Others dropped off meals and even collected money to hire a cleaning service.

Diana’s sister-in-law came to help for a few weeks. But that spring, Scott began to feel the strain of trying to balance caring for his wife with committee meetings, preaching and pastoral visits. He had a three-month sabbatical scheduled for later in the year, but hadn’t made any plans. He decided to ask for a month of his sabbatical time during the summer to be with Diana.

Dale Winkler, the moderator of Dover’s council, says the congregation’s leaders received guidance from the Rev. Curt Ackley, the association minister. The council’s decision was unanimous: Scott could take the entire three months.
On Curt’s advice, they formed a search committee and hired an interim minister, the Rev. Ellen Palmer Marcy. She provided excellent leadership during that time, Dale says.

During that summer, Diana rallied briefly. Their son, Joe, was getting married in June, and she wanted to dance at the wedding. Steroids had weakened her legs, but visits to physical therapy helped her gain strength. And though the cancer often made it difficult for her to find the right words, “she went from table to table, and thanked everybody for coming, without a hitch,” says Scott. “It was amazing.”

The gift of time
Scott returned to tasks at Dover in September. By that time, Diana couldn’t move without help. “I could leave her for about two hours at a time. So I’d come in here and go home, do something and go back. We got along pretty well,” he says.

One day in October, Diana became lethargic and wouldn’t eat. At the hospital, the doctors had bad news: the tumor was out of control, and nothing more could be done. The Pattersons returned home, and called in hospice.

Scott knew he needed more time. He phoned Dale Winkler wanting to borrow vacation days from the upcoming year. Dale called him back. Just take whatever time you need, he told Scott.

Diana’s final weeks were spent surrounded by family. Jessi, Joe and another daughter, Jennifer, were often by her side. Diana’s mother came up from Florida, and her brothers and sisters brought their families at Thanksgiving. On December 6, 2008, Diana’s battle with cancer came to an end.

Scott is still amazed by the congregation’s generosity — the cards, prayers, casseroles, and most of all, the gift of time. “There was nothing greater they could have given me,” he says.

Living out loud
The Rev. Davida Troy Crabtree, Connecticut’s conference minister, was diagnosed with breast cancer in July 2008. She decided to use her situation to help others learn about <caringbridge.org>, a web-based service that aids patients and their families in keeping friends and relatives informed during a serious illness.

“My original thought was that I would be open about the cancer and use it as an opportunity to do, coincidentally, some modeling of how a leader deals with a health crisis,” Davida says. “The choice was either total privacy or a considerable degree of openness. I chose openness because I knew the danger of rumors and secrets within the faith community.”

On her Caring Bridge page, Davida wrote about what she was experiencing, from her diagnosis through chemotherapy, a lumpectomy, radiation treatments and, finally, becoming cancer-free. She also was candid about the spiritual aspect of her illness, sharing her prayers and reflections.

“Gradually, I began to see it as a way for clergy and other caregivers to get in touch with what is really happening to a person while they are going through this,” she says.

From dealing with a past health problem, Davida knew that restoring professional relationships would be a challenge. She had continued to work during her treatment, but often remotely or one-on-one with staff. Once she was cancer-free, she needed to be intentional about helping people recognize her return to full leadership.

Davida’s openness may have helped change how people view church leaders. “I don’t think it hurts for people to recognize that their conference minister is a fully human being, just like they are. And the same goes for their pastor,” she says.

Facing the challenges
As she was journaling, Davida tried to be mindful of the pitfalls: the human tendency to place oneself at the center, rather than God; and the need to be loved and appreciated by others. “If I found myself veering into neediness,” she says, “I tried to channel that, when I encountered it, so that family could meet that need, or friends beyond the conference.”

A certain degree of role reversal is normal during a crisis, and within a congregation, it can help lay members discover their capacity for caregiving, Davida says. But the minister must be careful not to perpetuate his or her dependency on the congregation after the crisis is over. This “can very seriously distort the pastor’s vocation, the relationship with the congregation, and the congregation’s well-being,” she says.

Facing the challenges
David was diagnosed with stomach cancer as she was preparing for General Synod and her return to preaching around the conference. “It has asked a lot of this conference to journey with us on these 18 months of two cancers in our household,” she says.

‘He’s back’
Scott Patterson returned to work on Jan. 2, 2009. Grieving Diana’s death would take time, but he was looking forward to being with those who had done so much for his family.

The first two months were a blur, he says. While he was away, members had been diligent about not calling to talk church business. It took time to learn what had happened while he was gone.

Scott is impressed by everything Dover’s members and leaders accomplished while he was focused on Diana. They completed a strategic planning and visioning process. They raised an extra $70,000 to improve the sanctuary in preparation for the church’s 200th anniversary in 2011. They continued the Open and Affirming discernment process, leading to an almost unanimous affirmative vote a few months after his return.

Catching up on members’ lives also took time. “People had been in the hospital, people had been ill, there had been some deaths — so part of it was just learning the history,” he says.

Scott knew he needed to help the congregation see him as its minister again. “One of the things I told people was, ‘You don’t have to take care of me any more,’” he says.

But the shift wasn’t easy. Dale Winkler, the moderator, says people tiptoed around the pastor, even though Scott assured them that he was back full time.

A retreat for the church’s leadership, called by Curt Ackley, helped the congregation let go of its caregiving role. “(Curt) told us, ‘He can do everything. He’s back,’” Dale recalls.

Looking back on the journey
Thirteen months after his return, Scott, Dale, and Virginia Lockmeyer, Scott’s administrative assistant, laugh together as they talk about that difficult period.

One common thread among their recollections is connectedness. Having friends beyond the church was crucial for Scott during and after Diana’s illness. Clergy colleagues — within and outside the UCC — have given him a great deal of personal support, he says.

The church’s relationships also proved invaluable. In addition to Ellen Palmer Marcy, the interim minister they hired during the summer of 2008, several other pastors stepped in to preach. The Rev. Erv Koch, a retired UCC minister, helped with pastoral care from the time of Diana’s diagnosis until after her death. And a nearby congregation, Church of the Redeemer UCC, loaned its associate minister, the Rev. Jayne Ryan Kuroiwa, for the entire month of November 2008.

Scott remains amazed by, and grateful for, the congregation’s compassion and patience. “I guess the way I repay people is the same way we repay our parents … to do what was done for me, for somebody else. That’s the only thing I can do, because there’s no way I can pay that back.”