

Setting Priorities Can Help Avoid Neglect

By Jim Stinson, Consultant on Older Adult Ministry

All I did was knock on her door and introduce myself as the Director of Spiritual Life for United Methodist Homes. She invited me in and said plaintively, with obvious confusion as to why I was breaking the pattern that she had come to accept: “No one ever comes to see me.”

That was literally the opening conversation with one of our new residents at Wicke Health Center. Although it was not the first time I heard that comment, it still startled me. It obviously was the feeling that lay heavy on her heart. So heavy in fact that it came out of her mouth without prompting or hesitation.

My first reaction was one of sadness. No one should ever feel that alone! My second reaction was to wonder what made people stay away from this woman. My third reaction (and the only one I gave voice to) was to ask if she would like me to stay awhile and visit.

What followed was a tale of loneliness—a tale of a life lived in an isolation that only increased as she grew older. When I thought she was done telling her story, I asked her about her religious background. Then I heard the most depressing part of her story; she was a United Methodist and had been all of her life.

She had served her church in various capacities, but as she aged, she did less and less, attending worship services less often, and eventually stopped going to her church at all. “I haven’t seen my pastor or anyone else from the church since I stopped going. I guess they only accepted me when I could contribute my money and time.” I came to learn that she had no family nearby, and that she used to see the church as her family.

We visited often after that! I did not want to be a part of those who ignored her. I left her room that day, angry and sad. I was angry that the church, the body of Christ, had paid so little attention to a member of the family. I was sad because I knew her pastor and her congregation. They are good people, who were not neglectful on purpose.

As a pastor, the demands of parish life are well known to me. The hours required to be present in God’s name for others are often overwhelming. There are many excuses for such neglect. But I believe there is a question of priorities that need to be set. Surely someone had time somewhere along the way to visit this woman.

My thoughts returned me to a concept of ministry called “intentional ministry.” In a busy time, planning for, and programming for, specific ministries is the only sure way to accomplish what we know we need to do. Ministry to and with older adults is one such specific ministry. How different would my first conversation with that woman have been had her church had a committee on Older Adult Ministry? How different would that woman feel about herself had her church had a method of reaching out to shut-in members?

Every congregation I have ever known or served has the capacity to reach out to this population. Not every congregation does! Where is your congregation in this respect?