Gathering emphasizes ways
to avoid and combat cancer

Frances Stebbins

With the many varieties of cancer the second leading cause of death among Americans, clergy and
colorful care are bound to encounter
many families touched by the dis-
ease. In addition, their own lives
are affected when loved ones are
diagnosed with cancer and they are
faced with at best a long and expen-
sive illness for which full recovery
is still often uncertain.

And one of the few things a
grieving family can do is to try to
eradicate others in prevention of the
disease and point out community
resources that may make the trial
easier. For in urban areas like the
Roanoke Valley a lot of help is
available if patients and their fami-
lies know about and use it.

With this background, The
Jefferson College of Health
Sciences and the local unit of the
American Cancer Society recently
cooperated in sponsoring a free
two-hour workshop especially for
staff members of faith groups and
any others interested. It’s believed
to be the first such event and
may be followed by others as the
Carilion medical corporation seeks
to strengthen ties with the faith
communities so important in our
area.

The program attracted about 20
pastors, chaplains and parish nurses
to a large facility on Apperson
Drive where health sciences stu-
dents were present. The cancer soci-
ety’s staff work from an office in the
Colonade Center on Virginia 419.

Presiding were the Rev. Dr.
N.L. Bishop, the chief operating
officer of The College of Health
Sciences based on South Jefferson
Street. Bishop is a man of many
skills; his several degrees have
taken him to criminal justice and
the United Methodist ministry of a
Christiansburg congregation, to a
retirement home director as well as
an administrator in higher educa-
tion.

He’s also the son of parents who
both died of cancer relatively early
in life.

Bishop was joined by Debbie
Brown, a staff member of Green-
Memorial United Methodist Church
in downtown Roanoke -- as well
as formerly with First United
Methodist in Salem. She too lost
her parents to cancer and was their
caregiver, learning then about the
resources the cancer society has to
offer. She’s been active in the big
Relay for Life walks in summer and
teaches cancer prevention wherever
she can.

"Over half of cancer cases could
have been prevented," Brown told
the group. Increasingly people are
learning about the effects of smoking,
excessive drinking and poor
diets -- as well as some emotional
storms not expected -- which make
people more prone to develop the
disease. Heredity is also a big factor
with some cancers; knowing one’s
family history may help here.

Next the group heard from
Suzanne E. Seth, a registered nurse
who has specialized in cancer
patients for much of her profession-
al life, and strongly supports pal-
liative care through hospices when
the disease appears terminal. She
too has lost both parents as well as
a sister to different forms of cancer,
which, she pointed out, is not one
disease but many.

Cancer is basically cells of the
body that grow out of control and
rob the normal tissues of what they
need to survive, she explained.
Major organs as well as the blood
and other body fluids can all be
affected. Without treatment people
with cancer will die over varying
periods of time.

No one knows the cause the
cells go awry, Seth pointed out.
Environment, such as direct and
indirect exposure to tobacco or cer-
tain chemicals, clearly hurts some
people though others aren’t affected.
Some cancers do run in families and
may be prevented by early testing.
A minister revealed that his teen-
age granddaughter has been found
to be at risk for colon cancer; she’ll
get checked earlier and more often.

Treatment, said Seth, is still
surgery, radiation and all sorts of
chemotherapy which saves many
who formerly faced certain death
from the blood cancers. The nurse
described improved management of
the unpleasant side-effects the dras-
tic treatment may cause.

This where the American Cancer
Society can be especially useful
with its advice, equipment for
special needs, even some financial
help, staff members Dr. Phyllis
Whitehead, Rebecca Sweeney and
Kristen Lukas pointed out.

The pain cancer can cause is one
of the things that makes the diag-
nosis so terrifying to a new patient,
Seth and Whitehead pointed out.
Speaking as a hospice supporter in
its management she asserted that
fear of becoming addicted to pow-
erful drugs keeps many patients and
their families from using enough
medicines to keep a dying person
comfortable and able to carry on
some activities that make everyone
feel better.
Pain management nurses, such as those who work with hospices, know how much medicine to give and can increase it as needed, the ACS staff members said.

Speaking especially to those in the audience who are faced with theological questions, Seth said she believes in honesty about the likelihood of recovery. "Cancer is not a death sentence," she pointed out, but when a patient asks her if he's going to die, it's often possible to say, "Not today." For those with a family of faith acceptance of the reality that "It's between you and God" may be what's needed.

It's especially important to keep children informed of probable losses of parents or other close relatives, Seth advised. Even young children worry about illness in their families and the uncertainty they feel may cause long-lasting problems.

The American Cancer Society counselors can help. They can be reached at (toll free) 1-800-ACS2345.

Increasingly people are learning about the effects of smoking, excessive drinking and poor diets -- as well as some emotional storms not expected -- which make people more prone to develop the disease.