

# WHAT THE CHURCH CAN DO TO MINISTER WITH PERSONS LIVING WITH DEMENTIA OR THEIR CAREGIVERS

By Pat Baker, MS

Alzheimer's or other dementia type diseases are scary for the person living with the disease as well as their caregivers. Ministry for and with persons with dementia and their caregivers can be a pretty uncomfortable prospect if you have no experience being around persons challenged with these diseases. Hopefully this article will bring about some comfort and hope for an effective ministry with God's "confused" angels.

In order to have a responsible ministry you have to have some understanding of Alzheimer's or related diseases. In this case knowledge is power but it will also give you a sense of comfort to know more about what caregivers are dealing with and where the person afflicted is coming from. There is a lot of misunderstanding about Alzheimer's and related dementia. Another factor is that the medical profession is finding out more and more about the disease every day so the facts are constantly changing. Having a clear understanding of the disease will empower the church members and keep them coming back to volunteer.

Organizations like the Alzheimer's Association can provide outstanding informational sessions with church volunteers who feel the Spirit moving them to ministry with this group. Every state and territory is covered by an Alzheimer's Association and you can find out more information by going to <http://www.alz.org/>. You can also check around your state for physicians who specialize in treating persons with dementia. Another excellent resource is Teepa Snow <http://teepasnow.com/> who offers online training, informative videos and conferences. Her positive approach provides excellent information in caring for those living with dementia.

Each year at the annual conference of the American Society on Aging they offer several workshops on practical tips and techniques for working with memory impaired. One this year asked conference goers, when thinking of dementia, to think of using "habilitation" instead of "rehabilitation." Rehabilitation helps a person to re-learn abilities they've lost whereas habilitation helps a person with dementia use remaining abilities and skills and creates an atmosphere around the person to promote emotion. Habilitation focuses on making the most of remaining skills and abilities and does not focus on limitations or trying to teach what they have lost. This is a perfect model for a ministry for and with persons with Alzheimer's and related diseases. An example of this would be when working with a person with dementia (who was a regular church goer and pianist), try playing a piano around them and asking them to sit with you as you play. This could be very soothing.

The way one communicates with someone with dementia could be the key to a successful ministry. Positive communication with a person with dementia includes lots of smiling, light heartedness, not being critical, or fussing. Negative communication includes correcting everything they say, telling them you have heard that story a million

times, and pointing fingers at them. Just knowing those simple points can bring about a comfortable situation between a volunteer and a person living with dementia. Other techniques for good communication include:

- Nonverbal communication - positive body language, facial expressions, gestures, posture, low volume of your voice.
- Making an emotional connection - pictures, church, hymns, talk about neutral topics - animals, games, children, food.
- Join them in their reality - enter their world.
- Therapeutic Fiblets - little white lies to protect the person, not upset them, BUT talk to the family / caregivers about this before you enter into a conversation.
- Focus on feelings...not the words - Don't over react to their words but repeat back to them "it sounds like you are very angry, you look tired, does something hurt, you look so upset...is there anything I can do?"

Remember these communications dos and don'ts:

DO:

- Call the person by name
- Tell them who you are
- Use gestures or hand motions...but be gentle...not big and confusing
- Give one step at a time directions

DON'T:

- Don't reason or explain
- Don't ignore or deny their emotions (fear, anger, sorrow)
- Don't take what they say personally
- Don't point out or correct their misstatements
- Try really hard to not use the word "no"

Another proven technique that should be part of the ministry is don't forget to recognize their sorrow. Don't try to fix it...grieve with them!! Cry with them, pray with them.

A word of caution before embarking on this ministry is to be sure that the Minister, the session and the board of deacons are aware of what you are preparing to do. I would consider inviting them to be part of the training on the basics of the disease because in this day and age, they will have to deal with this health issue in their ministry as a pastor, deacon or elder. Here are the statistics:

- 1 in 3 seniors die with Alzheimer's or another dementia.
- 1 in 9 people aged 65 or older has Alzheimer's.
- Alzheimer's disease is the only cause of death in the top 10 in America that cannot be prevented, cured or slowed.
- About 1/3 of people over 85 have Alzheimer's Disease
- Of those with the disease an estimated 15% are 64-74 years of age, 43% are 75-84, and 38% are over 85.

*(Alzheimer's Association. 2015 Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures)*

Another way a church can minister to persons with dementia is to minister to their caregivers. The challenges and burdens can be great and often too hard to handle. Recognizing that alone can be comforting. The Alzheimer's Association can also educate caregivers and take some of those unknown burdens off of them.

The ministry can offer spiritual and emotional support. Get to know the person who is the caregiver. Their entire life might be revolving around the person they are caring for. Remember they did not always have that role. If you don't know them get to know them and the challenges they are facing. Most of the time all they need is for someone to listen with an empathic ear or allow them an opportunity to vent knowing they will not be judged. They are also grieving for the spouse or parent or friend who is no longer the person they once knew.

One needs to also consider that the caregiver might be in denial. This happens often especially with a spouse or adult child who has been around the person a lot and hasn't seen the gradual changes. A kind and gentle way to help them would be to get to know the care receiver through their eyes. Ask them; "Tell me about your spouse, mother, father, and sister before you started noticing changes." This is usually a positive way to get into the difficult conversation about the challenges they are dealing with now. If they aren't in denial ask them to tell you about the dementia, and what they know about it. If they lack knowledge, you could ask them if the church put together a class on the basics of dementia would they attend and what questions might they have or what would they be interested in learning. Providing an informational session for anyone interested at the church would allow persons who are struggling with their feelings or lack of knowledge to come and be part of a crowd and not singled out.

Starting a support group at the church for caregivers of persons with dementia could also be a very effective ministry not only for your church but a good outreach opportunity for the community. The Alzheimer's Association can also help with getting one started.

An excellent resource for a church who wants to go further and look into adult day services or respite care for caregivers is Robin Dill's book *Walking With Grace: Tools For Implementing And Launching A Congregational Respite Program*. Grace Arbor Adult Day Center is directed by Robin Dill at the Lawrenceville United Methodist Church in Lawrenceville, GA. This book offers a very comprehensive description of the process of starting a ministry such as this and making it a success. Her goals for each day say a lot about the commitment the church has for this very successful ministry. They are:

1. To honor and glorify God
2. To provide love, acceptance, and joy to the participants
3. To provide a service opportunity for the volunteers for the church and community to use their gifts and talents at Grace Arbor
4. To provide opportunities for the participants to feel accepted, purposeful, independent, and successful - and to laugh!

Hopefully though this article you will consider exploring the way your congregation can reach out to persons who are facing the challenges of Alzheimer's and related dementia and their caregivers. Good luck with your ministry it is greatly needed!

**Pat Baker's** career in the field of aging spans over 45 years in both the private and public sector. Most of her career has been directing government programs funded under the Older Americans Act in Texas, Oklahoma and Georgia. She served as a lay leader of older adult ministry in Texas in the 80's. She recently retired as the Director of Health and Human Services/Senior Services for Gwinnett County, GA. Her dream in retirement was to return to Older Adult Ministry, so in early 2019 she took a position at St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Tucker, GA where she is the Director of Older Adult and Caregiver Ministries. Pat has been involved with POAMN since its inception and has served in various officer positions. She started the Older Adult Ministry Certificate Program at Columbia Presbyterian Theological Seminary in the Spring of 2019. One of her passions is working with family caregivers and she currently facilitates three caregiver support groups. She laughingly says that she "has failed at retirement!"