

Sensing the Sacred: *A Small Group Worship Program for those with Alzheimer's Disease*

2010 Wingspread Best Practice - Meritorious Award
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The goal of this project was to develop a tactile, story centered small group worship experience for elders who suffer from Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. *Young Children and Worship*, a well-tested, Montessori-based children's worship program, was the starting place. This program uses wooden figures to tell biblical stories as the "sermon" part of worship. Elders suffering memory loss benefit from worship with its rituals, prayers, songs, and sense of community, but the sermon with its dependence on words and concepts does not effectively communicate to this audience.

Creation of Sacred Space and Time

When the group gathers to worship God,



we greet one another in God's name, sing a hymn, and prepare our hearts to listen to one of God's stories. The story is

told with the help of felt under-lays and wooden figures. After the story, we wonder about it together, read scripture, give thanks, pray and receive God's blessing. Even if it is the middle of the afternoon in a Health Care Center dining room, the structure of the service, the simple and visual story-telling, and the experiential elements all contribute to a sense of worship and being in a safe sacred time and place.

Hope in the Lost Places

The experience of dementia is one of loss and "lostness." As the ability to assimilate, process, and remember new information is lost the world becomes an increasingly chaotic and seemingly



unsafe place. Against this backdrop of lived experience we chose the stories of the Good Shepherd, Zacchaeus, and the Easter story. In all of these stories the characters are known by name, and each provides a doorway to an experience of God's loving care. Advent/Christmas stories have also been developed.

Experiencing, Not Telling

The story telling is done with an economy of words and motion, where the teller is looking, not at the participants, but at the story ground and figures. All of this is done so that story itself, not the storyteller, becomes the focus of attention. Hearing and seeing a story from God's word provides an opportunity for the listener to have an experience with God, rather than just hearing about God or learning concepts about God. The content of the story itself may soon be lost; but the experience of the Spirit lingers.



Plans for the future

I am planning to develop two more stories to fit with the ones that have been developed. I see them being used in a rotation, and with some connection to the church year. Advent/Christmas can be used during Advent and during Christmas. The Good Shepherd and the as yet to be developed, *Follow Me* could be used during Epiphany. *Zachaeus* is set during Lent, and the Easter story can be used through the season of Easter. In the weeks of ordinary time between Pentecost and Advent, *The Good Shepherd*, *Zachaeus*, *Follow Me*, and one other yet to be developed Jesus story could be rotated. I've found is that repetition of the stories doesn't seem to blunt their meaning. It is a new experience for the worshippers each time.

I've developed scripts and patterns for the four stories that have been completed. I've also written an overview "how-to" piece, and an outline for the training of volunteers to do this ministry.

This ministry could flourish in several settings. It is definitely a wonderful addition to the spiritual life programming in any memory care or Alzheimer's care unit in assisted living and skilled nursing. It could be staff initiated with volunteer assistants, or the staff could train teams of volunteers to bring the weekly worship to a small group of residents.

This is a program that could also flourish in churches. It could be taken as outreach to parishioners or church friends who are

being cared for in their homes. Congregational teams could also take these stories into adult day care centers, senior centers, and residential care centers.

I have found that those telling the stories probably receive as much as those seeing and hearing the stories. Learning the stories and telling them are soul nurturing and sustaining. And participating in ministry to a group that is largely overlooked helps the team members appreciate their own lives and lessens their fear of aging.

I would love to help teams get started on this program. It takes planning, work and organization to get it started. But its implementation is a joy and brings joy and hope to the participants.

If you would be interested in seeing scripts, collaborating on new stories and talking about starting a program like this, please contact me at:

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