

A Nursing Home Ministry Handbook for Staff

Section 1 - An Overview of the Nursing Home Christian Population

What Is a Christian?

Our first question would obviously be, "What is a Christian?" In attempting to answer this question we first look at a definition of "religion" in general. Then, in that light, we will look more closely at what, or who, a Christian is.

First, we can look at three textbook definitions of "religion" in a generic sense:

- 1) Religion could be best defined as mankind's attempt to achieve the highest possible good by adjusting our life to the strongest and best power in the universe. This power is usually called God. Most religions are organized systems of beliefs based on traditions and teachings. Religion seeks to discover values and moral standards; and to attract people to them through worship and discipline. Religion has been one of the most powerful forces in history. There has never been a people that did not have some form of religion." (adapted from The World Book Encyclopedia, 1977, on the topic of "Religion")
- 2) Another definition of "religion": "A system of rules of conduct and laws of action based upon the recognition of, belief in, and reverence for a superhuman power of supreme authority." (Webster's Unabridged - 1954 edition)
- 3) No discussion of Christian nursing home ministry is complete without reference to this text in Scripture: "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." (James 1:27 - KJV)

Secondly, let us now consider a more specific definition of a "Christian" as opposed to just someone who is "religious":

- 1) A "Christian" is someone who believes in the reality of a historical Jesus whose eternal, divine being, His life on earth in the flesh, and His teachings are reliably recorded in Holy Scripture. Christians believe that Jesus was who He said He was and that He did - and He does - what He said He would do, and therefore, they believe that He has a right to authority over their life. (Jerry Johnson)
- 2) "A believer in the religion of Christ; one who follows his teachings in practice. One who formally professes his belief in the religion of Christ." (Webster's Unabridged - 1954 edition.)

2014 Pew "Religious Landscape Study"

Religious groups in the U.S.

The RLS surveyed more than 35,000 Americans from all 50 states about their religious affiliations, beliefs and practices.

Christian - 70.6%

- Evangelical Protestant 25.4%
- Mainline Protestant 14.7%
- Historically Black Protestant 6.5%
- Catholic 20.8%
- Mormon 1.6%
- Orthodox Christian 0.5%
- Jehovah's Witness 0.8%
- Other Christian 0.4%

Non-Christian Faiths 5.9%

- Jewish 1.9%
- Muslim 0.9%
- Buddhist 0.7%
- Hindu 0.7%
- Other World Religions 0.3%
- Other Faiths 1.5%

Unaffiliated (religious "nones") 22.8%

- Atheist 3.1%
- Agnostic 4.0%
- Nothing in particular 15.8%
- Don't know 0.6%

SOURCE: "Religious Landscape Study." Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (2014). - <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>

We should mention here that it has been our observation that, generally speaking, the demographics of a facility reflect the demographics of the community around that facility (obviously, excepting age and infirmity).

In the population of the United States over the age of 65:

Almost 81% consider themselves "Christians."
70% are absolutely certain that there is a God.
65% consider religion to be very important in one's life.
65% engage in prayer at least daily.
58% read their Bibles.

SOURCE: "Religious Tradition by Age Group" - Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (2014). - <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/age-distribution/>

An Overview of Christianity

A Little History of the Christian Church

In order to provide some background on how Christianity got where it is today, we provide below a brief overview of the history of how the Christian Church developed.

The death of Jesus of Nazareth should have put a quick and quiet end to what had been a minor religious disturbance in the smoldering tinderbox of Roman-occupied Palestine. There was no public outcry when the enigmatic Jewish preacher was executed after he challenged the religious authorities by declaring "the kingdom of God" was at hand. His demoralized disciples had simply given up and gone home. Whatever it might have become, this tiny dissident sect of Galilean Jews had been decapitated and seemed destined to be quickly forgotten.

But as the New Testament tells it, the broken faith of Jesus' disciples was restored as they were confronted by the risen Christ and as the Holy Spirit came upon them during the Jewish festival of Pentecost a few weeks later. Suddenly and dramatically, they began preaching boldly in the streets of Jerusalem that the resurrected Jesus was "both Lord and Christ."

Within a few years, their message would echo through the cities and villages of Jewish Palestine, touching a chord with many but also creating turmoil within Judaism. After a few decades, the movement would begin to take hold in the commercial and cultural centers of the Greco-Roman "world". And within a few centuries, what began as a grass-roots movement of Jewish peasants would become a powerful institution and a dominant force in Western culture. (U.S. News & World Report; Apr 20, 1992; Jeffery L. Sheler)

322 A.D. - Constantine Defeats His Last Rival. Seeks a restoration of the ancient glory of the Empire on the basis of Christianity. Persecution of Christians stops in Western Culture and Christianity becomes the main religion of the State. Seat of power moved from Rome to Constantinople. During most of his political career, Constantine seems to have thought that the Unconquered Sun and the Christian God were compatible - perhaps two views of the same Supreme Deity - and that the other gods, although subordinate, were nevertheless real and relatively powerful. Effects of Constantine on Christianity: an end of persecution; development of "official theology;" for selfish reasons, people flocked to what became the

imperial church which many considered sinful and apostate; an age of religious "giants" ensued who shaped the church for centuries to come; pomp and circumstance and imperial protocol pushed the congregation into a less active role in worship; bone relics of martyrs and huge church buildings began to dominate Christian devotion and worship; clergy exempted from taxes. (The Story of Christianity, Vol. 1; Harper and Row Publishers, 1984; Justo Gonzalez, pp. 120-126.)

520 A.D. - In the east, under Justinian, the state is seen as the Heaven ordained defender of the Christian faith and the protector of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. In the west, the Pope ("papa") of Rome has taken this authority. Rome's religious leaders begin to gain political control. Eastern religious leaders are subservient to the emperor in Constantinople. In coming centuries, debates over theology begin to seriously polarize east and west: they quibbled about one word in the creed; they insisted on different practices for Lent; they disagreed over the type of bread to use in celebrating the Eucharist; they differed over the worship of icons (holy images), seen as windows into the divine by some and as idolatry by others; and of course, the Roman Bishop and the Bishop of Constantinople joust for religious supremacy. (Church History In Plain Language, Word Book, 1982; Bruce L. Shelley, pp. 149-169.)

1054 A.D. - The great division between the Eastern (Constantinople) and Western (Rome) Churches: Representatives of the Roman Pope, Leo IX, excommunicate the Patriarch of Constantinople, Cerularius. Underneath this religious competition - Roman thought placed man in a legal posture with God, man is obliged to meet the demands of a just God, thus penance and purgatory develop whereby man makes restitution to God for sins. Eastern thought is dominated by the great theme of the incarnation of God and the re-creation of man in His image (man carries an "icon" of God within himself); hence, sin is not a legal infringement on God, but a reduction of the divine likeness, a wound in the original image of God. In Rome, the church is a formalized institution overseeing religious transactions between God and men's souls. In the east, the church is seen as the mystical body of Christ invigorated by the Life of the Holy Spirit restoring man in an atmosphere of love to the likeness of God. Center of Eastern Orthodoxy ultimately moves to Moscow. (Church History In Plain Language, pp. 159 - 169.)

1500-1650 A.D. - The Age of the Reformation. The New World is explored and colonized while Lutherans, Calvinists, and Anabaptists rise and flourish as religious movements in Europe.

Lutheranism: Salvation by faith in Christ alone; the Scriptures, not popes or councils, are the standard for Christian faith and behavior.

Calvinism: "Reformed" Christianity; Predestination - God is the Governor of all things. In his own wisdom, from the remotest eternity, he decreed what he would do, and by his own power, he executes what he has decreed. No one can be a true Christian without aspiring to holiness in this life. No man, whether pope or king, has any claim to absolute power.

Anabaptism: The Christian experience must go beyond inner experience and doctrines; it must involve a daily walk with God, in which Christ's teachings and

example shape a transformed style of life. Pacifists. Love is the Law - mutual aid and redistribution of wealth. All believers are priests and missionaries - very congregationally oriented. Separation of church and state - i.e., the right to join in worship with others of like faith without state support and without state persecution.

(Church History In Plain Language, pp. 255 - 281.)

1648-1789 A.D. - The Age of Reason and Revival. Reason takes the place of faith in Western Culture. The Methodist movement and "revivals" grow. (Church History In Plain Language, pp. 327 - 370.)

1789-1914 A.D. - The Age of Progress. French Revolution, collapse of the Old Regime. The Church faces social unrest and the challenge of intellectual doubts (evolution). In the Roman church, the pope's supremacy and infallibility declared. Modern missions develop. Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism are birthed. (Church History In Plain Language, pp. 371 - 436.)

The Orbits of Christianity

High Church - Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Episcopal

Very liturgical - thoroughly prescribed worship and ceremonial format.

Sacramental - Formal rituals and specific ceremonies required for adherence.

Traditional - Things must be done a certain way because that's the way they were set up and determined centuries ago.

Hierarchical - Rigid, layered leadership structure.

Main-Line Denominations - Lutheran, Presbyterian, Christian Church, Methodist, some Baptists

Congregational - at least some democratic decision-making.

Theological - denominational teachings preeminent.

Formal - Church governance, order of worship and service conduct is very formal and prescribed.

Evangelicals - Baptists, Brethren, Nazarenes, Pentecostals, Charismatics.

Pastors are strong leader figures.

Local congregation is the highest order of authority.

Missions and evangelizing is stressed.

The Christian's validation is "experience" oriented.

Their emphasis is on intimate "relationship" with God

NOTE: The historical Black Church is represented in each of these orbits, also.

Mutual traits that exist in all the orbits of Christianity

Nominalism ("name only" Christians) is in every orbit.

Fervent adherents (serious-minded, devoted) to the cause and person of Jesus Christ are in every orbit.

Evangelicals ("soul-winners," mission oriented) are in every orbit.

Charismatics (energetic exercise of the "gifts of the Spirit") are in every orbit.

Denominational Distinctives

Remember – every "Christian" audience in every facility is subject to be interdenominational.

Basic questions with very diverse answers within Christianity

How did God create us? Was it some form of evolution over millions of years or was it a literal six-day event?

Has God finished revealing Himself to man? Or is mankind still learning and in need of adjusting our record?

What does the Christian Bible mean and how do we apply it to our lives?

Are other religions valid in God's eyes?

As humans, are we really born condemned to eternal punishment if it were not for some supernatural intervention or are we basically good inside and able to find our own way if we try?

How do we show our love for God and for our fellow man?

And these basic differences aside, there are a myriad of contentious interpretations and ideas that Christians struggle with:

Are the "gifts of the Spirit" for today?

When will Christ return - before, during or after The Tribulation?

Can you lose your salvation?

Do you have to be baptized to go to heaven? Is it sprinkled or dunked?

Should we pay a tithe to the church?

Do we meet on Saturday or Sunday?

Does the Bible have any mistakes?

Can women be ordained?

Should we pray to Mary and the Saints?

Is it right to have musical instruments in worship services?

Is the local church the highest organization or is an overseer of a group of churches the highest authority? What about the Pope?

If you are a good person will you go to heaven?

Do you have to go to church to be saved?

Is it right to eat out on Sunday?

These questions are still being debated among theologians and Christians in general. You may have strong convictions about the answer to some of them, if not all. Or, on the other hand, you may not have an opinion on any of these issues. In any case, we caution you to be careful when you deal with these subjects in the course of your duties. Emphasize the major themes of the Christian faith, not the divisive points. Major on the major points of Scripture and minor on the minor. Though we must be true to the foundations of our own faith, we must be careful, if at all possible, not to offend one of the residents who may not share your view on some point of doctrine.

The Major Themes of the Christian Faith

God's Loving Provision for Man's Salvation - *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life."* John 3:16

A Loving Relationship with God and Fellowmen - *"And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these."* Mark 12:30-31