



**FRAIL ELDERLY
IN THE PEW AND
HOW MIGHT WE
KEEP THEM IN
WORSHIP?**

Written by Sue Bolha, RN, *Parish Nurse*

Frail elderly in the pew and *how might we keep them in worship?*

A love for worship has usually been well established through years and years of regular church attendance for our elderly in their later years. However, it is not unusual anymore for worship attendance to become irregular with the health issues that accompany advanced aging. "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing" (Hebrews 10:25). Upon closer examination of the issues at hand, there are things that a congregation can do to make worship a more welcoming environment.

Some will say, **"I just can't hear the Pastor, so why should I come?"** Perhaps your congregation could take a look at the current sound system? Technology in this area has advanced greatly in recent years and much can be done to improve the situation. Many churches are installing an Auditory Looping System. WELS Mission for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing can provide much information, wels.net/mdhh.

Those with osteoporosis may say, **"My back begins to hurt, sitting in the hard pews for so long."** Something as simple as a row of padded chairs that replaces a regular pew can really make the difference. Or encourage your member to bring a small pillow from home that could be left in the pew or tucked in a corner until next week.

Some may say, **"Even with my glasses, I can't see the hymnal or order of service and feel silly not being able to follow along."** Some churches offer several large print "order of service" folders that are prepared each week with the entire service included (readings, psalms, hymns, etc.). Bold and enlarged prints, especially for the parts of the service that require the congregation to respond, are especially appreciated.

Those with mobility issues may say, **"I just can't walk that much or it is too hard for me to come up to the altar for communion."** A covered entrance with handicap accessible doors is a blessing for our frail elderly. Keep these thoughts in mind when remodeling or building a new facility. A couple of wheel chairs kept ready and waiting at the entrance communicates a word of welcome. Talk to your Pastor and perhaps he would be willing to bring Communion back to your pew. Sitting at the end of a pew is helpful.

My parent has Alzheimer's disease and struggles

with memory issues. A diagnosis of Alzheimer's can present a variety of challenges for the family as they care for their loved one. A person with Alzheimer's will have progressive problems with short-term memory but long-term memory remains intact much longer. And just like anyone else, they have spiritual needs and derive much comfort from participating in worship. A congregation can do much to help the person with Alzheimer's and their families feel welcome at worship.

Some may say, **"Mom has a hard time keeping up with the changes during the worship service."** Sometimes encouraging the family member and mom to remain seated during the service is helpful, eliminating all the up and down activity. Having a helper nearby to guide your loved one relieves the stress of trying to remember what comes next! Using the simpler format of the "order of service" folder for the visually impaired eliminates the need to switch from hymnal to a regular service folder.

Some may be concerned about all of the pre and post service stimulation that may be difficult for someone with Alzheimer's to process. Soft seating in the perimeter of the narthex or meeting space may be just the thing that allows "mom or dad" to feel safe while preparations to come or go are made. Tell people in the congregation that your loved one has Alzheimer's, encouraging them to stop and say, "Good morning." A smile and this little bit of conversation about the weather, goes a long way in helping the person feel connected to others, remembering pleasant times.

The care-giving role can be emotionally and physically exhausting. It is a lonely role that others often don't understand. There is a sense of loss and sadness as they watch their loved one struggle and slowly deteriorate. For the caregiver, remaining in

worship is important too. "I can do all things through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13). Hearing those words week after week can help one find a sense of balance and peace. Our Lord encourages us to care for one another in our time of need and the body of Christ can do that well. That could take the form of a listening ear or a word of encouragement. A card that says you are loved by God and valued by me could be a lifesaver on a tough day! How about a meal, delivered "just because" we recognize the wonderful job you are doing? Or an offer to sit and visit with mom for an hour while the caregiver takes time for an errand put on the back burner? Giving the caregiver permission or encouragement to seek out help when that time comes relieves feelings of guilt.

Wherever two or more are gathered....

As advanced aging or the disease of Alzheimer's progresses, there may come a time when worship with the congregation may become too great a challenge. That is when the congregation must switch gears and take God's word to them. That can take the form of a pastoral or parish nurse visit, reading familiar verses of Scripture or prayers. Remembering a shut-in with a bouquet of altar flowers and the bulletin by the flower committee is appreciated. Some congregations send out printed sermons or DVD's of the sermons, keeping in mind that family or staff may need to help with that by reading or setting up the DVD. As time goes on, simple pictures of Bible truths can help your loved one remember that Jesus loves them. Singing a song learned long ago (*Jesus Loves Me* or *I Am Jesus Little Lamb*) with a simple refrain may allow the person to participate in this simpler but no less important form of worship.

Thoughts for the Parish Nurse or nurse in the Parish

It is not uncommon for nurses to overcommit when presented with the many needs in a congregation and so it is good to begin with smaller goals and do them well. Establish some kind of system to keep track of your time spent and the number of visits being made, as it is good for congregations to be aware of that. Look for opportunities to mentor others and increase the joy that these visits will bring. Issues of confidentiality need to be discussed in each congregational setting. It is wise for members to understand that the pastors and the nurse work

together as a team and that matters shared on a visit may be shared amongst the team as needed to provide for proper ministry. Posting the privacy policy in a newsletter article might help members to understand what the expectations will be.

Whether a nurse begins a formal parish nurse ministry, organizes a visitation ministry or makes informal visits to a member at home we are encouraged to take words of comfort found in Scripture with us on our visits. Make use of regular worship, Bible classes, personal devotions and the wealth of solid devotional materials that are already written. Nurses, understandably, feel a bit hesitant and unprepared to do this but making use of these materials is simply the best way to prepare you for providing devotional thoughts for fellow members. When people are involved with devotional visits with others, the best comfort they can bring is the comfort they themselves have received. St. Paul opened his second letter to the Corinthians with these words: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

These thoughts were written in response to observations made as a caregiver traveling down the road of Alzheimer's with my mother-in-law. I am also an RN and parish nurse, visiting our frail elderly at their homes and other options for senior living. But none of that prepared me for this walk with Alzheimer's on a personal level. What comforts me is God's promise to get us through the challenges that lay before us. A congregation that has been loving and supportive has also surrounded us. Participating in Word and Sacrament and talking to others going through the same thing whether in a support group for caregivers or in the narthex on a Sunday gives me encouragement for the week. You may have your own ideas to share with others.

The Alzheimer's Association offers great information and resources. (www.alz.org) The Lutheran Home Association (www.tlha.org) is another source of information and comfort, including a free booklet, "It's Alzheimer's—It's Time for Extraordinary Love". They are developing more resources all the time for our congregations as we minister to our frail elderly.

How can I help build up the body of Christ?

- Listen to our frail elderly and caregivers, offering to help as needed
- “So glad you could join us today!”
- Pray for our frail elderly and their families
- Consider how your congregation cares for the body of Christ and if any changes might be made