

Introduction to A Nursing Home Ministry Handbook for Volunteers

What Can You Do?

This handbook is about volunteering in a long-term care setting as a minister for Jesus Christ. There are many meaningful and important things a Christian volunteer can do in nursing home ministry and not all of them involve preaching or singing hymns, as important as those two things are. The spectrum of talent and gifting and skills that are useful and helpful to the residents is very broad. If you do not think you have a place in care facility ministry because you cannot preach or sing, please investigate this handbook and think again! Do you have a love for the elderly and the infirm? Would you like to help them with their loneliness and boredom? Let us say, in our experience, to do so is to be the hands and feet of Jesus to those you will meet. Without preaching or belting out a hymn you will carry through the doors of the care center a powerful message of the Good News of Jesus Christ – with a smile and a caring heart!

If you preach and teach and sing – great! But the message to the Church of Jesus Christ is that just visiting and refreshing and cheering up a fallen, hurting brother or sister in Christ is pure religion in God's eyes!

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

Why does a nursing home need volunteers?

A lack of funds is the most obvious cause for there to be a need for volunteers in the various fields of caring for the less fortunate. There are needs for volunteers in the field of prison ministry. How about ministering to the homeless...or unwed mothers...or human trafficking...or teen delinquency...or orphans...or the elderly and infirm living in long-term care settings in every locality in the country?

There are a lot of reasons why a facility does not have the financial resources to meet all the needs all the time of everyone entrusted to their care. In any case, the net result is the same: on some level, the temporal deprivations imposed by tight budgets result in some suffering to some degree. So, our collective social conscience grabs at the obvious solutions to either pour more money into institutional care or to somehow coerce business offices of care facilities to reduce their bottom line.....right?

Well, no amount of money will buy a loving heart! Or a caring touch. Or a sympathetic ear. Or a sincere prayer. Or a genuine testimony to the love of Jesus Christ. Or the determination to be a blessing despite standing in a yellow pool by a wheel chair.

And here's the kicker: from the East coast to the West coast, from Canada to Florida, we have met staff members of long-term-care centers who do things like we list above, everyday. It is their life's work, it is their calling, it is their God-given gift to care for others who cannot care for themselves as the means of their employment. Many administrators would love to have more employees like this. But there is a limited number of such workers available and burnout is an all too often eventuality for those who are in the field. Even if there was an inexhaustible supply of qualified staff, the truth is, no facility could ever afford to pay a living wage to enough employees to meet all the needs of all their residents all the time.

So.....just like hospitals, and crisis pregnancy centers, and soup kitchens and prison ministries.....care facilities need volunteers.

Who needs you to volunteer in a nursing home?

The Residents Need You

If nursing homes need volunteers, who exactly in the care facility needs you? First, and foremost, the residents of the home need you. This is the obvious one. It goes without saying, the elderly and the infirm population of the facility are in need of loving care.

Many of the residents of a typical nursing home never have a visitor who comes just to see them. The reasons for this are many, but here are some of the possibilities. Often, they have outlived most of the folks who knew them in the community. Sometimes, the people in their home church who are responsible for following up with them have changed. The new pastor and secretary never knew them and their contact information has fallen through the cracks for one reason or the other. Friends or family members who were close to them are too old to get out and are in need of help themselves. Younger friends and family members are busy. Many times, usually to be closer to their primary care-giving relative, a nursing home resident has been moved many miles away from their home and are separated from the support base of the community who knew them and loved them. Sometimes, stresses in relationships caused by poor relational skills in one party or the other, or both, has alienated the resident from their family and friends. In any case, the residents need love and care, especially from someone who, from their point of view, they know are not there "just for the money."

Residents who do have strong support from family and friends also need you. There are times we need to talk to someone who is not so close to our problems. There are things a resident may be willing to talk about with a caring volunteer that they are not so comfortable with mentioning them to a family member or an employee of the facility. Sometimes you may be able to provide a fresh perspective on things that seem to them to be a hopeless tangle. The ones who do look in on the resident may not have the time to sit and really visit. You can be the friend who gives them the honor of small-talk and the diversion of laughter.

Most Importantly, whether a resident has regular visitors or not, as a nursing home minister, you may be a priceless link for that one who has questions and needs straight answers to the difficult issues of life and death.

The Staff Needs You

Yes, the staff needs help. If you go to them with a humble attitude and willing hands, offering your time and skills to assist them in their job, the staff will usually enthusiastically embrace you. Many of the tasks required of an activity director do not allow them to spend time interacting with their residents. They know the needs more than anyone else in the building, and if you help them with the activities that are so important to the residents they are usually very grateful. Employees of nursing homes need encouragement. Employees need friends. Employees need a “Thank you for what you do!” Wonder when was the last time someone took the activity assistant at the nursing home near you a bouquet of flowers or a gift card for the local steakhouse? Burnout on the job in a care facility is real and some sensitive caring for the caregivers goes a long way.

The Family Needs You

It may be a spouse or a child. It may be a sibling or a cousin. There may be a “tag team” who rotate in looking in on mom. Whatever the framework of family support for the resident in a long-term care setting, it is really hard sometimes for them to be consistent with all the normal pressures of life that continue even though their loved one is sick or elderly. It is not unusual to meet a family member who has essentially shut down their life except to tend to their wife or mom in a nursing home. They are at the facility just about every day. Many times the family members have taken up the responsibility to regularly visit the nursing home and do the laundry and look after the finances and see to the room temperature and encourage the staff about the diapers and the special diet and the medication....just imagine! That family could use some reinforcement. Just knowing that a volunteer “friend” looks in on their loved one when they cannot make it helps so very much. And there are times when the family would like to do those things but they are rarely able. They are overjoyed to hear their mom talk of her friend who comes by and sings hymns with her every week.

The Volunteer’s Enrichment

If you feel the Lord tugging at your heart and you are able to volunteer some of your time and talents to nursing home ministry, the ways you will find enrichment and joy are many and priceless. This dimension of “reward” for the Christian minister in long-term care has been experienced and expressed to us by untold numbers of volunteers. In each case, the circumstances and personalities are different, but the testimony typically goes like this: “I go to minister to the residents and I always leave feeling more blessed by them!” This is because there are human beings in just about every long-term care setting who have unavoidable needs that are beyond their means to fully address and they, and the staff caring for them, and the family that loves them can use a little help from you...and that “little help” is like a drink of cold water to parched, dry lips. And God’s Word is confirmed as it says: It is more blessed to give than to receive!”

I have shewed you all things, how that so laboring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive. Acts 20:35