

DEATH TO LIFE THROUGH GRACE: SPOTLIGHT ON THE OPIOID CRISIS

This recently appeared in the *New York Times* when they asked readers to [submit stories](#) of how opioid abuse has affected their lives:

“My son has been addicted to opiates for 11 years now, first OxyContin, then heroin. Every time he lied to me about getting clean, I would believe him and try to help him out. Now I just hope his bottom is not his death. This is something no parent can be at peace with. My son is dead but not dead.” — *Ross (father)*

Dead, but not dead. Can these bones live?

Overdose deaths in New Jersey are nearly equal to the number of deaths from car crashes. In 2015, for the first time, deaths from heroin [surpassed gun homicides](#). New Jersey has seen a 22% increase in overdose deaths in the past two years in all counties in the state.

A CDC study noted that users of prescription drugs are 40 times more likely to use heroin, a figure that cements commonly prescribed medication as a threshold for use of more dangerous substances -- a pipeline that has yet to be brought under control. Communities of color continue to feel the detrimental effects of the criminalization of addiction, which today is being replaced by a new focus on harm reduction and improved public health. Moving forward, the church must also give ongoing attention to the racial disparities relevant to addiction its treatment.

By setting a constructive and compassionate tone in conversations on opioid abuse, we can achieve the imperative of chipping away at the stigma of opioid addiction. Stigma can prevent parents and clergy from speaking with youth about the dangers of opioids, prevent individuals struggling with opioid addiction from seeking the treatments they need, and prevent cities and counties from providing these treatments. Help eliminate the shame.

CVS pharmacies this past week announced that in the Garden State they will began selling Narcan without a prescription. This is a life-saving decision. An individual can be revived from a heroin overdose with Narcan, but the effects of the narcotic are suspended only temporarily and 911 should still be called. They need other medications that can only be administered by a doctor or an emergency room.

In the narrative of Ezekiel 37:1-14, God and Ezekiel work together to bring life back to the dry bones. God adds sinews and tendons, flesh, and muscles to make them strong, and skin to give them form. Yet still they lie lifeless. God tells the prophet to speak the spirit, or breath -- and Ezekiel does so. The spirit breath blows from the four winds and the bodies live.

Divine action and a human response appear to be the model for healing in this text. Initiative comes from God, who wills all people to be free from the disease of addiction. Healing and recovery are possible. The good news is that our governor and state legislators have been speaking truth about this crisis and resources are being appropriated to promote healing -- breath is being breathed into the plight of so many.

What can you and your congregation do?

- Get acquainted with the [new state website](#) that offers help and information.
- If your members have narcotics that are not needed any longer, take them to appropriate locations for proper disposal. Medicine Drop locations can be [found here](#) or by asking your pharmacists. Do not flush medication in the toilet, this will harm our water supply.
- Continue showing love, support, and grace to community members struggling with addiction. Talk about this issue openly. Only grace fills the gap between what we are made for, and what we ourselves can manage.