

Lessons and Blessings Amid Life With HIV and Prostate Cancer

Bishop Stacey S. Latimer, who has metastatic prostate cancer and HIV, finds healing power in clinical trials, spiritual journeys, his faith community and a large four-legged friend.

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When Bishop Stacey S. Latimer learned he had prostate cancer in 2019, the disease had already advanced to Stage IV. This wasn't his first time facing a life-threatening illness. While serving in the military, he was diagnosed with HIV. That was in 1987, almost a decade before highly effective treatment became available.

Although relatively healthy, Latimer was placed in the AIDS ward at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Washington, DC, where he was asked to help attend to people dying of AIDS. He witnessed profound loss and stigma; indeed, some parents were unwilling to visit their dying children. "It tore me up," he recalls. "I made a pact with God, that if you let me live, this is what I'll do, I'll [work to] make a difference with HIV." In the ensuing years, Latimer built a career ministering to the disenfranchised, including folks with HIV, and doing outreach, capacity building and education in the Black church.

Along the way, he came to terms with being gay, and his understanding of theology deepened. Latimer went from being a Baptist to an independent Pentecostal to a member of the gay-affirming Unity Fellowship Church in Brooklyn. He was the founder and pastor of Love Alive International Sanctuary of Praise Worship Center. That led to liberation theology and becoming a bishop with the Church of the Everlasting Kingdom. "As scripture says, we move from faith to faith and glory to glory," Latimer says of his evolution.

He was leading a congregation in Manhattan when, in 2019, he learned he had metastatic prostate cancer. Chemotherapy helped for over two years—shrinking 11 tumors down to four before it stopped working. Latimer's treatment options were complicated by a low white blood cell count, but his doctors found a clinical trial at New York University involving a targeted therapy that releases radiation to kill cancer cells.

When Cancer Health spoke with Latimer via Zoom, he had just completed a round of infusions in a cycle that will last 26 weeks. We initially had to push back our discussion because he was feeling “one of those nauseous mornings.” Our discussion has been edited for length and clarity. This marks our latest installment in the column Can Heal—that life-affirming declaration is right there in the title of this magazine, Cancer Health—and we hope the column will help you do just that.

Thanks for rallying for this interview. I’m surprised your dog, Kane, isn’t joining us.

I have to stay three feet away from him for three days—and from pregnant women and children for seven days. After I get my injection, I’m radioactive. I don’t think he understands, and it’s like he’s becoming depressed. He’s been with me every day—except one day I was in the hospital. I picked him up in 2020 when he was 10 weeks old. He’s an Italian mastiff, a gentle giant. He draws a lot of attention and is known as the Mayor of Brooklyn.

How did you two end up together?

As a child, I always had dogs. When in my teens, I saw an Italian mastiff, and I was like, I want that dog. But they were too expensive. Then [a few years ago] I was on the internet one day, and one popped up on my Facebook feed, and I became obsessed. So I started looking around at breeders. I put a deposit down, and then two months later, the cancer diagnosis came. I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to have him orphaned. I decided to discuss it with my doctor. He said, "Mr. Latimer, you get your dog. People with pets generally do better."

Has Kane boosted your health?

He has been a life changer. Actually, before I got him, the doctor said to me one day, "Mr. Latimer, I want you to do at least 7,000 steps a day." It was a struggle. But once I got him—10,000 steps, 15,000 steps. Getting a dog just starts to make you feel good.

You have been open about HIV and sexuality in the church community. Do you also share about your cancer?

I had started pastoring here in about 2009 and was heading to become a bishop. They knew I was having [health] issues. When my urologist told me, "I think this is cancer," I told my staff, and they said, "You aren't doing this by yourself." When I went to the doctor, four staff members went with me! They came with pens and paper and drilled the doctor. At the end, he asked if I had any other questions. I said there was only one thing they didn't ask: "How long do I have to live?" He said, "Mr. Latimer, let's say this, you're not going to die in the next two weeks. But I want you to know this is serious."

[During a follow-up visit] he showed me images of the 11 tumors I had, and he said, "I want to do something that most folks haven't heard of. I'm going to put you in remission." What he was doing was giving me hope.

When I first got my cancer diagnosis, I went back to life as usual. The doctors were surprised and said I have to stop some of it. My bishop called me and said, "We all love you, but you are not Superman. I want you to rest and heal. Practice your stillness. Practice your mindfulness." And once he told me that, I did.

Can you share how faith impacts your outlook and your health?

For me, religion has always given me hope. Faith always provided that God is going to make a way. If you believe you are divinely made by God in God's image for a divine purpose, it does something to you and for you. All of that says, "You've got something to do. There's a mission." All of that says, "I have no time to sit around and die, nor is doing that going to fulfill me or my purpose." I think of how my life has been used to educate the Black church about HIV and AIDS and now cancer. I feel this need to herald and scream because doctors are not telling us about the things we have to stay on top of [like cancer screenings].

Finally, can you share a motto or religious teaching that has inspired or comforted you along your health journeys?

My philosophy, starting in 2023, the first time I was told that my particular cancer treatment was no longer working, has been: "I refuse to worry about and fear that which has not happened, for it will rob me of the joys of today." And a motto that we share in Kingdom is: "Life has only lessons and blessings to offer, if we are open and receptive to believe."