

# Is Your Church Dementia Friendly?

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Those of us who have been close to a person who is living with dementia know how devastating the disease can be. It may seem as though the person we have known is disappearing. Caregivers often experience frustration, feelings of helplessness, or despair. Referring to our aging population, someone has said that dementia, including Alzheimer's, is like a tsunami moving toward us.

What does this mean for our churches? How can we continue to include persons with dementia in the life of the congregation? How can we plan meaningful worship? How can we support caregivers? How can we become dementia friendly churches?

Let's begin by thinking about what we believe. The Rev. Cynthia Ray, minister member of Presbytery and executive director of the Presbyterian Association of Homes and Services for the Aging (PAHSA), wrote for The Presbyterian Outlook magazine:

"If we understand that 'Remember me' is among the highest mandates of Jesus and that faith regenerates through our shared memory, how can we better remember those who forget?"

We believe that every person is created in the image of God. The ancient poets who gave us the beautiful hymn of creation in Genesis 1 made no exceptions. There were no exclusionary clauses! Being disabled does not erase the image of God.

To be created by God means being loved by God. "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, ... nor anything in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39) We may forget, but God does not forget us.

So how can the church respond to the challenges of memory loss? Members of the PTCA Disability Concerns Ministry have struggled with this question. We have chosen memory care for our focus for this program year.

We have prepared a packet of resources for every congregation. These will be available at the Disability Concerns Ministry table at the November meeting of Presbytery. A sample of the resources we have selected includes “Ten Tips to Become a Dementia Friendly Church” from PAHSA, “Communication” from the Alzheimer’s Association, and “Even When I Forget, the Music Is Familiar” from Presbyterians for Disability Concerns, our denominational network.

God is faithful. “I have called you by name and you are mine.” (Isaiah 43:1) Let us also be faithful to God’s beloved — those who forget and those who care for them.