

Keep Communication as “Normal” as Possible

By JIM STINSON, Consultant for Older Adult Ministries

It wasn't very long after she arrived that it became apparent Helen was having trouble adapting to her new situation. She had moved from her home of many years. The time came when her physical condition made it unwise for her to live alone. Persuaded by the fact that her five adult children still lived in Connecticut, where they had been raised, Helen took up residence at Wesley Heights, an assisted living community of United Methodist Homes in Shelton, Conn. She struggled to adjust, and for a while it seemed as if she would not succeed.

One day she said something that led me to say to her, with a smile on my face, “Helen, are you sure your name isn't trouble? You seem to like stirring things up.” Without missing a beat, she responded, “My name may be trouble, but you are surely “trouble's helper.” Something changed with that exchange; she began to open up and again be the woman others had known. She was strong and opinionated, yet loving and caring.

I took a strong liking to her and discovered that one of the things she missed was “bantering” with anyone about anything. At Wesley, she was missing that means of communication. She was being treated with kid gloves because we believed she was fragile emotionally. We bantered back and forth many days, sometimes about nonsense, but often about family, religion, life and death.

Eventually Helen moved to Wicke Health Center and became a hospice patient. Even then “Trouble” continued to talk to me about the important issues in her life.

What an important lesson learned! Loving someone enough to enter their world, to use their language, their means of communication, can—and does—change lives for the better. Far more is accomplished for the older adult when those caring for him or her meet the person where she or he is.

Older adults, as most people, want to be accepted for who they are. They do not need to be coddled or infantilized. Despite any limitations they might have, they are still the unique individuals they have always been.

Congregations, pastors, lay persons, family members and friends, too often let the frailty or illness of a person get in the way of relating to the whole person. Any effective ministry to or with older adults should seek to create an environment where this attitude is banished, and replaced with one where age and frailty are not a reasons to relate to the person any differently than before.