



Faith-Based Partnerships: Milwaukee Community Health Workers Collaborate with the Church of God in Christ to Address Breast Cancer Disparities

By Shannon Shelton Miller

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Improving outcomes for women with breast cancer requires a collective effort. Family, friends, support groups, advocacy organizations, and medical teams all play crucial roles in guiding women through the challenges of diagnosis, treatment and recovery.

One often overlooked but vital source of support, especially for women in underserved communities, is the church. For many, the church is not only a place of worship but also the heart of their community, offering both spiritual and emotional support.

More health care leaders are recognizing the importance of collaborating with churches and faith-based establishments in the fight against breast cancer. In Milwaukee, community health advocates have partnered with the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), one of the largest predominantly Black Pentecostal

denominations in the U.S. with over 6.5 million members, to make breast cancer awareness and breast health education a priority.



Dr. Sandra Millon Underwood

“Black women are more likely to be diagnosed at later stages of cancer, which leads to poorer outcomes,” said Dr. Sandra Millon Underwood, R.N., Ph.D., professor emerita of nursing at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee and adjunct professor at the University of Wisconsin Parkside. “Our goal is to provide the tools, information and connections to healthcare that will change this reality.”

The partnership began in 2019 when the COGIC Women’s International Convention came to Milwaukee, and Underwood met with Dr. Aileen Stingley, chair of the alliance of female healthcare providers for COGIC’s International Department of Women.

They discussed how COGIC, along with other predominantly Black faith denominations, could address the health inequities that disproportionately affect Black women, including higher rates of breast cancer morbidity and mortality.

“Many women don’t have the time or resources to focus on their own health because they are so busy caring for their families,” Stingley said. “We're prepared to form partnerships and collaborations with teams so we can create better lives for women, their families and the communities where they live.”

Medical information, spiritual cares

COGIC’s Annual Women’s International Convention attracts close to 30,000 attendees each year, giving health care advocates an ideal opportunity to reach a significant number of Black women in a space where they feel supported and cherished. Stingley invited members of the Wisconsin collaborative to the 2024



Dr. Aileen Stingley

convention in Orlando, and Milwaukee health care providers Nancy Wynne and Cherry Pickens spent the weekend working in a dedicated health and wellness space that offered preventive screenings, educational materials, one-on-one consultations and spiritual support.

In one case, the impact of their effort was immediate. Wynne recalled meeting with a young woman in her 30s who had a family history of breast cancer and wanted to keep up with her self-examinations. She was wondering if she was doing them correctly and asked the team for help.



Nancy Wynne

With their assistance, she performed the exam properly for the first time – and discovered a lump.

“We provided the support she needed to better understand her body,” Wynne said. “It was an emotional moment for both of us. She wanted to learn about breast cancer, but also wanted prayer. We found that a lot of ladies who came to our table not only wanted to know about breast cancer, but they also wanted to know how to examine themselves correctly and wanted prayer. I thought that was awesome.”

Others shared personal stories of resilience, like one woman in her late 60s who had undergone breast cancer treatment and hip surgery. Doctors didn’t expect her to walk again, but at the convention, she was walking just fine. She also shared how she was still able to play golf.

Wynne and Pickens heard so much during their time at the convention – from younger women who wanted to give information to their mothers to others expressing their fear about life after a breast cancer diagnosis.

“We just allowed them to talk and express themselves,” Pickens said. “We just listened.”

The power of faith-based partnerships

The partnership with COGIC is just one example of the community outreach health care leaders say is critical to addressing the disparities in breast cancer diagnosis and survival for Black women in Southeast Wisconsin and beyond. A [2022 Wisconsin Cancer Collaborative report](#) found that while the mortality rate for white women in Wisconsin had been declining since 1995, the breast cancer mortality rates for Black women remained the same during that period.

In the most recent time interval cited in the report, the Black breast cancer mortality rate in Wisconsin (27.8 per 100,000) was 50.3% higher than the White mortality rate (18.5 per 100,000). That gap gave Wisconsin the third-largest Black-White disparity in female breast cancer mortality among all 50 U.S. states.

Health care leaders cite these disparities when detailing why more collaboration is needed between medical organizations and community groups.

“We want to galvanize our churches, our sororities and all the different clubs women belong to increase health literacy in the African American community,” said community health nurse Julia Means. “We want to teach our women to be able to advocate for themselves and take care of their own health.”



Julia Means

The Wisconsin Cancer Collaborative, [Wisconsin Well Woman Program](#),

Nurses Affecting Change, Komen foundation, American Cancer Society and Sisters Network of Southeast Wisconsin are among the organizations providing support for this continued effort, along with Froedtert & the Medical College of Wisconsin, Aurora Health, Ascension and others.

Underwood notes that this work is already making an impact in cities like Milwaukee, Kenosha and Racine. The goal is to expand such initiatives nationwide by identifying local leaders, physicians, nurses, community health workers, hospitals and faith-based organizations to build sustainable programs that ensure women have access to the care and information they need.

“There is so much being done to address breast cancer in our community,” Underwood continued. “The ongoing partnership with COGIC and their intentional efforts provide an opportunity to do even more.”

Bishop C. H. McClelland, pastor of the Holy Cathedral Church of God in Christ (Milwaukee) and bishop of the Wisconsin Northwest Jurisdiction, asserts that the collaboration between health professionals and regional faith leaders of the Church of God in Christ is strong -- and only growing stronger.

"As the saying goes, 'an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure!'" he said. "This means we can't just be reactive, but we must be proactive. We believe and desire to continue this work as well as expand our efforts within (and beyond) our faith community!"



Dr. Aileen Stingley, Bishop C. H. McClelland and Cherry Pickens