



# CanCare

## *Cancer Survivors Minister to Others*

Anne Turnage

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**CanCare**, a specialized pastoral care ministry involving vigorous activity by lay persons, was born in Richmond, Virginia, transplanted to Charlotte, North Carolina, and now thrives in Houston, Texas. There, over 700 volunteer cancer survivors have joined this spirit movement and have been trained to offer companionship, encouragement, and hope to others dealing with the disease. These volunteers serve most effectively by making contact while the diagnosis is new, even before surgery or other treatments are under way. However, help can begin whenever the person with cancer needs support. Long-term friendships form through multiple contacts, visits, and confidential conversations over weeks, even months or years.

One unique quality of this ministry is that it is faith-based, sponsored by an ecumenical, interfaith coalition of congregations across the city. Further, all volunteers have had an experience of cancer and have gone through required training. This training alerts the volunteer to listen for emotional cues in the personal stories they hear, gives basic information about the disease and patterns of treatment, and orients the volunteer to the resources and restrictions of the service. Training also addresses the spiritual dimensions of the cancer experience, so that the visitor can invite conversations about the religious resources available. A lively community of mutual concern evolves as each new "class" goes through the training and joins the larger force of volunteers in service. After completing the intense training, the volunteer is matched with survivors by type of cancer, type of treatment, age, gender, and family situation.

Pastors can become immune to statistics showing that one person in three will have cancer. But a pastor occasionally finds several parishioners hit with a cancer diagnosis in a brief period; that's when a different feeling strikes—the feeling that an "epidemic" is underway, that its "victims" need special attention. CanCare alerts pastors to an asset among the people of the parish, persons who have been through the cancer experience. These people are often grateful for their good health, the second chance they have been given. They know how drastic the impact of a cancer diagnosis is, how dismal the treatments can be, and

how uncertainty can terrify. CanCare affords these persons an opportunity to express their gratitude to God by reaching out to brothers and sisters in their difficulties with cancer. It gives them a chance to express their faith in the arena where they have suffered and lived and learned. Few other organizations encourage cancer patients to explore the spiritual dimensions of their journey. They can convert scars into strong spiritual muscles through this ministry.

One pastor, realizing that a significant number of women in her congregation had had breast cancer, wrote a letter inviting the 23 to get together; 21 of them showed up to talk about their shared experience. Instant bonds were formed, and the group shaped plans to meet regularly for mutual support and to reach out to other women with new breast cancer diagnoses. Their club borrowed their label from a Florida group and called themselves "Bosom Buddies." Some churches focus on lay ministry in the cancer world by supplying professional leadership to guide support groups for persons with all kinds of cancer. Other pastors find ways to befriend and encourage cancer survivors. (Anyone who did not drop dead when informed of the diagnosis qualifies as a cancer survivor.) The cancer survivor can benefit from conversations with the pastor to reflect theologically on the cancer experience and to find meanings that shape life after cancer.

For more information, contact CanCare of Houston, 9575 Katy Freeway Suite 428, Houston, TX 77024, telephone 713-461-0028, [www.cancare.org](http://www.cancare.org), and Cancer Information Service (800-4CANCER), a service of the National Cancer Institute. □



**Anne Turnage founded CanCare in 1990 and is the author of *Grace Keeps You Going: Spiritual Wisdom for Cancer Survivors*, forthcoming from Geneva Press.**