

## **Nourishing the Connection for Absent Elderly**

By Jim Stinson, Consultant on Older Adult Ministry

“In the journey of frailty, slowly but surely there is one loss after the other. The church should not be one of the losses.” (Karla Woodward, ‘Pastoral Care Ministry for the Frail,’ Spring 2011 issue of Center Sage)

Karla Woodward of The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas speaks a word to all congregations, pastors and laity, which needs to be heard and embraced. Because people, as they age, often become too frail to attend church services does not mean the church is unimportant to them.

Often times, older adults gradually disappear from worship services and activities at the church. And too often, these folks are forgotten by their pastors and church family. I am always distressed when I hear people living at Wesley Village tell me how active they used to be in the life of the church and how much they miss it and how long it has been since they have seen anyone from “my” church. The need for spiritual guidance and for fellowship with other church members does not diminish with age or frailty. In fact, in many instances, it increases. I’ve heard too many older adults say that the only time they hear from their church is during the church’s pledge drives. For them, the church is one of their losses.

With busy schedules and other constraints on time, it is often easy to neglect the spiritual needs of older adults. An intentional ministry to this age bracket in every congregation is one sure way to see that the old and frail are not forgotten, but valued for their past contributions to the life of the church, as well as for who they still are. How this ministry is shaped is of less importance than its intentionality. In large measure it can be a lay ministry. Regular visits, notes, phone calls, cards on special occasions are all ways to care for older adult members. (Having said that, I offer an aside to pastors: Older members of your congregation feel very blessed and cared for by the church when you personally visit them.)

Woodward offers a caution to congregations establishing such an intentional ministry. “The overall needs of frail people are generally deep and wide. Without clear guidelines, determining the nature and scope of pastoral care, pastors and visiting volunteers can easily get caught up in trying to intervene in many different needs and that can be overwhelming (and at times, inappropriate). A successful and appropriate pastoral care program for the frail can be designed, developed and implemented, but it has to be done with great care and concern in defining boundaries from the beginning.”

If your congregation is already offering such an intentional ministry—God bless you! If it is not, begin the conversation with your congregation and go from there.

Rev. Stinson is available to visit your church with ideas and training for older adult ministries; please contact him at [jstinson@umh.org](mailto:jstinson@umh.org).