



Written by
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Enabling worship in care homes

- Arrive early to prepare
- Work as a team
- Create a worshipful atmosphere
- Make worship accessible
- Celebrate the seasons
- Encourage resident participation

Background

Leading worship in care homes is challenging. Daily living is going on around you, and residents living with dementia and other complex needs struggle to concentrate and engage. Staff may or may not welcome you or understand why you are there. Residents represent different faith traditions; many have not been practising church members so their knowledge of the Christian faith stems from childhood. Careful planning is needed in creating services of worship accessible to all residents.

1 Arrive early to prepare

If possible, minimise distractions by using a room not attached to a kitchen or dining room where there will be

competing noise and activity. Set up the space for worship; this may mean moving chairs and creating a visual display with a cross, LED candle and a Bible, or other objects to illustrate the theme of the service. You could play hymns in the background. If there are residents in the room who do not wish to attend worship, give them the option of moving elsewhere. Work with staff to ascertain who would like to attend the service and then personally invite those suggested. Ask staff to help move those who want to come to the room provided for worship.

2 Work as a team

It is difficult to lead worship alone in a care home. If possible, go with a small team of volunteers who will help gather residents, take part in the service, sit among residents to support them, join in with hymns

and responses and get help if needed during the service. The team can spend time after the service engaging with individual residents and building friendships. Friends and relatives of residents sometimes like to visit at the time the service is being held so they can join in alongside the person they visit – they can be a source of help too.

3 Create a worshipful atmosphere

It takes time to gather residents from around a building. As people begin to arrive, it can help to play hymns and perhaps you could encourage those who wish to sing along. Singing or listening to music before a service helps to create an atmosphere of worship and builds a sense of community; it enables people to make connections in the brain which significantly improves concentration and participation during the service. It can help residents settle, reducing the disruption of latecomers. If there is a team, before the service is also a good time to chat, catch up on news and help guests feel welcome.

4 Make worship accessible for everyone

As people arrive, think carefully where to seat people with visual or hearing impairments or dementia to maximise participation. Think about light and sound. Minimise distractions. Use large print, lightweight hymn books or sheets. Use a simple, familiar order of service, the same format each time to last about 30 minutes. Make the service visual, sensory, three dimensional. Don't use too many words, keep readings, talks and prayers short, and try to encourage interaction. Tell stories, act out readings, use prayers that people know and hymns and songs that are easy to sing. Use themes which are relevant and part of the experience of older people living in a care home.

5 Celebrate the seasons

Celebrate the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost, Harvest, Remembrance and Ordinary Time and make the most of the sensory stimuli and music that each season has to offer, aiming to create the right mood and atmosphere for the season. There are joyful seasons, reflective seasons and solemn seasons which all bring variety to the monotony of life in residential care. Through these celebrations tell the whole story of Jesus – his birth, his life, his death and resurrection, his ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit. In this way, help residents to grow in faith and in their knowledge and love of Jesus. During each season, try running a craft group, making items to be used in the service (Christingles, flower arranging for Mothering Sunday, Easter gardens, Harvest displays etc).

6 Encourage resident participation

Invite more able residents to help with readings and prayers and leading the singing, greeting people as they arrive or giving out hymn books. Include sections which spark reminiscence by tapping into long-term memories; this will encourage residents to reflect on their lives and enable you to get to know them better. Do all you can to help residents to be active participants rather than passive recipients, noticing and building on their responses. Address residents by name as you draw them in to conversations through the service and link what one person says with thoughts expressed by another, so building a sense of worshipping in community.

Further resources:

Celebrating the Seasons in Residential Care Homes: A service for every week of the year by Lindsay Pelloquin and Jaye Keightley (The Paul Thomas Group, 2022), available to buy via Amazon.

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