

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:

- Approach God
- Worship and praise God and feel his caring presence
- To come to God with their pain and sorrows as well as joy and thanks giving and praise
- To seek God for help, to be comforted and to ask for healing
- To spark a faith-filled response to God.

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 worship and engage with God.

1. 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
- Don't rush the service
- Make direct eye contact with residents as much as possible
- Use lots of repetition to ensure continuity of the message
- Use large gestures pause for recognition time
- Worship with residents not from above. Don't always stand above but occasionally kneel in front of each resident, getting on their level and holding hands
- 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 worshipper's 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 helpers from church where possible should...

- Be spaced 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, 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

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 contain cues to indicate that it is “worship time”
- Use the same pattern and format for every service
- Two thirds of the songs should be the same at each service

3. Reinforcement

Reinforce the themes of the service by making them public. For example, bulletin boards announcements, handouts for residents, family and staff which have the words of the songs, the message and the meaning of the activity etc.

Where possible try and encourage re-encountering sessions between services (i.e. alternate weeks you could do a “home group”).

All residents could be given handout for their rooms. This may contain suggestions for how to reinforce the message, words for songs, numbers to contact for pastoral support and ideas for re-encountering activities.

Compensation for cognitive difficulties is very important. Try to minimise the cognitive demands of the service, i.e. only one service booklet if any at all. Be mindful of which residents seem able to follow the booklets. For some residents the booklet may be too complex to follow and may increase confusion or agitation. Other residents may find it comforting to hold a booklet even if it cannot be used to follow the service. Go slow, wait for people to respond, minimise interruptions etc...

Worship memories can be awakened when the same familiar items and words are used each service. For example, use a bible translation that resonates with the residents experiences. Include songs from the resident’s past and if appropriate sing only the **first verse and chorus**. Use liturgical forms from the resident’s past but very short ones. Use traditional worship words, i.e. ‘trespass’.

Setting the scene for worship

It can be useful to have background music playing for the 5 minutes during setting up, whilst keeping other noise to a minimum. Holiness of worship is supported with soft music playing as it helps to cue people in to church. Gentle music is known to have an impact on emotional functioning in dementia. For example we know that calm music played during meal times can enable people to sit longer and focus on their meal. Psalm 139 can be a lovely opening song.

Remember that the relationship between level of cognitive impairment and brain damage is not linear. The environment makes a significant difference in determining how people function and how they are able to engage in the present moment.

Work with the care home staff to help them understand the need for a protected space, with minimal interruptions. The care home may need time to understand that you are trying to create "church" and you are not just there to provide some stimulation to the residents.

Warmly welcome residents to "church", let them know you are here to do church and meet with each one. Nametags can be helpful in small groups.

Format found to work well in the Evening Star Project

1. Gathering

Start the service with a 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 it. 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 triune God...

" 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. Always use the same 2 opening songs. This is a very important aspect of creating a dementia friendly service.

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

Remember that the pace of the songs may mean the residents find it hard reading, understanding and following the song. This is another reason why it can be better just to have the first verse and chorus repeated. Each time it is repeated the resident has been given more time to connect with the words.

4. Opening prayer

This can remain the same each service, for example ones based on the Psalms (19:14) or very short liturgy. 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 throughout the service. The message should be delivered in a way that invites 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, ie. *“God promises to love Bessie etc.” (Make eye contact)*

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.

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.

Planning

It can be useful to plan services for a few months in advance to ensure they link together and allow repetition and reinforcement. You can then repeat these over time rather than always thinking you have to do something new.