

# Congregational Care and Cancer



## Rituals and Resources for Healing through the Seasons

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# Our Purpose

- To build congregational capacity to walk with people with cancer who are managing the many transitions and challenges of the cancer journey.
- To offer resources geared towards enabling congregations to attend to the complex issues that people with cancer and their families face. It is our hope that congregations will become more confident in their ministries of healing.
- Scripture: The Emmaus Road (Luke 24:13-35)

# Why Cancer?

- There are common themes that touch the stories of almost everyone who has cancer:
  - Uncertainty
  - Disconnection
  - Identity Crisis
- One in three Americans will experience cancer in their lifetime so the impact in our congregations is significant.
- A diagnosis of cancer can shatter a person's sense of not only health but images of control and the sacred.
- James and Laura have had personal experience with cancer and know the powerful role sacred images, prayer, supports and stories play in one's experience of hope and healing.

# Why Cancer? Because of...

“possibilities for the pastoral use of sacred images and stories to confront despair and nurture hope.” -Jann Aldredge-Clanton



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# The Impact of Cancer

- Feelings of shock.
- Encounters with the “language” of cancer from the medical world is often a fear-inducing experience.
- Family and community reverberations.
- Loss of normalcy, identity, voice.

Scripture: *“My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws.”* Psalm 22:15

# Church as Healing Space

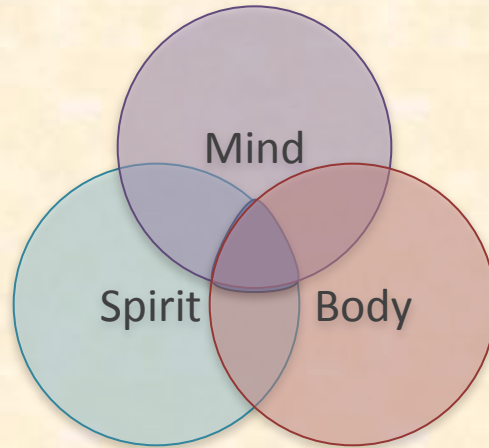
Care is rooted in the Psalms and in Jesus' ministry. *"Be strong and let your heart take courage."* Psalm 27:14



- We find healing narratives throughout Scripture.
- “Healing the sick and preaching the word were inevitably linked to the in-breaking of God’s reign.” - Abigail Rian Evans

# Definitions of Healing

- Types of healing: Mind, Body, Spirit.



- Physical, emotional, and spiritual healing.



# Reflection 1

How does your congregation/faith community understand healing?

What is your own definition of healing?

What passages, hymns or images speak to you about Jesus' healing presence?

# Healing is...

- "Healing, in the Christian sense, is the reintegration of body, mind, emotions and spirit that permits people, in community to live life fully..." -UCC Book of Worship
- "*Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.*" Mark 5:34
- "A spiritual community can foster resilience to trauma and loss." -James L. Griffith and Melissa Elliott Griffith

# Ministry of Presence and Approaches

- We are called to care.
- We seek to listen and witness to the other person's feelings, attend to their comfort level, and not impose our own views and opinions.
- Approaches to the Ministry of Presence may include:
  - A model of wellness in the midst of illness
  - R and R: Respect and Ritual Support
  - A Movement from Isolation to Integration
- “Each person, just by accepting me however I was at the moment, lifted me to a better place.” -Susan Halpern

# Special Considerations

- \* Awareness and outreach to underserved populations such as the homeless and persons living in poverty.
- \* Attention to justice issues of access to adequate healthcare, wellness visits, and preventive screenings. In our current system, there are many disparities related to gender, geography, income, race, immigration status, ethnicity, disability status, and other factors.

# Being a Listening Witness

“Healing presence is the condition of being consciously and compassionately in the present moment with another believing in and affirming their potential for wholeness wherever they are in life.” -James Miller and S. Cutshall

- In what ways have you personally been able to be present for someone facing a difficult time?

# Phases of the Cancer Journey:

What to expect when offering pastoral/communal care

- Diagnosis
- Entry into Treatment
- Treatment
- Living a New Normal
- Recurrence
- Loss and Transition
- Beyond Treatment



*“If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.” Psalm 139:9-10*

# Forms of Support

- Communal Connections
- Pastoral Care for patients/  
caregivers/families
- Rituals and Rites of healing:  
personal, prayerful, powerful
- Worship
- Education
- Faith Journey Questions



# Diagnosis: Cancer

**Casserole/Cooked Meal/Card Phase** — a time of reaching out with food and friendship. BUT, note dietary concerns.

- **Logistics: follow the lead of the family with...**
  - grocery shopping, childcare, cooking, pets
  - lawn care, cleaning, car inspection, bills
- **Support: Accompany person to appointments.**
- **Faith Journey Questions: Why me? What does this mean? How will we get through this?**
- **Rituals: Storytelling, Prayers, Psalms.**



# Entering Treatment

## Casseroles/Cooked Meals/Cards, Cont'd

- People are facing a change in their identities- for a time at least, they will be “patients”.
  - Listen for what the person is giving up
  - Mark new routines
  - Connect the hospital with the faith community, through a prayer circle, or blessing the equipment
- Attend to the holy space of decision-making.
- Honor the person’s feelings.

# In Treatment

## The Long Haul Phase

- Settling into new routines.
- Faith journey questions: For what do we hope? How can we hold onto hope for each other?
- Learning to receive.
- Emotional and spiritual supports often needed- support groups, visitation, and transportation.
- **Rituals: Mark transitions in treatment-** celebrate in the pastoral prayer; offer a private blessing or prayer of thanksgiving.

# Beyond Treatment

## Thawing Out Phase

- Ending treatment and having more questions.
  - Changes in support networks – not seeing the same people anymore, missing hospital supports
  - No longer feeling like we're actively treating the cancer
- Faith Journey Questions: Who am I? Where am I headed? Where is resurrection in my life?
  - Adjusting to a new body
  - Facing new fears and freedom
- Reintegration in faith community (with ritual?)

# Living a New Normal (and grieving the old)

## The Daily Different Phase

- **Chronicity in the Cancer Club.**
  - Periodic check-ups / scans can cause anxiety
  - Continuing to deal with after-effects of treatment (diet, etc.)
- **Faith Journey Questions:** Where did the old normal go?  
What in me/us has changed through this experience with cancer?
- **Back to work but feeling different.**
  - Making elegant choices day to day
- **The Bigger Picture / New Lenses:**
  - Wellness: Exercise, yoga, nutrition, and taking time to be healthy
  - Self-advocacy, being a role-model, participating in community events, growing in desire to “give back”

# Prayer of Blessings and Losses

Source of all Comfort and Power,  
we seek your comfort as we mourn our losses,  
and your power as we gain new strengths...  
Empower us to let go of the old and embrace  
the new as we grow toward all that you  
created us to be. Amen.

-Jann Aldredge-Clanton

# Finding One's Voice- Again



“Each person, just by accepting me however I was at the moment, lifted me to a better place.”

“My ability to make some choices about attitude, being present in the moment, and having connection with others were enough to sustain me day to day in the slow process of recovery.” -Susan Halpern

# Facing Recurrence

## The Rollercoaster- Again

- Faith journey questions: What will happen to me? Where is God? Where is hope?
  - Fear of the unknown, listening to where the person feels he/she is with God
- Supports needed include deeply personal needs, care and conversations.
- Rituals, prayer, images, and writing as healing.
- Pastoral Care
  - Sensitivities toward the unique trajectory of each person's journey.

# Dealing with Loss and Transition

*“My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.”*

Jer. 8:18

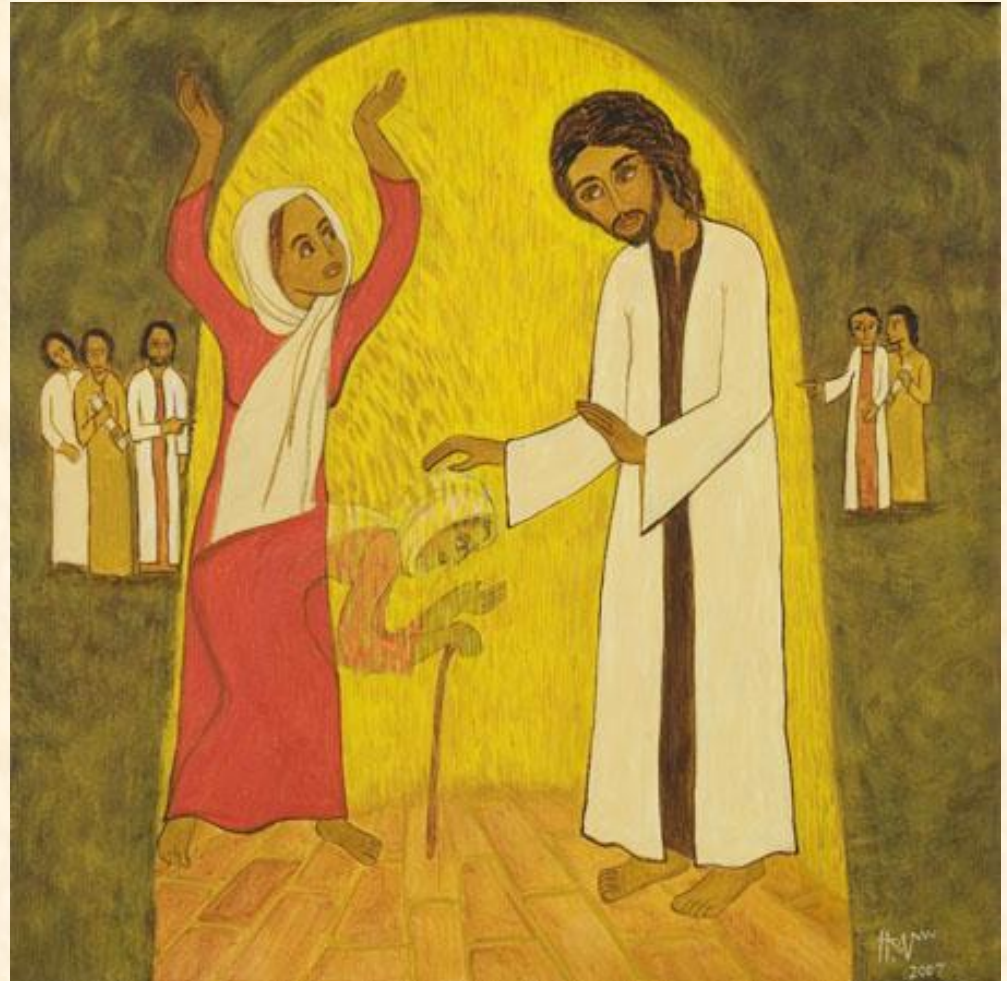
- Transitions, body changes, and life passages.
- Faith Journey Questions: How are we feeling? Where am I going? Where has my loved one gone?
- Rituals for the person themselves dealing with losses (physical, social, emotional, etc).
- Rituals for the caregiver/family/children.
- Dealing with grief and end of life care.



# An Ethic of Care and Hope

“We yearn for healing as well as blessing with a dream of nothing less than the mending of creation as our hope.”

-Thomas A. Droege



# Avenues for Healing Ministry

- Personal visits
- Creating a health cabinet/committee
  - Selecting a Parish nurse/  
health counselor/advocate
    - Lay members
    - Communal / Clergy
      - whole congregation      -personal stories/testimonies
      - small group                -sermons: children/adults

# Reflection 2

- What are the strengths we build on?
- What is your greatest concern for your own health, and can your faith community help?
- Where are we as a faith community going?
  - How might we imagine assessing our congregation?

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“Those in the Church are called to heal the sick, bind up the brokenhearted, and proclaim the healing and life-transforming love of God.”

*- The Rev. Dr. Deborah L. Patterson*

# Assessing (y)our Congregation

- **Congregational Assessment Guide**  
(see Health, Healing, and Wholeness, Mary Chase-Ziolek)
- **Action Plan Template- great tool**  
(see The Unbroken Circle, James L. Brooks)
- **Writing a Mission Statement: An Ethic of Congregational Care** (written by the community following an assessment period)

# Possibilities for next steps

1. Do you have a health ministry team? If not, this might be a good way to develop your congregation's health-related programs and spiritual practices.
2. Are you interested in convening a support group for people facing cancer or other situations?
3. Would an adult education series work well? You could focus on topics such as being present, patient-and family-centered care, or others.
4. How can your congregation's worship expand to address the needs of people facing cancer?

# Closing Devotional

Scripture, Song and Prayer

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,  
That saved a soul like me.  
I once was lost but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.  
T'was Grace that taught my heart to fear.  
And Grace, my fears relieved.  
How precious did that Grace appear  
The hour I first believed.  
When we've been here ten thousand years  
Bright shining as the sun.  
We've no less days to sing God's praise  
Than when we've first begun.

Every human being has a great, yet often unknown gift.

To care, to be compassionate, to become present to the other, to listen, to hear and to receive.

If that gift would be set free and made available, miracles could take place.

-Henri J.M. Nouwen

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\*\*See complete Bibliography attached as handout, and available for download from the U.C.C. website



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# Bios

- Laura Fitzpatrick-Nager is a Master's Candidate at Yale Divinity School (2013) pursuing ordination in the United Church of Christ (CT Conference). She is a certified spiritual director, workshop presenter and speech-language pathologist. She is the author of *Swimming on My Wedding Day: My Cancer through the Seasons* (iUniverse, 2008). Laura has a special interest in health ministry.
- James deBoer is a 2011 graduate of Yale Divinity School. He is in the ordination process with the United Church of Christ in the Rhode Island Conference. He is a cancer survivor, an outdoor enthusiast, a history buff, and a pet lover (of other people's pets). He understands the church's call to healing, in all its various dimensions, to be our primary task as Christians.

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