

Church Services for People with Dementia in Care Homes

(Taken from various sources, particularly the Evening Star Project)

Services with care homes should aim to enable to person with dementia to:

- Spark a faith-filled response to God
- Approach God
- Worship and praise God and feel his caring presence
- Come to God with their pain, sorrows, joy, thanksgiving and praise
- Ask God for help, to be comforted and to ask for healing

Music, singing, scripture, sermon, sacraments, prayers, rites and rituals are all vehicles to enable residents to respond to the presence of the living God in their lives. Dementia frequently interferes with a person's ability to connect with and to benefit from regular religious activities and worship styles that were meaningful in the past.

Principles of a Dementia Friendly Service

There seem to be 4 principles that, with the power of God, can have a significant positive effect on persons with dementia enabling them to do business with God. These might not be achievable within our resource but here they are:

1. An Effective Leadership Style

The worship leader should...

- Be slow and intentional in every aspect of the service
- Speak slowly and clearly so that you are easy to follow, allowing long pauses between statements (dementia slows the speed at which people can process information). Don't rush the service. Offer information in smaller chunks so people are not overloaded with information.
- Make direct eye contact with residents as much as possible. The usual non-verbal communication needs to be exaggerated as people with dementia can struggle to understand words and subtle cues. Use large gestures and pause for recognition time.
- Use lots of repetition to ensure continuity of the message
- Worship *with* residents *not* from above. Don't always stand above but occasionally kneel in front of each resident, get on their level and hold hands to bring them into the present moment.
- Don't just speak from the front, interact with the residents, sing and pray with them
- Be observant, attendant and ready to respond appropriately
- Watch carefully for any response that residents may have, paying attention to physical spoken or emotional clues
- Listen carefully to residents and give them room to express themselves
- Encourage sharing by asking questions and empathising with worshippers experiences. Reflect back to them emotions and experiences that they are expressing. Use validation techniques and reflective listening.
- If you sense a need to talk to a person or the group about something they are feeling or going through go ahead and do it. Have some appropriate hymns to fall back on and be prepared to go off script and lead the group in prayer. It is more valuable to meet the

group's spiritual needs than ensure the planned service. Be flexible and willing to go in another direction.

- Show love and acceptance
- Be patient and don't correct residents. Use validation of their experiences. Eye contact, touch and careful listening demonstrate love and acceptance.

The worship helpers should...

- Be spaced thoughtfully through the area ready to assist and worship with residents they are near
- Sit and worship *with* the residents *not* from above
- Model worship participation with large gestures and facial expression and clear speech during songs
- Be mindful of the responses of those around them, helping residents to stay focussed on the service and to respond to their emotional needs, to recognise any needs for prayer, to ensure they understand any activities etc.
- Provide subtle cues for the residents during worship

2. Repetition Repetition Repetition!

Repeat the same theme throughout the service, in preceding services and where possible between services, for example

- Use of same songs with repeated verses
- Repeating the same message at different junctures throughout the service
- Ensuring the same physical environment for the service each week, which should also be cued to suggest "worship time" (see below)
- Use the same pattern and format for every service
- Two thirds of the songs should be the same at each service

Worship memories can be awakened when the same familiar items and words are used each service. For example, use a bible that translation that was used in that era. Include songs from residents past using only first verse and chorus. Use liturgical forms from residents past but very short ones. Use traditional worship words, i.e. trespass

3. Reinforcement of key themes

Reinforce the themes of the service by making them public, for example using:

- Bulletin board announcements detailing what the service has been about, the songs sung, any props used and re-encountering activity ideas for families or staff if they wish to reinforce the message during the week. Can also have contact details for church for prayer etc. Residents can take responsibility for updating it and being the church rep in the home.
- All residents to be given handouts. These may have on them the words of the songs, the message, prayers for the week and the meaning of the activity. Can cue family towards the bulletin board for more information / contact details for the church.
- Where possible try and encourage re-encountering sessions between services (i.e. alternate week do a "home group")

It can be useful to plan services for a few months in advance to ensure they link together and allow repetition and reinforcement. (Informal services could reinforce the formal ones with big events used to tie all previous services together?) Can then start repeating these each year or two, allowing for special church celebrations.

4. Getting the environment right and preparing residents for worship

There is not a linear relationship between the severity of brain damage and a person's level of deficits. The environment is a significant moderator of how people function emotionally and cognitively and how they are able to engage in the present moment. Residents need external / environmental cues to orientate them to Church and quieten their hearts for worship.

Play background Christian (e.g. Psalm 139) music for 5 minutes whilst setting up to cue residents in for "church". Gentle music is known to have an impact on emotional functioning in dementia. For example calm music during meal times increases the time residents sit as well as their food intake. Music also decreases agitation

Create a "protected space" with minimal interruptions from staff. Have signs on doors stating church is on to remind staff to lower their voices and be mindful of the service in progress.

The anticipation of church and worship can be built with the use of props. For example, a gold (wrapped) church box with smaller worship props inside it (i.e. large traditional bible, free standing and/or small wooden cross, fabric in liturgical colours to cover the worship tables; model church replica.) to cue people in to church. As the residents sit down they are given the props to hold.

Sit in a semi-circle around the "alter table" (if in the dining room) or ensure church related props are placed around the room in the lounge which are visible to all residents.

Use only one service booklet

Nametags to be worn by leader/helpers and leaders/helpers to try and learn residents names

Warmly welcome residents to "church", let them know you are here to do church and meet with each one.

Format found to work well in Evening Star

1. Gathering

Start service with punchy orientating script...

"welcome everyone, we are the family of God and together we are going to have Church"

Leader places a large church replica where everyone can see. Hand out / collect props and arrange on tables whilst saying...

"God calls us to worship and today we worship him as brothers and sisters"

2. Gods Greeting

A familiar greeting to announce the presence of the Trinity...

"God gives us this greeting - Grace to you and peace from God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Amen"

3. Worship in Song

No words to music provided unless you are sure residents will benefit from it. Use very familiar songs, only first verse and chorus, and repeat each part. By not using words you encourage the residents to use recall. If they can't recall the words they are unlikely to be able to read. Always

use the same 2 opening songs, for example, 'He's got the whole world in his hands' and Holy Holy Holy'. This is a very important aspect of creating a dementia friendly service.

"Let us begin our worship by singing together, look for a moment at your hands (pause and look at your hands), think for a moment of God's hands, he's got the whole world in his hands, shall we all sing that song"

During singing use large gestures and incorporate residents names in the songs. Use your knowledge of individual residents to engage them, for example...

"these hands held a tennis racket, these hands held babies etc..."

For this reason it is important to get to know each residents story (at one of our events).

Use another link to get to the second song.

Reflections from others... Songs are fast – residents will find it hard reading and understanding and following the song – another reason why its better just to have first verse and chorus repeated. The first time the verse is sang some are just recalling it and its a bit patchy, the second or third time it will be easier and the they may connect more with the words. After the repetition of songs over several services residents on occasion were herd humming the songs during breakfast and lunch.

4. Opening prayer

This can remain the same each service, for example ones based on the Psalms (19:14) or very short liturgy one. i.e.

"Heavenly father we come to joy to worship you. For you are great. And you are holy, now may the words of our mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O lord, our strength and redeemer, Amen".

5. Testimony of faith

Apostles creed, John 3:16 or Psalm 23.

6. Visual lesson and Scripture

Use props, group tasks or a story. If residents seem distant use gentle touch to cue them back in. Leader should move throughout the room as they speak. The visual lesson gives meaning and context and gains attention. End any reading with the traditional...

"this is the word of the lord. Thanks be to God"

7. Message

A simple message with a repetitive theme that you can repeat over a series of weeks, i.e. Gods keeps his promises all the time.... individual service themes of Gods promises to comfort us, God promises to forgive us etc...

The message should be delivered in a way invite residents to talk it over and think it through and to engage them on a personal level. To cue this engagement avoid memory questions which may be discouraging and use phrases such as *"I wonder"*, for example...

"God promises to love us forever, I wonder if this is comforting to you?" (pause and wait for response). "I wonder if we sometimes don't feel that promise?"

Helpers can repeat this question to those residents that they are sat with. When asking these questions don't rush a response. Responses from residents may help direct us to prayer.

Personalise statements from scripture...

“God promises to love Bessie etc.” (Look into the residents eyes whilst making it personal)

8. Hymns of response

Chose a familiar hymn(s) that ties in with the liturgical theme. Make a linking statement to the song which repeats the message...

“God promises to always be with us, no matter the storms of life, God is always faithful. Please join me in singing Great is thy Faithfulness”

Helpers should sit with the residents and be vocal and expressive in their singing. Residents often look to the helpers for the song words and mirror their expressions. Singing with residents whilst making eye contact can attune the residents to the music, help them feel valued and connected.

9. Prayer

Reinforce the message of the day, then open up the question...

“What should we pray for this morning?”

If no response from residents, helpers can ask residents *“what do you need from Jesus? What do you want to thank Jesus for?”*

Helpers should watch for residents nearby, cue them in, reinforce the question and invite any responses. Weave these together to make a corporate prayer and also offer to pray with individuals at the end if they desire.

Reflections from others... When asked for prayer request residents gradually felt more comfortable offering requests without being asked. Prayers moved from an inward focus (health, food, shelter) to outward – others, sick, telling others about Jesus.

10. Closing prayer

Lord’s prayer?

11. Benediction / Doxology

For example, Numbers 6 24-26 *“The lord bless you and keep you, the lord make his face to shine etc.”*

You can encourage holding of hands.

12. Personally bless all residents

Take this opportunity to comfort, offer to prayer etc. This can be done by helpers in that area of the room or the leader – but be ready to pray with residents.

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