

Dementia and Religion: Songs and Stuffed Animals Instead of Sermons

Excerpts

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Dementia is the overall term for the 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](#).

RICHLANDTOWN, Pa. (RNS) — The seven women, most in wheelchairs, sat in a semicircle facing stained-glass windows and an altar topped with a cross and a statuette of Jesus holding a lamb. Underneath the draped table was an ark-shaped container brimming with small stuffed animals.

"Spirit Alive," a weekly multisensory worship service for people with mid- to late-stage dementia, was about to begin at a United Church of Christ-affiliated skilled nursing center 50 miles north of Philadelphia.

The Rev. Jamie Moyer carried out the day's theme of creation by leading "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," holding up pictures of colorful flowers and passing out the soft toys, with each woman choosing one to hold.

"God looked at you and said, 'Oh, I created you, Ruth,'" she said to one resident, as she held up a mirror to the woman's face and went around the semicircle to affirm each person. "I love you very, very much."

The 45-minute service, held at each of Phoebe Ministries' four nursing homes, is one example of how faith leaders are moving beyond traditional worship services to provide a spiritual space for people with dementia. Experts say retirement communities and congregations need to incorporate ways of not only caring physically for people with dementia but also helping them to continue to have a quality of life that may include a spiritual dimension.

A 2014 [review](#) of studies of older adults with dementia found that those involved in spiritual and religious practices had a better quality of life. Phoebe Ministries' own research has shown that residents with dementia involved with the Spirit Alive program are more engaged during worship and reported feeling closer to God.....