

True Ministry Begins in Loving People

BY JIM STINSON, Consultant on Older Adult Ministries

Less than two weeks out of seminary, at my first fulltime appointment as a pastor, Al came to see me. Al was 50 years my senior, a retired Methodist pastor, and more than ready to offer advice. And never was the advice offered meanly or critically! It always came with a sense of caring that was always welcomed. Over the years, we became good friends and colleagues, with a great deal of respect for each other. In fact, Al visited me each Tuesday morning, even after I had moved 90 miles away from where he lived. He became a part of my family, performing baptisms for my children, attending birthday parties and picnics, and seeing my children as the children he never had. Al has long since died, but his presence and advice are still very much alive in my memory.

I've long wondered what it was that drew me to a true friendship with a man 50 years my senior. One thing is certain: the friendship began that very first day he visited me and offered me advice. What prompted the advice that made me want to know him better?

Al clearly sensed that, as a young 24-year-old assigned to a congregation with a lot of older adults, I was feeling a bit uneasy. In seminary, there were no classes or seminars on how to win trust with those of a much older generation. He said, "Jim, if we know you love us, you can say and do anything you want. You can make all sorts of mistakes, and you will. (Boy, was he right there!) You don't even have to be a good preacher. The more you love us, the more your preaching will improve. In the final analysis, just love us, that's all anyone really wants or needs."

Those words rang true instantly. I've carried them with me for more than 45 years now, and they have never been proven wrong. In fact, when I practice them, they are always proven absolutely right. In those moments of ministry when doubtful of the ability to minister adequately, when I remembered the advice and "just loved" them, the doubt disappeared and ministry happened.

As I lead workshops and do preaching and speaking around the conference on ministry to and with older adults, the question of "how to" always is raised. I've come to believe there is no magic bullet, there is no surefire way to do ministry with older adults. But I do know that effective ministry at any level has to begin with "just loving" the people. That seems so basic, it sounds trite. But there is no doubt it is an accurate statement. Without loving the people (which includes: caring enough to speak the truth, expecting the same in return, accepting them as and where they are, redirecting self-centered concern into concern for others, offering the gospel of serving others to them) there can be no effective ministry. How to have effective ministry to and with older adults? Begin by just loving them. "In the final analysis...that's all anyone really wants or needs."

Thank you Al!