

A Nursing Home Ministry Handbook for Staff

Section 2 - The Spiritual Dimension of Nursing Home Ministry

Four major questions of religion

Who is God?

How has God revealed Himself to man?

What is man's relationship to God?

What does God want us to do?

How Christianity generally answers these questions:

WHO IS GOD? God is the eternal, universal, transcendent, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent Creator.

HOW HAS GOD REVEALED HIMSELF TO MAN? God has revealed Himself to man as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In His creation.

In Holy Scripture.

In the person of The Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

In the person of the Holy Spirit in the world today.

WHAT IS MAN'S RELATIONSHIP TO GOD? Man is invited into a personal relationship with God founded on humble, child-like faith, recognizing our need for His divine intervention and fellowship in our life.

WHAT DOES GOD WANT US TO DO? God desires for us to love Him in response to His love for us and, simultaneously reflect His divine love that He bestows on us to everyone around us.

Considerations for Spiritual Care of Long-term Care Residents

Medicine for Body – Soul – Spirit: It has been documented that "nurturing, nonpunitive religion is good for your mental and physical health" (Reflections on aging and spiritual growth, 1998, Weaver, Koenig and Roe, p. 17).

Heightened Spirituality with Age: Gallup polls in 2000 have shown that among people who experienced a great spiritual event in their lives, only 22% did so in adolescence. Another study of people over 66 showed that 40% experienced a significant change in their religious faith after the age of 50.

Dealing With Loss of Control: "When elders are admitted to a nursing home, they often lose control over their lives. This loss of autonomy and assault on personal dignity are highly distressing for many individuals. Loss of control and loss of individuality, then, are major factors that trigger and maintain emotional problems in this [nursing home] setting" (Aging and God, p. 355. 1994. Harold G. Koenig, Hawthorne Pastoral Press: Binghamton, NY)

We are creatures of habit and we usually develop our habits based on our personal preferences - our likes and dislikes. Diet, sleep, entertainment, bodily functions, personal hygiene, and thermostat settings are just some of the areas in which we hone our habits into a deeply seated way of life. As we age there is a natural conflict between our comfort level and the changes imposed by time. Old Man Time delivers circumstances that are forced upon us against our own choosing - financial changes due to retirement, physical abilities due to health changes, family changes due to deaths, marriages, divorces, and maturing children. Often we have little or no control over the timing or the magnitude of these changes...they just happen.

So, just in the arena of unwanted, uncontrollable changes, age naturally imposes a significant challenge to us all. Now...factor in the relatively sudden decision that the only viable option for a person is that they move into a nursing home! All of a sudden all of the major areas of their way of life are compromised. Despite the best efforts of administrators and staff, the nursing home residents have little or no practical control over the decision making processes affecting many of their personal preferences. The differences between the normal rate of change brought on by age and the rate of change thrust upon someone in a sudden move into a nursing home is like the difference between wadding out into a shallow lake at a tolerable pace and being thrown over the side of a ship at sea. In many ways, it is like a death. All of a sudden they have lost their home, their natural social network, their financial stability, their sense of security, much less their control of the thermostat, what's for supper, or when to take a shower.

A few years ago, at a meeting related to professional care facility staff, a young speaker made the comment that she had no intention of ever living in a nursing home. Her reasoning was that all of a person's choices are taken away when they go through the doors of the facility. At that moment, a vision burst into the mind of the author of the poem below of so many of the nursing home residents whom he had gotten to know and love in the course of his ministry. They feel all of their losses deeply, but they maintain their high character and grace, even in the worst of circumstances. Invariably, he had found that their strength lay in the many years they have labored faithfully for the Lord Jesus. As the speaker made her point, the first few lines of this poem began to flow in his mind. While she continued her speech, he quickly penned this poem to honor these sweet, faithful Christians.

It is the cry of our heart to see the Christian community . . . all Christians . . . take up their responsibility and do their part to encourage and strengthen the hands of these precious saints now living in care facilities, often forgotten by the religious public.

"You Say I Have No Choices"

by Jerry Johnson

I don't set my own alarm clock,
Haven't seen it for many days.
The open curtain at my window
Lets in unwanted rays.
I guess my roommate is a sweetie
But she sure does have her ways.
I've forgotten my dear home address:
Good memories now a haze.
A lotta neat people pop in to visit
But no one ever stays.
No need to fuss about the noise at night,
I found it never pays;
And the rigmarole to get my prune juice
Is a daily, tangled maze.
Oh yes! I let go of many things:
Choices . . . and control of my own fate!
But there's choices I won't surrender
In this lonely, forgotten state:
I choose to keep my smiling face:
Won't let depression take my heart.
I'll pray for the crying souls at night:
While nurses struggle I can do my part.
When my children call, I'll make small talk
When they don't have much to say;
I'll make them laugh and giggle;
I'll understand when they cannot stay.

I'll choose to keep my patience
When the shower is too cold.
I'll not complain or grumble
When the burger's three days old.
I'll talk to poor Miss Sally in the hall
Though she never talks to me.
I'll wait with a real sweet smile for that nurse
Who comes so grudgingly.
And, so don't you see ?
I still have my choices!
This power you cannot take.
My attitude is still mine to mold . . .
And I'll mold it for Heaven's Sake
"You Say I Have No Choices" copyright © 1995 Gerald T. Johnson. All Rights Reserved.

The Basic Spiritual Needs of a Christian

1Cor 13:13 And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Faith

Approaching the later years of life, we begin to see, with growing certainty, the unavoidable reality of death. Again, this fact naturally presses us to seek the internal fulfillment of spiritual well-being.

Christians have often found just such a blossoming fulfillment in God through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ as He is revealed in Holy Scriptures.

Accepting this God-given gift of faith in Christ brings us His sovereign promise of joyful life beyond the grave.

We find substance in our faith through the presence of His Holy Spirit in our hearts.

And we find vital encouragement for our faith in the faith we see in the lives of fellow believers around us.

This is the testimony of this presenter. And, this is the Gospel that elderly Christians love to share and love to hear again and again because it is more and more the reality of their experience.

This faith, so very priceless to Christian residents, is fed and strengthened through:

Bible reading feeds our faith.

Prayer feeds our faith.

Discussion and teaching on faith issues feeds our faith.

Our faith is strengthened when we are **reminded of the power and the faithfulness of God**.

Our faith is strengthened by **sharing and listening to others share their faith and hope in Jesus Christ**.

The Old, Old Story really never gets old - **our faith is strengthened each time someone rehearses the Gospel** of Jesus Christ with us.

Hope

How would you like for someone to give you a million dollars?

If you really believed it, your demeanor would change, even before you actually possess the cash! Your face would immediately show your joy and relief for your new found hope. Now you will be able to pay off all your bills and never have to worry about having enough to cover the house payment again.

Your attitude toward your benefactor would change as soon as you really believed they were going to make you a millionaire!

If you had to wait for days – months – years for it, could you use a little encouragement along the way?

To someone who believes the message of Jesus Christ – how valuable to them is their anticipation of "eternal life"? But the wait can be brutal, can it not?

This is why it is so crucial for the Christian to be encouraged in their faith, especially as they face the nearness of their natural death. (Very hard to relate to unless you REALLY share their experience by facing the nearness of your own natural death.)

Love

How do you feel when someone relates to you this way (see 1Corinthians 13):

They are patient with you all the time.

They are kind to you all the time.

They never envy you or begrudge you for your possessions or your position.

They are more focused on you than on themselves.

They are not arrogant.

They are never rude.

They are not self-seeking. They never have a self-centered ulterior motive.

When you are unpleasant or unjust toward them they are not provoked.

They don't keep score of your wrongs against them.

They take no pleasure in your demise or in the bad behavior of others.

They are a flowing fountain of honesty and genuineness.

They hold up under all pressure.

They constantly maintain the focus of their faith in the Truth.

They maintain these traits under any and all hardships.

They never let you down.

As compromised and absent and partial as these traits are sometimes in our human relationships, a believing Christian actually experiences these characteristics, in the most ideal and perfect sense, in their relationship with their invisible God.

Whether we can relate to this fact or not in our personal experience, can we imagine how important it is to the believing Christian for this loving relationship to be reinforced?

Ways this reinforcement takes place:

Singing songs of God's love – corporately and privately. For example (from "Favorite Hymns of Grace" and "Hymns Of Our Redeemer"):

Count Your Blessings

Love Lifted Me

O How I Love Jesus

His Eye Is On the Sparrow

In the Garden

I Must Tell Jesus

Standing On the Promises

What a Friend

To God Be the Glory

Lily of the Valley

At the Cross

Selected readings on Love in Holy Scripture.

Reading and discussing Scripture that draws our thoughts to focus on the love and care of God for His children speaks to the core of our spiritual person. (Many of these passages are in our large print

scripture booklet, "The Love of God") These passages referenced here are just a few of those that address our deepest need for encouragement in God's love.

Psalms 23

Jeremiah 31:3

John 3:16

John 15:9

Romans 5:8

Romans 8:35

1Corinthians 13

Galatians 2:20

Ephesians 2:4-5

1 John 3:1

1John 4:16

Jude 21

Public and private prayer.

Personal devotions.

Christian fellowship – an environment of mutual support and encouragement.

One of the greatest ways for a believing Christian to reinforce and heighten their experience of God's love is to tell others about it - just talk about their personal relationship with God!

Out of this "Divine, Loving, Reciprocal Relationship" comes a plethora of really priceless benefits (see Galatians 5:22):

An ever upward spiraling love for others.

Joy

Peace

Emotional strength – long-suffering

Sweetness – gentleness in nature

Wholesomeness - goodness

Confidence – a positive outlook – a trusting soul

Endurance under pressure

Self-control

These benefits are empirical – observable. Therefore, any perspicuous Christian can take a personal inventory of these things in their life and use them as a thermometer of their "spiritual well-being."

Facility staff can use this "thermometer" as an indicator of a believer's need for encouragement in God's love for them. It is very helpful when the staff member or Christian volunteer can be a model of godly love for the resident to see and hear. This demonstration and profession of love has an efficacious effect on virtually the full spectrum of believing Christian residents regardless of their lucidity. Note: this thermometer is not a tool for "fruit inspection" - not a ground for criticizing and finding fault.