Dementia-Friendly Faith Communities

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Webinar Outline

• Why should faith communities be dementia-friendly?
• Dementia, time, and responses of faith communities
• Applying dementia-friendly community principles to faith communities
• Barriers
• Opportunities

Why be dementia-friendly?

• Older adult connections
Why be dementia-friendly?

• Volunteer ministries

Why be dementia-friendly?

• Core values

Dementia (AD in particular) has been called “the theological disease” (Keck, 1996)

• Religious faith (in the Abrahamic traditions) is sometimes defined as “remembering God and being mindful of God in all that I say and do.” Can one hold faith if one can no longer remember God?
• Dementia evokes spiritual questions about meaning.
• Dementia is a “theological disease” because it raises core questions about what it is to be a self, or a creature formed in “the divine image.”
How can congregations prepare to become more dementia-friendly?

- Critically examine attitudes and assumptions about aging, older adults, and dementia
- Reflect theologically on aging and dementia
- Involve older people and persons living with dementia in the discussion. Be dementia-inclusive!

Dementia, time, and responses of faith communities

Faith communities can tell a new story about accompanying one another through sorrow and suffering: the “shatterings” of dementia
What does it feel like when the doctor says “You have dementia, most probably of the Alzheimer’s disease type”?

My life is over! Now what?

How will I tell my spouse/partner, my children, my grandchildren, my friends, my boss, my…?

What did I do to deserve this?

Why did God let this happen to me?

Will anyone still love me?

YES!

Can my life still have meaning?

YES!
Getting to YES

Spiritual companionship for the diagnosed person and care partners through the journey of dementia

What is spirituality?

Elizabeth MacKinlay’s Model of Spirituality

- **Relationships with others and/or God**
- **Spirituality**: Ultimate meaning mediated through...
- **Creation/Environment**: Nature, work, human imagination
- **The arts**: Music, art, poetry, drama, dance, etc.
- **Religion**: Worship, prayer, reading sacred texts, meditation
**Spiritual companionship**

- Is first and foremost a relationship
- Can be prompted by religious faith and can occur within religious settings (e.g., congregations)
- Can be nurtured by shared enjoyment of the arts
- Can also be nurtured by shared enjoyment of the natural world

**What do spiritual companions do?**

- **Accompany** people with dementia and their care partners through the whole journey
- **Adapt** to the changing needs of people with dementia and care partners
- **Accommodate** by learning new communication techniques as dementia progresses
- **Advocate** by telling a new story about dementia and enduring personhood

**What are the qualifications of a spiritual companion for people living with dementia?**

- Prayer
- Humility
- Patience
- Willingness to learn about dementia
- Spiritual support
Who will be accompanied?

• The person who has received the dementia diagnosis
• The care partner
• Other family members
• Friendship networks

Becoming a dementia-friendly faith community: 10 key areas for action
(Alzheimer’s Society, 2013)

1. Include people with dementia and care partners

Dementia is a disability that can be accommodated with patience and kindness
2. Challenge stigma and build understanding

- WORSHIP
- PREACHING
- EDUCATION FOR ALL AGES
- COMMUNITY OUTREACH

3. Provide accessibility

- Hearing Loop
- Elevator
- 9 Smart Tips For Improving Your Church Bulletin

4. Acknowledge potential

5. Encourage and support early diagnosis

6. Offer practical support for engagement in the life of the faith community
7. Define “living well in community” inclusively, from private homes to memory care residences

8. Offer reliable transportation

9. Make sure environments are easy to navigate

10. Work to spread dementia awareness to other organizations in the community
Barriers for faith communities

- Lack of clergy education about aging and dementia
- Attitudes about older adults and dementia
- Denial of suffering
- Gossip

Opportunities!

- Spiritual companionship training
- Accessibility for all
- Spiritual growth for the faith community

Telling a NEW story

A story of joyous life in community
A story of I and Thou
A story of living with meaning