

Church in Nursing Homes: Developing a Worship Ministry Marlene F. Brands, Contract editor at Faith Alive Christian Resources

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Calvin College
1855 Knollcrest Circle SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49546-4402*

My 88-year-old mother has lived in a nursing home for almost four years. That's more than 200 Sundays! Frequently I ask, "Mom, did you go to church today?" Always she answers, "Oh, there's no church here." On several occasions I've attended the afternoon worship, and almost always I'd have to agree.

We never outlive our need to grow spiritually and to be part of a worshiping community. Yet all too often residents of nursing homes do not experience meaningful worship. Unless a staff chaplain is available, this ministry may be delegated to volunteers who may be unprepared to minister effectively.

So how can we do "church" in nursing homes more effectively? I'd like to focus on two areas: developing a gift-based ministry and creating a worshipful environment.

Developing a Gift-Based Ministry

Here's an objective place to start: recognize that not everyone has the gift of ministering to the frail elderly. When you do that, you may be surprised at who *does* have that gift. Be sure to include my eleven-year-old grandson, who has drafted a plan for a retirement village and who recognizes that "loneliness is a big problem." Add the soft-spoken fourteen-year-old boy who volunteers to serve coffee and cookies at my mother's nursing home. How about the retired high school principal and his wife who share programs from their 50th anniversary with each resident, whom they call by name? And then there's my uncle, who faithfully sends my mother devotions via e-mail.

This is a wonderful opportunity for intergenerational ministry. Look for those within your church family who show love and compassion for the elderly, and then:

- train them to minister as a team, using their unique gifts.
- network with other congregations to develop and train partner teams.
- work cooperatively with nursing home staff to schedule and set up a time and place for worship.

Creating a Worshipful Environment

Unless a nursing home has a chapel or other space dedicated exclusively to worship, creating a worshipful environment is vital. It's the sensory cue my mother and her peers, especially those who may struggle with dementia, need to recognize "church." Think of the stimuli you experience as you first enter a familiar place of worship. Then bring these cues to the multipurpose space at a nursing home.

Use the following ways to engage residents the moment they approach the worship area:

- Arrange a podium or small table and chairs to simulate a sanctuary setting. Plan for easy access for residents in wheelchairs.
- Hang a worship banner at the front or by the door. Consider rotating banners to reflect the church year, giving residents yet another point of orientation.
- Light a fragrant candle. The sense of smell may capture the attention of a resident with limited vision or hearing. (You'll want to check first with staff to make sure none of the worshipers has fragrance allergies.)
- Play familiar hymns as people gather. Sometimes a piano or organ may be available, but residents will appreciate a variety of instruments. This is a great way to involve members of your congregation who may not otherwise feel gifted for this particular ministry.
- Welcome worshipers by name. Nametags are a must for the team and for residents and will add intimacy to the routine of greeting one another.
- Involve the residents as greeters, ushers, and so on. Remember that we all have gifts to share!

So the team is in place; a worshipful environment has been created. Now what? The team will need information about the diverse characteristics and needs of the elderly in nursing homes and training to incorporate the key elements of worship into a brief service.

Meanwhile, imagine two hundred Sundays without church. While they long for heaven and home, the frail elderly need to experience "church here." Let's not neglect the gathering of these saints.