



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

November 14, 2017

Contact: Lottie Ryans

Phone: 423-722-5101

COMMUNITY LEADERS CALL FOR HOUSES OF WORSHIP TO HELP ADDRESS OPIOID ABUSE; UPCOMING SUMMIT TO BE HELD IN REGION

BLOUNTVILLE, Tenn. – Opioid addiction affects people in all age groups and socioeconomic circles, dramatically reducing the quality of their lives and presenting an opportunity for the community to act.

Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia have experienced the devastation that results from addiction. It is a commonly misunderstood and highly stigmatized disease that has many causes and requires more than one approach to prevention and treatment.

Many community leaders who have observed this extensive problem and have expertise in this arena have identified one large segment of society that can play a powerful role in addressing this situation – houses of worship and the congregations that comprise them. They are issuing a call to action for people of all denominations to become involved in helping others who are in the throes of addiction.

“Every Christian knows the story of the Good Samaritan, but how many of us remember the man on the side of the road who needs attention,” said Dr. Marvin Cameron, senior pastor of First Baptist Church in Kingsport. “Unfortunately, our region is overwhelmed with people on the side of the road due to opioid addiction. We have a choice. Like the religious leaders who ignored the man on the side of the road, we can walk by and pretend the problem and the people don’t exist.

“Or we can do something about it.”

Cameron is one of 15 members of a multidisciplinary steering committee that will host [“The Holy Friendship Summit: Healing the Heart of Southern Appalachia.”](#) a two-day conference at Celebration Church, 429 Shipley Ferry Road. The event will be held May 18-19 and feature local and nationally renowned experts, who will provide a broad array of perspectives about the opioid addiction crisis.

The summit’s purpose is to bring together clinicians, clergy, educators, congregations and friends to share love, resources and guidance on how to respond to, interact with and care for people struggling with pain and addiction.

“We are thrilled to assemble some of the best minds and compassionate hearts to offer their insights and motivate people to recognize the importance of assisting their brothers and sisters in Christ who might be experiencing opioid addiction,” said Roger Leonard, the summit’s lead organizer and an adviser to businesses across the country. “What’s really exciting is the work will not stop when the summit concludes. Instead, we have structured this conference to serve as a springboard for further activities that will improve people’s lives and strengthen our communities.”

Attendees will benefit from participating in multiple education tracts, discussing topics such as pain management, depression, anxiety, trauma, violence, incarceration, prevention and recovery. There will also be several panel discussions, plenary sessions, opportunities for fellowship and opening and closing worship services.

“By bringing together clergy, clinicians and members of congregations to seriously address the drug crisis and by framing our response to that crisis in terms of holy friendship, this conference will be a landmark event,” said Andy Crouch, an author, musical worship leader and former editor and publisher at Christianity Today, who will be one of the event’s speakers. “I believe this summit will be remembered as a turning point in the way our society addresses one of the great challenges of our time.”

The steering committee held a news conference Tuesday, Nov. 14, at Northeast State Community College to discuss the need for people of faith to help, heal and support others in need. They highlighted some of the underlying factors that can lead to opioid addiction and the importance of understanding them in order to address this crisis.

One committee member, Dr. Mark Hicks, associate pastor of State Street United Methodist Church in Bristol, Virginia, shared how his church responded to the opioid addiction situation by creating Recovery at Bristol, a ministry to help people so they can move forward with their lives.

Plus, the group provided additional details about the summit and conveyed that participants will receive a menu of action plans and a clergy toolkit that can be used with local congregations. The committee also discussed plans for a post-conference regional research project that will identify barriers that prevent religious communities and medical professionals from partnering effectively to address opioid abuse and its consequences. This project will present solutions for these challenges.

The steering committee has a goal for the summit of attracting 1,000 clergy and lay delegates representing 500 churches in the region.

“We have designed this summit to serve as a change agent by providing additional resources in the fight against opioid addiction,” said Lottie Ryans, a committee member who serves as director of workforce and literacy initiatives for the First Tennessee Development District. “Through this event and subsequent work, we will bring hope, healing and health through our collaboration with clergy, congregations and clinicians. We see a future filled with promise.”

Sponsors for the summit so far include Wellmont Health System, Mountain States Health Alliance, Gregory Pharmaceuticals Holdings Inc., Chick-fil-A of the Tri-Cities, BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee and the Bristol Herald Courier.

People who are interested in learning more about the event's goals and schedule of events or who want to register can visit www.holyfriendshipsummit.com. The cost to attend is \$25 if a person registers by March 15 and \$35 afterward. Groups of 10 or more can come to the summit for \$20 apiece, and students can attend for \$10 each.

###