

Bringing the Bible to Alzheimer's patients

In a Schaumburg retirement community, a minister pioneers a new approach to telling stories from the Bible

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Rev. Nancy Gordon knows some people may question the point of providing worship services for people afflicted with advanced Alzheimer's disease.

After all, the thinking goes, what can people who can't remember who they are gain from trying to learn about God from Scripture?

But Gordon, director of growth opportunities at the Friendship Village retirement community in Schaumburg, said that when people with Alzheimer's are taken to religious services, she has seen them be moved--if only for a moment.

"They may forget what they experienced 10 minutes later," said Gordon, "but ... who are we to say it hasn't reached them on some level?"

Gordon believes she has found a way to bridge the gap between people with Alzheimer's and their faith more regularly in a way that acknowledges their body's failings but addresses their spirit.

It's a method she first heard about a decade ago when, as a beginning minister on a retreat, she was wowed by the presentation of a technique for teaching children about the Bible using wooden figurines.

"This was to a group of pastors, and it was very powerful," said Gordon, an Evangelical Covenant minister who has been in her current job for six years. "I experienced it as a powerful way to tell biblical stories, even to adults."

She said she believes the Montessori-based method of learning for children could be adopted for adults with Alzheimer's. Thanks to a \$9,000 grant she recently received from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship of Grand Rapids, Mich., Gordon has the opportunity to try out her theory with the 40 residents with Alzheimer's at Friendship Village.

The grant will help her buy materials and enlist the aid of Sonja Stewart, the Christian educator who made that memorable presentation to Gordon and her fellow ministers.

Stewart is co-author of "Young Children and Worship" and "Following Jesus," books that show Christian teachers how to present the stories of the Bible to children as young as 3.

She believes her methods could help elderly patients "at least follow the story, and with their feelings, help them participate in the story where their diminished language skills might not have allowed them to," said Stewart, professor emeritus of Christian education at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Mich.

"People get a sense of joy from the presentations," she said. "They will feel good about it, even if they forget it five minutes later."

Whether such efforts truly touch the soul is the essence of the struggle to deal with the spirituality of Alzheimer's patients, said Jim Eller, an ordained Presbyterian minister and director of the institute for gerontological studies at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

"I always ask caregiver groups: Do Alzheimer's patients have a soul? When the individual becomes blocked, does that mean there's no spirituality?" he said. "Of course they say yes, they have a soul. The issue is, how to get there."

Some facilities have tried to bring worship services to people with Alzheimer's by involving them directly in a service and touching on their long-term memories, playing hymns they might remember from childhood, or employing the prayers and passages that have stuck with them as rote.

In some cases, nursing homes have seen a clergyman give up his efforts "because no one remembered his name," said Melanie Chavin, vice president of program services for the Alzheimer's Association of Greater Chicago.

Stewart's method seeks to explain the Bible by telling its stories in clear language, explaining a passage before moving simple wooden figures of prophets or shepherds around to visually demonstrate a story.

Afterward, the audience is given a chance to respond by asking questions, using the figurines themselves, or working on artwork to interpret it has heard.

Residents in Friendship Village's Alzheimer's unit may attend a weekly worship service with other residents who do not have the disease. That service has a sermon, songs and prayer.

In the new service following Stewart's method--which Gordon said may begin in December--a story will take the place of the sermon, moving away from abstract concepts in favor of the basics of the Bible.

There will have to be some changes from the methods used with children, Gordon believes, including using bigger wooden figurines than the 3- to 4-inch ones used for kids, and elevating the language to a more adult level.

Differentiating it from the method used for children is critical, said Chavin.

"People struggle with this all the time," she said. "If you presented it in the exact same way as you would for children, that would be demeaning."

Still, Chavin said she trusts Friendship Village to develop a program that respects the residents, and Gordon might be tapping into something that could be widely used.

"One of my pet peeves is if you go to a care facility, when you get to the Alzheimer's unit, that part of a person's growth [concerning religion] is ignored," she said. "I'm excited hearing about this."

Gordon is still developing the program and hopes to have it ready for use with Friendship Village's residents in December, in time for Christmas services.

"Theologically, these people still carry God's image," said Gordon, "and I think they are worthy of the very best ministry we can give them."