

Dementia and Religion: ‘What if I Forget About God?’

Excerpts

Adelle M Banks

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Dementia is the overall term for memory loss and cognitive impairment that results from diseases such as Alzheimer’s. It progresses as damage to the brain disrupts normal communication between brain cells and, in turn, affects behavior and thinking. This story is part of a Religion News Service series on dementia and religion. The rest of the series can be found [here](#).

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (RNS) — When geropsychologist Benjamin Mast evaluates dementia clients at his University of Louisville research lab, there’s a question some people of faith ask him:

“What if I forget about God?”

It’s a query that reflects the struggles of people facing diseases like Alzheimer’s.

The earliest stages of Alzheimer’s involve the buildup of protein fragments, or plaques, on some brain cells and the growth of twisted fibers, or tangles, within those cells. That process, Mast said in an interview, “damages a particular aspect of the memory system more significantly than others.”

In his book, “Second Forgetting: Remembering the Power of the Gospel During Alzheimer’s Disease,” Mast describes a man who may not always remember his grown children’s names but “quickly joins in” when someone reads one of his favorite psalms.

Mast said what remains intact is the part of the memory that’s held longest. In some cases, that relates to faith: hymns and creeds that people may have recited for years.

“If you ask a person who’s been deeply affected by Alzheimer’s about something that happened yesterday, you’re going to their weakness in terms of memory,” said Mast.

“But if we can engage them, for example, in the context of faith services with older songs and hymns that they’ve known for many years, we’re meeting them where they’re strong.”

From congregations to chaplains’ offices, there are stories of kept faith and questions about whether it has been lost. Experts and everyday individuals speak of “magical” moments when people who usually stare into space are suddenly enlivened by worship and tough times when a loved one no longer avows a long-term belief.

R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary — whose campus is about seven miles from Mast’s lab — has learned of both sides of this aspect of dementia.

His mother is in a memory care facility years after receiving a diagnosis of Alzheimer's.

"Thankfully, she is very aware of God's love," said Mohler, recalling family members' visits with her.

"She just constantly reminds us all of how blessed we are and will just make statements of how much God has blessed us."