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Pressbox View: 'Incredibly long journey' continues for Lewiston pastor

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One thing about cancer is that it plays no favorite. Young, old, male, female, tall, skinny, short, black, white, yellow — anyone — it affects us all.

And then there's a day when you think you might have the upper hand and, boom, the deadly disease strikes again.

Pastor Leah McDowell knows what we're talking about, all too well; she has been battling cancer since late 2008.

"It's been an incredibly long journey," she said.

McDowell, 34, is pastor at Saint Paul's UCC/ELCA Church in Lewiston. She grew up in Rushford, graduating in 1995 and doing undergraduate studies at St. Olaf. She attended seminary in Philadelphia where she then served for five years at an inter-city church before coming back to Minnesota late in 2008.

That's when the cancer hit.

"I had pains in my upper leg," she said, "and it continually got worse. At first, I thought it was a pinched nerve but finally, I had surgery. To our surprise, the tumor was malignant."

That was two years ago, in March of 2009.

"I had six weeks of radiation and it appeared that everything was fine," she said, "and, in fact, I was declared cancer free."

Soon after her one-year checkup in June of 2010, though, Pastor Leah noticed a small lump under her right arm, over in the chest wall. Based on history, a red light went up.

"It was the same type of cancer," she said. "A second primary location, and that happens sometimes with this type of cancer. It was taken out last September. It was a major surgery."

More radiation and chemotherapy followed but in January more bad news. The tumor reappeared. There were two rounds of chemo, five weeks of radiation and due to a low blood count, a hospital stay..

That's when doctors discovered that a cancerous mass had developed in her adrenal gland. Surgery. More chemo.

And now comes word that the mass has metastasized, it is growing. Real soon, there will another surgery and more chemo, although not necessarily in that order.

"As a pastor, I was called to help guide parishioners through tough times, and I always had a shoulder to cry on.

"All of a sudden, the tables are turned. It's been a learning process. I'm just taking this one day at a time."

The Fools Five will be held Sunday in Lewiston, which is a wonderful community event with all proceeds going to cancer research.

For the past two years, Pastor Leah had walked the one-mile course with her mother (Sonja Cook).

"I'm not much of a runner," she said, "but I was planning to get in shape and do the five-mile run this year. My dad (Duane) had signed us up."

With the relapse in September, those plans have changed, although she still plans to walk the course with her mother and husband (Dave).

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""Yes, I have cancer but Sunday isn't about me," she said. "there are thousands like me; we're all waiting for a cure.."

Pastor Leah said there is no way she could fight her battle alone.

"This community has been so supportive, and they've been through so much," she said. "I can't go to a store without someone asking how I'm doing.

"And the Saint Paul's congregation has been tremendous, a Godsend. They are the reason I get up on Sunday mornings.

"No way, I could do any of this without their support and prayers. There is something to be said about the power of prayer."

All through her life, it's been Pastor Leah who has offered prayers for others.

So now, wouldn't you say, it's our turn.

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