

“Jim, will you say the last rites for my mother? The doctor says she will not be alive this time tomorrow morning.” “Annette, won’t you let me call your Mom’s priest to do so? She has always been a faithful member of her church.” “No, Jim, Mom has told me more than once that when this day came, she wanted me to call you.”

What did I do? It was not the first time I had been asked to perform a service for someone from a different religious tradition than mine. I always believed that pastoral care and an ecumenical spirit trumps other considerations. And so the answer was easy. I shared prayers and thoughts about life, death and resurrection with Annette, her Mom and other members of their family.

But these thoughts are not about performing such a service. They are about a lesson I am learning again and again as I do ministry in a long-term care setting where many religious traditions are represented. I’m discovering that most people, as they face life and death questions, want pastoral care, far more than they are concerned about distinctions of church theology. They want to experience the love of God and to be reassured of the wideness of God’s mercy. There seems to be the sense that the things that often divide us during our lifetime simply are not important.

Each time I relearn this lesson I recommit to an inclusive ministry. How often lay speakers and clergy are called upon to lead worship in a long-term care facility! How often I hear them forgetting this lesson! We need to be aware of the people to whom we have been called to minister. In nursing homes and such they are Methodists, Episcopalians, Baptists, Roman Catholic and every other possibility. Such a setting requires that we be non-denominational in our approach. It requires that we witness to the good news of Jesus Christ and the overwhelming love of God and trust that God can speak to all people through a good pastoral presence. A good sign for me of whether I’ve done so comes when I hear the comment I heard recently, “I am not Methodist, but I felt as if I were hearing my own pastor speak to me.”

Christian ministry with the older adult (perhaps with all people) is finally about touching them with the message of God’s love and mercy and with helping that experience become a reality for them. It is an exciting ministry that requires openness to all people, a loving heart convinced that Jesus made God visible, committed to sharing that presence with others, and a willingness to remember the message we have heard and to bear witness to it in a way that those for whom going to their “own” church is not an option will feel as if they are in their “own” church. It takes time and effort, but well worth both!

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