

Black churches push prostate cancer awareness

by [B. Denise Hawkins](#)

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(RNS) Thomas A. Farrington isn't looking for cards or a tie this Father's Day. What he really wants, he says, is for other black men sitting in the pews with a prostate cancer diagnosis to know they're not alone.

Two years ago, Farrington, the founder of the Boston-based Prostate Health Education Network (PHEN), launched Father's Day Rallies Against Prostate Cancer to raise awareness -- and emotional support -- in black churches and civic groups.

Any given Sunday, he said, "you can be sitting next to a fellow member and not know that you both have prostate cancer or that he has survived what you're going through."

Like the stigma that women once carried with breast cancer, Farrington said prostate cancer has rendered too many black men silent or, worse, driven them to their graves. The lack of knowledge and support about prostate cancer is "needlessly causing deaths and suffering, which must be changed," Farrington said.

Prostate cancer disproportionately affects African-American men; according to the American Cancer Society, black men have a prostate cancer rate that's 60 percent higher than white men. Black men are more than twice as likely to die from the disease, including a projected 5,300 deaths in 2011.

Farrington said church-based awareness, which can lead to treatment, is "one of the most critical pieces of the puzzle."

Farrington, who lost his father and grandfathers to the disease, founded PHEN three years after his own diagnosis. For the past seven years, his group has hosted an annual African-American Cancer Disparity Summit in Washington.

The idea behind the church rallies, he said, is to "take the message and education to one of the most trusted places we have in the black community: the church."

Lifting the stigma is often the hardest part, activists said, and it often needs to start in the pulpit.

The Rev. Frank Tucker, who in May marked his ninth month as a cancer survivor, has made his diagnosis and surgery a regular part of Sunday morning worship services at his First Baptist Church in Washington.

For a long time, "a cancer diagnosis was as hush-hush as an HIV/AIDS diagnosis is today," he said. "I want to let my congregation know that you're not doomed and you're not damned if you're diagnosed with prostate cancer."

Tucker's own candor has encouraged openness in others, including one parishioner who asked Tucker to accompany him to an oncology appointment.

"I probably wouldn't have even known about his diagnosis if he hadn't come forward to share it with me," says Tucker, 72. "I've found out that a number of men have cancer, but who wouldn't have told me if I hadn't first shared my story."

At last year's first-ever Father's Day Rally at Grace Baptist Church in Mount Vernon, N.Y., associate pastor William Mizell praised the men in the pews in their crisp suits and ties -- all of them in signature blue, just as pink has come to symbolize breast cancer.

"You look good in your blue today," Mizell said as he summoned cancer survivors to the front of the church, followed by men "going through" prostate cancer, along with the newly diagnosed and their families.

"I want you to know that you are in the midst of a loving congregation," Mizell prayed over the men. "We know that there is a balm in Gilead."

At Bryant Temple AME Church in Los Angeles, the Rev. Clyde W. Oden is encouraging the men in his congregation to share "a code" that may help save their lives: "Brother, do you know your number?" he asks.

The "number" men need to know, Oden said, is derived from a blood test that charts a man's PSA level, one of the early indicators of prostate cancer. He plans to distribute information on prostate cancer with a small booklet he wrote that chronicles his own faith-based battle with the disease.

"Prostate cancer is so dangerous, if you wait until there are symptoms, it's usually too late, which is often the case for black men," Oden said.

Dale Bell, a 13-year prostate cancer survivor and the PHEN coordinator at Mizell's Grace Baptist Church, said children approached him after last year's service and said "they were going to make sure that their daddy went to the doctor to be tested."

"Those are the kinds of responses we want to spark," he said.
"Family members are so critical to this battle."