

## A Cup of Kindness for Those Touched By Cancer

Sterling Service Tea Ministry offers happiness and hope

By [Mark Ray](#)

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*Credit: Mark Ray*

Late on a Saturday morning in early December, nearly 70 women gathered around elegant tables at Christ Church United Methodist in Louisville, Ky. For the next two hours, they enjoyed an abundance of teas, homemade foods and delectable desserts and talked about every topic but the one thing they had in common: cancer.

Some of the women were survivors. Some were still in treatment. Some had buried parents, husbands or siblings. Some had simply come to support a friend. All were there for respite from the disease that loomed so large in their lives.

“You automatically feel like you’re among friends,” said guest Randi Eden. “It’s people that have shared not your exact experience with it, but you’ve got that common bond.”

## Finding and Sharing Cancer Support

Eden should know. An 18-year cancer survivor, she has been coming to the church’s thrice-annual teas for more than a decade. At first, she was a recent survivor looking for support. Now, by her very presence, she models for other guests the promise of life after cancer.

“That’s always one of the first questions: How far out are you? Are you in treatment?” Eden said. “By having interaction with people that are farther out, they [say], ‘Oh, that does give me hope.’”



*Credit: Mark Ray*

Hope is exactly what Christ Church member Trudy Wheeler set out to offer when she founded the Sterling Service Tea Ministry in 2004. A lifelong tea lover, Wheeler had often enjoyed visiting tea rooms with her friend Janis Kittleson, but those visits ended when Kittleson lost her battle with colon cancer at 46.

“After she died, the idea came to me to create something that could honor her,” Wheeler said. “The thought was very elegant tea parties for women of cancer.”

A graduate of the tea school at Danville, Ky.’s Elmwood Inn, Wheeler gathered a half-dozen women and began planning Sterling Service’s first event. The church provided \$300 and a list of members who’d been touched by cancer; Wheeler and her friends prepared food and loaned plates and utensils. Since the same women set up, served and washed dishes, it made for a long day – especially when they started sorting silverware afterwards.

“We were all either holding pieces of silver very close to our eyes or taking our glasses off and saying, ‘Whose Reed & Barton is this?’ There was every name of silverware you can think of,” Wheeler said. “The next thing that we purchased was flatware!”

Thirteen years later, the ministry has its own flatware, its own tables and tablecloths, its own three-tier trays and its own mismatched china, which volunteer Morgan Stratton artfully groups

by color and style. The ministry also has dozens of volunteers, with separate teams of women and men now handling set-up, serving and cleanup. Most volunteers are church members, most guests come from the community.

## **An Elegant Meal and More**

What hasn't changed over the years is the program.

Each tea begins with a prayer. Then, as live music plays in the background, servers offer guests three types of tea; options in December were "Christmas in a Cup," a peppermint herbal infusion and the Sterling Service Blend, which the Elmwood Inn created for the ministry.

Next, servers deliver trays laden with food: typically two or three types of sandwiches, two or three savory options and a variety of desserts.

Finally, guests are offered sorbet or (as in December) peppermint ice cream.

There's usually a guest speaker, such as someone who talks about interior decorating or tea or some other non-medical topic. Whatever their topic, speakers often mention their own cancer experience, as did gardening expert Cindi Sullivan from the local NBC affiliate.

"She hadn't told anyone that her mother had cancer and had just recently passed away," Wheeler said. "When she came, she told the story."

The sort of meal Sterling Service provides might cost \$35 in a tearoom, but guests are never asked to pay. Instead, the ministry gets by on monetary gifts, in-kind donations and sales of loose tea from the Elmwood Inn. "They allow us to buy it at a lesser price, and we sell it for \$10," Wheeler said.

Some women, like Eden, are regulars at the events; others move on once they've beaten the disease. One guest came for years, then asked to be removed from the invitation list, which now numbers more than 120. "It was fabulous, but I'm taking my name off the list," she told Wheeler. "I don't need it anymore; I'm out of the woods."

Others are not so lucky. Several years ago, a frequent guest called to ask if she could have a whole table at the next event. Before Wheeler could respond, the woman said quietly, "I think this will be my last tea."

That's just what it turned out to be. But at that tea, the woman and five relatives were able to spend two hours not thinking about what lay ahead. Her obituary asked that memorial gifts go to the ministry, ensuring that other women in her position would have the opportunity, at least for a moment, to smile and laugh and enjoy a cup of kindness.

Since founding the Sterling Service Tea Ministry, Wheeler has helped women in several other states set up similar programs at their churches. As long as the programs focus on cancer, they may use the ministry's name and logo free of charge. For more information, visit [Christ Church United Methodist Tea Ministry](#).



By [Mark Ray](#).

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