

Introduction to Health Ministry

Cancer is the second-leading cause of death in African Americans. Prostate cancer, colorectal cancer, lung cancer, and breast cancer are a few of the several commonly diagnosed cancers in our community. To know that African Americans are more likely to develop cancer than people of any other racial ethnic group brings us to the question: *Why is cancer awareness a critical issue for the church?*

Churches play a vital role in the lives of African Americans. They provide a safe haven to the community, as well as a social structure for sharing information. African Americans turn to churches for comfort, knowledge, encouragement, and guidance. Therefore, churches are an excellent setting for community health education and cancer prevention and awareness programs. Churches have a genuine interest in the health of community members and the ability to link church members to resources in the surrounding community.

The church's role in the fight against cancer can significantly improve the quality of life of its members. In Paul's letter to the Romans, he urges believers to respect and appreciate their bodies:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service (Romans 12:1).

Churches can lovingly encourage their members and the community at large to honor their bodies as their temples. Health ministries can help people understand the importance of eating wholesome foods, exercising regularly, having routine health screenings, and using the resources available to them through the American Cancer Society.

The American Cancer Society developed this toolkit to provide health ministry leaders with practical and effective health education principles to work in harmony with their spiritual beliefs. This union of health awareness and spiritual awareness will help congregation members live in the fullness that God intended.

With this goal in mind, the American Cancer Society hopes that pastors will work together with health ministry leaders in their churches to conduct programs and health screening events that support healthy lifestyles. With this toolkit, churches can keep their members informed about cancer and promote overall well-being in the African-American community.

Starting a Health Ministry – A Step Approach

Churches and faith organizations have a vital role to play in encouraging and supporting congregational members to make healthy lifestyle choices. Just as churches and faith organizations are instrumental in fostering spiritual wholeness, they can also help congregants improve their physical health through education on chronic disease prevention, detection, and treatment.

A health ministry program helps members of the congregation address all aspects of health, including their spiritual, physical, and emotional health. By starting a health ministry, you can empower your fellow congregants to take charge of their health.

Step 1: Obtain Pastoral Support

Share your vision and plan for a health ministry with your pastor and demonstrate how it supports any existing ministries in the church. The pastor may not become actively involved in the implementation of the ministry. However, pastoral support is essential for a successful ministry, and it demonstrates the commitment of the church to the congregation's well-being.

Identify ways in which the pastor can promote emotional healing and physical wholeness. Suggestions include providing time during worship service for “health moments”; creating linkages with other health-specific ministries; and conducting Bible studies that focus on biblical concepts of health and wellness, and including of health messages in the church bulletin once a month.

Step 2: Identify Ministry Members

Who will be the key people to develop, implement, and maintain the health promotion programs of the ministry?

- Pray about your health ministry. Ask for guidance in recruiting key people who will be committed and faithful.
- Organize a small meeting of members who have expressed an interest in promoting health. These may be health-care professionals or laypeople interested in health and well-being. If your church has a designated parish nurse or health leader, consult with them for ideas.
- Place a notice in your church bulletin to recruit prospective members. Briefly describe the purpose of the ministry and member responsibilities.
- Ask your pastor to suggest members who may be interested in working with a new ministry.
- Identify individuals who may have community or professional relationships that could enhance the work of the ministry, such as community health educators, small business owners, and nurses or doctors.

Step 3: Needs Assessment

After you have recruited members, conduct an assessment of the health needs of your congregation. Identify resources that may be available to support your work. The American Cancer Society can provide you with sample assessments you can adapt for the needs of your church or faith organization.

The purpose of these assessments can vary, and include the following:

- to identify the health concerns and interests of members;
- to introduce or add ideas about health and wellness;
- to identify health activities or events and existing ministries within your church or faith organization; and
- to identify available resources (such as meeting space and people) within your church and the larger community.

Starting a Health Ministry – A Step Approach, *continued*

Step 4: Program Implementation

Once you have completed these steps, you will be ready to implement activities designed to meet the health needs of your congregation. First, you'll want to create awareness within the congregation about the importance of healthy living. Consider having a kick-off celebration for the entire congregation.

Below are suggested activities that health ministries could hold on a regular basis:

- Conduct healthy cooking demonstrations. Encourage church members to exchange recipes that are healthful. Make nutritious food a regular part of church meal planning.
- Organize a walking club, weight loss club, or other fitness activity that fits into church activities.
- Have 20 minutes of light physical activity before Bible study or choir rehearsal. This is a good way to educate participants about the importance of muscle stretching and stress reduction.
- Host an annual health fair that invites local community-based organizations to set up information tables and provide educational materials.
- Organize monthly health screenings. Work with your local hospital to bring health testing services to your church. Blood pressure, HIV/AIDS, diabetes, and cancer screening tests are usually available in communities – you just need to ask.
- Partner with health-related organizations to identify community programs and services that would support the mission of your ministry.
- Hold a “Lunch and Learn” event. Invite speakers to discuss health topics of interest.

Step 5: Evaluate

Evaluating your activities is important in determining your ministry's next steps. Evaluation assists in long-term planning as well as in determining the short-term needs of your congregation. Evaluate your activities so you will know which were beneficial to the congregation. Health ministry leaders can also develop progress reports, which can be shared with the pastor and other key leaders within your organization. Identify which activities may not have been helpful. The American Cancer Society can provide sample evaluation tools you may modify for your health ministry needs.



Cancer Prevention and Early Detection

Message to the Health Ministry Leader

Health ministry leaders are a vital asset to the church. They are a resource to the church and surrounding community for information and counsel regarding health matters. The role of a health ministry leader is to advise the church and community in the development and implementation of health-related programs and activities. Additionally, health ministry leaders promote and model a healthy lifestyle. Health ministry leaders have much work to do, but they are not alone!

The American Cancer Society has created the following curricula on prostate, breast, colorectal, and lung cancer to equip health ministry leaders with the knowledge, skills, and ability to educate their church and community members on cancer risks, symptoms, screenings, and treatment. These modules can be used to create literature such as stand-alone fact sheets, church bulletin inserts, or health awareness sermons. Additionally, this toolkit has a resource section on community programs sponsored by the American Cancer Society that may enhance your cancer prevention and health programming.

Training programs are available for each of these modules through your local American Cancer Society office. To find your local office, call 1-800-227-2345, or go online to www.cancer.org.

The American Cancer Society offers free brochures on preventing, diagnosing, and treating different kinds of cancer. You can order these brochures by phone (1-800-227-2345) and distribute them to the members of your congregation or community.

Beloved, I wish above all things that you may prosper and be in health, even as your soul prospers (3 John 1:2).

Partnering For Life
Faith-Based Partnerships Project

Affirming Cancer Awareness Through Health Promotion
www.cancer.org
1-800-227-2345

