

# Living with Cancer

By Miriam Hoelter

My life was going along smoothly: busy as a school counselor, active in my husband's congregation, two sons out of college, two sons in college. Life was very full and very good.

Then I came to my "fork in the road" — sudden pain in the night that resulted in a trip to the ER, tests, discovery of a mass on my right ovary, almost immediate surgery to remove the mass, and the diagnosis of ovarian cancer. This occurred, fittingly perhaps, on Ash Wednesday 2001.

Chemotherapy treatments were begun about three weeks later. I lost my hair the day before Easter Sunday. So much was coming out, I tearfully called my husband home from church — as he was preparing for Easter Sunday services — to help me get rid of it all.

This treatment regimen resulted in a five-year remission, which for me was a call to action. I significantly ramped up my life, accepting opportunities for service and leadership — professionally and personally — at the local, state, and national levels, including election as the first woman to a seminary board of regents in the LCMS. I definitely had a feeling of "now or never."

For the last three years, I have been dealing with recurrences. At each stage there has been the need to accept the new "normal": letting go of some hopes and

moving forward with gratitude for the present blessings, among them excellent health despite the cancer.

Of course, the support of family and friends means everything — and has from the beginning of this journey — and the expertise and caring of the medical community has been a constant resource for emotional and physical health in the midst of illness. My oncologist's philosophy is that treatment fit in with my life and schedule, enabling me to "live with cancer."

As with any life struggle, the spiritual questions arise. As I have sought to fit cancer into my understanding of God's will and work in my life, the following principles and the Bible verses have provided a foundation for moving forward in faith:

1. The question is not, "Why me?" but rather, "Why not me?" (Ecclesiastes 7:20; Psalm 90; Psalm 103:15–16)
2. Some react to serious health issues with anger toward God. God is the Author of good. We know Him as a God of love. (Psalm 16, especially verses 9–11; Psalm 27; Psalm 33:5; Psalm 34:8; Psalm 100:5; John 3:16; Romans 8:28–39)
3. We live in a fallen world. All around us is struggle and decay. Illness is a result of this fallen world. We cannot and will not expect to live a life free from any struggle. (Isaiah 40:6–8; Romans 8:18–27; 2 Corinthians 5:1–10)

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4. Christ suffered unbearable consequences for our sin. Illness can help us identify with — in only a very small way — the consequences of our sin. (2 Corinthians 4:7–18; Philippians 1:29–30; Philippians 3:10; 1 Peter 2:21–24; 1 Peter 4:13,16,19)
5. How do we understand God’s will in the midst of serious illness or any struggles in life? God’s will is “for all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:4) Does God will illness or struggles in our lives? Of course not! But God can and does, in His sovereignty, use all the difficulties we encounter to accomplish His purposes in our lives. That we do believe. We also firmly believe He will be with us every step of the way; in fact, He goes before us to prepare the next steps for our journey. (Psalm 139:9–18; Isaiah 43:1–3; Ephesians 3:20; Ephesians 4:7)
6. We are here to serve God and others. This has always been our calling and always will be as long as we live, in sickness or in health. (Romans 12; Romans 14:7–9; 2 Corinthians 5:15)
7. We all have struggles in our lives. We can expect to struggle. We are here to help each other in and through those struggles. The fact is that out of our own weakness comes deeper compassion for others who struggle. (Philippians 2:4; Colossians 3:12–13; Galatians 6:2,10; Ephesians 4:1–3, 32)
8. Time is not to be wasted on things that take us down or that take away from God’s grace being revealed to all. Crave those things that uplift. (Philippians 4:8; Colossians 3:1–3; Psalm 85:10–13; Colossians 2:6–7; 2 Corinthians 3:12)

Time is oh, so precious. Every day is a gift. I rejoice in the gift of each day as I live with cancer and move forward in faith and, yes, with joy.