

Sandra and Phil Meade, with the fateful staircase behind them, have grown closer as a result of their ordeal.

Falling down, getting up: Prayer

By John W. Kennedy
in Indianapolis

repeatedly spares woman's life



Paul M. Walsh

Sandra Meade scurried around church in typical fashion last Oct. 18. As Women's Ministries director at Calvary Temple Assembly of God in Indianapolis, Meade oversees a range of activities, from coordinating weddings to kitchen maintenance.

Meade had a reputation among the nearly 2,000 attendees of the church as a no-nonsense, get-things-done leader. Staff and laity affectionately referred to her as "Sarge."

That Wednesday morning, only four days back from a missions trip to Asia, Sandra had the opening service of a women's conference the next night preoccupying her mind. But the more urgent task before her involved arranging a funeral dinner at the church that afternoon.

In the church parking lot, Meade's husband, Phil, associate pastor at the church for 22 years, waited patiently to drive the couple

to the funeral as Sandra finalized the serving and clean-up crew list for the dinner. Sandra walked down Calvary Temple's carpeted curved staircase with wide wooden handrails that she had descended hundreds of times before.

But on the fifth step from the bottom, Meade somehow tripped. She tumbled down the steps and the back of her head crashed violently on the floor.

A frantic receptionist nearby rushed to assist and found Meade already bleeding from her mouth, nose and ears. By the time Phil had been summoned a few seconds later, his wife of 41 years had lapsed into unconsciousness. Paramedics, stationed only a quarter-mile from the church, arrived quickly following a 911 call. They lifted Sandra onto a board and carried her into the waiting ambulance. By now, church staff had gathered to pray in the lobby.

The paramedic crew prevented Phil from entering the emergency vehicle. The pastor grew anxious when the ambulance sat in the lot for what seemed like an eternity. Only later did he learn Sandra's heart had stopped as paramedics attempted to insert a breathing tube down her throat. The paramedics revived her before rushing to a nearby trauma center.

At the hospital, about 40 church staff and family members gathered to pray in the waiting room. Eventually a neurologist emerged to relay grim news: Sandra had suffered the worst possible bilateral frontal brain trauma. Sandra's brain had been pushed into the front of her skull, damaging lobes that controlled both memory and personality.

The medical reports didn't improve during the rest of the afternoon as a blood clot formed on the right side of Sandra's brain. She

also had a racing heart and fluctuating blood pressure, both warning signs of a stroke.

Even more dangerous, Sandra's brain continued to swell. A doctor explained that the maximum dose of medicine had been administered to try to stop the swelling. Any more could prove fatal.

Calvary Temple Senior Pastor Jerry McCamey, who has known the Meades since they began attending 28 years ago, turned the Wednesday night service into an intercessory prayer meeting for Sandra.

Within half an hour of the service starting, Sandra's brain swelling eased, never to be an issue again.

By Saturday, Sandra — still in a coma and connected to a respirator — had a raging fever. In an effort to lower her 104-degree temperature, nurses enveloped her body in an "ice blanket."

Sunday morning, a fatigued Phil had not left his wife's side for three days. Although his high school sweetheart remained in critical condition, he made an announcement to their three adult children, Phil, Perry and Sarah.

"We need to go to church," Phil declared. The immediate family worshipped together as Sandra's sisters kept watch.

Back at the hospital Sunday afternoon, Sandra's heart rate and blood pressure escalated. Her breathing became labored because she had contracted pneumonia.

A neurologist called the family together for a devastating prognosis: Sandra had sustained irreversible brain stem damage. Within 36 hours she certainly would be dead.

"He showed us scans that revealed damage to the front, back and side of her head," Phil says. "He didn't give us any hope."

The family consulted another neurologist who confirmed that permanent damage had occurred. Even if Sandra somehow pulled through, she would wind up in a vegetative

state, that specialist warned.

At the Sunday night service, McCamey exhorted congregants to pray around the altar for Sandra's survival. People stayed well past the time the service normally ended. By now, missionaries around the world whom the Meades had met on trips also had been on their knees before the Lord.

Miraculously, by late Sunday night, a neurosurgeon relayed that tests revealed Sandra's brain stem had begun to "heal," an unknown phenomenon in the field of medicine.

By Monday morning, Sandra had turned the corner for good. Three weeks after the fall she opened her eyes for the first time since the tragedy. Five weeks into the ordeal she began talking again.

At a rehabilitation hospital, staff weaned her off a breathing ventilator and the 20 medications she had been taking. Sandra began an aggressive all-day regimen of physical, occupational and speech therapy for four weeks.

On Dec. 23, Sandra Meade came home, her memory completely intact except for the month after the fall. At Calvary Temple's Sunday morning service the day before Christmas, Sandra made a surprise appearance on stage. She especially thanked the children who had been praying for her recovery.

During the lengthy hospital stay, dozens of church members rallied to support Phil, whose pastoral responsibilities include visiting the sick. Congregants fixed him nightly meals for two months, donated money to pay for his parking at the hospital, and even washed his clothes.

Despite the support, Phil became physically and emotionally drained as he helplessly gazed hour after hour at his motionless wife, 16 bags of medicine connected to her body. During Sandra's medical crisis, Phil suffered a heart attack

and temporarily lost his sight from hemorrhaging in his eyes. He credits daughter Sarah and daughters-in-law Kelly and Melissa with staying strong when he couldn't.

"They never let me give up," Phil says. "In times when I wavered, they spoke Scripture over Sandra. God honors unwavering faith."

The young women often recited Psalm 118:17: "I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done" (NIV).

Phil and Sandra say the experience solidified and intensified their love for each other.

"We had been so busy in the work of the Lord that we tended to forget how to be romantic," Sandra says. "But with him at my bedside around the clock it felt like we were dating again."

In March, Sandra passed a rigorous test to obtain her driver's license. In May she finished physical therapy and returned to work, resuming teaching at Women's Ministries functions. Today she looks the picture of health for a 60-year-old woman.



Sandra Meade learns how to walk again during a stay in a rehabilitation hospital.

Sandra has less stamina, which means she isn't as task-oriented these days. She admits she sometimes had been so focused on her duties she didn't hear when people walking by said hello.

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But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

ACTS 1:8, NIV



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SURVIVING TRAGEDY:



How to overcome medical debt

Although worker's compensation covered Sandra Meade's accident, such extended hospitalization can exceed \$1 million. How do families dig out of such debt?

The only real way to deal with such high levels of debt is to divide and conquer. See what avenues your medical service providers offer for extended payments. If you're already in debt from the medical bills, the only way to dig out is through savings — putting money away on a routine basis, trying to cut back on expenses.

The other thing you have to weigh pretty seriously is whether you are being charged interest on those medical bills. Sometimes you have to pay a high interest rate. In an extreme case, if you have a large amount and you're paying 8 or 9 percent interest, you have to consider if it would make sense to borrow money, such as through a home equity loan, to pay those off and pay yourself back.

The ideal case would be you have no interest on the debt you have from the medical bills and that you would have the opportunity to make monthly payments. One of the key things is to communicate with medical service providers. Let them know, "Here's the situation we're in. We got hit with a lot of things. We are going to pay this off and here's what our plan is." A lot of times just communicating with the provider can help you out.

After a hospital stay, you will typically receive a lot of bills from a lot of different places. There could be separate charges from the anesthesiologist and the lab, for example. You want to make sure you understand where all your bills originate and talk to each department. Sometimes a central accounting office at a hospital can explain the source of all your bills and make payment arrangements for you.

You should explore ways to avoid catastrophic medical debt. Make sure you have some type of insurance coverage that has protection against major medical crises. You can help protect yourself by maintaining cash reserves in case you do go into the hospital or have a medical emergency where you can't work.

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"I'm more aware of what comes out of my mouth," Sandra says. "Everybody jokingly says I'm nicer."

On those infrequent occasions when Sandra makes a comment about not being as peppy as before, McCamey has a word of exhortation.

"You don't look too bad for a dead woman," he tells her.

Sandra is convinced the Lord used the trial to show His sovereignty.

"This brought the church to a new plateau of faith," she says. "Now people truly believe God will do the miraculous. They say, 'God did it for Sandra Meade, why not me?'"

"It's one thing to believe," Phil says. "It's another to actually see a miracle happen."

It also taught church members perseverance, as Sandra nearly died



Paul M. Walsh

Sandra Meade enters into worship during a May service at Calvary Temple.

three times. "The answer to effectual, fervent prayer doesn't always come instantaneously," Phil says. "But the Lord is faithful as we continue to seek His face."

The miraculous recovery also has persuaded Phil to be zealous in his prayers for those he visits in hospitals. "I see sick people every day and I had grown accustomed to death and dying," he says. "This has shaken me to not accept what the doctors' reports are. Now I really believe there is nothing God cannot do." **tpe**

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E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.